TUTOR

Teachers' upskilling aiming at a holistic inclusivity in learning

Introduction to Inclusive education

Strand Four:

Reflexivity and the Interrogation of the Self

Contents

Introduction

Welcome to the unit "Reflexivity and self-questioning". This unit offers you the opportunity to reflect on your values, beliefs, and possible biases and to better understand their influence on your pedagogical practice. Through a combination of self-reflection and interactive discussions, you will develop a deeper awareness of reflexivity and its importance in the educational context. A particular focus will be on how stereotypes can influence educational outcomes.

The module combines asynchronous self-reflection with interactive elements.

Various materials and methods are available to help you work through the content of this unit in a practical way:

- **Core reading**: Introduction to the principles of reflexivity and prejudice

- **Diary exercises**: Document your insights, reflections, and progress

- **Scenarios and case studies**: analysis of real teaching situations to examine how prejudice manifests itself in everyday school life

By the end of the unit, you will have developed tactics for critically questioning your pedagogical practice and specifically making it more inclusive.

0.3.1 Beliefs, values, and prejudices

This strand explores how we come to hold our beliefs and values as educators, in the context of inclusive education. It covers the definition and meaning of reflexivity, the difference between implicit and explicit biases and their impact on educational practices and outcomes.

Beliefs are assumptions or ideas that a person holds to be true. According to Beck JS (2011), *"core beliefs are basic, inflexible, and generalized assumptions about oneself, others, the world, and the future"*. Beliefs develop through various influences such as cultural background, upbringing, education, personal experiences and social interactions.

Values, on the other hand, are stable, long-term guiding principles that determine what is important to a person. They serve as orientation for decisions and actions. Personal values can be *described* as *"overarching, desirable goals that motivate human behaviour and serve as guiding principles in life"*. A belief can develop into a value if a person attaches particularly high importance to it and is actively committed to it.
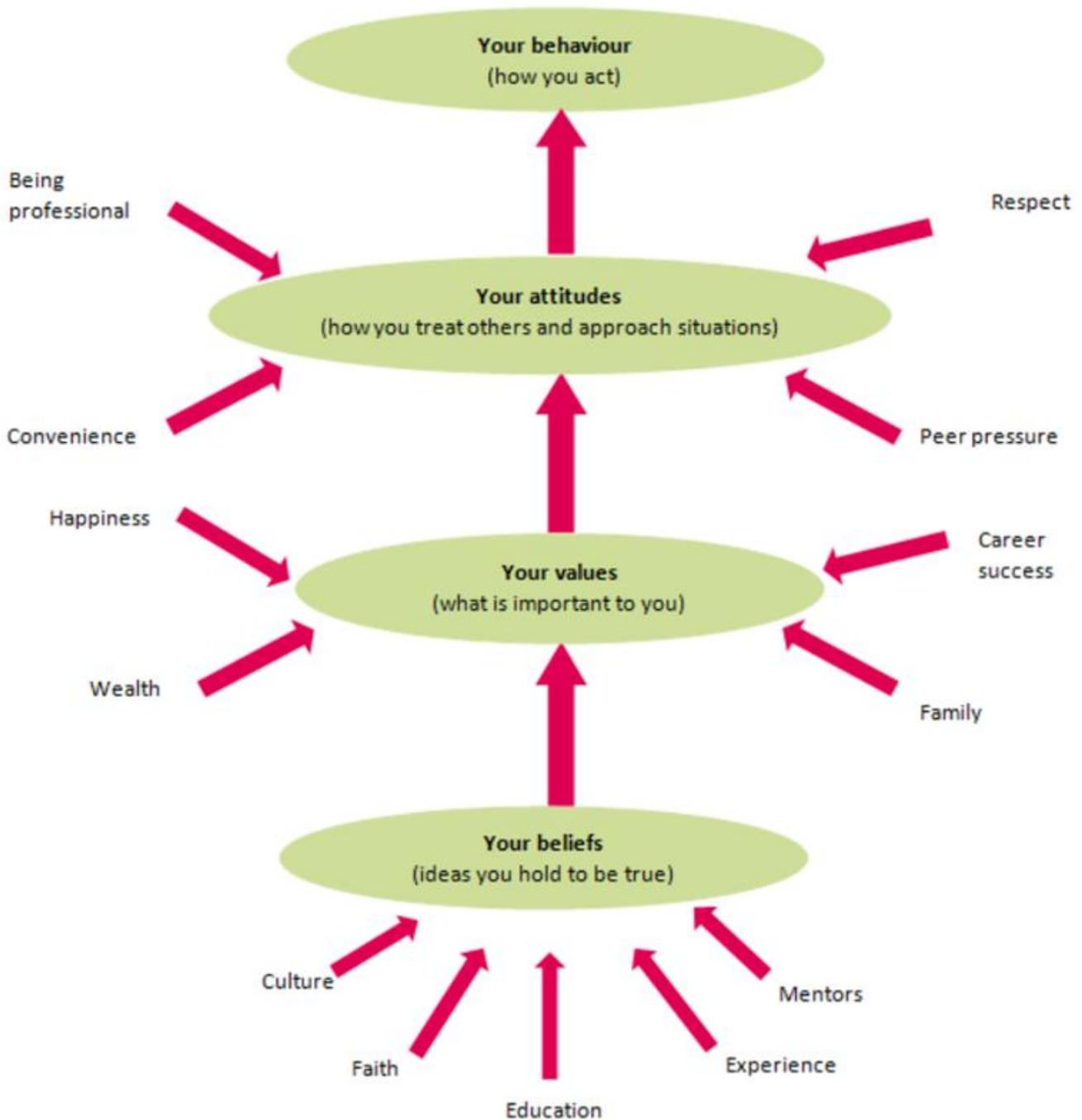
Both personal beliefs and values function as a filter through which people perceive their environment, themselves, and others. According to Bandura (1977), this value system develops through social learning processes - especially in childhood, when children adopt norms, attitudes and cultural messages through observation and imitation.

Personal beliefs and values influence thoughts and actions but are not the same as prejudice. However, if certain cultural messages are adopted without reflection, they can promote conscious or unconscious **prejudices**.

Identification of personal prejudices
Identifying prejudices is a crucial step in breaking through negative patterns of reflection, as prejudices often unconsciously distort reflection processes and lead to rigid thought patterns. By consciously questioning their own assumptions, individuals can recognize how these influence their thinking, decisions, and behaviour. This process promotes more nuanced self-awareness, reduces uncertainty, and enables reflexivity to be used constructively rather than getting caught up in inner conflict or bias. This paves the way for a more open, critical, and inclusive way of thinking.

How beliefs, values, and attitudes and formed and how the go on to impact your behaviour:

Graphic Source

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Prejudice can influence professional practice, decision making and judgment and affect how social differences are perceived, discussed, and treated - with direct consequences for learners and their families.

"If you know your beliefs and biases, you can develop better informed practices to prevent unintended messages, behaviours and discriminatory actions.” *(Guerra & Nelson, 2009).*

The emergence of preconceptions is inevitable and often results from a lack of understanding of different situations, people, or even interactions that we cannot fully grasp. These assumptions are not necessarily negative. These preconceptions are usually based on knowledge, lessons, beliefs, prejudices, or values passed on to us by those around us (e.g. families, community members, teachers in the form of cultural norms or truisms). They may also be based on our own past personal and professional experiences or even long-standing cultural norms in society that are reflected in deeply ingrained ideas about people, cultures, communities, or social situations.

Emergence and effects of prejudices

Presuppositions are a natural part of human cognition and often arise when we cannot fully grasp a situation, person, or interaction. They are not negative per se - in fact, **presuppositions serve as cognitive simplifications** that allow us to make quick decisions without carefully examining all the information. From an evolutionary perspective, this can be an advantage. However, preconceptions become problematic when they are based on **stereotypes**, negative

beliefs or unfounded assumptions about certain groups or situations. Then we speak of prejudices. In the long term, **prejudices** can develop into deeply rooted **beliefs** about people, cultures or social circumstances that unconsciously influence our own actions and judgments.

Prejudice takes many forms and can have a significant impact on interactions between teachers and learners. They are reflected in teaching methods, grading practices and accessibility measures and can - consciously or unconsciously - lead to discriminatory structures. A distinction is made between implicit and explicit prejudices.

Implicit prejudices are based on unconscious attitudes or stereotypes that influence actions, reactions and judgments without the person concerned being actively aware of them. They can be activated involuntarily and often lead to people being treated differently without it being intentional. For example, a teacher may unconsciously give more positive feedback and attention to students who are receiving instruction in the first language while students who are using a second language, and are engaging or speaking up less, receive less attention. These students may feel marginalized and less motivated to actively participate in class, which can affect their linguistic and academic development in the long run.

Explicit prejudices are conscious preferences or dislikes towards certain people or groups. They are based on clear convictions and can be communicated openly. For example, a teacher believes that men are more interested in science than women and therefore offers male students more support and resources in STEM subjects. Women may feel discouraged and undervalued, which affects their academic performance and reduces their chances of pursuing a STEM career later.

Both implicit and explicit prejudices can lead to discriminatory practices such as racism, gender discrimination, classism, or homophobia. They often have a profound impact on learners' self-image and educational opportunities. It is therefore essential to become aware of one's own assumptions, to question them critically and to take measures to create a truly inclusive learning environment.

How can prejudices be overcome?
Recognizing prejudices in others is often much easier than questioning our own unconscious assumptions.
Reducing prejudice in the educational environment requires a conscious examination of educational institutions structures and culture, teaching materials, and one's own attitude.

This requires the development and implementation of targeted **strategies to promote diversity, equality, and inclusion.** Key elements of such strategies should be:

- **Diverse curricula:** Learning materials should represent diverse cultures, identities, and experiences so that all students can find themselves in them and at the same time learn about different world views. Using an anti-bias review of curricula and teaching materials can help with this (see strand six).

- **Break down barriers:** Educational institutions should regularly review their policies and structures to ensure that discriminatory practices do not exist and that diversity is actively promoted.

- **Further training and opportunities for reflexivity for educators:** Regular training courses on unconscious bias, cultural sensitivity, and inclusive teaching methods help teachers to reflect on their practice and make it non-discriminatory. The landscape of inclusion is always shifting and progressing. It is important to stay on top of the latest research, practice, and agreed languages. Reflexivity (discussed later in this document) is not an activity that is completed once and done. Educators need to regularly check in with themselves to identify, name / acknowledge, and work towards erasing their own biases and values or beliefs that may be contrary to inclusive practice. However, they must be given time and space to do this.

Inclusive teaching enables all students to actively participate and contribute their perspectives while reducing discriminatory structures:

- **Use a variety of materials**: Literature, case studies, and examples should consider diverse cultural and social backgrounds to break down stereotypes and make marginalized groups visible in a non-tokenised way.

- **Create an open culture of discussion**: Students should be encouraged to critically question their opinions and discuss them openly while adhering to clear rules against discrimination and hate speech. Discussion does not have to be perfect. Perfection can be the tool of the oppressor (Nwanze, 2025).

- **Allow for mistakes and be gentle with yourself and others**: Building on the above point about perfection – mistakes will be made, and progress is not neat. Conversations and dialogue should be messy, imperfect, and allow for mistakes, learning and growth. Mistakes or hurtful language during a dialogue or conversation should be approached with curiosity rather than reproaches. Argue the point not the person – find out where the language or opinion is borne from,

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provide the correct or more appropriate language gently, and provide gentle insight into how the language or perception has changed, is hurtful, or harmful.

- **Use inclusive language**: Always try to use gender-neutral and culturally respectful language and addressing names and pronouns correctly promotes an appreciative learning environment. Ask for clarification on name pronunciation. Model making mistakes, apologising, and correcting the behaviour and the language.

Prejudices not only have an impact on teaching, but also on social interaction. An educational institution that **promotes respect and empathy** can reduce prejudice in the long term:

- **Anti-bullying programs:** Schools should actively combat not only physical but also verbal bullying and cyberbullying and encourage students to stand up for each other. However, remember that not all behaviour falls under bullying.

- **Mentoring by classmates:** Older students can function as mentors for younger students and actively exemplify empathy and inclusion. However, be mindful of who is holding the extra burden of mentoring and why.

- **Involve families and the community:** Engaging with parents, partners, families, and local communities about prejudice and inclusion can raise awareness of these issues. This also means listening and learning. Listen to understand not to respond.

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Regular evaluation is necessary to ensure that measures against prejudice are successful: Talk to students, teachers and communities help to make progress visible and identify areas for improvement. Remember when you seek conversations and understanding, it is important to put what you have learned into practice in a visible way and provide feedback to those who provided you with information and insight.

Recommended reading

Dewey, J. (1910). How We Think. Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company. https://doi.org/10.1037/10903-000

Guerra, P. L., & Nelson, S. W. (2009). Changing professional practice requires changing beliefs. *Phi Delta Kappan*, *90*(5), 354-359.

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Lin, M., Lake, V. E., & Rice, D. (2008). Teaching anti-bias curriculum in teacher education programs: What and how. Teacher Education Quarterly, 35(2), 187-200.

Patricia Poitevien, Cynthia Osman; Tackling Implicit and Explicit Bias Through Objective Structured Teaching Exercises for Faculty. J Grad Med Educ 1 June 2018; 10 (3): 353-354. doi: https://doi.org/10.4300/JGME-D-17-00906.1

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Beck JS. *Cognitive behaviour therapy: Basics and beyond*. Guilford press; 2011

0.3.2 Reflexivity

For Educators, reflexivity means critically questioning their own beliefs, assumptions, and teaching methods. This is not only about the subject content, but also about how these beliefs influence teaching actions and interactions with students.

In this unit, we look at the importance of reflexivity: Why should teachers question their own assumptions? How can a reflexive analysis help to identify blind spots in one's own pedagogical practice? The aim is to provide teachers with tools to reflect on their own assumptions and to recognize and remove possible barriers to an inclusive learning environment.

What is reflexivity?
Reflexivity is an ongoing process of self-reflection through which people engage with their actions, feelings, and perceptions to become aware of them. This process establishes a connection between our personal thoughts and the social context of the situation.

What is the difference between Reflexivity and Reflection?

Reflexivity is the act of noticing and uncovering. It is a continual process of reflexing back and forth of what values, beliefs, biases etc. that you hold and discover how you came to hold them. It allows you to notice your patterns of behaviours, thoughts, and motivations as you interact with the world, and then digging into them to find the rationale of why you are thinking and acting as you are in those social interactions. You notice as they evolve and change and are purposely curious about why that is. Reflexivity provides a deeper self-awareness and accountability for educators. Reflexivity examines you as a person.

Reflection is the act of looking back on your actions (your educational practice) and reviewing it for how you felt, what could have gone better, what worked well, and helps you plan what you need to do next. It is a more functional process that improves your awareness of how you are teaching, allows you to full understand and improve your practice. It also helps you to tailor your teaching to a specific group or individual. Reflection examines your practice.

A combination of reflexive thinking first, followed by reflecting on how you taught or delivered content is a good ongoing process to engage in for inclusive learning.

Types of reflexivity:

Reflexivity can manifest itself in diverse ways - as constructive self-observation that enables critical reflection, further development and open interaction, or as obstructive self-questioning that reinforces insecurities and distorts reflection processes. The latter can lead to blockages, bias, and rigid thought patterns. Both explicit and implicit reflexivity can contribute to personal and social development.

Explicit reflexivity is characterized by verbalized, expressed reflexivity. By openly expressing their thoughts and concerns, asking questions, seeking feedback, and engaging in social dialog, individuals gain a deeper understanding of the social context. Explicit reflexivity contributes to mutual understanding, helps to clarify thoughts and align one's actions with common goals.

Implicit reflexivity is an inner self-perception in which people reflect on their thoughts and emotions without verbal expression. This form of reflection allows personal motivations and behaviours to be questioned more deeply and promotes conscious, independent thinking. It supports personal development and facilitates ethical decision-making. By critically examining one's own assumptions, beliefs, motivations, and behaviours, it contributes to the creation of an inclusive educational environment.

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Ethical and fragmented reflexivity, on the other hand, can be seen more as obstructive processes. In **ethical reflexivity**, individuals wrestle with the question of who they should be in a particular social context, often at the expense of their own beliefs and values. This inner uncertainty can lead to inauthenticity and prevent them from fully engaging in social interactions. In the case of **fragmented reflexivity**, individuals are self-reflective but unconsciously use this awareness to reinforce their anxieties about social interactions. This leads to inner conflicts that they are not always able to control or resolve. The associated insecurities and tensions can make communication and collaboration more difficult. Those affected may feel overwhelmed and withdraw, which hinders their learning process.

In inclusive education, it is crucial to reflect on thoughts and actions regarding inclusion so that all students have equal opportunities for successful educational experiences. Through a reflexive process, teachers can better understand how their own thinking, beliefs and emotions shape their pedagogical actions.

The role of reflexivity in shaping your educational practice

Reflexivity is a key tool for making educational practices more conscious, fairer, and more inclusive. Not only does it help educators to question their own imprints and thought patterns, but it also enables them to actively shape the learning culture and sustainably develop their own pedagogical practice. Reflexivity helps to specifically analyse central aspects of teaching and one's own pedagogical attitude:

- **Uncovering hidden thought patterns**: Reflexive thinking and observations makes conscious and unconscious assumptions visible that can influence behaviour towards students.

- **Questioning one's own influences**: Educators are encouraged to reflexively think on how their own biography - shaped by their own educational experiences, social influences, and cultural norms – which in turn shapes their pedagogical actions and their view of students.

- **Reflecting power relations**: Educators have a certain position of power both in the classroom and beyond. Reflexivity helps to become aware of one's own role of authority and to understand power not as hierarchical control, but as responsibility for a fair and learning-promoting environment.

- **Strengthening sensitivity to diversity**: A reflexive attitude and practice makes it easier to perceive different life realities, needs, backgrounds and learning requirements and to respond to them in a targeted manner. This means not only reacting to diversity, but also actively integrating it into the classroom.

- **Promoting critical pedagogy**: Reflexivity supports a dialogical, participatory teaching culture in which educators and students can learn together, question traditional structures, and deal with social power relations.

- **Building empathic and supportive relationships**: Reflexivity helps educators to better empathize with their students' perspectives and create a trusting, appreciative learning atmosphere.

- **Align teaching practices with ethical principles**: Through a combination of reflection on practice and reflexivity on the self, educators can systematically review their teaching methods and decision-making processes and ensure that they are in line with the principles of inclusion, equity, and equality of opportunity.

- **Actively shaping classroom culture**: Reflexive teaching promotes a learning environment in which differences are valued, and students can contribute authentically without fear of being judged or devalued. By questioning what how you conceptualise a *classroom* or a *learning environment* you can be open to alternative views of what a classroom can look like and where learning can take place.

- **Lifelong learning and professional development**: Reflexive teachers see themselves as learners. They remain open to re-examining what they hold as value systems and beliefs, and world views. They are open to new pedagogical insights and critically review existing teaching practices. They are willing to interrogate and develop

themselves further - not only in terms of professional development, but also by consciously questioning their own thought patterns and pedagogical routines.

- **Creating a lasting impact in the education system**: The influence of reflexivity goes beyond the classroom. It helps to initiate structural changes in the education system - be it through the critical questioning of school structures, the development of new didactic approaches or the active commitment to more equal opportunities at an institutional level.

Reflexivity is therefore not just an individual practice, but an important contribution to the further development of the education system as a whole.

Methods of self-questioning

Self-questioning or interrogating is a method of reflexive action that requires more than just superficial introspection, which also means consciously taking time for it. Four effective methods for self-questioning are keeping a reflexive diary, critical reflection on action, peer feedback, and scenario analysis.

Keeping a diary: reflexive interrogation through documentation

A reflection diary enables a structured personal reflexive process even if the writing and thought process itself is not linear. Writing reflexively tends to follow the mind's tangents and reactions and bubbling thoughts, then re-reading what you have written, followed by a period of noticing or observing. Through a regular writing routine, patterns in ways of thinking, reactions, and teaching practices or actions can be recognized. This can involve unconscious prejudices, for example, or feelings and actions that need to be questioned and developed further. Writing things down itself already supports the process, as it forces you to consciously formulate thoughts to the end instead of just keeping them vaguely in your head. By recording their thoughts on paper or digitally, educators can become clearer about their convictions, uncertainties, or unconscious assumptions. At the same time, reading your own diary later can provide a more distanced, critical perspective of your entries. This external perspective helps to better classify emotional reactions and feelings, actions and inactions, recognise developments and progress over time, and deal more constructively with your own convictions. It makes it possible to question yourself more consciously and thus to deepen processes over time.

Critical reflection: in-depth questioning of own assumptions

Through critical reflection, one's own decisions, reactions, practices, and convictions can be systematically scrutinized. It goes beyond spontaneous insights and forces educators to deal

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with the deeper causes of their actions. Instead of simply justifying intuitive behaviours, they can ask themselves: "Why did I react this way? What assumptions did I make? How can I do better next time?". For example, the realization that they repeatedly call on the same students in class could lead to the question of whether unconscious stereotypes are behind this. This process makes it possible to break down entrenched thought patterns and make lessons more equitable.

Collegial feedback: learning through external perspectives

It is often difficult to look at your own practice objectively. Feedback from colleagues offers valuable insights into blind spots and opens up new perspectives. For example, an educator could be made aware that they are unconsciously giving performance feedback to students, which could have a very discouraging effect. They often formulate criticism of homework or exams very directly ("Unfortunately, that's wrong.") and rarely explicitly praises the effort behind a performance. While she sees this as objective and efficient, some students appear frustrated or demotivated as a result. Through this feedback, the teacher begins to pay more attention to giving constructive feedback. They try not only to point out mistakes, but also to emphasize progress and efforts ("You've chosen a good approach here, even if the result isn't quite right yet."). This change strengthens the students' self-confidence and motivates them to develop further. It is a good idea to collect constructive criticism from a colleague who is not the same – economic background, race, ethnicity, and so on. This can help to illuminate assumed norms in practices such as assuming everyone will go home and have dinner, or assuming all of your students will have internet, electricity, trusted forms of feedback, a family or support system that can help them, agrees with your politics, or share your religious beliefs: "Have a great Easter break, and don't forget not to eat too much chocolate!"

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Collegial feedback not only promotes the professional development of individual educators but also strengthens teamwork and a shared commitment to a more inclusive school culture. While it is important to get feedback from colleagues who are different to you, it is also important not to automatically make marginalized colleagues the main responsible parties for diversity and inclusion issues. Responsibility for change should be shared and remember, no one person speaks for their entire race, gender, ethnicity, sex, religion, disability and so on.

Scenario analysis: practical reflection on real situations

Scenario analysis helps educators to reflect on their own behaviour and practice based on specific teaching situations. For example, an educator could question whether certain disciplinary measures were unconsciously applied more harshly to students of a certain group. By thinking through alternative ways of responding, they can act more consciously and fairly in the future. Modelling possible scenarios or case studies enables teachers to prepare for challenging situations and develop a methodological repertoire for more inclusive teaching practices.

Scenario: Recognizing and reflecting on inequalities in a class discussion

You teach a heterogeneous (diverse) class and notice that only certain students actively participate in discussions, while others - especially those from underrepresented groups - have little or no say.
 	
The following reflection questions can help to analyse this scenario and identify possible barriers in the classroom:
 	
• Questions about student participation:
 	
    o What unspoken expectations or preconceptions might I have about the quieter students?
 	
    o What methods can I use to encourage more equal participation and create a supportive culture of conversation?
 	
    o What are the barriers in terms of physical, emotional, psychological, and social engagement?
 	
    o What enablers of physical, emotional, psychological, and social engagement that I am not currently using?
 	
• Questions about the curriculum and materials
 	
    o Does my curriculum reflect diverse perspectives, or is a particular cultural viewpoint dominant?
 	
    o What are my resources and the environment saying to student who may experience marginalisation?
 	
    o How can I adapt content and examples so that they consider the experiences and voices of diverse groups?
 	
• Questions about prejudices in connection with interactions
 	
    o Do I unconsciously treat certain students preferentially or give them more attention?
 	
    o How can I ensure that all students feel valued, seen, and supported?
 	
    o Am I simply uncomfortable with some individual's silence?

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0.3.3 Stereotypes

Stereotypes are highly simplified and widespread assumptions about certain groups of people. They often arise from cultural norms, media portrayals and social conditioning and influence how we perceive and interact with others. This unit explores how stereotypes emerge, spread and the impact they have on individuals and society. A deeper understanding of their origins and mechanisms enables teachers to critically question stereotypes in the classroom and reduce their harmful influence.

Cognitive function of stereotypes

Stereotypes are a form of cognitive distortion that makes it easier for people to quickly categorize others based on supposedly shared group affiliations. They serve as heuristics - unconscious cognitive shortcuts that the brain uses to structure the social world and make quick decisions. This categorization can be useful in everyday life, but it also carries risks: stereotypes ignore individual differences and force people into rigid assumptions. A small perceived kernel of truth is transferred to an entire group without taking its diversity into account. This can reinforce prejudices and lead to discrimination.

To create an inclusive learning environment, it is therefore essential to recognize, critically question and actively counteract stereotypical thought patterns.

Emergence of stereotypes

Stereotypes develop early in life through social learning. Children unconsciously adopt patterns that they observe in their environment - in the family, at school, through their peers, the media, and social norms.

The **family** is the first social authority that conveys values, norms, and beliefs. This often happens subtly through casual comments, behaviour, or unspoken expectations. Children learn early on which groups are considered "normal" or "different" and which characteristics are ascribed to certain social groups. Children who grow up in an environment in which they are too often confronted with stereotypes about members of their group internalize them and may pass them on to the next generation. In addition to the family, **school, educational institutions, religious communities, and peers** also play a significant role in early influences.

Every **society** has norms that define what is considered socially acceptable. These norms influence how people perceive groups and their members. They are passed on through traditions, rituals and cultural values and contribute to the persistence of certain stereotypes

across generations. This creates standardized expectations about how people should behave depending on their gender, ethnicity, or social status.

Stereotypes are often reproduced in the public sphere via **the media**. Films, news, advertising, and social networks reinforce certain images by repeatedly showing stereotypical representations. Because such representations are often perceived as reality, they become entrenched in the collective consciousness over time. Studies show that people tend to pay more attention to information that confirms existing stereotypes, while contradictory information is often ignored. This reinforces the so-called "confirmation bias" - the tendency to only pay attention to information that supports existing beliefs.

The **education system** also plays a significant role in the dissemination or deconstruction of stereotypes. Depending on how curricula are designed and what content is taught, educational institutions can either reinforce or challenge existing prejudices. There is a danger that schools and other educational institutions do not impart knowledge neutrally but instead reflect the perspectives and interests of dominant social groups. This can be seen, for example, in historiography, which often focuses on the perspectives of privileged groups, while the experiences and contributions of marginalized communities are ignored or distorted. The way in which topics such as colonialism, migration, gender roles or social inequality are treated - or whether they are treated at all - can reinforce or dismantle existing stereotypes. Another problem is the selection and portrayal of role models in teaching materials. When textbooks portray male, white, or wealthy individuals as successful scientists, artists, or leaders, while women, people of colour or members of the working class are less common or stereotyped, this reinforces certain images of competence, success, and social influence. As a result, students receive subliminal messages about who is considered "capable" or "important" and which groups tend to remain in the background.

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In addition, educators may - consciously or unconsciously - adopt stereotypical assumptions about students' abilities. Research shows that educators often have different expectations of students depending on their gender, social or ethnic background. These expectations can manifest themselves in subtle differences in interaction, support or assessment and thus influence academic performance. A well-known example of this is the so-called Pygmalion effect, which goes back to a corresponding experiment by Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson: students from whom educators expect high performance actually show better academic results - regardless of their actual ability. Conversely, the Golem effect can lead to students performing worse when less is expected of them.

Institutional structures can also reinforce existing inequalities in education. For example, standardized tests or certain selection procedures for higher education are often adapted to social norms that do not take all students equally into account. Language and cultural barriers often disadvantage children from non-dominant social groups (see Mac Ruairc's paper from Strand Two). In addition, disciplinary measures in schools often reflect stereotypical ideas, for example when students from certain ethnic groups are punished more often for breaking the rules than others.

Stereotypes not only influence how we perceive others, but also how we see ourselves. **Group identity** - the feeling of belonging to a certain social group - is shaped by social influences. People often adopt characteristics that are ascribed to their group, as they are guided by the expectations of their social environment. At the same time, the contrast with the "other group" often creates boundaries that lead to further prejudices. These in-group and out-group dynamics have a strong social impact: people tend to evaluate members of their own group more positively, while they perceive members of other groups as more homogeneous and less individual. This effect is often reinforced by social biases that pit groups against each other instead of emphasizing their similarities.

The individual and social impact of stereotypes

Stereotypes are not harmless assumptions - they have a profound social impact. If they are accepted as reality, they can legitimize existing inequalities. Instead of judging people on their individual merits, they are reduced to generalized attributions based solely on their group membership.

Stereotypes are directly related to prejudice and discrimination. **Prejudices** are negative attitudes towards certain groups, while **discrimination** means that people are disadvantaged because of such prejudices. Stereotypes often provide the basis for these mechanisms as they reinforce generalized beliefs about other people.

Stereotypes influence both the self-image and the social perception of certain groups. **For individuals, the experience of stereotyping can have a significant impact on mental health.** The feeling of being seen as deficient or less valuable in society can increase emotional distress, reduce self-esteem, and affect well-being. Negative stereotypes influence self-perception and can lead to people adopting derogatory attributions about themselves or experiencing identity conflicts. People who are constantly confronted with derogatory social assumptions about their own identity or group membership are more likely to develop anxiety, depression, or chronic stress. Stereotypes also influence people's behaviour and

decisions. If certain groups are systematically confronted with negative expectations, this can lead to them feeling restricted in their actions or deliberately not seizing certain opportunities. For example, the idea that women are less talented in technical professions can mean that women are less likely to choose a career in this field - not because they are less capable, but because they have repeatedly been told that they do not belong there. Such mechanisms reinforce existing inequalities and further cement stereotypical role models.

A particularly dangerous effect of stereotypes is the **self-fulfilling prophecy**: if people feel that they are underestimated or devalued because of their group membership, this can unconsciously influence their behaviour. For example, a student who is told that girls are less talented in math may develop less self-confidence in this subject, report less often or avoid challenges - which reinforces the assumption that girls are worse at math. Such mechanisms can lead to inequalities being further entrenched. This also plays a significant role in the internalization of discrimination.

Internalized oppression occurs when people from marginalized groups adopt the negative stereotypes, prejudices, or social narratives about their own group. This can lead to them underestimating themselves, not seizing certain opportunities or exhibiting behaviours that unconsciously reinforce existing inequalities. This dynamic can manifest itself in many forms, be it in relation to gender, ethnicity, disability, or other social categories. This internalization does not mean that those affected explicitly believe that the derogatory stereotypes about their group are true. Rather, internalized discrimination often manifests itself in subtle self-doubt, lower expectations of one's own performance or the feeling of being less entitled to take advantage of certain opportunities. Over time, these negative beliefs and stereotypes become integrated into the behaviour of individuals, perpetuating discriminatory social structures and policies that were originally created out of prejudice or ignorance. This creates a self-fulfilling prophecy: people who are already confronted with negative prejudices unconsciously behave according to the low expectations placed on them. For example, students who belong to a marginalized group and have internalized the stereotype that they are less intelligent may perform worse in education - not because of a lack of ability, but because they are less trusted and may develop less confidence in their own abilities. This reinforces the original stereotype and legitimizes existing inequalities retrospectively.

A well-known phenomenon in this context is the **stereotype threat**, where the fear of confirming a negative stereotype can cause those affected to perform below their potential.

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These mechanisms contribute to the persistence of inequalities, as they are not only maintained externally by social structures, but are also unconsciously perpetuated by internalized patterns within marginalized groups.

Various **forms of internalized discrimination** and their effects are described below:

- **Ableism (discrimination against people with disabilities)**

  Internalized ableism occurs when people with disabilities internalize society's common prejudices and misinformation about their abilities. They begin to see themselves as less competent or resilient, which can lead to self-doubt and diminished self-esteem. This can lead them to forego professional or personal opportunities because they believe they cannot fulfil them anyway. An example would be a person with a brain injury who assumes that they cannot get a challenging job anyway due to their disability and therefore does not even apply.

- **Colourism (discrimination based on skin tone)**

  Internalized colourism occurs when people with darker skin adopt societal ideals that portray lighter skin as more beautiful or desirable. This can lead them to perceive themselves as less attractive or less successful. Some try to conform to these ideals by lightening their skin or fitting in socially, while others avoid social and professional opportunities for fear of rejection. In the long term, this reinforces the social prejudices that make colourism possible in the first place.

- **Racism (discrimination based on *race*)**

  Internalized racism can lead to racialized people - often unconsciously - doubting their own abilities or feeling less like they belong in certain educational contexts or professions. This can affect their academic and professional development and lead them to aim lower, reinforcing existing inequalities.

- **Sexism (discrimination based on gender)**

  Internalized sexism occurs when women or non-male individuals adopt social perceptions that portray them as less competent or less suitable for leadership roles. This can lead to them selling themselves short in salary negotiations, avoiding leadership roles or having less confidence in themselves. As a result, they remain trapped in traditional roles, which further reinforces gender inequality in the world of work.

- **Homophobia and heteronormativity (discrimination against LGBTQI+ people)**

  Internalized homophobia occurs when LGBTQI+ people adopt societal prejudices about their identity and reject themselves or try to suppress their sexual orientation or gender identity. This can manifest itself in self-hatred, avoidance behaviour or excessive conformity to heteronormative expectations. In some cases, it leads to those affected turning against other LGBTQI+ people to gain social acceptance.

- **Classism (discrimination based on social or economic class)**

  Internalized classism occurs when people from low-income backgrounds believe that their economic situation is their own fault or that they are worth less than wealthier people. This can lead to them ascribing fewer opportunities to themselves, foregoing educational or job opportunities for fear of rejection or believing that they are not entitled to support. These further cements existing social inequalities.

Internalized prejudices therefore often lead to self-limitation - be it through stereotypical attributions or structural disadvantages. To break this cycle, it is necessary to strengthen self-awareness and reflection at an individual level as well as to actively remove the social barriers that restrict people in their development.

The impact of stereotypes depends heavily on **the social context and existing power structures.** It is particularly problematic when influential actors - such as politicians, the media, or educational institutions - consciously or unconsciously reinforce stereotypes. Privileged groups benefit when others are portrayed as less capable or able, as this justifies existing inequalities and restricts access to resources, opportunities, and social influence. Stereotypes fuel systemic inequality by serving as a justification for discriminatory practices and policies. They can help to reinforce social hierarchies by maintaining power relations that favour dominant groups.

Stereotypes also **have far-reaching effects in the education system**. They influence educators' expectations of students and vice versa. When educators adopt stereotypical assumptions about the abilities of certain groups, this can lead to affected students perceiving themselves as less capable and performing less well. This domino effect leads to less confidence in them, making them less motivated to fulfil their potential.

Stereotypes have a similar effect **in the workplace**, where they can influence hiring practices, promotions, and the atmosphere in the workplace. However, cultural diversity can create

successful leaders who better utilize the potential of all employees and create a more inclusive work culture.

When stereotypes are used specifically to maintain existing power relations, they can act as a **means of social control.** This happens when minorities or underrepresented groups are assigned certain roles or systematically denied certain skills and opportunities. This creates or consolidates social structures that further reinforce existing inequalities and unequally distribute access to resources and opportunities for influence. Stereotypes can be used on a large scale to legitimize discriminatory measures. One example of this is the assumption that immigrants "take jobs away" from the native population, which is used as an argument for restrictive immigration policies.

Stereotypes contribute to **social and cultural division** by increasing mistrust between diverse groups and weakening the sense of community. When people are reduced to stereotypical attributions, it becomes easier to perceive them not as individuals with their own experiences and abilities, but merely as part of a prefabricated category. This dehumanization makes it more difficult to develop empathy and understanding for the affected group, which further entrenches prejudices and, in extreme cases, can lead to exclusion or even hate crimes. Social divisions deepen because groups are not viewed based on actual knowledge and mutual respect but are defined by repeated stereotypical portrayals in the media and social narratives. This leads to stereotypes becoming self-reinforcing: The more frequently certain images and narratives are reproduced, the more they appear to be "natural" or "given" - and the more difficult it becomes to question them. A society divided by prejudice is less likely to unite in the face of shared challenges. In tackling social problems, it forgoes a diversity of perspectives that would be one of its most valuable resources. This lack of unity can gradually weaken democratic institutions and foster social conflict and instability.

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Stereotypes can also **influence relations between countries at an international level**. The creation of derogatory stereotypes about certain nations or cultures makes cooperation on global issues such as the climate crisis, security, and economic development more difficult. By reinforcing prejudices, stereotypes hinder diplomatic and economic cooperation and help to make global challenges less effective.

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Deconstruction of stereotypes

Dismantling stereotypes with harmful consequences requires a conscious **examination of one's own thought patterns** and continues with social change. To achieve this, it is necessary not to base decisions on prejudices, but to perceive people as individuals and view them in a differentiated way.

To recognize one's own stereotypes, prejudices and deeply rooted convictions, self-awareness and critical reflection are required. Important concepts in this self-awareness process are:

- **Implicit prejudices**: Unconscious thought patterns that influence our behaviour and decisions without us realizing it. One example is the assumption that men or women are better or worse suited to certain jobs because of their gender.

- **Cultural stereotypes**: Generalizations about certain groups based on ethnicity, nationality, gender, or religion. Examples include the idea that women are less suited to technical professions or that people of a certain origin are particularly aggressive.

- **Confirmation bias**: The tendency to selectively perceive information in a way that confirms existing beliefs while ignoring contradictory facts. This leads to people deliberately surrounding themselves with media or narratives that support their point of view.

- **Ethnocentrism**: The belief that one's own culture is superior and that others should be guided by it. This can manifest itself in the expectation that certain values or norms should apply universally.

- **Heteronormativity**: The assumption that only heterosexuality is normal and natural, which leads to bias against or discrimination against non-heterosexual people.

- **Binary gender roles and sexism**: Social ideas about the tasks and characteristics of men and women, for example that men are responsible for earning a living and women take care of the children.

- **Classism**: Discrimination based on social or economic background. People from lower-income backgrounds are often seen as less capable or hard-working, while wealthier people are automatically considered more successful.

- **Religious stereotypes**: Generalizations about people based on their faith, e.g. the assumption that all Muslims are extremist or that certain religions are fundamentally more peaceful than others.

- **Ageism**: prejudices against people based on their age, for example that older people are technophobic or young people are irresponsible.

Reflecting on our own prejudices helps to create more inclusion and fairness. It helps us to recognize which assumptions about social groups influence our thoughts and actions.

The **education system can play a significant role in deconstructing stereotypes** by not only imparting knowledge but also encouraging reflection on one's own thought patterns and making their interconnectedness with social norms and power relations visible. Media literacy training helps pupils to recognize and critically question stereotypical representations in reporting. This creates an awareness of social inequalities and makes it clear that identity and personal history should not be determined by social attributions.

Educators play a key role in this by promoting critical thinking and encouraging students to actively engage with stereotypes - both in the educational institution context and beyond. This ability not only helps in education, but also in dealing with prejudiced information and social injustices.

An inclusive classroom environment helps to challenge stereotypes by establishing diversity as the norm and promoting acceptance. When students learn from an early age that difference is natural, they are less reliant on resorting to simplistic stereotypical explanations. In addition, such an environment promotes social and emotional development by strengthening empathy and making it clear that people have different experiences. Actively addressing and rejecting stereotypes in the classroom can also help to combat their persistence and raise awareness of their social impact.

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A self-reflective attitude is essential for educators to be able to effectively introduce such interventions into the classroom. They must become aware of their own prejudices and question how these influence their lesson design, their expectations of students or their behaviour in the classroom. This includes thinking about who is admonished particularly frequently in class, who receives what support, or which perspectives are given preferential treatment. Educators who are aware of these mechanisms can make more targeted, fair, and thoughtful decisions that benefit all students.

In addition to individual reflection processes, structural measures are also necessary to overcome stereotypes in the education system. This includes the conscious integration of diverse perspectives into the curriculum to make diverse cultural backgrounds visible. A critical review of textbooks and teaching materials is also necessary to uncover and avoid stereotypical representations and implicit messages. Continuously adapting the curriculum helps to break down traditional prejudices and promote a more open, differentiated view.

This helps to ensure that students not only learn about different perspectives but also feel that their own history and identity are given equal consideration in the educational process. This promotes a stronger sense of belonging and raises awareness of equal opportunities. In addition, fairer assessment methods need to be developed that ideally consider students' different starting points and prevent existing stereotypes from being unconsciously passed on. Initial and on-going teacher training can help to identify unconscious bias and develop strategies to promote equal opportunities in the classroom.

Reflection questions for dealing with stereotypes in education

Stereotypes influence the way we perceive our environment, make decisions, and interact with others. Especially in the educational context, it is crucial to become aware of these mechanisms, as they can significantly shape students' learning and development. The following questions invite you to question your own pedagogical practice and explore ways to create an inclusive, unbiased learning environment:

Recognizing and challenging stereotypes in the classroom

- What stereotypes do you encounter in your classroom - be it in teaching materials, in student behaviour or in your own expectations?
- To what extent are social norms and power relations reflected in these stereotypes?

Influence of media and culture on the perception of stereotypes

- What role do the media and cultural narratives play in the creation and dissemination of stereotypes?
- How can students be encouraged to question stereotypical representations in the media?
- To what extent do cultural influences affect educators' expectations of students and vice versa?

Effects of stereotypes on students and Educators

- What are the consequences for students when they are confronted with negative stereotypes about their social group?
- How can stereotype threat (the fear of confirming a stereotype) affect students' academic performance and self-confidence?
- To what extent do your own prejudices and stereotypical expectations influence your behaviour towards students?

Self-reflection and professional development

- How can you recognize your own prejudices and work on reducing them?

- What strategies can you use to ensure that you consciously promote a classroom culture that counteracts stereotypes?

- What didactic methods could help to promote critical thinking about stereotypes?

- How can students be encouraged to question their own prejudices and see diversity as an enrichment?

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0.3.4 How our values, beliefs and prejudices are shaped

Self-directed work

After thoroughly reviewing the article provided in the link, carefully examine the questions and proceed to answer one of them.

Scientific Article Reference:

https://lmcreadinglist.pbworks.com/f/Ladson-Billings%20%281995%29.pdf

Reflection Questions on Inclusive Education

1.   Exploring Personal Values and Beliefs

- What personal values and beliefs influence your approach to inclusive education? How do they align with the principles of culturally relevant pedagogy?

2.   Understanding Cultural Relevance

- How does your teaching practice reflect the cultural backgrounds and lived experiences of your students?
- In what ways can you integrate culturally responsive teaching strategies into your curriculum?

3.   Addressing Biases

- How have your biases shaped your expectations of student behaviour and academic performance?
- Reflect on a recent classroom interaction. How might your biases have influenced the outcome? How could you approach it differently?

4.   Impact of Institutional Practices

- How do institutional norms and policies in your school support or hinder inclusive education?
- What actions can you take to challenge systemic biases in your institution?

5.   Fostering Inclusivity

- How can you use reflective practices to create a more inclusive classroom environment that respects and values diversity?
- What strategies can you employ to ensure all students feel represented and valued in the learning materials and activities?

6.   Challenging and Evolving Beliefs

- How has professional development or engagement with diverse student populations challenged your beliefs about teaching and learning?
- What steps can you take to continue evolving your beliefs and practices towards greater inclusivity?

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0.3.5 Interrogating Ourselves

This unit is part of self-directed learning.

Reflexive questions: Interrogating Yourself

Reflexive thinking begins with a series of questions. The following list contains examples of reflection questions that invite you to begin on a journey of reflexive thinking and self-interrogation in relation to your position as an educator.

Take the time to think through individual questions and remember if your mind starts to wander down tangents – follow them and be curious!

<u>Who Am I?</u>

Borrowing from Jewell & Durand's book *This Book is anti-Racist, 20 Lessons on How to Wake Up, Take Action and do the Work.* First list all the things that make you who you are:

My name is Joanne Smith. I am:

- Female (assigned at birth and identify as)
- Straight
- Middle Aged
- Able bodied
- White
- Dyslexic
- A Mother
- A Sister (I have three sisters and I'm the youngest)
- A Daughter
- A Wife
- A friend (My friends have always been girls. I don't have many male friends.)
- A colleague
- A reader
- A first-generation University Student
- A teacher and a trainer
- I grew up working class, but I am now considered middle class
- Travel lover (I love to explore the world. I've been to Australia, lot of Europe, the United States, and I taught English at a private international school in Dubai for three years)
- An animal lover
- Catholic (I suppose but I don't go to mass)
- Irish
- I live in the city (but I grew up in the countryside)

Who am I (again)

Taking Joanne's first surface level immediate list of who she is, she could then begin to interrogate who she is based on this list:

- Female (assigned at birth and identify as) – *did I always know I was female? Did I ever question it? How do I feel about people who do not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth?*
- Straight – *did I always know I was straight? Did I ever question it? How do I feel about people who are LGBTQ+? Do I hold any beliefs or stereotypes about LGBTQI+?*
- Middle Aged – *Why did I think it was important to identify what age I am? Is that something that means a lot to me? Is it an indicator of something – wisdom maybe, life experience? Do I value that?*
- Able bodied – *Oh gosh – I wear glasses! I never realised that my sight is something that can be class as disabling! Why didn't I recognise that my glasses and contact lenses are a disability aid? Everyone wears glasses and they are fashionable now ….*
- white – *I don't think about my whiteness really. It's just who I am. I think about my whiteness in relation to other skin colours and race when I'm prompted to by activities like this or when the Black Live Matter movement was happening. I try not to see colour – we are all human – we are all the same. It doesn't really matter what colour I am or anybody else.*
- Dyslexic – *this is something I overcame. Thankfully, we have autocorrect now and spell check. I get a bit defensive and embarrassed when I'm teaching if I get something wrong.*
- A Mother – *I have two girls, and I love it! It's hard but I have my mam to help me. My mam was always at home when I was growing up, but I can't – I have to work. I really didn't understand parents of my students and especially my students who were parents until I had kids myself. Now I realise I made so many judgements and assumptions.*
- A Sister (I have three sisters and I'm the youngest) - *Ha! I'm beginning to realise how female my life is!!! Why have I never realised that before? I wonder if it effects how I interact with my male students or colleagues?*
- A Daughter
- A Wife
- A friend (My friends have always been girls. I don't have many male friends.)
- A colleague
- A reader
- A first-generation University Student
- A teacher and a trainer
- I grew up working class, but I am now considered middle class.
- Travel lover (I love to explore the world. I've been to Australia, lot of Europe, the United States, and I taught English at a private international school in Dubai for three years)

Can you guess what Joanne will be prompted on as she moves through her list?

As you interrogate, you begin to eventually move from a reflexive process to a reflective process that encounters your own educational journey, and your past and current practice as an educator.

Reflection questions:

Personal imprints and expectations:

- How was my educational journey? Did I go to a school / college?
- Was I "good" at school or learning? Did it get easier or harder if I progressed?
- Was it in my community?
- Did I face any barriers or enablers?
- Did I see myself, my family, and my community reflected in the school or college?
- What did I learn about "good" and "bad" behaviours in class and school? Do I still hold them?
- What experiences from my own school days shape my image of "good" and "bad" teaching practice?
- Are there certain teachers or trainers who have inspired me - and why? Which aspects of their teaching methods would I adopt, and which would I rather not?
- Were any subjects or topics every considered male / female / not appropriate? What were they?
- Do I hold any beliefs that certain topics should be for older children or adults?
- Do I believe that men would be better than women in come things? Sport / Math / Engineering etc? Do I believe that women are better than men in some subjects, careers, etc.? Have I considered what non-binary people are good and not good at?

Ideas of inclusivity and diversity in the classroom:

- What assumptions do I have about different students (e.g. in terms of gender, origin, learning behaviour, socio-economic background)?
- Can I see where they may have come from?
- Do I feel comfortable teaching people who don't look, act, speak, or behave like me or my community? How do I act?

Reaction to challenging situations:

- How do/would I react if discriminatory or exclusionary remarks were made in my class?
- How do/would I feel if those remarks were made by a person because of their own religious or cultural beliefs?
- How do/would I deal with a scenario where some students always speak up in class while others hold back?

Integration of self-interrogation into teaching practice

Assumptions, beliefs, values, biases, and teaching practices should be systematically reviewed and interrogated by educators to identify and counteract possible unconscious biases. The key is to act proactively rather than reacting to problems. Possible steps of self-questioning could be:

1. **Self-questioning**: What personal values, experiences and beliefs shape your own teaching? What unspoken assumptions may influence interactions with students?

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This reflection helps to make unconscious thought patterns perceptible, especially implicit prejudices, cultural assumptions, or recurring patterns of behaviour. Ways of self-interrogation are provided above.

2. **Review the curriculum:** Teaching materials should be analysed to determine whether they represent diverse perspectives or unintentionally reinforce dominant cultural narratives. A balanced curriculum ensures that different voices are heard, and stereotypes are challenged. This will be examined in more details in Strand Six: Inclusive Environments.

3. **Lesson planning:** Is the teaching content designed to encourage critical thinking about issues such as identity, power, and equality? It is not only about taking diversity into account, but also about actively engaging with social structures and their effects.

4. **Interaction with students:** Are all students given the same support and attention regardless of their background? Equitable teaching means recognizing individual needs and responding to them in a targeted manner.

5. **Feedback mechanism:** How can openness to criticism be actively practiced and a system of regular feedback from students and colleagues be established that helps to identify and reflect on blind spots - especially regarding inclusion?

By consistently implementing these steps, teachers can create a space in which all students are seen, heard, and valued.

Consider the following statement made by a parent:

"She just wants to be a teenager and do teenager things and have teenage worries. She doesn't want to be the Black teenager."

1. In your opinion, what could be happening in this scenario to make a parent say this?
2. How would you react to this statement?
3. What are your feelings about this statement?

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