

# Intersectionality in SEN

## Welcome to Module 11 of your SEN toolkit!

In this module we look at how the challenges of SEN intersect with other factors such as gender, race and culture.

## Aims

By the end of this module, I will be able to:

- recognise the common intersectionalities within the SEN world taking into account gender, culture and ethnicity.
- apply my understanding of intersectionality to different groups of SEN learners.
- understand that one size does not fit all in relation to effective SEN provision.



## Introduction to the Challenges of Intersectionality

*The job of a teacher is inextricably connected with a set of skills and competences needed to take their students along the path of successful learning, but also the path of emotional development and social integration. Skills required by a teacher in an inclusive setting typically go beyond textbook methodology.*

### Reflexive questions

How far do you agree with the following statements on a scale 1-5 (1=completely disagree; 5= fully agree)?

**1. The success of teaching often depends on factors outside the school environment; the more familiar we as teachers are with these external factors, the more successfully we can teach.**

1  2  3  4  5

**2. All teachers have implicit biases which have a potential to make a negative impact on children.**

1  2  3  4  5

**3. Conversely, all teachers have implicit qualities to make a truly positive impact on a child.**

1  2  3  4  5

**4. It is OK for a teacher to feel uncomfortable in an inclusive classroom: we need to step out of our comfort zone in order to truly challenge our biases.**

1  2  3  4  5

**5. If we as teachers can understand challenges and biases then we are perfectly positioned to alleviate the situation for SEN learners.**

1  2  3  4  5

### Answers

1. Both practice and research have shown that factors outside the immediate environment have a decisive impact on the success of our teaching and educational practices. The more knowledge and understanding we have of these, the more successfully we can teach.

2. Again, this is true. Considering that more often than not we are not aware of this fact, it is good practice to reflect on both our teaching and the impact on our students, while making constant improvement in this respect.

3. This is true. All of us have innate qualities with a potential to make a truly positive impact on a child.

4. Not only is it true that it is quite natural to feel discomfort in the inclusive classroom, but it is absolutely vital to understand that we need to step out of our comfort zone in order to truly challenge our biases.

5. True. And conversely, if teachers are not aware of the challenges and biases, there is a high level of risk that the conventional one-size-fits-all support provided to SEN students will produce no results.

## Overcoming Obstacles

*You are about to encounter two people - Rasheed and Julie. They were both diagnosed with forms of SEN when they were at school. This is the first part of their stories.*

Listen to two stories from people who successfully overcame difficulties related to SEN, despite being hindered by other obstacles. Listen to the stories and answer the questions that follow.

### Story 1: RASHEED, part one

“My name is Rasheed.

As a young boy, I wasn't a bad person. I feared going into the classroom because I couldn't read. I was diagnosed with dyslexia when I was in my 3rd grade. Consequently, I was included in the school's programme for SEN children.

This did not really help my education, in fact, in my grade nine, I would have ended up in prison if there hadn't been for a great teacher. Today, by the grace of God, I'm proud to be an Emmy-nominated actor and outspoken advocate for dyslexics like me...”

### Story 2: JULIE, part one

“My name is Julie.

When I was twelve, I was diagnosed with ADHD. Formally, I was given support

by my teachers, but in the actual fact my education was a time of continued hardships.

While I struggled to please others, they somehow never understood my efforts. Determined to be a good student, I spent hours on homework with daydreams getting in the way. However, if it hadn't been for my teacher I wouldn't be where I am today, a successful physiotherapist...”

## Reflexive questions

1. Is there such a thing as general dyslexia? Why? Why not?

2. Can a teacher take for granted the support of a SEN child's family?

3. Does autism feel the same for all children?

4. Does ADHD mean the same for all people? Does it impact one's life in the same way?

Empty text box for response to question 4.

5. How important is a teacher's role in providing a truly meaningful support to a SEN child? Why?

Empty text box for response to question 5.

6. Do boys and girls respond in the same way to classroom practices aimed at supporting SEN children?

Empty text box for response to question 6.

7. Are race and culture an important factor in providing support to a SEN child?

Empty text box for response to question 7.

8. Can it be taken for granted that a SEN child will be successfully supported in a school which has an adopted SEN policy in place?

Empty text box for response to question 8.

## What does intersectionality mean and what are the factors that intersect?

In the previous modules 1-10, you have learned how to provide support to students with dyslexia, ADHD and autism. In many instances, however, the support provided by the teacher is deterred by the impact of other factors such as gender, race, culture, family or poverty.

When these factors are combined with a case of neurodiversity, this can be referred to as 'intersectionality'.

The following represents a general idea of this concept:

SENs	FACTORS		
	Gender	Poverty	Culture
Dyslexia	A	B	C
Autism	D	E	F
ADHD	G	H	I

- Read short descriptions of intersectionality involving a SEN student and one or more additional factors, then try to determine the area of intersectionality between the SEN and the external factor(s).
- Look at the table that shows some of the areas of intersection between SENs and the other factors, with a potential powerful impact on the teaching and learning process;

- For each of the situations, write a letter A-I using the table below. The first one has been done for you as an example.

### Example:

A white girl with ADHD attending school in an environment where ADHD has been traditionally related to misbehaved boys.

**Answer:** The correct answer is **G** (ADHD intersecting with gender)

## Part 1

### Situation 1

A black girl with dyslexia attending a school with the dominantly white population of children.

**Answer:**

### Situation 2

A black boy with dyslexia attending a school with the dominantly white population of children and growing up in a poor unsupportive family.

**Answer:**

### Situation 3

An autistic boy whose mother refuses to accept and acknowledge the need for SEN support, but resorts to punishment and repetitive drill in order for the boy to have better grades at school.

**Answer:**

### Situation 4

A boy with ADHD living with a foster family, with no support or proper conditions to do homework.

**Answer:**

### Situation 5

A girl with ADHD coming from a minority ethnic group and having problems of being accepted by the children in the local community and school.

**Answer:**

## Answers

Situation 1: C (dyslexia and culture); Situation 2: B (dyslexia and poverty); Situation 3: F (autism and culture/family); Situation 4: G/H (ADHD, gender and culture/family); Situation 5: G (ADHD and gender).

Look back at the examples and their connection with the intersectionality factors on one side and the school environment on the other, then answer the following questions:

1. How do you think the intersectionality in the above cases might impact the daily job of a teacher?

2. What might be the strategies that a teacher may apply to successfully counter-balance the negative impact of intersectionality factors such as race, culture, gender or poverty?

## Part 2: What went wrong?

The traditional one-size-fits-all support provided by the teachers very often fails due to other factors apart from the SEN in question. In this activity, you will be presented with two situations in which the teacher provided targeted support to a SEN student, but did not achieve the expected result. These two situations are continuations of the stories about RASHEED and JULIE.

Read and listen to the stories. Use the 'Intersectionality worksheet' to:

- establish and note down what SEN was in question and what the teacher did to provide support to the SEN student in question
- establish and note down what went wrong, i.e. what unwanted negative reaction and /or result followed
- deduct which intersectionality factor was the cause of the failure of the traditional on-size-fits-all support provided

### a) Intersectionality worksheet

#### Situation 1

SEN type:

Conventional support provided by the school/ teacher, without success:

What negative reaction/ result followed/?

What went wrong? Due to what negative intersectionality factor(s) did the support fail to produce results?

#### Situation 2

SEN type:

Conventional support provided by the school/ teacher, without success:

What negative reaction/ result followed/?

What went wrong? Due to what negative intersectionality factor(s) did the support fail to produce results?

## Answers

A completed 'Intersectionality worksheet' is given here for reference. The answers provided here represent a possibility, not a definite 'true' or 'wrong' type of answers.

### Situation 1

**SEN type:** Dyslexia

#### **Conventional support provided by the school/ teacher, without success:**

Teacher assigned additional homework practice; Teacher tried to force or impose group work on student; Teacher set ambitious learning objectives; Teachers adopted one-size-fits-all approach

#### **What negative reaction/ result followed/?**

The students struggled and got frustrated, he handed in messy and poor quality homework. Student distanced himself even more from the peers and the school.

#### **What went wrong? Due to what negative intersectionality factor(s) did the support fail to produce results?**

Culture and race: John's cultural background was unsupportive and generally not prepared to trust mainstream education in any form; his family was unaware of the depth of this problem at school and the consequences their lack of support was producing.

### Situation 2

**SEN type:** ADHD

#### **Conventional support provided by the school/ teacher, without success:**

Teachers tried: additional homework, discipline measures, forcing Julie to openly confront her peers in order to discuss disagreements with them

#### **What negative reaction/ result followed/?**

The student did not improve her performance, low grades and conflicts led to lowering of self esteem, withdrawal, detachment/inattentiveness and consequently to an even worse performance continuing in a downward spiral.

#### **What went wrong? Due to what negative intersectionality factor(s) did the support fail to produce results?**

The main reason for the failure of the conventional measures and attempted support in school was the factor of gender, which plays a major part in girls' vs. boys' ADHD. Other negative impacting factors include family and culture (i.e. traditional perception of a girl's role in the society).

## b) Stories:

### Rasheed, part two

(continuation of Story 1 from Step 2)

“Teachers tried various strategies to tackle my dyslexia. They assigned homework which I always handed in messy or unsatisfactory. My test scores were continually low, and the frustration I felt did not help improve my performance. In group work projects I found myself excluded or unable to contribute or establish a meaningful cooperation with my peers.

Back at home, my reality was very different. My older brother and sister excelled in school, so they would tease me because I couldn't read. My mother scolded me, calling me “dumb” and “stupid” for not being able to succeed in school like them.

I come from the projects. There is a mentality there that White people are out to get us. I suppose my family thought they were helping me by practicing “tough love,” but in fact they were shattering what little self-esteem I had. All of it was driving me to seek refuge in the streets from peers who were, more often than not, up to no good.”

### Julie, part two

(continuation of Story 2 from Step 2)

“While friendly and well-meaning, I often got distracted while a classmate was

talking to me. I missed the other person's social cues, and didn't respond in a desirable manner. I was both impulsive and inattentive and likely to commit many social blunders.

Now I know that boys tend to be more direct with each other and resolve their conflicts more openly, so when I was made by my teacher to stand up and confront a peer in order to resolve a discipline issue, it was a traumatic experience for me. Now I know that a boy with ADHD doesn't require the same set of social skills, but back then at school, it was a different situation.

As most mothers do, my mother expected me to conform to the rules and standards of both the school and society. I was told over and over again to be thoughtful, polite, and compliant, which was an unattainable goal with a girl with ADHD.

So even though my teachers tried to help, this all came down to additional practice and homework, and repeated attempts on my forced socialising, without much success.

As a result, my self-esteem was sinking as I questioned my academic and social abilities. I suffered in silence.”

### Part 3: What you can do to spot, understand and then limit the impact

In Stage 2 of this Module, you were introduced to Rasheed, who is a successful actor despite being diagnosed with dyslexia at the age of nine. Rasheed said that despite being included in the school's programme for SEN children, he was struggling and would have probably ended up in prison if there hadn't been for a great teacher.

#### Task one

You are going to read an account of how a teacher managed to help Rasheed to counterbalance the negative impact of the intersecting factors.

Before reading the story, use the table below to guess the order of actions undertaken by the teacher. Arrange the actions. Put these actions in the order of importance in the given situation. In the spaces provided, write numbers 1-10 (1 = most important; 10 = least important):

a) Establish and maintain a continual in-depth dialogue with the family of the SEN student	
b) Talk to the student and try to get beyond the surface, in order to establish the root intersectionality causes	
c) Establish the extent of support provided to the student in the home environment	

d) Talk to colleagues and other professionals in order to gain useful new information	
e) Refer to expert and reference books in order to gain additional knowledge on the matter	
f) Attend seminars in order to gain additional knowledge and competences	
g) Reduce the burden of homework and/or break down the load into small tasks	
h) Practise and promote empathy and encouragement and /or introduce calming techniques such as breathing deeply, thinking positive thoughts, etc.	
i) Organise group counselling with others with similar SEN students	
j) Take time to reflect on your own strategies and methodologies and look for areas for improvement	

Now, listen to and read the third part of the story about Rasheed find out which of the above techniques were used by the teacher.

### Rasheed, part three

(continuation of story)

I had a dyslexic black boy in 9th grade who was struggling with his academic performance. After some time, I realized that his results were way below his capabilities, so I tried a number of strategies to help him improve. None of those were successful, and at the same time I could see that he was becoming more and more detached from the school and other students.

I felt that I could help, but did not know how. I took an opportunity to speak to him about his life and realised that he did care about the school and his performance, only did not know how to improve. So I told him, “I need you to sit in the front of the class.” This proved to be a positive change.

Not much later, we had an agreement about the homework, and I made sure he was getting the amount and type of homework he could tackle and make progress. In this case, it meant careful assignment of textual homework, writing and reading assignments.

What I also discovered was that at home, he had little support from his siblings and parents, who probably unwillingly but effectively discouraged him from doing his homework assignments. To help him with this, I made an arrangement with the school librarian and Rasheed was provided with a space where he could do his homework.

He responded with a lot of enthusiasm. In regular dialogues in which I revised the aims for his assignments, it became clear that he had a problem with self-esteem. I made sure that he would get praise for everything he did

accurately or when he put in the effort. I spoke to several fellow teachers, and we joined forces in our work with Rasheed.

He responded in a fantastic way, and you could virtually see the transformation. I used this opportunity to have a meaningful conversation with his parents, explaining what their son was facing and what we could together do to enhance his academic achievement. It really is not that complicated – it all starts with love and encouragement. Most important of all, parents can simply hug a kid and say, “It’s OK, baby. We’re going to work together to make you the best reader you can possibly be.”

Ultimately, his academic improvement and the ensuing boost in self-esteem helped him to overcome the barriers which almost separated him from his peers. He was now able to challenge the misconceptions he had been brought up with, as a black boy growing up in an environment of mistrust towards the predominantly white society.

When I asked him to join our school Drama Club, he accepted without hesitation. It could be that he trusted me, but perhaps he knew deep inside him that he had the talent for acting. From that moment on, things were moving much better for Rasheed.

Am I happy with how the things worked out? More than that. Through my experience with John I was able to learn a lot and I am happy to know that this knowledge still helps young people who have to cope with intersectionality, as well as the challenges of being neurodiverse.

### Follow-up task:

1. Which of the strategies from the list were actually used by the teacher?

2. Use the ideas from the list to make your own 'Intersectionality actions' that are the most appropriate to your teaching situation.

### Answers

Question 1: Rasheed's teacher does not mention using strategies under e), f) and i).

### Part 4

3. Optional additional task: Read the story about Julie to find out why she insists that "if it hadn't been for my teacher I wouldn't be where I am today".

#### Julie

"Julie caught my attention early on as one of the students I had trouble with, both with discipline in my class and also with the performance.

I knew that she was one of our ADHD students, but unlike the others, she somehow failed to respond in a positive way to the support that we as teachers were providing. This support was in a way dictated by our Individual Educational Plans and the school policy for SEN students. Looking back, I can now see that such support cannot be successful without a truly individualised approach to every student.

In addition to struggling with her assignments (as a rule, she would hand in unfinished homework), she would try to mask her difficulties and she appeared shy. This type of her behaviour was in sharp contrast to occasional lapses in discipline, such as fiddling with her crayons while struggling to stay tuned in, or going through emotional outbursts, which threatened to isolate her from the rest of the class.

As a Biology teacher, however, I noticed that she enjoyed practical and laboratory assignments. The turning point was a situation in which the class were practising First Aid and I could see how Julie brightened up and excelled.

This got me thinking, and as a result I changed my approach to her assignments.

Apart from being more patient with her in general, I started to cut back on the number of tasks assigned for her homework. I also allowed her to retake the odd test.

There were several techniques that I learned from more experienced colleagues, so I soon made sure that my lectures were split into shorter periods, of up to ten minutes at the most.

Needless to say, I was generous with positive feedback for both effort and achievement, and pretty soon Julie was making some real academic progress and showed a very positive change in her self-esteem.“



## Developing a SEN culture

*A teacher is only one of the many stakeholders/ participants in the teaching process inside an inclusive classroom. The role of other stakeholders is often of key importance in the success of the actions undertaken by the teacher.*

*A truly effective support in any institution is possible only within a well-developed SEN culture.*

### Task one

Read the comments A-E made by teachers from different schools. Then look at the SEN Culture Development Model and try to determine where on the chart of SEN Culture Development Model each of the schools A-E is.

#### Teacher comments:

A: "In our school, we do not try to attract or retain SEN students when they do enrol – if they can cope with the curriculum – fine, if not, we advise them to look for a school with a more flexible curriculum."

B: "The most important thing for me as a teacher is to have all the documentation and reports completed and submitted in time, even though I rarely get any feedback on them."

C: "In my classroom, I have to pay proper attention to the majority of the students and I am afraid I do not always have enough time for my three SEN students in the class."

D: "We have regular meetings with parents and (from) the local community, to see if the school environment does what it takes to accommodate members of ethnic minorities."

E: "I often feel that my efforts as a teacher are not understood by the family of my dyslexic student."

### SEN Culture Development Model Special Educational Needs





## Task two

Answer the following questions:

1. Where do you think your school is on the SEN Culture Development model?

2. What are the steps that have already been taken by your school that have made it possible to reach the current position?

3. What steps need yet to be taken in order to progress to the next level on this model?

4. Who are the key stakeholders to be involved in the future development of SEN culture in your school?

5. How can intersectionality be taken into consideration when developing an action plan for a fully integrated SEN culture?



## What to consider about Intersectionality and neurodiversity: 9 thoughts

*Below is a nine-point checklist for how to manage your approach to intersectionality and SEN*

- 1. Work towards creating classroom communities where the **discourse of difference** positions all students and their unique traits as positive, valued, and respected.
- 2. Be committed to bringing an **ethic of care** into the classroom. Within such a classroom differences would be embraced and explored through open dialogue.
- 3. **Achievement and academic goals** must also be balanced with a desire to instill a moral element into the classroom that celebrates diversity.
- 4. As educators teach and provide students the opportunity to resist and **challenge pervasive stereotypes** individually and collectively.
- 5. Seek out and **engage parents** and guardians in the classroom community. This entails that educators attempt to understand a parent's perspective and acknowledge that perspective as valuable.
- 6. **Create safety** within your teaching environment. Building trust, support and respect in the classroom takes time. Being open and purposeful with how you develop a safe classroom environment is the first step. Allow each student to have their own space and let them use this space as they see fit
- 7. **Address bias.** When teacher bias presents itself, the teacher may or may not be conscious of it, so it's important to have an honest look at ourselves to see if we hold beliefs that potentially damage our ability to education and form relationships with our students
- 8. **Network peers and role models.** Greater opportunity for meaningful social contact may improve social involvement of, as well as enhance academic outcomes for, pupils with SEN educated in mainstream schools.
- 9. **Start with strength.** Students in strengths-based programs are absent less and have higher GPAs, greater confidence, and more hope. A child's belief that they can change, grow, learn, and succeed – that is, their level of hope – is absolutely key to educational success. Ultimately, a child will not sustain effort unless they believe it will have a positive effect.

## Check your understanding

Take a short quiz to check you've understood the main points of the module.

Do the quiz to see how well you remember some of the main points of the Intersectionality module.

### 1. Students with the same SEN will...

- a) behave the same
- b) express themselves differently
- c) keep to each other

### 2. SEN children cannot be significantly affected by other factors...

- a) true
- b) false

### 3. Girls with ADHD, as opposed to boys with ADHD, are...

- a) physically aggressive
- b) impulsive and inattentive with low self-esteem
- c) unable to sit still

### 4. Inequality, inability to articulate needs and volatile home environment relate to...

- a) Rudeness
- b) Inadequate social skills
- c) Poverty/social deprivation

### 5. Teachers' role in SEN is to...

- a) Put together a plan towards a more positive SEN culture
- b) Leave the SEN issue to experts
- c) Treat all students in the same way

## Answers

1. The correct answer is B: SEN does not mean the same for all children, each child will react differently
2. The correct answer is B – a number of factors affects SEN students, such as race, gender, socio-economic aspect, family, culture...
3. The correct answer is B - undiagnosed ADHD can have a negative impact on girls' self-esteem. It can even affect their mental health. Boys with ADHD typically externalize their frustrations. But girls with ADHD usually turn their pain and anger inward
4. The correct answer is C: Poorer children tend to have less time, power and fewer resources. They generally have lower academic achievements, therefore SEN is harder to spot and provide support.
5. The correct answer is A – Teachers play a vital role in encouraging positive SEN culture and can bring about huge impact on children's education and life opportunities.

## Reflect on the module

*In this final section, think about what you've learned this module and how you can use this in your day-to-day working life.*

1. What is your biggest takeaway from this module about the challenges of intersectionality in SEN?

2. What do you commit to changing in your practice to take into consideration the intersecting factors which affect SEN students?

3. What do you understand about how intersectionality impacts SEN?