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## Intersectionality in Educational Spaces

It used to be that individual factors (a student's personality, lack of motivation, lack of parental support) were blamed for a student's struggling academic performance. It is only recently that schools have realised the grave impact that contextual factors have on student achievement. Included in these elements are systems of oppression (racism, sexism, ableism, etc.) that directly impact a student, by actively discriminating against non-dominant groups and not allowing them to thrive. Intersectionality is a framework born from the understanding that these systems operate together, creating an environment in which minoritised students struggle to succeed. Therefore, an intersectional analysis of schools is necessary to better tend to students' needs and ensure educational equity. Teachers and staff should have an understanding of how systems of oppression operate and should engage in continuous analysis of their own backgrounds in order to challenge any biases they may have in engaging with students.

“There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not lead single-issue lives.”  
Audre Lorde

The previous quote has been used to exemplify intersectionality, as it encapsulates its essence in a few words. When we talk about intersectionality, we refer to a framework that emphasises the interlinked systems of oppression and privilege which impact our everyday lives and which we cannot effectively separate. By systems of oppression, we refer to those structures designed to hinder individuals who belong to a non-dominant group by enacting discriminatory practices and policies. These structures include sexism, racism, transphobia, ableism, and heterosexism, to mention a few. Recognising the existence of these structures and making a concerted effort to halt their influence in our everyday school practices is critical to giving our students the best possible chance at academic success.



We should analyse our students' lives and our policies and practices with an intersectional approach in mind. This means we consider our students' multiple identity markers simultaneously, not focus on one at a time, and understand students face discrimination on multiple levels. For example, a student with ADHD may also have another identity marker (e.g., being from a migrant background or having low financial means) that further marginalises them. It is important to note that it is not the category itself that causes marginalisation but rather the societal implications built around it; social stigma is enacted and attached to these categories, and discrimination and exclusion of these students occur as a result. These factors are interconnected. If our approaches to diversity work and interventions do not view them as such and instead focus on one identity marker at a time, they will most likely fail. Teacher education should include notions that all forms of oppression should be addressed; otherwise we also risk creating a hierarchy of needs where some student's necessities are prioritised over others.

Returning to our hypothetical student: we could enact a program to offer academic support for students with ADHD, including measures aimed at addressing the stigma they face because of the ADHD label. But if we ignore the intracategorical variations, i.e., treat all ADHD students as similar and attempt to give them all the same support, our efforts are bound to fail.

Our hypothetical student, for example, may be further struggling with a language barrier. The support programme meant to help them manage ADHD may, therefore, not be helpful at all. Simultaneously, let's say there's a separate programme to support students with acquiring the language of instruction — where do we send our student? If we sent the student to both programmes, would this require further engagement outside school hours?

Let's assume we sent our hypothetical student to both programmes. These placements could put additional scheduling burdens on our student's parents, who may already be struggling with balancing parenting responsibilities and work responsibilities, and can ill afford to lose a day's work due to their precarious financial situation. Add to this the social stigma our student will face due to the various identity markers mentioned above (having ADHD, being impacted by poverty, being from a migrant background), and this sets up the student and their family for a less-than-ideal academic experience. Teachers and professionals within the school system should learn to be conscious of this, including being aware of the fact that schools don't exist in a vacuum. They exist within a cultural and historical context which impacts their everyday functioning.

## Recommendations

- Adequate teacher training programmes that are not afraid to openly discuss oppression and discrimination need to be developed and implemented at the schools.
- Measures need to be taken to ensure all teachers participate in training programs and they are held often enough, so that new hires also take part. These programmes need to focus on diversity and active challenging of systems such as heterosexism, racism, and sexism.
- Racism, sexism, heterosexism, and other systems of oppression — and their influence — should be seen as current problems and not as just historical issues which happen to continue to impact us. They are often deliberate, and we need to be on the lookout for the various ways in which they are enacted and replicated.
- Critical engagement of teachers and students in order to interrupt the use and transmission of oppressive ideologies and terminologies, which may continue to perpetuate exclusion and discriminatory practices within and outside the classroom.
- Teachers and professionals need to actively question their own diverse experiences and how their background and identity may impact their assumptions and understanding of their student's experiences.
- Teachers should be wary of activities that may cause students unintentional emotional harm. For example, having students create a family tree or a picture book may be painful for students who are impacted by the child protection system. They may not have access to this information.
- Teachers should be careful when sharing information regarding a student's life experiences, family life, or identity. This may lead to students being labelled as problematic, at risk, or other stigmatising names, contributing to justifying exclusion and discrimination. Students should be able to maintain agency concerning how (and with whom) they share their stories.
- A clear anti-bullying policy and procedure should be in place and shared among staff, students, and their families. Everyone will know how to proceed when such situations arise and teachers can take action swiftly and protect any mistreated student. A lucid procedure will also ensure there's no disparity in how some instances of bullying are managed versus others. This ensures all instances are taken seriously and prevents their escalation, leaving little room for subjectivity in interpreting offences.