

# DADD *Express*

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*Focusing on individuals with autism, intellectual disability, and related disabilities*

## Teachers' Corner

### Intersectionality in the Classroom



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*Intersectional representation is important to our organization. To meet our goal of increasing intersectional contributions to the field, the DADD Diversity Committee is presenting a three-part series to educate others on the importance of intersectionality in special education. The first part in the series introduces how to start incorporating intersectionality into your classrooms. The authors offer a variety of resources and strategies to help you connect concepts to your practices.*

When we think about teaching, we have often lumped students into three categories: *above level*, *on level*, and *below level*. While this categorizing may be helpful in some respects, there are also other “identities” that should be considered. For instance, race, ethnicity, and ability can all coexist and intersect as it relates to the PreK–12 environment (Boveda & Aronson, 2019). It is important that teachers find a way to fuse intersectionality into the main ingredients as opposed to sprinkling it in as a topping (Case, 2017).

*Intersectionality* as a concept is generally attributed to Crenshaw (1991); it was born out of the 1980s gender, race, and class studies movement. Scholars in multiple fields use intersectionality to critically examine how marginalized groups experience oppression and discrimination due to two or more “markers” of difference (Garcia & Ortiz, 2013). These markers were initially attributed to race, gender, or class but have recently expanded to include disability, sexuality, language, or any other “difference” resulting in discrimination, stereotyping, or oppression. Intersectionality exists when complicated topics involving race, gender, sexuality, nation, age, ability, language, and citizenship (any two or more) combine (Villa-Nicholas, 2018).

In the classroom, intersectionality can play a pivotal role in the interpersonal dynamics between peers and teachers, coordination and collaboration with families, and beliefs about postsecondary endeavors for students with disabilities. Seventy-three percent of students served under IDEA were from diverse

backgrounds in the 2013–2014 school year (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017), yet 82% of the teaching force is white (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Adopting pedagogical systems rooted in intersectionality is a benefit to all. Teachers must move beyond acknowledgement of differences to *valuing* differences. Doing so takes both personal and professional work on the part of educators. We must first address our own personal identifying markers, then we must work to identify hidden bias and privilege, and finally we must actively teach in ways that honor, value, and capitalize on differences.

It is important to “check your temperature” as an educator. Your personal emotions can bleed over into your interactions with your students if you are not careful. Behaviors that may not normally bother you could cause an uncharacteristic reaction if you have not checked your temperature and become aware of it. While reflecting on your temperature, you also need to check your bias and privilege (Staats, 2016). It is often an uncomfortable topic, but it is a necessary one. Often people struggle to empathize because they have not acknowledged their biases and privilege. An example of privilege can be seen when a teacher discusses community helpers and indicates a police officer is a helper and can always be trusted. While this is generally true for many families, some families would disagree. As a teacher you perhaps need to consider other peoples’ realities. Additionally, you should also be sure your classroom and lessons represent everyone in your class. This is more than specific months set aside for diverse students (e.g., Black History Month). Instead, lessons infused with diversity should be included throughout the year in your curriculum.

As you work on promoting diversity and intersectional pedagogy throughout all aspects of your classroom, there are a number of podcasts, activities, websites, and books to choose from. Here are a few resources to consider:

1. **Dr. Christopher Emdin’s** (2016) book, *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood...and the Rest of Y’all Too*, is a tool to help teachers create more comfortable and trusting spaces for students in urban classrooms. Trust is essential for teachers who work with students who do not look like them.
2. Podcasts featuring **Dr. Kim Case** and **Dr. Desdamona Rios** discuss their backgrounds and how they became interested in intersectional pedagogy. Specifically,

they also describe more detailed information related to intersectional pedagogy and theory and how it intertwines with social justice.

<http://tinapippin.org/constructivism/intersectional-pedagogies/>

<http://nothingneverhappens.org/intersectional-pedagogies/intersectional-pedagogies-part-2/>

3. The website linked below has detailed information on teaching intersectionality in various grade bands of K–12, including standards, activities, and companion texts.

<https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/summer-2016/toolkit-for-teaching-at-the-intersections>

As you work to incorporate intersectionality in your classroom, it is important to remember that (a) it is appropriate and (b) there is the potential to feel uncomfortable. You must work through that feeling in an effort to make a change in your classroom culture. Draw from the resources listed in this article, and let your curiosity lead you to a richer discovery related to intersectionality. Subscribe to news sources (e.g., podcasts, social media outlets) and seek out information from your local higher education institutions or professional scholars who are focused on this topic to help you remain current in the area. Individuals who are dedicated to intersectionality are passionate about the issue and happy to share their knowledge and experiences with others who are open and willing to learn. This is a very complex topic and one should not expect to master it in a short amount of time. Be patient and persevere. Expect to continue to learn more about this topic for as long as you live.

*The DADD Diversity Committee looks forward to continuing this important work in future issues of DADD Express. The second part in the series will focus on additional resources to support intersectionality in the classroom. If you would like to get more involved*

*with DADD's Diversity Committee, with concepts of intersectionality in special education, or with DADD, please contact Liz Harkins, Diversity Committee chair ([harkinse@wpunj.edu](mailto:harkinse@wpunj.edu)). ■*

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