

Why SEN is complicated

Welcome to Module 2 of your SEN toolkit!

In this module we delve into some of the details of SEN in order to help explain and understand the complex challenges we face as teachers and learning designers.

Aims

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

- identify some of the core concepts that are fundamental to effective SEN provision
- adapt your and other attitudes towards SEN to your own context
- understand your own preconceptions, limiting beliefs, knowledge gaps, and constraints in relation to SEN



Check-in

Conversations about why SEN is a complicated subject can be difficult, but they're important. Have you ever considered some of the frustrating things people say about neurodiverse children? – and how these things might make them feel?

Read the ten statements about **teachers**, below. Then tick the box next to them if you've ever heard people say that statement (or something like it).

- Teachers get paid more than a lot of other jobs. Why are they always complaining?
- Isn't teaching the closest thing you'll get to "a job for life"? That's so lucky!
- You only spend an average of about twenty hours a week teaching!
- Teachers are just there to make kids' lives miserable and keep them in one place until the bell rings.
- You say it's hard, but really, you're just working with children. It's not like a proper job.
- How many weeks a year do you get on holiday? Is it ten? More?
- Those who can, do. Those who can't, teach.
- I read a statistic once that teachers work a lot fewer hours than most professions.

- It's not like your company loses money and has to sack people if you do a bad job.
- Don't you finish work sometime in the afternoon?

How about SEN **children** though? Have you ever heard any of the following said about them? Read the ten statements about SEN children, below. Then tick the box next to them if you've ever heard people say that statement (or something like it).

- SEN is characterised by a deficiency in...
- I'm really positive about the disabilities of the SEN children that I teach
- They'll never achieve as much as the other children
- SEN can be such a problem for teachers
- Dyslexic children can't read or write
- Autistic children have no empathy with other kids
- ADHD children can be really tiring sometimes!
- A lot of parents and children use dyslexia to excuse poor learning – kids hide behind it
- They can be as good as other children in some areas
- They're special, even though they have problems

Reflexive questions

Now tick the face that most represents how these statements make you feel. How about how these statements might make SEN children feel?



We all know how hard it can be to hear casual stereotypes about us, and it's understandable how easy it is to unwittingly say the wrong thing.

Article: My SEN Pupil?

You are about to read a dialogue between two teachers. Although re-written in a format that suits the task, this is taken from an actual dialogue that happened.

Please read the dialogue: My SEN Pupil. Whilst reading, think about how it makes you feel.

This is an edited conversation that happened between two teachers, Carlos and Mariana. The names are not their real names.

Carlos: I can't believe it. There's this one boy who just disrupts everything in class. I've tried everything.

Mariana: How does he disrupt everything?

Carlos: He's just unruly. He won't sit still, he won't listen, he won't concentrate, he interrupts all the other kids, he's even got into fights because he's such a pain. I've tried talking to him nicely, I've tried shouting, I've tried punishing him, I've even tried ignoring him, but nothing works.

Mariana: That's terrible. How is he?

Carlos: How's *he*? It's not him we should be worrying about, it's all the other children. He's ruining everything for them!

Mariana: But it's not his fault, is it?

Carlos: Of course it is. The others aren't the ones running around all the time, they're not the ones making noises to themselves, or shouting out when they shouldn't. Who else's fault is it?

Mariana: Maybe it doesn't have to be anybody's fault. Maybe it's just who he is.

Carlos: Yes, and "who he is" is a monster. I can't get through my lessons sometimes.

Mariana: What did he say when you tried talking to him?

Carlos: He just clammed up. He looked really sad, looked at the ground, looked stressed, and said he was sorry. And then later that afternoon, he was up to his old tricks. It's like he wasn't listening to me at all.

Mariana: Honestly, it sounds like you might be dealing with him wrongly. It sounds like you're expecting him to fit in with all the other kids in the way they fit in with each other. Have you considered why he behaves like he does?

Carlos: Sure – he's just naughty and disruptive! We all get kids like that in class.

Mariana: But all you've done is label him. That's not understanding why he is the way he is.

Carlos: So you expect me to spend all my energy discovering what makes him disruptive, while at the same time he's free to carry on disrupting everybody else's learning? I don't have time for that, and the other students don't have time for that either. It's discipline he needs, or he'll keep spoiling things for everyone else.

Mariana: Okay, I know how hard it is for all of us when children behave in ways we're not prepared for. Could you ask him to come and talk to me please? I think I know somebody who might be able to help him...

Reflexive questions

1. Once you've read the dialogue, highlight or note down all the negative language you think Carlos used about the student in question.

Check your answers against the **highlights**. Do you think there's more negative language that hasn't yet been highlighted?

Answers

Carlos: I can't believe it. There's this one boy who just **disrupts** everything in class. I've tried everything.

Mariana: How does he disrupt everything?

Carlos: He's just **unruly**. He **won't sit still**, he **won't listen**, he **won't concentrate**, he **interrupts** all the other kids, he's even got into fights because he's **such a pain**. I've tried talking to him nicely, I've tried shouting, I've tried punishing him, I've even tried ignoring him, but nothing works.

Mariana: That's terrible. How is he?

Carlos: How's *he*? It's not him we should be worrying about, it's all the other children. **He's ruining everything** for them!

Mariana: But it's not his fault, is it?

Carlos: Of course it is. The others aren't the ones **running around all the time**, they're not the ones **making noises** to themselves, or **shouting** out when they **shouldn't**. Who else's **fault** is it?

Mariana: Maybe it doesn't have to be anybody's fault. Maybe it's just who he is.

Carlos: Yes, and "who he is" is a **monster**. I can't get through my lessons sometimes.

Mariana: What did he say when you tried talking to him?

Carlos: He just clammed up. He looked really sad, looked at the ground, looked stressed, and said he was sorry. And then later that afternoon, he was up to **his old tricks**. It's like he **wasn't listening to me** at all.

Mariana: Honestly, it sounds like you might be dealing with him wrongly. It sounds like you're expecting him to fit in with all the other kids in the way they fit in with each other. Have you considered why he behaves like he does?

Carlos: Sure – he's just **naughty** and **disruptive**! We all get kids like that in class.

Mariana: But all you've done is label him. That's not understanding why he is the way he is.

Carlos: So you expect me to spend all my energy discovering what makes him **disruptive**, while at the same time he's free to carry on disrupting everybody else's learning? I don't have time for that, and the other students don't have time for that either. It's discipline he needs, or he'll keep **spoiling** things for everyone else.

Mariana: Okay, I know how hard it is for all of us when children behave in ways we're not prepared for. Could you ask him to come and talk to me please? I think I know somebody who might be able to help him...

1.1 How do you think this negative language would make the child feel if he knew he was being talked about like that?

1.2 Do you think it's possible the student was neurodivergent? If so, what neurodiverse condition (SEN) do you think he had?

1.3 Can you think of any teachers you know who have reacted to students like Carlos did? Can you think of any teachers who have reacted to students like Mariana did?

Answer 1.2: The student may well have had ADHD

2. What stereotypes do you think Carlos held about students such as the one he was complaining about?

2.1 Write down two ways in which these stereotypes might impact upon Carlos's interactions with students

2.2 Write down two ways in which these stereotypes might negatively affect SEN students

2.3 Now write down two ways in which these stereotypes might privilege (unfairly benefit, at the expense of others) non-SEN students

Perceptions of SEN

In this section you will explore how SEN is described by different people, and how these different contexts can influence how people perceive SEN learners.

Part 1: How SENs are described by people

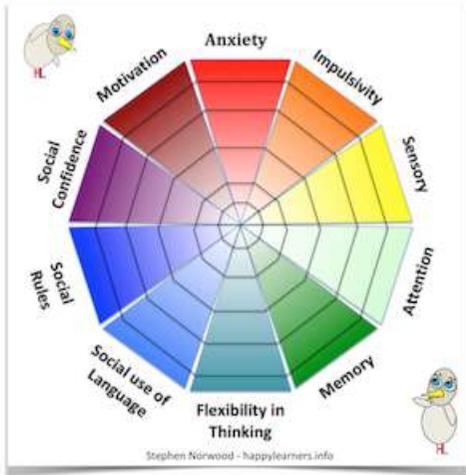
Look at the cards: “SEN Is...”. These are all ways that different SENs have been described by different people. Guess which SEN is being described on each card, and then select that card to see whether you’re right. Is this the only SEN you think that could be described in this way?

<p>Different thinking style</p> <p>Answer:</p>	<p>Differently abled</p> <p>Answer:</p>
<p>Learning difficulty</p> <p>Answer:</p>	<p>Slow learners</p> <p>Answer:</p>
<p>Hyperactive</p> <p>Answer:</p>	<p>Attention to detail</p> <p>Answer:</p>
<p>Uncontrollable</p> <p>Answer:</p>	<p>Slow readers</p> <p>Answer:</p>

<p>Challenging</p> <p>Answer:</p>	<p>Annoying and disruptive</p> <p>Answer:</p>
<p>Literal thinkers</p> <p>Answer:</p>	<p>Unsociable</p> <p>Answer:</p>
<p>Creative thinkers</p> <p>Answer:</p>	<p>Gets stressed easily</p> <p>Answer:</p>
<p>Good at solving problems</p> <p>Answer:</p>	<p>Different</p> <p>Answer:</p>
<p>Great reserves of energy</p> <p>Answer:</p>	<p>Can't spell</p> <p>Answer:</p>
<p>Disorganised</p> <p>Answer:</p>	<p>Quiet</p> <p>Answer:</p>

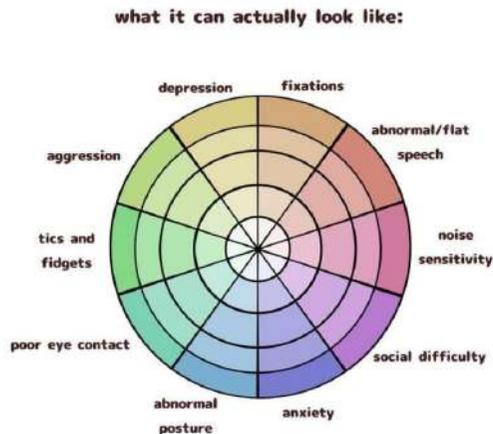
Answers

Different thinking style Answer: Dyslexia	Differently abled Answer: Dyslexia	Creative thinkers Answer: Dyslexia	Gets stressed easily Answer: ASD
Learning difficulty Answer: ASD	Slow learners Answer: Dyslexia	Good at solving problems Answer: Dyslexia	Different Answer: ASD
Hyperactive Answer: ADHD	Attention to detail Answer: ASD	Great reserves of energy Answer: ADHD	Can't spell Answer: Dyslexia
Uncontrollable Answer: ADHD	Slow readers Answer: Dyslexia	Disorganised Answer: Dyslexia	Quiet Answer: ASD
Challenging Answer: ADHD	Annoying and disruptive Answer: ADHD	Part 2: Spectrums in SEN Often, we hear of “spectrums” in SEN (such as the “autism spectrum”). But now we can see how the idea of a spectrum might be limiting. Take a look at an example of “the autism spectrum”, created by Stephen Norwood of HappyLearners.info:	
Literal thinkers Answer: ASD	Unsociable Answer: ASD		



Sections on the spectrum include “anxiety”, “social use of language”, “memory”, and “impulsivity”, among others.

Now take a look at another example of “the autism spectrum”, created by TheMighty.com.



Sections on this spectrum include “fixations”, “aggression”, “poor eye contact”, and “social difficulty”, among others.

It’s clear that there’s an almost infinite number of options to include, and that the choices we make depend on our own aims and purposes.

Now try imagining that one of your students is “on the spectrum” and answer the following questions:

- Do you think that if you created a profile for this student, she or he would always occupy the same places on the spectrum?
- Would this student always be placed (for instance) 10% of the way “up” the “anxiety” section, and 70% of the way “up” the “social awkwardness” section?
- Might it be that thinking of your student like this might define her (or him) in limiting ways?

Now consider: what might it mean to be “right at the top of” the “anxiety” scale? And what might it mean to be “right at the top of” the “social use of language” scale? Are these scales, created neatly in the shape of a circle, really comparable?

Think of some people you know. These might be colleagues, they might be parents, they might be other students at your school. How might they construct an “autism spectrum” for a student you know (or can imagine) who is autistic? How might that student construct a similar spectrum for herself or himself? Would these spectrums be the same?

Part 3: The importance of context in the world of SEN

Now, look at the image below and immediately ask yourself: what does this picture look like / represent? Do you think other people would see the same thing? (if you have the opportunity, ask some colleagues)



We see what we see partly because of what we're looking at, but partly because of who we are.

If we say “this student is autistic”, or “that student is dyslexic”, we’re making a statement as much about our notions of autism and dyslexia as it is about the student we’re talking about. It’s also easy to imagine, then, that as our descriptions and understandings of SEN are dependent on our contexts, and everybody’s context is different, there will be some differences in how SEN is looked upon from one person to another – especially where there are differences in class, culture, and emphasis on academic success.

Finally, list three factors that might influence how different people could look at dyslexia, autism, and ADHD. How are these factors different from your own context?

For all SEN students, there is therefore better understanding of neurodivergent conditions when we *ask* and *listen*, rather than *label*.



Preparing to listen to SEN students better

The world of SEN is complicated. The way that dyslexia, ADHD, and ASD might impact a student will differ from person to person, culture to culture, and moment to moment. As we have seen, simply saying “This is what ADHD (for instance) is”, can be hugely problematic. On the other hand, listening is a valuable way to learn what people are going through. We all want to be listened to!

One of the best ways to understand SEN students and the experiences they have in education is to listen to them. But often, in order to listen, we have to know how to ask the right questions in the right ways.

Look at the “Butterfly Template” for asking and listening. The template has two sides to it – on the left, there’s the side that deals with asking the right questions; on the right, there’s the side that deals with listening for the important answers. The top half of each section is divided into four segments, dealing with the benefits of asking and listening; the bottom half of each section is divided into four segments, dealing with the challenges involved with asking and listening.

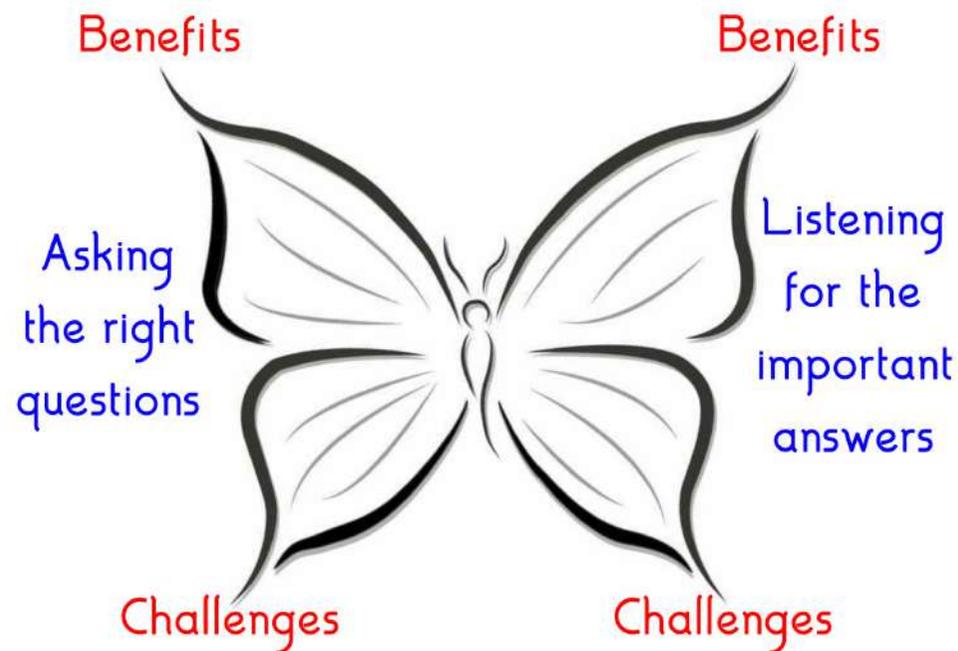
Fill out the butterfly template as best you can. What are the biggest challenges involved with asking the right questions of your students? How can you overcome these challenges?

What are the biggest benefits you will get from asking the right questions?

What are the biggest challenges involved with listening to your students?

How can you overcome these challenges?

What are the biggest benefits you will get from listening to these answers?

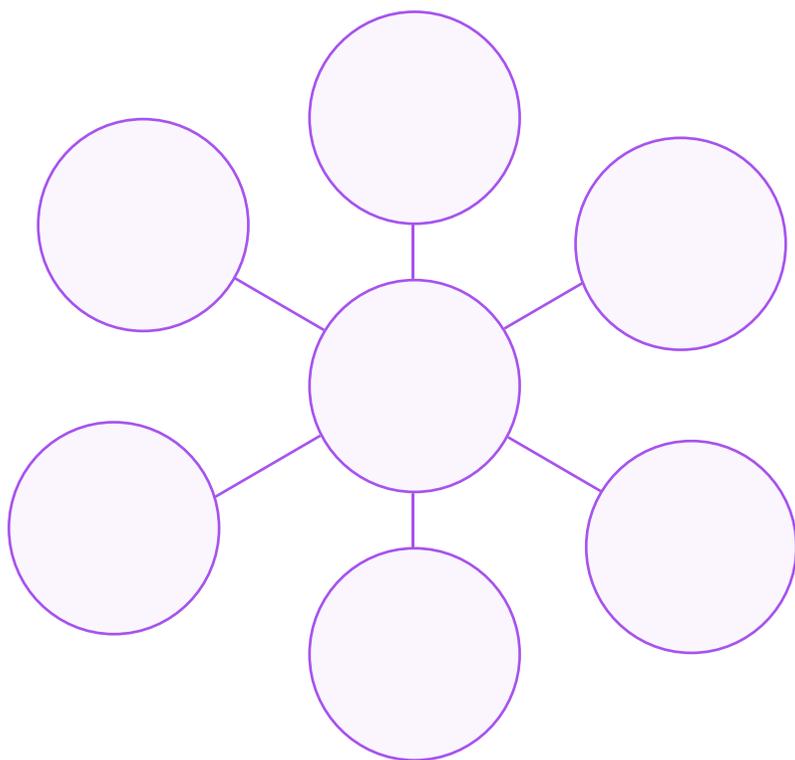




One of the key values of the SEN Toolkit is that we find ways to communicate. Listening is one of the keys to communication, and labelling – while sometimes useful – can limit communication by limiting our curiosity.

Fill out the spider diagram – “listening not labelling” – with six reasons listening to SEN students is more beneficial than labelling them.

Listening is not just something we do naturally. Often, we have to be prepared to listen.



Planning to Listen

Below is a template for you to fill in.

This template should help you identify the students who need you to listen most, identify ways of creating the right environment to listen, identify ways of reducing barriers to communication, and identify ways of getting the most out of the listening process.

Fill out the template, then discuss it with a colleague, asking for advice and ideas on how to develop the plan you have made.

Stage 1: Identify

How do I identify the students I most need to listen to?

- What are the characteristics I might look for?
- How might I match the characteristics to SEN?
- How might I find out who has those characteristics?
- Whom should I ask to find out relevant information?

Success could look like:





Stage 2: Environment

How do I create the right environment to listen?

- What kind of environment for dialogue is there now?
- What is positive / negative about this environment?
- What kind of environment do I want, ideally?
- What three steps can I take to engineer the optimal environment?
- What about the environment might stop the student wanting to talk?
- What about the environment might stop me wanting to talk?
- What three steps can I take to remove the environmental barriers to dialogue?

Success could look like:

Stage 3: Barriers

How do I remove the barriers to communication?

- In any teacher –student situation, what three things might make communication difficult?
- How do I remove these barriers?
- In a teacher – SEN student situation, what three things might make communication difficult?
- How do I remove these barriers?

Success could look like:





Stage 4: Trust

How do I build trust and establish rapport?

- What are the key skills I need to build trust? Where can I check online?
- What are the key skills for establishing rapport? Where can I check online?
- How might I demonstrate that the student's experiences are important to me?
- What outside influences might damage trust and rapport between teacher and student?
- What three things can I do to remove those barriers?

Success could look like:

Stage 4: Listening

How do I get the most out of listening?

- What do I want to listen for?
- How will I approach these topics sensitively?
- What are my own limiting beliefs about the SEN student's experiences?
- How might I demonstrate I'm listening during dialogue? What are the three key components of active listening?
- How will I actively reflect upon the things I've heard?

Success could look like:





Stage 6: Proof

How do I demonstrate that I've listened to the student?

- What types of actions might the student hope to see after the dialogue?
- What kinds of changes in my behaviour might I initiate?
- How might I show the student that I have been listening?

Success could look like:

Stage 7: Activating the plan

How do I put my plan into action?

- What three things might I need to do in order to initiate the above steps?
- How can I make these three things SMART?
 - Specific
 - Measurable
 - Achievable
 - Relevant
 - Time-bound
- What challenges do I foresee in putting this plan into action?
- What can I do to overcome these challenges?
- When will I begin?

Success could look like:



Five ways to navigate the complexities of SEN

Now you have completed your template, take some time to reflect on it. SEN is a complex topic and only through listening to those with SEN can we truly begin to understand these complexities.

Five things we can do to navigate the complexities of SEN include:

Examine

Examine our own ingrained prejudices and implicit bias, by examining the language we use about SEN students

Consider

Consider the ways we currently look at SEN. Are these ways limiting, are they adequate, and are they negative?

Listen

Listening is the best way to learn. If we forget to listen, we risk limiting our understanding.

Be humble

Often, when we listen, we hear things that we might not want to hear, or we learn things we always believed to be otherwise. But listening requires that we take seriously those things that we hear, and the first thing we need to do, therefore, is accept that we have a lot to learn.

Relax

The world of SEN is complicated, but that doesn't mean it's impossible to

navigate, or that every time we get something wrong we're ruining things for other people. The whole world is complicated, and getting things right is a long, fascinating, and hopefully enlightening process. It is important that we realise that taking the journey, rather than automatically getting everything right, is an incredibly important step.

And of course, the five principles of the SEN Manifesto are useful to remember here as well. They are:

1. We value everybody – those with SEN, those who might have SEN, those without SEN, and ourselves included. Having an outward-facing attitude is the best way of becoming SEN-aware, and valuing SEN students does not mean paying less attention to others.
2. We accept ourselves – in this context, it can mean that we accept and love ourselves even though we get things wrong from time to time, because nobody's perfect. The very act of taking The SEN Toolkit is something to be positive about.
3. We find ways to communicate – specifically, in this instance, we work hard to listen to our SEN students.
4. We get it right from the start – but we should remember that “getting it right” here does not mean “we are perfect from the start”, it means “we start here, now, to improve and develop”.
5. We all share responsibility – it is our responsibility to listen for the negative language that we and others might use, to watch out for the labelling that is all too often used, and to bring others into the conversation. This also means allowing ourselves to learn from our colleagues, and perhaps most importantly, the SEN students themselves.

Check your understanding

To check understanding after such a challenging module, try this fun and easy quiz!

Choose true or false.

1. All cultures see time the same way

- a) True b) False

2. Dyslexia is a single, identifiable condition

- a) True b) False

3. The “autism spectrum” is the definitive way of seeing “autism spectrum disorder”

- a) True b) False

4. The language we use about our students betrays our attitudes towards them

- a) True b) False

5. Listening to SEN students’ experiences can help us understand the difficulties they face

- a) True b) False

Answers

1b, 2b, 3b, 4a, 5a.

We have compiled six key points from this module that you can take with you:

1. SEN is complex, not least because the needs of the students are not always fully understood by those who know the student
2. SEN is complex, partly because the needs of the students can come into conflict with the demands of the education system
3. SEN is complex, partly because of the negativity of the language we all use, without realising the harm it might do
4. SEN is complex, because there is no single thing each SEN condition can be described as
5. SEN is complex, partly because even sophisticated ways of looking at SEN (such as conditions being “spectrums”) are not always clear
6. SEN is complex, because understanding requires listening, and listening is a complicated activity

Which of these key points do you agree with the most? Would you add any other points to this list?

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 the module regarding the complexities of SEN?

2. What aspects of your own preconceptions, behaviour, and activities will you now reflect on, considering the work you have done?

3. What do you think will be the key things you will need to do when attempting to learn about SEN experiences from students, and why?