

Discussion paper

Five principles for inclusion

Ben Newmark and Tom Rees

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**Confederation
of School Trusts**

The voice of school trusts



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Ben Newmark is a secondary teacher and school teacher. He has worked in education for nearly twenty years. His eldest daughter Bessie has Williams Syndrome. She is kind, enthusiastic, charming and popular with her friends, family and teachers. She has just begun Year 2 at a wonderfully inclusive mainstream primary school.

Tom Rees is Chief Executive of Ormiston Academies Trust. He was previously Executive Director of Programmes at Ambition Institute and has worked in education for twenty-five years. Tom was a primary headteacher and then education director in a school trust over a ten year period, which included running a special unit for children with learning disabilities. His eldest son, Freddie, loves swimming and dancing. He also has Down's syndrome and autism. Tom was the founding chair of a charity which supports children and families affected by Down's syndrome.



Confederation
of School Trusts

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Institute

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Its evidence-based professional development programmes support educators at every stage – from early career teachers through to CEOs leading multiple schools, and all the crucial teaching and leadership roles in between.

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Forewords

In July 2022, the Confederation of School Trusts and Ambition Institute published an important paper, *A good life: Towards greater dignity for people with learning disability*, written by Ben Newmark and Tom Rees.

Tom and Ben say: "If we are to take this opportunity as society to think again about the place for those with special educational needs and disabilities, we have to be able to make a fuller and more inclusive articulation of what a good life is, and what it could be."

They argue that this is about dignity and belonging. And it is absolutely still the value we place on work and learning. We think that the purpose of education needs a wider narrative than performativity. We offer that this might be a narrative of human flourishing. We define human flourishing as both the optimal continuing development of children's potential (the substance of education, the value of knowledge) and living well as a human being. It is about living well in our communities and societies, and creating communities defined by an ethic of belonging.

This next paper on five principles for inclusion takes the thinking of the earlier paper and develops a chain of reasoning, articulates a system of belief, and is a call to action. We should not wait for someone else to make the changes we want to see in the world. We can start, even in small ways, by being the change we want to see.

Of course we need structural and funding reform of our system of special educational needs and disabilities. We need fundamental changes to the assessment system so that dignity is at the heart of all assessment. We should continue to make this case purposefully and intentionally to government.

But we can also focus on the schools and trusts we lead. Let us commit to building strong educational institutions that address the inequalities and hardships we face as a society and as a nation. And let those institutions work together in a single moral purpose – to advance education for all the children in our schools – to create equal social and educational value for all children. Let us act together for a wider common good.

Leora Cruddas CBE

Chief Executive, Confederation of School Trusts

Teaching children with special educational needs and/or a disability is an area where teachers consistently say they would like more support.

At Ambition, we are committed to enabling teachers to develop a 'built-in, not bolt-on' approach to supporting children with special educational needs, where inclusion is part of the fabric of schools. We are grateful for the expertise and input from the many contributors to the round table discussions that helped shape this work. We hope it will support dialogue, reflection and practical change.

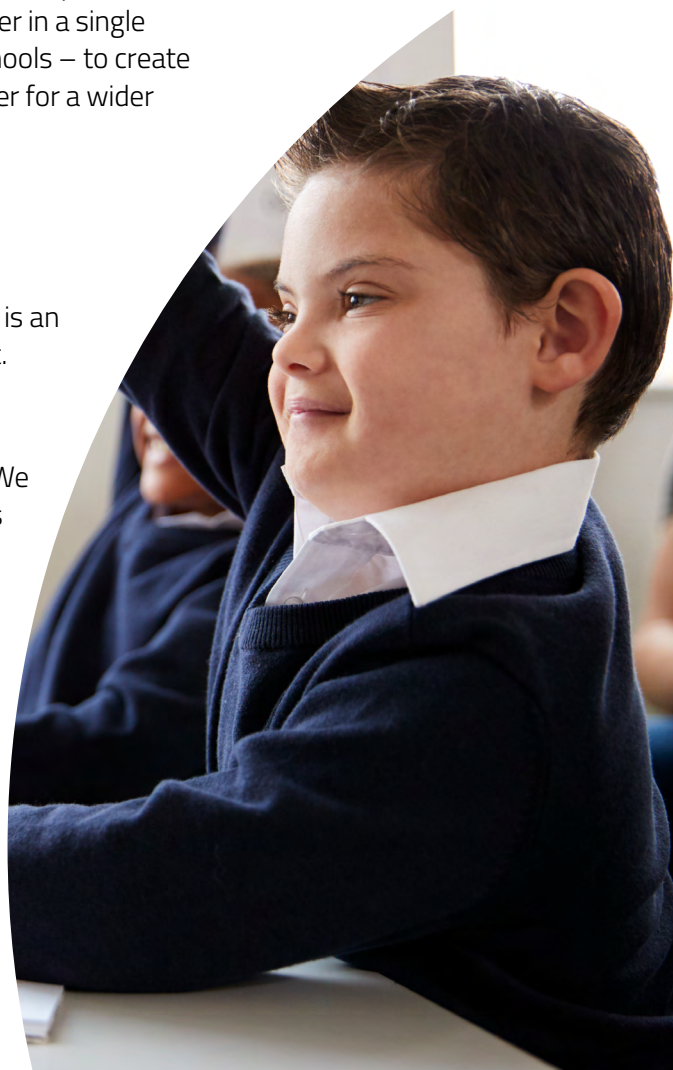
All children deserve to be treated with dignity and feel a sense of belonging. We are proud to be co-publishing this discussion paper with CST, as a contribution to the conversation about how best to support teachers, schools and trusts to deliver high quality education – for all pupils.

Hilary Spencer

Chief Executive, Ambition Institute

"It is time for parents to teach young people early on that in diversity there is beauty and there is strength."

Maya Angelou



Introduction

“A child with a disability has the right to live a full and decent life with dignity and, as far as possible, independence and to play an active part in the community.”

Article 23, *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*

Education in England does not work well enough for children identified with SEND.

The challenge isn't new. Since the beginning of mass schooling, our education system has struggled with the challenge of including all children in a positive and meaningful way.

Some efforts of past societies are shocking to us today. At its most extreme, up to the 1950s some children with intellectual disability were not sent to school at all and were instead placed in asylums or institutions.

The post-war movement ended such obvious segregation. Since then, through changes to law and movements of integration and inclusion, the right of all children to a high-quality education until at least the age of 16 has been established.

Things should now be better than ever.

Despite this obvious progress, however, our national system is in crisis. There is no alternative way of describing an education system not working for too many children and their families.

There is a recent and welcome focus on SEND within the school system. To a large extent, this has been driven by the government's SEND review¹. It has also been driven by concerns from teachers and trusts about their ability to respond to the complexity of need in schools.

Since the Department for Education's Green Paper in March 2022 and the national SEND improvement plan² published in March 2023, there has been renewed debate and speculation. The level of dissatisfaction with the current system is acknowledged honestly within the improvement plan, which states:

- The system is failing to deliver improved outcomes for all children and young people.
- Too many parents have lost faith in a system that is not sufficiently responsive to them, is increasingly adversarial, and in which they face long waiting times to access information and support for their children, including accessing therapists and mental health support.
- Despite substantial additional investment, the system has become financially unsustainable. The government has increased high needs funding by over 50% from 2019-20 to 2023-24, with no marked improvement in outcomes or experiences.

The attention of government on these issues is welcome and we in the education system should support reform that helps improve the efficiency, effectiveness and user experience of the SEND system.

But there are underlying structural challenges that have a huge impact on the daily experience and life prospects of children with SEND, which must be acknowledged and addressed.

Our current SEND system is built on a medicalised and legalised model – which requires proof of deviation from a defined norm to secure extra help in school.

1 Department for Education (2022). [SEND review: right support, right place, right time](#).

2 Department for Education (2023). [SEND and alternative provision improvement plan](#).

While this model may be pragmatic to allocate resources, the processes it drives such as Educational Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) and Disability Living Allowance (DLA) lack dignity, and reinforce segregation by setting up a false binary between those with SEND and those without.

This combination of the medical lens and the consequent segregation often results in lower quality provision for those with SEND, delivered by less qualified practitioners, instead of the high-quality expert teaching to which every child is entitled.

The government clearly has much to do to improve the ways in which this manifests in the SEND system, and we should push for those changes to happen.

This paper is aimed at examining what schools can do.

It suggests five principles to underpin a more affirmative version of inclusion, with some examples of where they are already being enacted.

None of this is easy. If the solution for creating a more inclusive education system were obvious, we would have found it by now. We recognise that school leaders often feel they are navigating competing priorities: whether that's balancing the needs of a majority group compared to a few individuals, or achieving good headline performance measures while maintaining inclusive practice.

We hope this paper will help schools to reconcile these apparent tensions and that it will encourage more sharing of good practice, so that together we can move towards a school system that works better for all learners.

Origins of this paper

In July 2022, the Confederation of School Trusts and Ambition Institute published a paper written by Ben Newmark and Tom Rees, *A good life: towards greater dignity for people with learning disability*.³

Their paper explored ways in which the outcome of the SEND Review and Green Paper consultation could shift the way society thinks about people who find learning difficult.

Following its publication, the Confederation of School Trusts and Ambition Institute convened a series of roundtable discussions and blogs to examine and interrogate these themes further. The roundtables comprised school leaders, SENDCOs and teachers from a range of settings including mainstream and special schools. Parents of children with learning disabilities attended and presented, as did people with specific learning difficulties and disability.

Five principles for inclusion is the result of these discussions. We have attempted to capture the ideas and practices that were shared by participants and organise them into principles. Our hope is to stimulate discussions that might help to improve the educational experience and outcomes of children with SEND. We are grateful for all input received by roundtable participants and contributors to this paper; any flaws or omissions are the responsibility of the authors.

A note on language

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) is an umbrella term used to identify and describe children who require extra help and support to be successful in school.

Under the umbrella sit those with physical disabilities, those with identified learning

³ Newmark, B & Rees T (2022) *A good life: Towards greater dignity for people with learning disability*. Confederation of School Trusts and Ambition Institute.

disabilities, and others without a formally identified condition.

The term is problematic; it suggests a binary between children with and without SEND. It implies these children are fundamentally different from the norm, and that their struggles are a product of these differences rather than the systems and structures around them.

This can lead to beliefs and practices that exclude these children from aspects of education taken for granted by other children.

This does not mean all children will learn at the same speed if the systems and structures around them are changed to better meet their needs. Some children – particularly those with learning disabilities – will always find learning harder than most other people. While this disability is not their identity, it is part of it, and a properly functioning education system must support learning while affirming them as complete, unbroken humans. A depressing result of this framing is how many families have come to feel that the only way in which they can access support is to themselves categorise their children as deficient through processes – like EHCP applications – that require them to demonstrate failure to get the help they need.

This goes against the instincts of parents and families and can be humiliating and degrading.

Secondly the term SEND implies a commonality of experience. This is misleading and obscures the individual identities of those assigned the label. This leads to generic policy and strategy and can expose children to inappropriate practice.

In earlier drafts of this paper the term SEND was not used. Instead, the paper referred to “children who find learning more difficult”, in an attempt to better capture the diverse experiences and identities of those identified as having special educational needs and disabilities.

It was an attempt to encompass those who find learning harder because this is part of who they are, those who find it harder because of the systemic obstacles they face, and those for whom both are true. In contrast to SEND, which creates an artificial dividing line, it also aimed to highlight how finding learning easier or harder is not binary but every person exists on a continuum.

This new term was not without its own problems, however, and it is more suited to some children within the SEND family than others.

We also know that while language matters, juggling terms is not enough. Language changes rapidly, but lived experience remains the same. We are also keenly aware that a focus on language and terminology can distract from what really matters – better outcomes for children who need these now.

After much debate, and recognising its limitations, we decided to stick with the term SEND in this paper. This designation is still used to direct resources towards children



who need extra support, and without it thousands of young people would find themselves without the help they need.

We still live in the hope, nonetheless, of a long-overdue retirement of this term, as more specific and expert practice leave it without purpose or function.

In the meantime we will continue to strive to find more precise language and to focus more on how to meet children's learning needs, than on their diagnosis.

Principles for inclusion

The *SEND Code of Practice*⁴ defines inclusion as the "progressive removal of barriers to learning and participation". As a school leader, inclusion should be seen as an iterative process – continually identifying and removing anything that gets in the way of all children accessing high quality education.

Under five principles, this paper gathers examples of places and projects that are responding to the challenge of inclusion as a priority and are generously sharing this openly with others. Those working hard at inclusion may recognise elements of their work even when it isn't explicitly identified; we hope they will see they aren't alone in pursuing expert support for those for whom school does not work well enough.

⁴ Department for Education (2020), [SEND Code of Practice](#)

Five principles for inclusion

Dignity, not deficit

Difference and disability are normal aspects of humanity – the education of children with SEND should be characterised by dignity and high expectation, not deficit and medicalisation.

Greater complexity merits greater expertise

All children deserve a high-quality education – where extra support is needed, it should be expert in nature.

Different, but not apart

Encountering difference builds an inclusive society – children with different learning needs should be able to grow up together.

Success in all its forms

Success takes many forms – we should value and celebrate a wide range of achievements, including different ways of participating in society.

Action at all levels

Change happens from the bottom-up as well as top-down - everyone has the agency and a responsibility to act.



Principle one: Dignity, not deficit

Difference and disability are normal aspects of humanity – the education of children with SEND should be characterised by dignity and high expectation, not deficit and medicalisation.

Every child is as an individual existing within the broad range of humanity. While some children need more help than others, everyone is complete in themselves and of inherent equal value.

Society distinguishes between what is considered normal and what is considered different, and those labelled with SEND are often framed as deficient or lacking – deviations from a constructed norm.

Children with SEND can still be subject to segregation within mainstream school settings and frequently receive teaching from less qualified teachers⁵, and expectations of what they can achieve are often too low.

Clearly, this is unacceptable. Our schools should show there is value in difference, and no shame in finding learning harder.

Achieving this goal is made challenging by the medical model of disability, which positions people as disabled due to their impairments or differences, focusing on what is “wrong” or different. The system is set up this way: from Education, Health and Care Plans to Disability Living Allowances, vulnerable children and their families are often required to provide evidence of failure to access support.

As SEND specialist Barney Angliss points out: “it often seems the only way for young people with SEND – or their parents and carers to get help [...] is to characterise themselves as ‘impaired’, somehow less.”⁶

The medical model is not inherently wrong – it can help those who have a specific disability they can and wish to change, such as epilepsy or a visual impairment that can be fixed through surgical intervention if this is what a person wants. But there are many situations when the medical model is not appropriate.

Increasingly, our school system labels children with low attainment as having “SEND”. Currently, around four in 10 children within the school system will be classified this way at some point in their school journey.⁷ Clearly this is too big a proportion to respond to through specialist or personalised intervention; we need to be able to meet this broad range of need within regular mainstream classes.

The combined impact of over-medicalisation and capacity pressures mean we need to a different approach. Our education system should challenge framing that locates problems within children, rather than within approaches to teaching them.

Under the social model of disability, the way society is organised is positioned as the disabling factor – it focusses on what someone needs, and on provision aimed at removing barriers that prevent their inclusion and participation.

These philosophies manifest in our attitudes to difference. For example, asking, “How do we support this child to read fluently?” instead of stating, “They can’t read fluently because of their diagnosis”.

One of the challenges for schools, is that labels can become a self-fulfilling prophecy, with low expectations resulting in poor outcomes.⁸ Whereas labels and

⁵ Webster, R (2022). *The Inclusion Illusion: How children with special educational needs experience mainstream schools*. UCL Press.

⁶ Wespieser, K (2021). *The researchED guide to Special Educational Needs: An evidence-informed guide for teachers*. John Catt.

⁷ Hutchinson, J (2021). *Identifying pupils with special educational needs and disabilities*. Education Policy Institute.

⁸ Jussim, L & Harber, K (2005). *Teacher Expectations and Self-Fulfilling Prophecies: Knowns and Unknowns*.

categorisation can lead us to reach too quickly for provision that is “additional and different”, this principle emphasises the need to demand higher expectations of teaching for those who need it the most. This requires us to strengthen the main teaching offer and to ensure that high quality teaching is itself the intervention.

When a child’s needs are being met with inclusive design, the label becomes less integral to their educational experience. An increasingly inclusive and expert school and classroom environment helps children with SEND to learn better - but it also helps everyone to learn better.

As Nicole Dempsey says: “The high quality, expectations, accountability and drive we offer for most of our students is the right of all students, but the individualisation, responsiveness and care that is often reserved for our SEND students is the right of all students too.”⁹

Case studies

The Alltogether Learning Disability Project¹⁰.

Too few children encounter the stories of those with learning disability in their school curriculum. Children with learning disability rarely see themselves in what they learn. This can easily create a sense that education is not really for them.

While there has been a welcome focus on diversity and differences around gender, nationality, religion, race and class in recent years, the voices of those with learning disability are often not heard.

Ben Newmark, a history teacher, school leader and the father of a child with learning disability – and Shaun Webster MBE, an accessibility expert with a learning disability himself – decided to do something about this. Ben and Shaun worked together to create a school history curriculum telling the story of the inclusion and exclusion of people with learning disability from the prehistoric period to the present day.

The project grew to encompass two versions of the booklet, a teacher guide and an audio podcast with the script adapted and read by people with learning disabilities. The content – written with help of historians, teachers and those with personal experience – show how learning ability and disability are societal constructs not empirical binaries; that everyone’s degree of ability and disability is contingent on how far they are included; and the process of inclusion involves everyone in society.

The curriculum has since been taught in special schools, mainstream comprehensives and selective schools.

It shows inclusion as an action – something we must actively do and continue to do as a society as the needs of its members change.

The project demonstrates what can be achieved by a diversity of people working together on projects designed for everyone. It would not have been possible without the input of expert academic historians and teachers, and the project would not have been accessible or relevant without the expertise of people with personal experience of the issues in it.

The Revel Primary School. Brinklow and Monks Kirby, Warwickshire

At The Revel the differences between children are explained and celebrated.

When admitting any child – including those with SEND – The Revel Primary School begins by asking, “What do they bring to us and how do we share it?”



Resolved and Unresolved Controversies. Personality and Social Psychology Review.

9 Dempsey, N (2022). *What is the SEND system for?* Ambition Institute.

10 <http://www.learningdisabilityhistory.org/>

This affirmation is an expression of their belief every child contributes to their community, and that it is a duty of the community to identify and celebrate this contribution.

SENDCO Helen Wood believes in openness and positivity, and in engaging the natural curiosity of children to create a culture in which difference and disability are seen as normal aspects of human experience.

Helen and her team are effortful and deliberate in normalising adaptation and adjustment, so all children see the reasons for them, emphasising the school's duty to ensure all children learn.

This might mean enlarging the worksheets of all children in a class, so they see their work is no different to that of a partially sighted child requiring this adaptation, or it might mean all children using standing desks at points in the day to normalise the experience of a child who needs one most of the time. If a child requires a tablet computer to access work, then all children in the class are shown how it works if this is what the child who needs it wants. The Revel carefully considers whether an adaptation required by one child might actually be of benefit to more or even all.

At The Revel non-verbal children are not described being unable to talk – instead they are described as “talking with their hands” or “talking with touch”, which is both accurate and affirmatory.

Helen understands that inclusion means working closely with families so that goals and aims are developed collaboratively and not just imposed. Her approach is at heart very simple. Every day she asks: “What would we want for this child if they were ours? Because they are.”

Principle two: Greater complexity merits greater expertise

All children deserve a high-quality education – where extra support is needed, it should be expert in nature.

Teaching children with special educational needs should be a sought-after responsibility that teachers see as high prestige.

Children with SEND typically make less progress than their peers, yet they are often taught by less qualified staff. This is back-to-front. In many professions, the hardest tasks are reserved for those with the greatest expertise. The association of prestige with complexity can be seen in the status of consultant surgeons, master craftsmen or special forces.

Expert practice for those with SEND is both an intellectual pursuit and a moral and professional responsibility, rather than an act of generosity or a demonstration of kindness. High expectations and expert teaching and support are the entitlement of all children.

Sadly, all too often, children with SEND are placed at the bottom of the educational hierarchy with their education marked by lower standards, lower expectations, less scrutiny, and the perception that those who work with these children are engaged more in roles of care and charity than they are in knowledge-based expert professional practice.

This is damaging and untrue. Work with children who find learning difficult requires at least as high a level of ambition and expertise than work with the most academically able. Better inclusion would lead to schools providing expert support for all children – characterised by expert decisions based on the best available evidence.

Professionals in the most inclusive schools and systems are recognised and rewarded as truly expert practitioners. They are given the time and resource they need to meet the needs of the children they are responsible for and to. Their leaders see their work as central to institutional professional goals and are as deeply invested in the educational and social progress of children with SEND as they are in the progress of children without.

Expert practitioners and leaders do not accept practice just because it is the way things have been done before. They are proactive and brave, willing to have difficult conversations when these are in the interests of the children they are responsible for.

Case study

Dixons Trinity Academy

At Dixons Trinity Academy, “Mountain Rescue” is a multidisciplinary pastoral department that operates on the principle: whatever it takes, for as long as it takes, when they need it, because they need it.

The analogy was developed by SENDCO Nicole Dempsey, predicated on the idea every child climbs their own mountain and is entitled to the highest level of expertise and support to do so. It expresses a whole-school culture.

The aim is not to remove children from mainstream provision but to support them in accessing it. To achieve this, Dixons Trinity Academy might assign more than one teacher to a group of children, so intervention sessions and smaller group instruction can be delivered by those best qualified to do so.

Another approach is to merge classes and teach large groups of academically secure



students together, freeing expert teachers to support those who find the content more challenging. This can mean supervised practice or independent work for those ready for it, creating capacity for smaller group catch-up, pre-teaching and interventions for those who still need it.

Nicole and her team understand how important it is that children with SEND are placed at the centre of decision making; their experiences and outcomes are seen as a responsibility of all staff and not just those employed to work only with children with special educational needs. To facilitate this there is no separate office for the SEND team – all facilities are shared, helping develop an understanding of how all roles work together to the advantage of all students, particularly those finding school a struggle.

Finally, Dixons Trinity understands the importance of seeing children holistically; to have a good educational experience they need to feel happy, confident and included. The social strengths and challenges of children are considered just as carefully as their academic profile; those that need it are given targets and support for social occasions – such as “Family Dining”, in which form groups eat together – so that they are able to benefit from these in the same way everyone does.

Nicole’s work is an expression of her belief that all children are valuable and deserving of attention. She rejects the idea of a binary between those with SEND and those without, and sees children as individuals who require different levels of expert support, which will change over time.

She says: “There aren’t children that came to learn and children that came to be looked after. There are just children.”

Principle three: Different, but not apart

Encountering difference builds an inclusive society – children with different learning needs should be able to grow up together.

Inclusion is important to get right for children with SEND. It is also important for the wider benefit it can bring to society. Being an inclusive society requires normalising difference, and proximity is an important piece of the puzzle.

If we rarely meet people who are different to us, they can seem unusual.

Encountering difference can engender more accepting and positive attitudes. Where people have a relationship with a disabled person – whether as a family member or a colleague – they are less likely to hold negative attitudes towards disability in general. They are also more likely to have a perception of prejudice that matches the experiences of disabled people.¹¹

Schools can create proximity, by prioritising integration both within mainstream schools and between specialist and mainstream provision. Currently too few children in mainstream schools have meaningful interactions with those in special schools and SEND departments within mainstream settings can often feel disconnected. The effect of this can be to locate the problem of inclusion in the excluded and imply they must change to be welcome in mainstream society – as if they have to reach a certain level in order to be welcome and included.

Achieving the right balance is hard. Specialist provision is necessary for some children. This can (but does not necessarily) reduce the chance of relationships being formed between children with SEND and those without. Building regular interaction between mainstream and specialist settings can be challenging, and requires determination and commitment from school leaders.

It's not a given, however, that including children with SEND in mainstream school will guarantee meaningful interactions between children with different learning needs. Approaches such as setting, in-class grouping or withdrawal interventions – while often introduced for good reason – can create segregation reinforced by a misleading binary between those considered "normal" and those considered "special."

It doesn't have to be this way: many special schools, specialist provisions and mainstream schools build meaningful, ongoing partnerships. And mainstream schools can take some simple steps to reduce the perception of difference by employing interventions that help all learners, including those with SEND.

Great schools plan inclusion by design. Teachers who are inclusive by design plan a lesson with those who struggle the most in mind. In every part of the lesson the pupils with additional needs are in the forefront of their decision making. For example, the teacher breaks knowledge down into small chunks and plans how she will check for learning after each new piece of content. This strategy helps the pupils in her class with additional needs, but also all pupils benefit from the approach.

Inclusive schools see inclusion as core business: it is built into the fabric of the school, not bolted on at the end. They know that centring the school around those that find learning hardest benefits all children.

Working together, we can get to a place where we no longer hear teachers or headteachers say, "I'm not an expert in SEND". SEND provision should not be a secret garden: good teaching for those with SEND is in most cases good teaching for all.¹²

¹¹ Dixon, S et al. (2018). *The Disability Perception Gap*. Scope.

¹² Davies, K and Henderson, P (2020). *Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools: Guidance Report*,

Pupils with SEND, whether in mainstream or specialist settings, should not be treated as fundamentally different to others. Through their actions, schools can reduce segregation, and create plentiful opportunities for interaction.

Case study

Frank Wise Special School

At Frank Wise Special School every child up until the age of sixteen has half a day a week working in partnership with their peers in a local mainstream school – a feature of its practice for more than forty years. At Post-16 the curriculum is constructed in a way that places off-site education at the heart of what they do, to ensure that students can apply their knowledge and skills beyond school, interacting and engaging with the other members of the local community.

Well aware of the systemic barriers to inclusion their pupils face, the school's leaders have spent years working to build opportunities for pupils in mainstream education and wider society. Joint Headteachers Simon Knight and Heidi Dennison are aware of the dangers of locating inclusion challenges within their pupils and have helped the organisations they work with better understand what their pupils can bring to mainstream schools, the workplace and the wider community.

Staff at Frank Wise school work closely with those in local mainstream partner schools to identify shared goals focused on the needs of the children involved. This can mean considering how different facilities or additional equipment could be used to enhance the curriculum, or how a shared activity could benefit the academic or social development of those taking part. The purpose of any project is considered carefully before beginning, and its success monitored and evaluated.

Wherever possible visits between schools are reciprocal, with those from mainstream settings shown how they gain from accessing the curriculum, resources and spaces at Frank Wise. This demonstrates the benefits of inclusivity for everyone and helps fight benefactor-beneficiary modes of thought.

Inclusion is supported by building close links with the private sector, working with employers to ensure students get access to work experience and developing organisational understanding of how to effectively support people with their learning needs.

School staff are always looking to find new ways to enable members of wider society to understand what Frank Wise's students can offer, and to reduce the extent to which this information can be doubted. This has resulted in the production of digital business cards accessible by QR codes, annotated photo books evidencing the application of knowledge and skills, and CVs highlighting what the young person can do, alongside the support required to enable them to maximise their potential beyond school.¹³

Joint Headteacher Simon Knight says: "Our work to improve inclusivity and help embody a sense of belonging in our pupils is only made possible because of the close relationships we have built with local mainstream schools, employers and the wider community and their willingness to embrace inclusionary practices. Commitments must be collectively owned if they are to result in change."

The work of the team at Frank Wise shows how meaningful inclusion and greater proximity can make society stronger and fairer. We hope it will inspire others to build new partnerships that bring more people closer together.



Education Endowment Foundation.

¹³ Knight, S (2022). *In pursuit of a life well lived*. Confederation of School Trusts.

Principle four: Success in all its forms

Success takes many forms – we should value and celebrate a wide range of achievements, including different ways of participating in society.

Education needs a broad and ambitious vision of what a good life is. Schools play an important role in opening doors for children so that they have choice and opportunity in their life; exams and qualifications play an important role in this. At the same time, we need schools to be places that value the intrinsic worth of each individual child, who is more than just their exam grades, and that celebrate success in all its forms.

As expressions of society, schools are vulnerable to amplifying a narrow set of values based on wealth, professional status, and academic credentials. It's common for schools to celebrate extraordinary academic achievement through assemblies, award evenings and prize-giving ceremonies. High-profile alumni are often invited back to schools to inspire and motivate, often with tales of elite sporting and musical success.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with marking such achievements; a focus on academic outcomes is certainly not misplaced. But if these aims become too dominant, schools can become exclusionary to children for whom such accomplishments are not appropriate or realistic. This does not mean lowering standards but recognising that success can look different.

If we mark only conventional achievements, we imply those who don't rise to the top of prestigious fields have not succeeded. This is unimaginative and untrue. While credentialist and status-based achievements can contribute to good lives, good lives are not dependent on them.

Inclusion means building communities that affirm and value a wide range of achievements and experiences. It means noticing the extraordinary successes in the completion of everyday activities for those who have worked hard at them, and celebrating different ways of participation in society without condescension. It means understanding these things need not be in tension with each other – that acing spelling tests and learning to eat independently for the first time can both be impressive achievements, and that entry to Oxbridge and achieving an apprenticeship at a local firm are both dignified steps into adulthood to be celebrated – when we learn to properly value people as complete individuals who start at different points.

To do this meaningfully, schools need to pay close attention to the voices of all those who attend them, and to hear and value the ambitions of young people and their families.

In doing so, schools can broaden their conception of good lives and open them up to more people. They can enrich communities by showing the importance of noticing and celebrating the achievements of all members, and not just a constructed elite. They motivate everyone to participate.

Case study

Our Community Multi Academy Trust

At Our Community Multi Academy Trust – a school trust of faith and non-faith primary schools based in Kent, the leadership has worked hard to broaden the definition of children's success.

Executive inclusion officer Cassie Young says: "There is nothing more depressing



than sitting in a meeting solely focused on outcomes for the majority, and asking about the attainment for pupils with SEND.

“This is where the tricky conversations begin. Fundamentally, some children are just never going to reach a one-size-fits-all expected standard and some aren’t even going to be working in the key stage for their chronological age. Does this mean they are always failing? Does this mean that the school is always failing them? The answer of course, is no. We cannot work in absolutes, just as we can’t really, in any circumstance, talk about SEND as a homogeneous group and yet, too often, we do.”

For Cassie it’s important the work children do is valued and respected regardless of how this compares with others. She and her team look hard for evidence that shows children are succeeding and bring to light things that might be overlooked by others. This means gathering specialist reports showing a child has mastered something new, and the accounts of families and the children themselves that show how their lives have been enhanced and enriched by what they learn at school. They consider a narrative of success vital even when – especially when – a young person has a special need or disability that means their achievements might be overlooked.

Cassie sees being a champion for individual children as a core part of her role and asks those she manages challenging questions, such as: How can they celebrate the huge progress and leaps children make on their own merit, free of comparisons with other children that construct them as failures?

Cassie has worked with a school that enrolled a child who had been permanently excluded from two previous schools and had been educated at a specialist behavioural unit. The child had never been on a school trip or had the opportunity to work – or even interact – with peers in school without a supervising adult.

Extensive support was put in place. This included a detailed risk assessment to identify likely triggers for challenging behaviour, adaptations to instructional language and work with adults and children to normalise the ignoring of involuntary tics and outbursts so these were no longer such sources of anxiety.

By the end of Year 6 they worked regularly worked independently and with peers, had been on lots of trips, including a final residential expedition on their own without a supporting adult.

Cassie is a realist and understands what might appear to be the smallest step for one child can represent an astonishing achievement for another. When standard measures place the rungs of the ladder too far apart, she and her team fit extra rungs so there are genuine opportunities to recognise and reward success.

“Families generally have two wishes for their children”, Cassie says. “To be happy and to have friends. This is important and we should do all we can to make these dreams come true. To achieve this we need bigger, wider and broader measures of success for all our children.

“By capturing the immense achievements happening every day and showing the knowledge that education brings can deliver happiness and fulfilment, we can really start to see the change that is needed.”

Principle five: Action at all levels

Change happens from the bottom-up as well as top-down - everyone has the agency and a responsibility to act.

Everyone working with children, including school leaders and individual teachers, has the power to advance inclusion and improve the educational experience and outcomes of children with SEND.

School systems are expressions of wider societal values, and achieving inclusion within them is difficult. It is easy to feel downhearted, as parents become increasingly frustrated, and even the government's own review admits a long list of seemingly intractable problems with the SEND system.

Policymakers must prioritise making these changes, and those who understand the challenges should absolutely be advocating for that systemic change. But children get only one shot at school, and they can't afford to wait for system reform, which takes years to enact, with no guarantee of success.

A constructive debate about a better future requires us to focus on what we can change more than on what we can't. For more than 10 years, schools have been trying to achieve the goal of being a 'self-improving system'. Within this context, we should accept responsibility for thinking hard, and taking action.

Schools contain high levels of expertise and with sufficient resolve and direction have the ability to better include more children. Yet many teachers don't feel confident supporting learners with SEND¹⁴; in fact, this is the area where trusts say they will encounter the most challenge.¹⁵

It's clear that system and school leaders can do more to enable the profession to feel confident to meet this challenge. This has to start with training and development: school leaders can make sure that the training they are providing is based on the best available evidence on what works for children with SEND.¹⁶

Headteachers and school trust leaders could familiarise themselves with the evidence base on best practice in SEND, starting with the EEF's guidance documents, and consider the case studies in this paper. There is scope for everyone working at every level in the education system to learn more, and to improve provision, and outcomes. We should be ambitious in our vision for a better future, and pragmatic about the journey to get there.

The momentum we need will begin with recognising the agency we have and the responsibility to use it. If we wait for others to move before we move, we will be forever remain stuck where we are.

As Nicole Dempsey reminds us: "There's no use banging your head against a brick wall. Instead, we must chip away at the bottom of it. All of us, chip away at our own little bit of it. Eventually, the wall will fall."¹⁷

Case study

River Learning Trust

River Learning Trust, a trust of thirty primary and secondary schools based mainly in the South-West of England, places meaningful inclusion at the heart of all it



14 Ginnis, S. et al. (2018). *Newly qualified teachers: annual survey 2017*. Department for Education.

15 Jackson, I et al. (2022). *National CST School Trust Report*. Edurio and Confederation of School Trusts.

16 Davies, K and Henderson, P (2020). *Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools: Guidance Report*. Education Endowment Foundation.

17 Dempsey, N (2023). "There's no such thing as children and SEND children, only children." Dixons Academies Trust.

does. One of its guiding principles is “everyone learning”, which means offering rich educational experiences to all regardless of their academic ability, social background or special educational need.

As Director of Inclusion, Katherine Walsh is alert to the issues caused of the lack of standardisation around SEND and recognises the importance of expert SENDCOs in navigating the associated inherent complexity. She understands that this systemic complexity means good experiences for children with SEND require SENDCOs making good decisions, and the best way to ensure this is to attract the most talented teachers and to then build their knowledge and expertise rather than wait for a systemic shared clarity which may never arrive.

At River, the role of SENDCO is prestigious, and its role in the ladder to headship deliberately emphasised. SENDCO positions are expert teaching roles and SENDCOs must spend at least 50% of their time teaching.

To recruit potential SENDCOs, and best prepare colleagues for this role, the trust annually delivers an ‘Aspiring SENDCO’ course. This emphasises that the position is primarily a teaching leadership role and should not be characterised by co-ordination and form-filling.

On the course the responsibilities of all staff to children with SEND are made explicit and the link to distributed leadership made clear. The needs of children with SEND are viewed as collective and shared, with the responsibility for developing and sharing specific strategies with teachers a core function of the SENDCO role.

To make this possible in challenging financial times, the central team works collaboratively with local authorities to minimise the bureaucracy of the role and support the wider system to better meet the needs of children and young people with SEND. When this means the central team or others picking up time-consuming administrative tasks, that’s what happens.

The importance of language is emphasised in trust communication. The use of phrases such as “they have SEND’ are directly challenged as these labels do not promote a holistic or useful understanding of the challenges a child faces.

Teachers and leaders are encouraged to break down the challenges children can face in the school or home environment to a granular level. For example, teachers are encouraged to focus how difficulties some children have in sustaining attention manifests itself in a classroom and what evidence suggests can be done about this, rather than using it as a reason to explain away poor outcomes or a reason to reach for a SEND designation or diagnosis before changes to teaching practice have been explored and enacted.

This approach is truly inclusive as it is based on what is helpful for all children, with children with SEND not a separate group who need to be treated as if they were fundamentally different to their peers.

River Learning Trust CEO Paul James is conscious of the constraints that can make inclusion feel hard, but strives to create momentum by building a culture that encourages teachers and leaders to focus on what we can change, and not what we can’t. Keenly aware that children get only one go in the school system, he says: “We can’t wait for the national change to come; we are where we are.”

Afterword

River Learning Trust's CEO Paul James is right. We are where we are, and this means the thousands of children identified with SEND in schools right now are where they are too. And they as children rely on us. They are our responsibility.

We have a responsibility – all of us – to make inclusion real. To offer more children more chances to feel successful and to realise dreams and aspirations that are as vital and important as anyone else's.

We hope this paper has given those who want their schools to be more inclusive, somewhere to start – to help teachers better support pupils for whom learning can feel like a battle, and lead to more children and families feeling positive about education and their lives beyond school.

Nowhere is perfect, and the contested nature of inclusion means there will always be some difference of opinion on what good inclusion is. This paper will be differently interpreted and understood, and identifying strong, replicable practice will involve robust discussions in good faith. Through these discussions we hope to learn more.







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