



## It is time to act: Making your school inclusive for students with intersex variations

The information and recommendations provided in this eBrief are based on findings of the research projects developed in the framework of the INIA: Intersex – New Interdisciplinary Approaches Innovative Training Network.

### Basic facts:

Within all walks of life, there is a group of people who are largely invisible. According to the United Nations document 'Human Rights Violations Against Intersex People. A Background Note', up to 1.7% of the population has an intersex variation. This means they have a body that does not conform to traditional understandings of male and female bodies. There is nothing inherently dangerous or unhealthy about having a body with an intersex variation.

People with intersex variations may be subject to medical or surgical interventions on their bodies, which can be experienced as traumatic, and can have an impact on their experience of education due to sick leave or absenteeism, etc.

Language in this space is very contested. Within medical circles, intersex variations have many diagnostic labels but are collectively known as 'Disorders of Sex Development (DSD)' or 'differences of sex development (dsd).' Some people prefer to use terms like 'intersex'. In this brief, we use the term 'intersex variations' to be inclusive of all perspectives.

People with intersex variations are born and raised in families with diverse class, race, gender, cultural and geographical backgrounds. People with intersex variations have diverse faiths, ethnicities, gender identities/expressions, sexual orientations, and other social characteristics.

### What are the issues?

It is probable that there are students with intersex variations in every school. However, they are also highly likely to be unacknowledged with the consequence that their specific needs are overlooked within the school community. People with intersex variations experience psychological and social issues of which schools are often unaware.

The lived experiences that people with intersex variations shared with INIA researchers identify different issues arising in the school context. These can include:

- Increased rates of absenteeism and dropout
- Discrimination and bullying
- Lack of knowledgeable health and counselling services
- Negative experiences within toilets, bathrooms, and changing facilities

More often than not, intersex variations are entirely excluded from education within both the formal and informal curricula. Where they are addressed, they are reduced to the context of medical pathology, mythology, or LGBT issues. This leads to the social exclusion of students with intersex variations in the school context.

### Things to consider:

- Many people with intersex variations identify school as the start of lifelong experiences of exclusion.
- The medical and psychological trauma that students with intersex variations may carry is not acknowledged by many schools.
- Students with intersex variations may experience prolonged, and often repeated, absences due to medical interventions, which may negatively impact their well-being on many levels, including physical and psychological health; academic performance; feelings of belonging; and the ability to form and sustain friendships.
- Students with intersex variations may actively avoid engaging in subjects because they are uncomfortable with attention being drawn to their bodies in spaces such as sports and changing facilities.
- Many students with intersex variations face bullying and exclusion from peer groups at school. This may be amplified once their intersex variation becomes known due to the lack of awareness and acceptance of intersex variations.
- Students with intersex variations may not recognise themselves, or their experiences, in curricula. Intersex variations are often not covered in human biology courses, nor are they covered in other subjects. A strict binary understanding of sex, and a conflation of sex and gender, contribute to the general confusion on this topic.
- The use of outdated, pathologising, and incorrect terminology (e.g., 'hermaphrodite', 'DSD') or confusing intersex with 'trans' or 'non-binary' when discussing intersex variations is still prevalent and is often the only reference students with intersex variations will find about themselves in any literature.
- Students with some intersex variations may have specific learning and/or physical needs, for example, dyslexia or fatigue, which must be met to support their optimal learning.

### Questions for reflection:

- How could you, as a teacher, support students with an intersex variation at your school?
- How will you explore intersex variations and discuss relevant issues with students?
- Is the Dignity in School/Bullying policy of your school inclusive of intersex experiences?
- Within your school environment, how can you maximise the potential for students with intersex variations to have a positive educational experience?

### Recommendations:

- Raise awareness and acknowledge the existence of people with intersex variations in the classroom, regardless of whether there is a known student with an intersex variation amongst the cohort.
- Be sensitive to the health and well-being of students with intersex variations. Be aware of potential experiences of trauma, and champion friendly and inclusive spaces.
- Train education and support staff on the issues and needs of people with intersex variations.
- Review whether your anti-bullying and harassment policies address the needs of students with intersex variations.
- Create inclusive policies that consider the needs of students with intersex variations, such as gender-neutral uniform policies.
- Provide comprehensive sex education that not only includes information about intersex variations but also explores social aspects, such as relationships with peers and with their own bodies. This also encompasses discussions around bodily autonomy, consent, and personal boundaries.
- Include educational materials that address intersex variations beyond medicalised and pathologised depictions. Provide access to resources, such as books and media, that include intersex experiences. Prioritise the materials created by intersex people themselves.

### About the INIA project:

The INIA Innovative Training Network is supported by a grant from the European Commission's Marie Skłodowska -Curie Actions program project number 859869.

For more information, please check

<https://www.intersexnew.co.uk/>

\*We acknowledge that there are differences of opinion amongst INIA Consortium members and more widely amongst people with intersex variations.

\*\*This brief reflects only the views of the authors, and the agency is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.

2023