

Inclusive Quality Education for Children with Disabilities

A [recent report](#) by researchers from the University of Cambridge¹ presents a literature review of key issues and debates regarding inclusive quality education for children with disabilities. The report is intended as a broad examination of issues surrounding education for children with disabilities, with the authors drawing on international evidence to propose a new 'Three Rs' model - 'Rights, Resources and Research' – for inclusive quality education.

This note draws out key messages from the report across several themes.

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1. What does inclusive education look like? Conclusions from the literature

Chapter 1 of the report provides an overview of the key developments in international discourse that have supported the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream educational efforts.

- Inclusive education is argued to be a process of systemic change that must take place at every level to build classrooms, educational systems and communities based on an 'ecology of equity'. Educational outcomes are connected to processes that exist outside the educational setting (e.g. ethnicity, socio-economic status) as well as practices inside the setting: both sets of factors must be addressed in order to achieve truly inclusive education.²
- Developing better schools for all requires the removal of barriers to participation and learning for *all* students, not only those identified as having SEND. At policy level, this requires the restructuring of education systems at every level to put 'flexibility and variation at the centre, structurally as well as in terms of content, with the goal of offering every individual a relevant education'.³
- Inclusive education in the classroom '(views) differences between children and between adults as a resource for learning'⁴ and should have 'a positive attitude about the learning abilities of all pupils'.⁵
- Inclusive education means mobilizing resources effectively. Having adequate resources such as 'teaching materials, special equipment, additional personnel, new teaching approaches' which are accessible to every student ensures that all children can fully access the curriculum.⁶
- School-to-school collaboration is an effective way of sharing expertise and best practice: research suggests that extensive collaboration between schools has the potential to effect system wide improvement, particularly in challenging areas.⁷

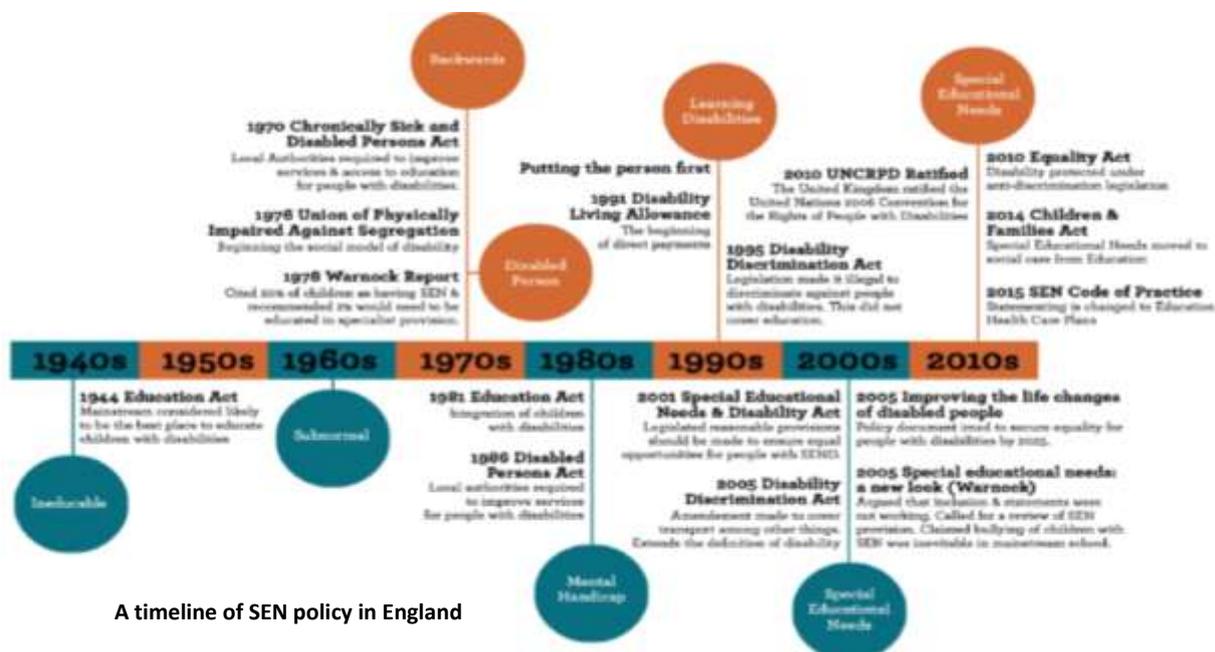


Illustration 2. Understanding equity in education

2. Understanding disability: historical and contemporary models

Chapter 2 outlines key developments in how disability is conceptualised, and how these developments have shaped policy and provision linked to disability.

- The most historically prevalent way of conceptualizing disability is the medical model, which argues that the source of ‘pathology’ lies in the individual and that ‘treatment’ is best carried out in specially designed institutions such as special schools or rehabilitation centres.⁸
- Many disabled people have criticised this model, arguing that the embodied experiences of impaired sight, hearing, learning or movement cause fewer barriers to them than the loss of power, dignity, discrimination and intolerance that they experience in relation to others’ perceptions of disability.^{9,10}
- The 1970s saw a shift in the conceptualization of disability towards a social model, which proposed that ‘disability’ did not lie in the individual but in societal structures of oppression. Criticisms of the social model highlight its lack of focus on lived experiences of impairment and its denial of disabled people’s ‘experience of (their) own bodies’.¹¹
- Contemporary understandings of disability acknowledge that disability experiences are shaped by both environmental factors and individual bodies. The World Health Organization’s [International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health](#) now proposes an integration of the medical and social approaches, considering disability and functioning as outcomes of interactions between health conditions and contextual factors.¹²
- Different understandings of disability, both between and within countries, can lead to challenges in data collection and measuring. On a global scale, studies aiming to establishing prevalence rates of disability suggest that local perceptions, definitions and social dynamics all influence disability identification and recording.
- The authors contend that the definitions of disability in the UK’s [SEND Code of Practice](#) locate disability within the individual and their perceived inability to access facilities and/or services, and fail to acknowledge the role of societal barriers in understandings of disability.



3. Inclusive education in England: an overview

Chapter 3 presents overviews of inclusive education in England and India in order to show key strengths and challenges for the global North and South. This note deals with findings from the English context only. The chapter begins by setting the policy context, reflecting on key policy documents and identifying who the children with disabilities are for each country.

- There are marked disparities in terms of educational attainment for children with Special Educational Needs in England. The Equality and Human Rights Commission reports that in the school year 2012/13 children with SEN were over three times less likely to achieve at least five A*-C GCSEs or equivalent (including English and mathematics) compared to children without SEN. This gap is larger than it was in the school year 2008/9.¹³
- Children with SEN are almost seven times as likely to be excluded from school in comparison to children without SEN.¹⁴
- There are 1,039 (maintained & non-maintained) special schools in England. Currently there are 109,180 children learning in both maintained and non-maintained special schools, approximately 1.3% of the total school population.¹⁵



Illustration 11. SEN data disaggregated by gender

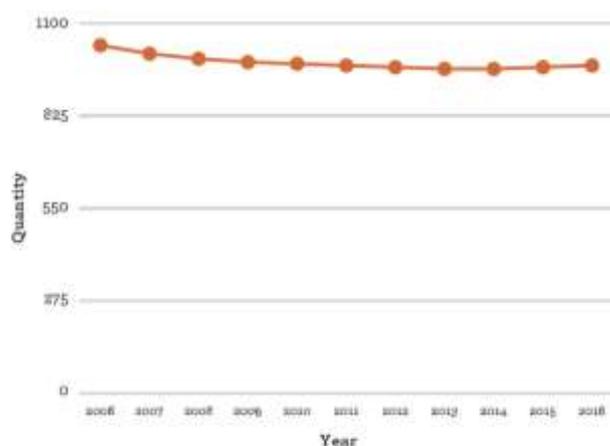


Figure 12. Number of special schools in England (Authors' calculations based on DfE, 2016)

- While age, gender and FSM status are well documented as affecting the likelihood of children having SEN, scant research has been undertaken on ethnicity and SEN in England. Existing research suggests that Black and minority ethnic (BME) groups face barriers in accessing the services and provision they need in England and that institutionalized racism can create tensions between service providers and BME groups.^{16,17}
- Evidence also suggests that there is disproportionality for some children with BME backgrounds assessed as having SEN in England. Research conducted in 2009 found an overrepresentation of Black Caribbean students identified as having behavioural, emotional and social difficulties¹⁸, while within the current category of social, emotional and mental health (SEMH), Black Caribbean children (SEN Support) and child travellers of Irish heritage (EHC plan) are most likely to be identified.¹⁹
- There is a higher prevalence of children with English as an additional language (EAL) in some SEN categories than in others: it is currently unclear why different prevalence rates of EAL speakers exist in different SEN categories, but it may be related to differing cultural conceptions of disability and diagnostic tools that are designed for Euro-North American contexts.^{20,21,22}

4. Debates around inclusive education in England

Chapter 3 goes on to critically engage with the literature on inclusive education for each country and identify key debates within this literature.

- The literature highlights many tensions surrounding inclusive education in England: the three key debates highlighted by the authors are politics of identification and provision, the conflicting nature of competition and inclusion, and the recent rise in special schools.
- The recent growth of academies has led to more schools operating outside of the control of the local authority, resulting in anxiety over the provision of services for children with SEND. This increasing autonomy of schools along with a drive to end a 'bias towards inclusion' suggests a move to maintaining a 'more discrete, specialist provision for student with SEN and away from inclusive education'.²³
- There are tensions between the government's policy on inclusion and a focus on league tables and results: Bhopal (2011) argues that the 'culture of competition' present in schools means that inclusion is juxtaposed with the need for high attainment in exams.²⁴
- Fiscal competition and the need for system efficiency also impacts inclusion.²⁵
- Some researchers argue that the recent increase in special schools will lead to social segregation and undermine the critical 'links between schools, local communities and friendship networks'²⁶; others emphasise that the mere placement of children in mainstream schools 'does not necessarily amount to inclusion'.²⁷

5. Inclusive education in England: what works?

Finally, chapter 3 reflects upon the literature for each country to identify factors that may lead to successfully delivered, high quality inclusive education.

i) Support provided by teaching assistants (TAs)

- When effectively trained and correctly deployed, TAs have huge potential to have a positive effect on the learning of primary school children.^{28,29,30}
- It has been suggested that working 1:1 or with small groups of children may be the most effective deployment of TAs, but that the use of TAs in this manner may also lead to the 'educational segregation' of pupils with SEND.^{31,32}
- The current practice of expressing students' learning support needs in terms of hours usually means that this is converted directly into TA support hours, which limits the type of support that is implemented.³³
- A 2010 literature review comparing the effectiveness of TAs and teachers suggests that TAs are equally successful in promoting children's learning and attainment. However, to be effective TAs must be employed to carry out specific objective and be utilized in order to enact targeted interventions.³⁴
- There is a consensus within the literature that improvements must be made to the pre-service and in-service training of teaching assistants, and that there is a need for teachers to be trained in working effectively with TAs.³⁵

ii) Developing an Inclusive Curriculum

- Academic attainment: Glazzard argues that a focus on performativity within the education system marginalizes SEND learners, and that education policies articulating inclusion through raising academic attainment 'reflect integration rather than inclusion'. In order to achieve social justice through inclusion, policy changes must reflect and value different forms of success.^{36,37}
- Representation: a study examining the digital media presented to primary school-aged pupils in England found a 'virtual absence' of disabled people. Where images of disabled people were found (n=34), the most common depiction was of physical disabilities - no images were found where a person had an 'obvious intellectual disability'.³⁸
- There has recently been a 'surge' in research related to inclusion and physical education (PE), with researchers arguing that the 'competitive, performance-orientated and heavily sport-based structure of many PE programmes' limits SEND learners' inclusion in the subject.³⁹

iii) A Need for Better Teacher Education

- Effective teacher education is vital to the process of inclusive education.^{40,41,42}
- Research with student-teachers shows that while there was strong support for inclusive education, many felt ill-prepared to teach classrooms of diverse learners.
- In current initial teacher education (ITE) programmes, information about SEND is generally 'added on' rather than built in as a fundamental element of the training. Moving towards a 'content-infused model' would 'enable teachers throughout their career to regularly review and consider how they might respond to individual differences...'.⁴³
- Robinson (2017) notes that in teacher education, 'the concept of 'inclusion' would trigger diversity discourses (which celebrate diversity and uniqueness), but 'SEN' would trigger disparity discourses (where diversity is associated with pathologizing, differential treatment and different expectations'.⁴⁴

6. Developing Inclusive Quality Education Systems: Reflections for Policy and Practice

In the final chapter of the report, the authors drawing together different insights from their analysis to reflect upon key elements that can feed into policy and practice related to inclusive quality education.

The authors argue that delivering inclusive, quality education requires a focus on the interrelated issues of rights, resources and research. This section takes a global focus and uses the 'Three Rs model' to highlight the urgent need for diverse stakeholders - such as policy makers, researchers and NGOs - to work in partnership in order to systematically address the global commitment toward inclusive quality education.



Illustration 14. Three Rs model

i) Rights

- Inclusive education should be based on the foundations of equity and social justice and cannot be driven by a charity based approach: moreover, services for people with disabilities should not be regarded as the responsibility of the charity sector
- However, relying solely on a rights discourse is problematic, raising concerns about these issues being seen as a largely theoretical, legal or government focused
- While there is no argument against the goal of providing all children access to a learning environment which is engaging and empowering, it's still not clear how this is best achieved. On a global level, one of the most significant gaps in current knowledge is the lack of information on the experiences and impact on the learning of children with disabilities who are attending schools (particularly special schools).
- There is evidence to suggest that education of children with disabilities benefits greatly from partnerships between special and mainstream schools, collaboration between various professionals, improved teacher skills and better learning environments.

ii) Resources

- Resources – human, material and infrastructural – are crucial to the development of inclusive quality education systems.
- Research shows that teachers frequently report their lack of preparation in responding to diversity of learner needs in their classrooms: there is an urgent need to review and upgrade teacher education to include principles of inclusive teaching and learning, with a particular focus on practical knowledge that corresponds to teachers' local realities.
- Many studies highlight that parents of children with disabilities, across different socio-economic strata, invest significant personal time and energy in ensuring that their child with disabilities can attend school. There is therefore a need to recognize the potential of working with parents and position them not merely as carers or recipients of service, but rather as partners in their child's education.
- Schools, teachers, and all students need high quality, appropriate and accessible teaching and learning materials. Developing accessible materials is most effectively achieved by making better use of existing resources to support learning. Proper access to appropriate assistive technology – including products that support communication, mobility, self-care, household tasks, family relationships, education, and engagement in play and recreation - is a precondition to ensuring that people with disabilities can participate fully in all aspects of education
- It's important to acknowledge that there are initial costs in moving towards inclusive systems, but that these costs are outweighed by long term benefits.
- While a focus on cost effectiveness is important it cannot be the only measure of success. Rather, 'value for money' should be reconceptualised from a mere focus on an assessment of cost versus quantitative outputs to an assertion that 'value' is only achieved when benefits reach the most marginalized.⁴⁵

iii) Research

- The World Report on Disability states that the existing “lack of data and evidence... often impedes understanding and action in the field across various sectors, including education.”⁴⁶
- It is important to acknowledge that influencing policy through research evidence is not something that researchers can do alone: there is a need to form strategic alliances with other key stakeholders
- Researchers have an ethical obligation to ensure that the research they undertake reaches a wide breadth of stakeholders: this means an awareness of effective dissemination strategies and pathways. Furthermore, there is a need for the ethical dimension of research dissemination to be brought forward, debated and developed.

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