Inclusive classrooms

Exploring the role of the specialist workforce in enabling classroom teachers to create inclusive classrooms

COUNCIL FOR DISABLED CHILDREN

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Contents

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Introduction

The government has set out its proposals for a reformed SEND system, stating its intent to 'increase upfront investment so support is readily available for classes and communities of children, rather than locked behind lengthy and bureaucratic individual assessment processes'. There is a system-level declaration here, certainly, but conceptual and pedagogical ones, as well.

Conceptually, this promise, which prefaces the newly-released SEND Reform Consultation, speaks to a commitment to a vision of inclusion aligned to the rights-based approach as set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), and which requires education systems to enable all learners to be educated amongst their peers and in their local community (and reversing the 'end of bias towards inclusion' of the Coalition days).

Pedagogically, it marks a call for schools to 'shift away from a narrow focus on learners' special educational needs and special needs education as specific provision, towards extending and improving the quality of support for learning that is generally available to all learners', as the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education articulated it.

The Council for Disabled Children undertook a small-scale project to interrogate the role of the specialist workforce in enabling this conceptual and pedagogical shift.

The process involved semi-structured interviews with 16 professionals across a variety of roles, detailed below. These were followed by a roundtable conversation held on the 24th of February and an iterative process of confirming with participants the conclusions and recommendations set out below. Coincidentally, the Schools White Paper and SEND Reform consultation were published the day before, and so we had the opportunity to reflect on them, and in particular the proposals around 'Experts at Hand'.

Who we spoke to

When speaking of the specialist workforce, we refer to allied health professionals (Occupational Therapists (OTs) and Speech and Language Therapists (SaLT); educational psychologists (EP); Hearing impairment (HI) and Visual impairment (VI) specialist teachers; autism specialist and advisory teachers; Specific Learning Difficulty (SPlD) teachers; outreach special school and Alternative provision (AP) teachers.

This is not intended as an exhaustive list, and we would consider others who might be called in to support classroom teachers with a specific knowledge and expertise set related to SEND from across education, health and social care (e.g., assistive technology specialist teachers, physios, mental health professionals).

Throughout the project, we spoke with mainstream primary and secondary teachers, educational psychologists, a head of inclusion, head teachers, SENCOs in primary and secondary schools, an occupational therapist, a speech and language therapist, a music service teacher, a teacher of the deaf and those with vision impairments, and a special school teacher.

Key findings

- Many classroom teachers have no experience of working with specialists. This is particularly true for secondary subject-specific teachers.
- The National Curriculum is perceived as a barrier to inclusion, and a source for concern for expanding the variety and severity of needs in a classroom. In addition, we heard that the specialist workforce does not currently support curricular adaptations (exceptions do of course exist).
- Special schools offer good examples of practice both as recipients of 'wrap-around' specialist input, and as providers of specialist outreach to mainstream settings.
- Across the board, all participants claimed the vast majority of specialist time is dedicated to individual interventions; and that the 'professional gaze' is almost exclusively individual-needs based.
- Our participants shared that often, when training for teachers around SEND was devoid of contextual input, it lacked long-term impact and was not effective.
- Amongst the specialist workforce, there is concern that current models of deployment mean that there is a narrowing of skills.

The questions we discussed

How would you define an inclusive learning environment?

Where everyone actively participates on all aspects of school life, and are enabled to feel safe and belong to the school community.

Where all adults are enabled to create an appropriate environment by training, professional development and ongoing support, including in harnessing the physical environment and technology where appropriate.

Where success is measured considering academic and non-academic factors and focussed on progress (not attainment).

An inclusive education system requires consistency of these values across all education phases.

What do mainstream classroom teachers need to create inclusive classrooms?

Some of the input from specialists needs to be redirected away from a purely one-to-one model and instead integrated into whole-class or whole-group teaching. This requires the development and use of clear strategies that are effective in whole-class settings. The input provided should be specific to the curriculum and directly connected to in-class tasks, ensuring that it is practical and relevant for teachers. Any adaptations suggested must also be manageable within existing time constraints. In addition, teachers require support in translating theoretical guidance into practical lesson planning so that specialist advice can be effectively implemented in everyday classroom practice.

There is also value in incorporating input from special school teachers, whose experience can inform more inclusive and practical approaches within mainstream classrooms. At the same time, new, more clearly established models of working with specialists need to be articulated. This includes opportunities for teachers to see strategies demonstrated within their own classrooms, allowing them to observe how approaches can be applied in real teaching contexts. Teachers should also have opportunities for feedback and reflection, as well as the chance to make in-the-moment adjustments with the support of specialists.

For specialists' input to be truly effective, their presence must be a consistent and visible part of the school community and environment rather than something that occurs only occasionally. This could include having named contacts within specialist services, maintaining ongoing dialogue with teachers rather than relying solely on written reports, and developing a shared professional language that supports collaboration and understanding.

Are the professions ready for a shift in the 'professional gaze' to enable whole-class input?

Across the professionals consulted, readiness for the proposed shift was described less as a matter of philosophical agreement and more as an issue of practical capacity and system readiness. In general, participants suggested that the underlying principles of the shift were broadly accepted, but the infrastructure, staffing, training, and funding arrangements required to implement it effectively were not yet consistently in place.

Mainstream classroom teachers reported feeling largely unprepared for such a shift. They expressed frustration with the current Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) process and with what they perceived as entrenched mindsets within schools regarding special educational provision. Teachers highlighted the increasing demands placed on schools, particularly the difficulty of releasing staff for training and the limited time available to build understanding of different types of provision. Many teachers reported low confidence and felt ill-equipped to implement interventions, noting that these often require specialist knowledge and skills that they had not been trained to deliver. Classroom teachers spoke powerfully about the importance of relational aspects of teaching as a key to inclusive environments.

In contrast, teachers of the deaf and teachers of the visually impaired suggested that the professional skills required for the shift largely already exist within specialist services. However, they argued that what is needed is a structural and cultural change -from what they described as a "myopic" focus on individual pupils towards a broader whole-class approach to support.

Educational psychologists (EPs) were among the most positive about the proposed shift and described it as potentially "transformative." EPs explained that they feel ready to contribute in this way and expressed a strong desire to work more directly with schools, delivering preventative and systemic support. However, they

noted that much of their current time is absorbed by Education, Health and Care (EHC) assessments and associated paperwork, which limits their ability to fulfil the wider scope of their professional role.

School leaders and union representatives emphasised that schools would prefer to see specialists working directly in classrooms alongside classroom teachers. They highlighted the importance of consistency across education settings and stressed that clear communication between professionals and institutions would be essential to making such a model effective.

A member of a primary autism advisory service reported that their team is already delivering much of this type of support at a universal level, providing services to schools free of charge. However, they identified ongoing barriers, including the continual turnover of school staff and the lack of funding for mandatory, whole-school training. These factors make it difficult to sustain consistent approaches across schools.

In contrast, many dyslexia teachers' work is currently concentrated largely on one-to-one support rather than broader, classroom-level practice. This existing mode of delivery may make transition to a more universal or systemic approach more challenging.

Speech and language therapists (SaLTs) highlighted significant regional variation in how services are funded and organised across the country, which was seen as a barrier to profession-wide readiness. SaLTs reported that, in many areas, the funding structures and service models required to support this approach are not currently in place. Nevertheless, they emphasised that there is considerable willingness and enthusiasm within the profession to work in this way. At the same time, concerns were raised about the potential deskilling of the workforce and the continued emphasis on statutory assessment processes, both of which were seen as obstacles to broader systemic working.

Finally, Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) raised concerns about recent changes to qualification requirements. They argued that these changes risk devaluing the profession and may undermine the expertise and leadership that SENCOs provide

within schools. Several professional groups also suggested that greater crossover and collaboration between professions could help increase readiness overall. Working in multidisciplinary ways, rather than within isolated professional roles, was seen as a potential mechanism for building shared expertise and strengthening the capacity of the system.

Other key points

Anti-Racist practice

The topic of anti-racist practice was raised during our roundtable conversation and attendees agreed that in order to truly become inclusive, educational settings must adopt an *actively* anti-racist approach. We agreed that the specialist workforce should be an agent of change in this regard, supporting school systems to uncover patterns of systemic inequity and promote an intersectional understanding of disadvantage.

Risks

A key risk identified by the group was that teachers would feel 'done to' as opposed to it being a collaborative process. Further concerns were raised around a reinforced power imbalance between class teachers and the specialists, which may lead to disengagement.

Another concern relates to the dilution of specialist expertise. Some practitioners fear that shifting toward universal models of inclusion may reduce the focus on pupils with complex and / or severe needs. In particular, there is concern that specialist assessment processes, traditionally used to understand and support these pupils, may lose their depth or rigour if responsibilities become more widely distributed across general classroom practice.

There are also worries about increased demand without corresponding resources. Teachers may experience rising workloads as expectations for inclusive practice expand, particularly when these expectations are introduced without additional funding or staffing. As inclusion becomes a broader responsibility across the school, teachers can find themselves managing more complex classroom needs alongside existing accountability requirements, contributing to stress and, in some cases, teacher burnout.

Some also point to the risk of superficial inclusion. In these cases, inclusion may be framed rhetorically in policy or school discourse, but without the systemic changes needed to support meaningful practice. As a result, strategies such as task adaptation can become tokenistic, appearing inclusive on

the surface but failing to significantly improve access or learning for pupils with diverse needs.

Finally, tensions can arise from conflicts within accountability systems. Strong pressures around attainment and performance metrics may discourage schools from retaining pupils with complex and / or severe needs if these pupils are perceived to negatively affect results. In this context, efforts toward inclusion can paradoxically be penalised within existing performance frameworks, creating a structural disincentive for schools to fully embrace inclusive practices.

Policy recommendations

1. Ensure that efforts for more affordable, equitable and timely access to specialists include time dedicated to whole-school / whole-class / whole-group work at the universal level.
2. Mainstream classroom teachers should be part of the remodelling of specialists' input, alongside classroom support staff and those teaching in alternative provision.
3. Models of 'training' should be converted to 'professional development', ensuring continuity, collaboration within and between professions, and sufficient space for reflective practice.
4. Consideration must be given to how to support secondary school subject teachers, where it is harder to maintain the relational aspects of teaching, and many never see a specialist.
5. Ensure specialists offer continuity of input within a school, offering a deep understanding of the lived realities of the school, learner profiles and issues which preoccupy teachers.
6. Classroom teachers and all specialists working in a school environment must have access to regular professional development and this is used to ensure that new models of working are effective and understood, and, where needed, updated.
7. The specialist workforce should play a role in promoting an intersectional understanding of disadvantage and actively anti-racist practice.

Implications for SEND Reform proposals and 'Experts at Hand'

- The model must be deployed at the Universal level as well as Targeted / Targeted Plus.
- We'd urge DfE to consider the argument made above and ensure some of the specialist capacity is intentionally diverted towards enabling whole-class inclusive practice.
- Participants felt that the terminology of 'experts' is not conducive to collaborative ways of working. It also appears to negate the specialism which is high-quality classroom teaching.

Examples of good practice

Actively anti-racist practice in Lewisham

EPs in Lewisham are piloting an approach to actively anti-racist practice, known as C-A-R-P (Critically-Conscious-Actively-Antiracist-Racially-Reflexive-Praxis), which has been developed by Eartha Chaloner.

The approach involves anticipatory, in-the-moment, and post-practice reflexivity, to challenge and transform intrinsic racial predispositions and power dynamics. Practitioners are encouraged to critically examine their lived experiences of otherness, ontological and epistemological preferences, and how these influence their perceptions of the children and families they serve and impact service delivery.

The model also encourages a focus on understanding the lived experiences of minoritised / marginalised groups and how these might influence the client's perceptions of the practitioner. C-A-R-P advocates for continual critical reflexivity about oneself, recognizing one's power and privilege, and intentionally engaging in anti-racist praxis as a consequence. It underscores the necessity for self-awareness, seeking to understand clients' social justice contexts, and taking action to redress systemic inequities.

More information can be found in E. Chaloner, A Qualitative Exploration of Black Parents' and Carers' Experiences of Working with an inner-London Educational Psychology Team (pages 166–168 and 282–285). Doctoral Thesis, University of East London.

https://doi.org/10.15123/uel.8z988

EP deployment in Lewisham

Educational Psychologist (EP) time in Lewisham is allocated under three separate strands:

- Education, Health and Care Needs Assessment (EHCNA)
- Services to schools (SEND Support)
- Strategic/operational projects

Dividing EP time in this way ensures that capacity is safeguarded and allows the EPs to work more effectively for children through the profession's five functions (consultation, assessment, intervention, training, and research).

It also helps deliver applied psychological thinking at three levels of the system:

- The organisation (whole-school, local authority etc.)
- Group (class, cohort of children, LA teams etc.)
- Individual (child, teacher, parent, carer etc.)

Whole-class awareness session for deaf and visually impaired children in Lewisham

Reception deaf awareness sessions for the whole class, use a book and story sack of toys / objects for key characters and elements of the story. The aim of this session is to talk about deafness and share the inclusion strategies described in the story, at a level all of the children can understand and learn from. When the class staff members are also present it can be a helpful reminder to them too. They also use this as an opportunity to model how to be 'deaf aware' as teachers: facing the class, expecting quiet, repeating the contributions of other children, having good lighting, using the hearing technology effectively etc.

The deaf awareness sessions are planned with the deaf child, so that they are in control of the messaging and can develop self-advocacy and confidence throughout the process. As the child moves through the school, the deaf awareness sessions develop. For example, exploring a book written with deaf children about the importance of knowing some sign language or about a famous deaf person or something topical. Schools are always asked to celebrate Deaf Awareness Week and are given resources to do this. It is also recommended that schools have books and toys representing children's disabilities, For example, a teddy with a hearing aid.

For vision impairment awareness, it is a bit more challenging, as there are fewer books available. The awareness sessions may involve asking children to draw something on their whiteboards with sleep masks on. Specialists may bring a model eye and talk about how eyes work or a brailler and show children how to braille. Time has been spent in a reception class teaching whichever children wanted to learn the braille alphabet using tennis balls, a muffin tray, and braille alphabet cards. This supports all of the children's knowledge of the alphabet, all of them understanding and copying patterns from a picture and all of them knowing more about braille. It also allowed the child with VI to feel positive about the support offered by

the specialist teacher.

In addition to awareness sessions, they have introduced a PenPals scheme, where deaf children in schools across the borough write to each other; they can ask each other questions and can talk about issues that affect deaf children. They also have Deaf Champions who are nominated by their Teachers of the Deaf to be champions and support other deaf children.

Participants believe this model of equipping children and young people with the understanding and tools for inclusion is a powerful method that could – and should – be adapted for other need profiles as well. The participation of deaf children in the session design is another powerful aspect to this intervention which should be more widely adopted.

SEND Spaces in Barnet

Barnet's Specialist Inclusion Services offer a tiered approach: strategic planning, training, quality assurance framework and resources and handbook. The interventions include elements which featured in our participants' recommendations, such as:

- Specialists enabling design of 'SEND Spaces' and supporting provision mapping
- In-situ modelling of good practice
- Evidence-based enhanced provision
- Classroom teachers having access to responsive advice, networking with peers, and sharing effective practice.

Outreach teachers in West Sussex

A strong example of good practice in relation to whole-class specialist input is the use of outreach teachers funded by the local authority, such as those employed by West Sussex County Council. In this model, outreach teachers are typically based within specialist or SEND schools and work directly with mainstream schools where there has been difficulty meeting a pupil's needs through existing provision.

The strength of this approach lies in its preventative and capacity-building focus. Rather than working solely with individual pupils, outreach teachers often model inclusive strategies within the classroom, advise on curriculum adaptation, support behaviour and regulation approaches, and help schools refine their universal provision. This ensures that specialist expertise has a broader impact, improving outcomes not only for individual pupils with SEND but also for wider groups of learners who benefit from improved inclusive practice.

Importantly, this outreach model avoids positioning inclusion as something that happens to mainstream teachers. Instead, it promotes collaboration, shared problem-solving, and professional dialogue. Outreach teachers gain a deep understanding of the school context, while mainstream staff feel supported rather than judged, reducing power imbalances and resistance to change.

Continuing professional development

The use of specialist-led continuing professional development (CPD) focused on universal provision. Sessions delivered by specialists in areas such as speech and language development, sensory integration, or regulation strategies – such as SALT-informed classroom approaches or Sensory Circuits – have been particularly impactful. When framed as whole-class strategies rather than targeted interventions, these approaches support inclusion by benefiting all pupils, including those without identified SEND, pupils with

English as an Additional Language, or those experiencing emotional or environmental barriers to learning.

Crucially, this form of CPD works best when it is practical, embedded, and followed up with opportunities for modelling and reflection, rather than delivered as one-off training. In both mainstream and specialist settings, this helps ensure that adaptations are meaningful rather than tokenistic.

Occupational therapy-informed classroom approaches

Occupational therapists can support inclusive classroom practice by working alongside schools to develop strategies that are practical, adaptable, and embedded within everyday teaching. While input may start via an individual referral, the approach can often be extended to consider how adjustments can be implemented at a whole-class level, supporting a wider range of children.

This includes collaborating with teaching teams to identify and model strategies that are straightforward to implement within existing routines. Areas of focus are not limited to sensory processing, but can include hand skill development, visual motor integration and perception, attention and engagement in meaningful activity, regulation for learning, coordination, and motor planning. Support may also address functional school-based tasks such as handwriting and independence in activities like changing for PE or making sure they have the right equipment for an activity.

Occupational therapists may also contribute to whole-school or group-based initiatives, such as motor skills development programmes, aiming to build staff confidence and promote participation across the school environment. This approach supports the development of inclusive practices that can be sustained within the classroom context.

More information about this approach can be found at:

www.linkstherapycompany.co.uk

COUNCIL FOR DISABLED CHILDREN

About the Council for Disabled Children

We are the umbrella body for the disabled children's sector with a membership of over 300 voluntary and community organisations and an active network of practitioners that spans education, health and social care.

As a membership body we provide a collective voice that champions the rights of disabled children, young people and their families and challenges barriers to inclusion.

We believe that every child and young person should enjoy the same rights and opportunities and that every aspect of society should be fully inclusive to disabled children and young people.

councilfordisabledchildren.org.uk