



Scenario reflection exercises:

Thinking through common teaching practices that involve learning and thinking differences

Description

This reflection exercise uses [Through My Eyes](#), an interactive experience created by Understood.org. This free set of resources features three simulations that are based on the real-life experiences of students with ADHD, dyslexia, and dyscalculia.

Goal

By looking at real-world examples from classrooms, teachers will learn to spot and address biases, and develop ways to help all their students thrive.

Time

Self-paced (approximately 1 hour)

Target audience

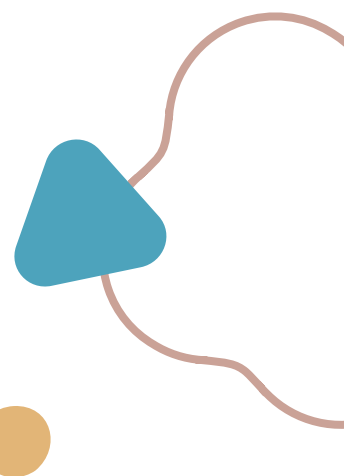
General education teachers (adaptable for all educators)

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Directions

Read and reflect on these five scenarios. You can work individually or with a small group. If possible, reflect on your answers with at least one colleague to gain insight and feedback. Refer to the answer key on the last page.



Scenario 1: Responding to student behavior

Ms. Lopez teaches fifth grade. One of her students, Jamal, has been falling behind on assignments.

Ms. Lopez notes that Jamal has strong verbal skills and a quick sense of humor that his classmates enjoy. But he fidgets a lot and has trouble staying seated during class. He also calls out answers without raising his hand. Ms. Lopez has tried to use [redirection strategies](#) as well as [prompting and pre-correcting](#). She also often reminds Jamal to stay focused and work quietly, but his behavior still disrupts the class.

After a particularly tough day, Ms. Lopez fills out a behavior referral form (also known as a discipline referral) for Jamal. She cites “consistent disruptions” and a “lack of discipline” on the form and submits it to the school administration.

Afterward, Ms. Lopez realizes she skipped key steps, such as talking with the school counselor, documenting previous strategies, and meeting with Jamal’s parents about her concerns. She also hasn’t observed him during other parts of the day, checked in with his other teachers, or talked to Jamal directly to get his perspective. She submitted the referral without a comprehensive view of his needs.

Discussion questions

1. What steps should Ms. Lopez have followed in this situation? Read the list of nine steps below. Number them in the order you think would work best. Pause and reflect on each step, thinking about your own school. What should be the first step? What should be the last step? Should any of the steps be removed? Should any be added? Discuss with a colleague.

____ Submit the behavior referral.

____ Talk with the school counselor.

____ Talk with Jamal directly to get his perspective on classroom challenges and to learn more about his preferences and interests.

____ Use classroom interventions, like [positive behavior strategies](#).

____ Try [classroom accommodations](#) such as flexible seating, wait time, or breaks.

____ Review classroom behavior expectations with Jamal.

____ Consult with colleagues.

____ Observe and document both positive and challenging behavior patterns, including noting what time of day the behaviors occur.

____ Communicate with Jamal’s parent or caretaker.

2. What assumptions might Ms. Lopez be making about Jamal based on his behaviors? What could she have done differently to understand what Jamal's behavior is communicating?
3. **Self-reflect:** As a teacher, how can you adjust your initial reaction to behavior challenges? How can you ensure fairness and equity when dealing with behavior challenges that are related to a child's disabilities?

Dive deeper: Explore a teacher's guide to [understanding behavior as a form of communication](#).

Scenario 2: Gender and ADHD

Ms. Roberts, a sixth-grade teacher, attends a data review meeting where she discusses her student, Lucy.

Ms. Roberts shares that Lucy's classwork is often incomplete. She's not a disruptive student, but she seems disengaged, staring off into space or appearing to daydream. Lucy especially struggles in math class. She follows along but doesn't ask or answer questions. Her parents have shared concerns, noting that Lucy seems "unmotivated." Ms. Roberts thinks the lack of motivation stems from a lack of interest in the subject.

During the meeting, the curriculum supervisor, Mr. Green, says that Lucy's behavior — especially her inattention and daydreaming — is something he's seen a lot in girls who end up being diagnosed with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). He points out that girls with ADHD may present more subtly. They may be inattentive and daydreamy rather than disruptive. This gets Ms. Roberts thinking: Maybe Lucy's challenges aren't because she's not motivated, but because there's something else going on.

Discussion questions

1. Read the following statements about ADHD. Decide whether each is true or false.
 - ___ ADHD is common in girls, but girls are diagnosed less often than boys.
 - ___ ADHD has long been overlooked and misunderstood in girls.
 - ___ Girls with ADHD often show fewer disruptive behaviors than boys with ADHD.
 - ___ ADHD is only identified in childhood and does not continue into adulthood.
 - ___ Students with ADHD may perform well in some subjects but struggle significantly in others.
2. How might the myth that "girls aren't as naturally skilled in math" influence Ms. Roberts' perception of Lucy's struggles in math? How could this myth and/or common misconceptions about girls and ADHD impact the support Lucy receives?

3. **Self-reflect:** Consider what active engagement looks and sounds like in your classroom. How might you adapt your definition of engagement to include all learners? How can you talk with your students about different ways of engaging? Discuss your ideas with a peer to receive feedback.

Dive deeper: Learn more about [ADHD in girls](#).

Scenario 3: Multilingual learners and special education

Ms. Chen teaches third grade. One of her students, Sofia, is a multilingual learner (ML). (Many schools and some laws use the term “English language learner,” or ELL.) Sofia’s parents reached out to Ms. Chen to see if Sofia might need extra support. They’re worried about how Sofia’s reading is coming along.

Sofia struggles with reading fluency. She often stops in the middle of a sentence and sometimes loses her place while reading. She also struggles to recognize and spell some words. Even with these challenges, Sofia joins in during class. But she sometimes misses cues because it’s hard for her to understand written instructions.

Ms. Chen wonders: Are Sofia’s challenges related to language acquisition? Or a learning disability? She reviews Sofia’s [WIDA](#) scores, which show an emerging proficiency in English. She talks with the school’s ML or ELL coordinator, who notes that while many of Sofia’s challenges are typical for someone learning a new language, she may need further evaluation to be sure.

Ms. Chen starts the formal referral process for Sofia. She documents Sofia’s consistent struggles with reading despite targeted language support. She notes instances where Sofia’s reading challenges may go beyond typical challenges for an ML. When presenting Sofia’s case to the school’s support team, Ms. Chen advocates for a reading evaluation to rule out dyslexia.

Discussion questions

1. Decide if the following statements are true or false.
 - _____ If a multilingual learner (ML) is struggling academically, the challenges are always due to language acquisition issues rather than a learning disability.
 - _____ MLs should not receive accommodations unless they’re diagnosed with a learning disability.
 - _____ Teachers should try to help MLs get language-acquisition support (such as bilingual or multilingual programs, if available) before considering a special education referral.

____ If an ML is struggling with academics, it helps to find out about their language and schooling history, such as how long they've been learning English and whether they learned to read before coming to the United States.

2. What specific steps did Ms. Chen take to ensure an accurate assessment of Sofia's needs? How did her approach help avoid potential biases?
3. **Self-reflect:** What resources are available at your school or district to help you make informed referrals for ML students?

Dive deeper: Learn more about how to help [if multilingual students are struggling in school](#).

Scenario 4: Misconceptions about learning disabilities

Mr. Alba teaches sixth-grade math. One of his students, Lucas, has an [Individualized Education Program \(IEP\)](#) for dyscalculia.

Lucas often struggles with math operations and has difficulty remembering math facts. Lucas shows progress in classwork when given the supports listed in his IEP, such as manipulatives and other tools to help visualize math concepts. But his test grades in Mr. Alba's math class are lower than his scores from previous years, even when using the supports.

In a recent team meeting, Mr. Alba expressed frustration, saying, "Lucas just isn't good at math! He's never going to get it." Other teachers chimed in, agreeing that since his area of disability is in math, this may not ever be a strength for him. However, his special education teacher, Ms. Lewis, disagreed. She pointed out that Lucas has shown growth and can continue improving with proper support. She emphasized that Lucas' challenges don't reflect his overall intelligence. She reminded the team that having a learning difference does not mean a student can't learn or do well.

Discussion questions

1. What are Mr. Alba's misconceptions about the relationship between dyscalculia and intelligence? How might these misconceptions impact Lucas' learning?
2. How do teachers' expectations impact students' motivation and performance, particularly students with learning differences?
3. **Self-reflect:** Think about one of your students who is struggling and could benefit from some feedback or more support. How can you phrase your feedback in a supportive and encouraging way? Write an example of the feedback you would give, focusing on their strengths and areas for improvement.

Dive deeper: Explore common misconceptions about [ADHD](#), [dyslexia](#), and [dyscalculia](#).

Scenario 5: Providing accommodations

Ms. Ray is a middle school general education English teacher. Her student, Daniel, has a [504 plan](#) that includes extended time for assignments, seating near the front of the room, and access to lecture notes.

Ms. Ray feels that Daniel's accommodations are unnecessary. She sees them as "special treatment" and believes that Daniel should be able to manage without them.

During a recent parent-teacher meeting, Ms. Ray expressed her concerns, saying that the accommodations are like "cheating."

She thinks that students often "don't need" these supports and are "choosing" to use them instead of studying for tests or completing tasks on time.

Daniel's parents felt uneasy after this conversation and mentioned their concerns to the school's 504 coordinator. The coordinator reminded Ms. Ray that accommodations are required by law to ensure Daniel's equitable access to learning.

Discussion questions

1. What steps can the 504 team take to ensure that the school complies with Daniel's accommodations? How can the team address Ms. Ray's resistance? There may be more than one appropriate answer.
 - A. Offer training sessions on how 504 plans protect kids with disabilities from discrimination in school.
 - B. Require Daniel's parents to approve Ms. Ray's decisions about the use of accommodations.
 - C. Allow Ms. Ray to opt out of implementing accommodations if she has concerns.
 - D. Schedule regular check-ins to support teachers and to ensure 504 plan compliance.
2. How might Ms. Ray's perspective on accommodations differ if Daniel had a wheelchair or other visible signs of disability?
3. **Self-reflect:** What are your thoughts on how accommodations support students? What resources are available to you to help you effectively provide accommodations?

Dive deeper: Explore [classroom accommodations](#) for learning and thinking differences.

Answer key

Scenario 1: Responding to student behavior

Answers may vary and should be discussed. But the first step should be “Observe and document both positive and challenging behavior patterns, including noting what time of day the behaviors occur.” The last step should be to submit the referral.

Scenario 2: Gender and ADHD

- **True:** ADHD is common in girls, but girls are diagnosed less often than boys.
- **True:** ADHD has long been overlooked and misunderstood in girls.
- **True:** Girls with ADHD often show fewer disruptive behaviors than boys with ADHD.
- **False:** ADHD is only identified in childhood and does not continue into adulthood.
- **True:** Students with ADHD may perform well in some subjects but struggle significantly in others.

Scenario 3: Multilingual learners and special education

- **False:** If a multilingual learner (ML) is struggling academically, the challenges are always due to language acquisition issues rather than a learning disability.
- **False:** MLs should not receive accommodations unless they’re diagnosed with a learning disability.
- **True:** Teachers should try to help MLs get language-acquisition support (such as bilingual or multilingual programs, if available) before considering a special education referral.
- **True:** If an ML is struggling with academics, it helps to find out about their language and schooling history, such as how long they’ve been learning English and whether they learned to read before coming to the United States.

Scenario 4: Misconceptions about learning disabilities

There are no exact right answers to these questions. But to deepen your thinking about this scenario, explore common misconceptions about [ADHD](#), [dyslexia](#), and [dyscalculia](#).

Scenario 5: Providing accommodations

Both A and D are correct responses to the question of what steps the 504 team can take to ensure that the school complies with Daniel's accommodations.

- A. Offer training sessions on how 504 plans protect kids with disabilities from discrimination in school.
- D. Schedule regular check-ins to support teachers and to ensure 504 plan compliance.

Acknowledgments

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