

Identity-Informed Schools

Using an identity-informed approach and viewing situations through an identity-informed lens can help us better understand and support all students and help us to avoid making certain assumptions or jumping to conclusions regarding behaviour, attainment and the impacts of trauma.

The Invisible Knapsack

Peggy McIntosh formulated the idea of the invisible knapsack in 1989 as an activity meant to help us examine our identities and the power and oppressions we can all carry with us wherever we go.⁴ It was intended to help us better understand each other and correct any biases we may have towards each other and ourselves. This can be a very useful activity when thinking about how your school treats

This activity combined the Invisible Knapsack with the Social Graces Framework

What's in your invisible knapsack?

- G** is for Gender, Geography
- R** is for 'Race', Religion, Refugee experience
- A** is for Age, Ability, Appearance
- C** is for Class, Culture, Caste
- E** is for Ethnicity, Education, Employment
- S** is for Sexuality, Sexual Orientation, Spirituality

different members of the community and also to reflect on the needs of groups who may be members of minority groups in your setting.

The Social Graces Framework

The Social Graces Framework, created by John Burnham and Alison Roper-Hall, helps us to see the various parts of our identities and explore how the different elements of our identities can help us to gain access to opportunities and support but can also how others can put us at risk of different oppressions depending on the society we are currently in.⁵ It is often used by social workers, healthcare professionals and teachers to analyse the unconscious biases we may hold towards certain groups and how that impacts the work we do with individuals belonging to those groups.



4 McIntosh, P. and Privilege, W., 1989. Unpacking the invisible knapsack. Peace and freedom, 49, pp.10-12.

5 Burnham, J. & Roper-Hall, A. (2017) Commentaries on this issue. Context, 151, 47-50.

Feel free to try the activity below:

G _____

R _____

A _____

C _____

E _____

S _____



Let's consider which parts of your identity bring you power in the society you currently live in. For example, if you are a white woman, your race will have unlikely been a barrier to gaining certain opportunities in education and the workplace in Britain. In fact, in many countries your race may make it easier for you to be welcomed into certain spaces and take advantage of certain opportunities.

Now let's consider those parts of your identity which don't bring your power in your society and can actually act as a barrier or a risk of oppression. For example, if you are a white woman, you have unlikely experienced structural racism, but you have likely experienced misogyny to some extent and this may well have been a barrier for you to access certain opportunities. For example, gaining employment in a male heavy sector like construction or STEM roles.

If you are a Black woman, you may have faced the double oppressions of structural racism, plus

misogyny. Kimberle Crenshaw called this type of analysis **intersectionality**, providing a more comprehensive way of understanding how our various identities overlap and interlink so that we can provide better support to people by gaining a better understanding of the challenges they face and the biases we may hold towards them.⁶

The invisible knapsack helps us to analyse how our identities can and do impact our lives and the way we view and treat others - this goes for our students too. For some students, they will see people of their race and culture widely represented throughout the curriculum and be able to better identify with the content as it reflects their lived experiences. For others, they may only see their culture represented in a history or geography lesson very occasionally or in a background character in a novel or play. For some students, they will see people of their race linked to crime regularly in the news or on social media and they may notice that their behaviour is challenged or punished more than other students in

6 Crenshaw, K., 1989. Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. u. Chi. Legal f., p.139.

class who are behaving in the same way. It is vital that we as educators become better at seeing and understanding these prejudices linked to identity so we can unlearn them, unteach them and examine our own behaviour towards our students which we may not have noticed before.

Our identities shape the way we are treated, the way we exist in our societies and ultimately the ways in which we can heal. If schools are not inclusive both in their treatment of all students and the inclusion of their identities in the curriculum and school life, students may struggle to feel safe, welcome and to heal. It may be uncomfortable to have these conversations and to reflect on your own assumptions and behaviour but it is vital work if we are hoping to support all of our students effectively.

Bringing Identity into the Classroom

Healing can take place through learning as well as focused wellbeing support. One way to aid this is through improving self-worth for your students by celebrating parts of their identities in lessons. Think of a topic you have taught previously. How could you bring elements of your students' identities into their learning?

Example: I'm a Food Technology teacher and I encourage the children to bring in recipes from their cultures. They help to teach the recipes to the class and share information about the origins of the food. The students look so proud to be able to share a part of themselves and show off who they are.

Psychosocial Support as a Route to Healing

Psychosocial support is the continuing support and care provided to an individual, in order to meet the appropriate emotional, cognitive, spiritual, social and physical needs, through interaction with people and the environment.

Psychosocial support can be both preventive and curative. It is preventive when it decreases the risk of developing mental health problems. It is curative when it helps individuals and communities to overcome and deal with psychosocial problems that may have arisen from the shock and effects of crises. These two aspects of psychosocial support contribute to the building of resilience in the face of new crises or other challenging life circumstances.⁷

Psychosocial support can be achieved by teachers, social workers, family members and friends – including adults and children. A school football club could be an example of psychosocial support where young people can have fun together, build their self worth, celebrate wins and build relationships within the team.

“A lot of PSS may seem like common sense because it is... Our relationships can help us to stay well”

(The British Red Cross, 2022)

7 Papyrus Project, 2023. Accessed via <https://papyrus-project.org/what-is-psychosocial-support/>