What is intersectionality?

Tolerance.org, adapted by Newsela staff

Intersectionality refers to the different kinds of identities people have. It studies how these multiple identities connect and affect a person’s life. These identities are race, gender, sex, disability, and sexual orientation, as well as where they live and socioeconomic status. Intersectionality also impacts how oppression and privilege connect and influence each other. Oppression is when someone faces unfair treatment because of their identity. Privilege is when someone has a special advantage because of their identity.

# Nicole: An Intersectional Case Study

Nicole is in the ninth grade. She is a mature, creative, hardworking student, and gets along well with others. The only thing is, she’s always late for school. She frequently misses her first-period class and rarely turns in homework, and as a result, her grades are suffering. Nicole’s teachers know very little about her life, and when they look at her, they may only see an African-American student who isn’t doing well. They may think of Nicole as an example of the fact that most students who miss class or drop out of school are black or Latino.

If teachers took the time to peel back the layers of Nicole’s life they would see another part of her identity — her socioeconomic status. This would offer a better understanding of who Nicole is. Nicole isn’t just a black student, she has other identities. She identifies as a girl and as a kid from a low-income family. She is responsible for taking care of her two younger siblings. To fully and properly support Nicole, a teacher must know and respect these kinds of details. They must see her situation through the many identities that makeup who Nicole is. That is the best way to understand how her identities impact her performance at school. Understanding these can help teachers better understand the circumstances surrounding Nicole that are affecting her grades and absences.

Legal scholar and law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality in 1989. She makes the case that society usually ignores many parts of people’s identities. People may see only the race, religion, or economic status of others, which can lead to prejudice and oppression.

In Nicole’s case, the problems she faces aren’t just about her multiple identities, but also stem from the oppressions that come with her identities. Her situation reflects the experiences of low-income people more than rich people and shows what specific challenges she faces as a girl and a black student. Specifically, Nicole must navigate parents who work long hours outside the home while also facing expectations as a female. As a female she is expected to take care of her siblings as their caretaker while her mother is at work. At school, teachers may have low expectations for her because she is a girl and African-American.

# Oppression, Power And Privilege In The Classroom

In the classroom, understanding multiple identities can help teachers and classmates better relate to each other. It can also help them understand the relationship between power and privilege in the classroom.

Christina Torres is a teacher at the University Laboratory School in Honolulu, Hawaii. She makes sure to view her students through their multiple identities. She describes this mindset as “understanding that there’s a long background” to who her students are. In general, girls have different life experiences than boys; blacks have different life experiences than whites; children from rich families have different life experiences than children from low-income families. Understanding context is also key, Torres says. “A woman who is Latina in L.A. is going to have a very different experience from someone who’s in the middle of Arkansas. The place matters, too.”

Torres’ ninth-grade class also explores internalized oppression. Internalized oppression is when people give in to the negative messages about who they are. For example, a mother playing catch with her daughter may tell her not to “throw like a girl.” In this example, the mother has bought into the negative message that boys are better than girls at sports, and may be passing that message to her daughter.

# Navigating The Intersections

Discussions about intersectionality and oppression might seem too difficult to talk about in class, but when a teacher brings up these difficult topics they show they care deeply about their students. In fact, Torres begins the year by asking her students to consider where and how they fit into their communities. She asks them to explore what makes them feel worthwhile there.

By emphasizing intersectionality, she equips her students with the skills to examine why they believe what they believe. They learn to question why their beliefs might differ from others’ and to determine how their ideas might be influenced by power and privilege. For Torres, helping students like Nicole navigate the world — and the way the world responds to them — is an important part of her responsibility as an educator.

“Every day kids enter our class, there’s an opportunity for them to be empowered or oppressed,” she says. “When I don’t consider intersectionality and what they might need, I run the risk of oppressing my kids. ... When we stop seeing our kids as whole people ... we stop seeing them as real people.”

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1. What is intersectionality?
2. What issues contribute to intersectionality?
3. What is the weakness of seeing people through a single identity?
4. What is the purpose of understanding intersectionality?
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Intersectionality refers to the different identities people have
6. What issues contribute to intersectionality?
The article describes race, gender, sex, disability, and sexual orientation, as well as where people live and socioeconomic status. Other issues could be religion, appearance, and age.
7. What is the weakness of seeing people through a single identity?
It is much easier to stereotype people through by seeing people through a single identity. People are complex and recognizing multiple identities supports better understanding.
8. What is the purpose of understanding intersectionality?
The purpose is to develop awareness and empathy for others and their situation.