How is inclusive education conceptualised by government guidance and teachers in England?

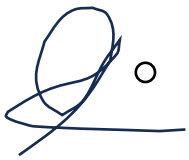
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MSc in Education (Comparative and International), 2025

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How is inclusive education conceptualised by government guidance and teachers in England?

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Abstract

In England, there have been significant strides in improving inclusivity in mainstream education, such as the creation of Special Educational Needs departments in mainstream schools, the introduction of Education, Health, and Social Care Plans, and the requirement for schools to provide reasonable adjustments for pupils. Yet, there is a lack of consensus regarding how to conceptualise inclusive education in England, and no clear or universal definition provided by the Department for Education. Not having a clear conceptualisation of inclusive education makes developing evidence-based interventions a challenging task, and exacerbates inequities in education.

This study explores government guidance documents provided by the Department for Education and interviews with teachers to create a conceptualisation of inclusive education in England. The study draws from the post-positivist paradigm and grounded theory to create this conceptualisation. This is with the aim of providing a conceptualisation that is contextually relevant, value-neutral, and actionable. Whilst primarily using thematic analyses of government guidance documents and interviews with teachers, the conceptualisation also takes the history of inclusive education and additional theories into consideration to provide a strongly evidenced conceptualisation.

The final conceptualisation identifies four main variables of inclusive education in England: An intersectional approach to inclusion; Improving the pupil experience; Inclusive teacher practice; and External support structures. The potential barriers to implementation and recommendations for practice are also provided in this study.

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Acronyms

EHCPs: Education, Health, and Social Care Plans

KS2/KS4/KS5: Key Stage Two, Four, or Five

LGBTQ+: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer…

NHS: National Health Service

SEN: Special Educational Needs

TAs: Teaching Assistants

UK: United Kingdom

1. Introduction

> *"We learn from what we fail to achieve. The complainer knows how much work goes into things staying the same. Being involved in a complaint can thus be a politicizing process in a similar way to participating in a protest or demonstration"(Ahmed, 2021, p. 283)*

This study was born from a position of frustration. Frustration towards the educational inequity in England, the persistent attainment gaps (Education Endowment Fund, 2018, p. 6), the disproportionately low absence rates for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds (Department for Education, 2023), and the vicious cycle of inefficient resource allocation (Department for Education, 2022, p. 3) that exacerbates this inequity.

This frustration towards the inequity within the English education system is not new for me. When I first decided to research inclusive education in England, I knew my own experiences of the English education system would come to the forefront. However, I am aware that this frustration exists for young people, families, and educators much beyond myself. I was inspired to write about inclusive education from my own complaints about the education system, but recognise how hearing other complaints and experiences beyond my own can create a record of power and resistance (Ahmed, 2021, p. 7). Through this study, I aim to create a conceptualisation of inclusive education that is larger than my personal context. *The Big Ambition* project in 2024 reported that 40% of children surveyed did not enjoy school or college (Children's Commissioner, 2024, p. 38). This study was written with those children in mind, along with the children who feel similarly, children who are not currently in mainstream education, or adults who feel a parallel frustration towards their school experience upon reflection.

There is a clear lack of consensus regarding what inclusive education means in practice (Florian, 2014). This lack of a clear conceptualisation of inclusive education has problematised 'education research, reforms and implementation of practices' (Krischler et al., 2019, p. 632). Through this study I create a conceptualisation of inclusive education that adequately considers the context of education in England (Love & Horn, 2021, p. 204), and can be utilised to design evidence-based inclusive education practices, so a lasting positive impact can be made for young people, especially young people who do not enjoy or feel included in school.

1.1. Research Aims and Rationale

How this study will create a conceptualisation of education is through analysing government guidance documents provided by the Department for Education that detail aims for inclusive practice and conducting and analysing semi-structured interviews with teachers currently practicing in mainstream education in England. I draw from the post-positivist paradigm and grounded theory to make this conceptualisation. I aim to create a conceptualisation that portrays the information that I gather from research without applying value to statements or adding my own moral judgment. I also begin with no information, adding to this conceptualisation as I gather more slices of data (Urquhart et al., 2010), and learn more about the Department for Education's aims for inclusive education and teacher's inclusive practices.

Overall, this conceptualisation aims to have three main elements:

1. Contextual relevance to the English Educational Context

2. Value-neutral and balanced

3. Usable as a blueprint to develop evidence-based inclusive interventions

The main research question that this study aims to answer is: *How is inclusive education conceptualised by government guidance and teachers in England?*

The following three sub-questions are also answered:

1. How is inclusive education conceptualised by the Department for Education?

2. How do teachers conceptualise Inclusive Education and use this in their practice?

3. What are the barriers to implementation for inclusive education?

I chose to explore only the context of England due to inclusive education differing depending on local context (Love & Horn, 2021). Inclusive practices may differ depending on the context and local communities' needs and requirements (Odom & Beckman, 2002). Therefore, the conceptualisation explored is relevant to the context of England only, although the potential implications of this study on other educational contexts are discussed in the concluding chapter.

1.2. Overview of Research

The study begins with an overview of the educational context of England. This overview is followed by the literature review, which explores the argued starting points for inclusive education, the opportunities and challenges implementing inclusive education can create, and the potential barriers to implementation. The methodology of this study is then provided, detailing the post-positivist paradigm and grounded theory which I draw from when approaching this study, the document analysis and interview methods used, and analytical approach. The findings from the study are presented across two chapters. One chapter contains the findings from the document analysis and emergent themes, and the second chapter contains the findings from the teachers interviews and emergent themes. The discussion of this study presents the overall conceptualisation of inclusive education in England, which utilises the themes identified in the document analysis and interviews, alongside other policies and theories related to inclusion. The discussion also presents five key barriers to implementation for inclusive education in England identified by the government guidance documents and teachers and provides four evidence-based recommendations for inclusive practice. This study closes with some concluding thoughts regarding the research process, outcome, and future implications this study could have on inclusive education and practice.

2. England's Educational Context

This chapter provides context for education in England to foreground the discussion of inclusive education. The chapter briefly discusses the stages of education that will be relevant to this study and options for schooling beyond the mainstream setting and explores current discourses relating to English education.

In England, there are five stages of mainstream education: Early Years; Primary; Secondary; Further Education; and Higher Education (Department for Education, 2012, p. 1). This study references the Primary, Secondary, and Further Education stages of education. There are many types of schools available in the UK, including Comprehensive Schools, Faith Schools, Free Schools, Academies, City Technical Colleges, State Boarding Schools, and Private Schools (Department for Education, 2025b). Pupils can also be taught through alternative provisions. The duty to provide alternative provisions for pupils was first introduced in *The Education Act of 1996*, which states that local authorities must arrange suitable education for pupils who, due to exclusion, illness, or other reasons, would not be provided with sufficient education in mainstream environments (Department for Education, 2025c, p. 5). 'Special schools,' however, serve a distinct purpose, and are different to AP (Department for Education, 2025c, p. 31). Special schools are designed to instruct pupils with SEN and disabilities.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent lockdowns have been labelled as 'the largest global disruption to education' (West, 2023, p. 3), and have caused a 'seismic disruption' to young people's education experience (Hamilton, 2024, p. 1). This disruption was felt across England, with the pandemic widening the attainment gap for pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds, pupils with English as an additional language, Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller pupils, refugees and asylum seekers, and pupils with SEN and disabilities (Choudry, 2025). The pandemic additionally worsened attendance, with levels of persistent absence doubling in the 2022-23 academic year compared to pre-pandemic levels (Education Committee, 2023). Emotionally-based school absences also rose significantly (Hamilton, 2024), a potential consequence of the rise of young people in the UK presenting with mental health difficulties since the COVID-19 lockdowns (Knowles et al., 2022). It has been estimated that one in five children had a probable mental health condition in 2023, increasing from one in eight in 2017 (Children's Commissioner for England, 2024, p. 10), and the median wait time for support varies greatly depending on referral reason. For example, the autism service has a

median wait time of 481 days, the neurodevelopmental team has a median wait time of 194 days, and the psychotherapy service has a median wait time of 141 days (Children's Commissioner for England, 2024, pp. 32–33). This median wait time also differs depending on subregional level, with a range of 36 to 251 days (Children's Commissioner for England, 2024, pp. 18–19).

Although the attainment gap has worsened since the COVID-19 pandemic, England has had a 'stubborn, persistent problem' with wide attainment gaps since 2007 (Education Endowment Fund, 2018, p. 6) . In KS2, 61% of all pupils met the expected reading, writing, and maths standards. In KS4, 45.9% of all pupils achieved grade 5 or above in English and mathematics GCSEs. However, 22% of pupils with SEN achieved the expected standards at KS2 (Department for Education, 2024a), and 7% of pupils with SEN achieve grade 5 or above in English and mathematics GCSEs (Department for Education, 2024b). 46% of KS2 pupils considered to be of 'disadvantage status', which is defined as pupils 'who were registered as eligible for free school meals at any point in the last six years, children looked after by a local authority or have left local authority care in England and Wales through adoption, a special guardianship order, a residence order or a child arrangements order' (Department for Education, 2024a), attained the expected standard in reading, writing, and maths in the 2023/2024 academic year (Department for Education, 2024a). In KS4, 25.8% of those considered to be of disadvantage status achieved grade five or above in English and Maths GCSE (Department for Education, 2024b). Moreover, attainment also varies depending on pupil ethnicity at KS2 (Department for Education, 2024a), and greatly varies depending on region and local authority in KS4, with a 13.7 percentage point range of variation in those achieving grade five or above in English and Maths at GCSEs depending on regions (Department for Education, 2024b).

3. Literature Review

Across literature, many working definitions of inclusive education have been created, yet there is still a lack of consensus regarding what inclusive education means or what teaching practices constitute as inclusive (Florian, 2014). Additionally, there is also debate regarding whether inclusive education has a net positive impact on pupils, and whether full integration of all pupils in the mainstream education environment is a desirable outcome.

This chapter explores literature relating to inclusive education, inclusive practice, and arguments supporting and opposing the implementation of inclusive education. This literature review discusses the starting point for inclusive education internationally and in the English context, significant acts and guidance for inclusive education in England, the potential impacts of implementing inclusive education, and key barriers to implementation. The chapter aims to provide a balanced overview of inclusive education, without providing my own judgements. The literature reviewed presents both the opportunities and challenges inclusive education can create.

Before discussing the background of inclusive education and opportunities and challenges it creates, it is useful to consider the core differences between inclusion and other related concepts such as exclusion, segregation, and integration. A useful diagram provided by Hehir et al. for a review of evidence for inclusive education and based upon the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities General Comment Number Four from 2016 outlines these differences and is useful to refer to for the context of this study (Hehir et al., 2016, p. 3), (United Nations, 2016). However, it is important to note that this is provided as a starting point, broadly defining inclusion rather than inclusive education, and differing from the final conceptualisation provided in chapter eight.



3.1. The Salamanca Statement

The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1994) is often considered a starting point for the study of inclusive education (Magnússon, 2019, p. 677), (Kiuppis, 2014, p. 747). Participants representing 92 governments and 25 international organisations attended a meeting in Salamanca in 1994 to recognise and work towards education for all (Right to Education Initiative, 2023). In *The Salamanca Statement*, inclusion is defined as the idea that 'all children should learn together, wherever possible, regardless of any difficulties or differences they may have' (The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1994, p. 11). *The Salamanca Statement* discusses the integration of pupils with disabilities in mainstream education as an effective way to counteract discriminatory attitudes towards children with disabilities (Krischler et al., 2019, p. 632).

UNESCO has published several documents to track the impact of *The Salamanca Statement* over time. Notably, the Enabling Education Network in collaboration with UNESCO published the newsletter *Salamanca - Ten Years On* in 2004. This newsletter reflects on the impact of *The Salamanca Statement* and provides various international examples of inclusive practice to share ideas for practitioners. However, this newsletter also highlights how 'inclusive education' is 'losing its freshness and is being used to mean too many different things' ('Salamanca -Ten Years On', 2004, p. 1) and a clear definition of inclusion is needed to continue to make progress ('Salamanca -Ten Years On', 2004, p. 1). Kiuppis similarly argues that the 'current disjointedness' of definitions of inclusive education originates from the Salamanca Statement, which conflated the ideas of education for all and inclusive education (Kiuppis, 2014, p. 747).

In 2019, UNESCO re-established their commitment to inclusion at the International Forum on Inclusion and Equity in Education, which had representatives from 55 countries in attendance (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2019). This forum saw the expansion of UNESCOs definition of inclusion from relating to integration to a definition that also considers diversity and equality, with inclusion here being defined as 'a transformative process that ensures full participation and access to quality learning opportunities for all children, young people and adults, respecting and valuing diversity, and eliminating all forms of discrimination in and through education' (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation, 2019, p. 1).

3.2. Inclusion in England

Whilst scholars are generally in agreement that *The Salamanca Statement* was the international starting point of inclusive education, there have been debates regarding when inclusive education started in England. Tümkaya et al.'s article *Historical Development of Inclusive Education in the UK* explores various suggested starting points for inclusive education. This article notes that *The Education Act of 1970* can be seen as the start of inclusive education, due to this being the transfer of the overseeing of the education for pupils with disabilities from The Department for Health to the Department for Education (Tümkaya et al., 2024, p. 150).

The Warnock Report from 1978 has also been proposed as a starting point for inclusive education in England (Clough & Corbett, 2000, p. 15). *The Warnock report*

contained 30 recommendations for education (Norwich, 2019, p. 2), enquiring into special education in the UK. *The Warnock Report* also introduced the term Special Educational Needs and the idea of individualised education plans (Clough & Corbett, 2000, pp. 15–16). *The Education Act of 1981* was informed by *The Warnock Report*, and is described as a 'clear foundation for professional conduct' in SEN teaching and practice by Tümkaya et al. (Tümkaya et al., 2024, p. 150). *The Education Act of 1981* is described as 'an act to make provision with respect to children with special educational needs' (The Education Act, 1981, p. 1). *The Education Act of 1981* also outlined aims to have children with disabilities participate in comprehensive schooling (Armstrong & Barton, 2008, p. 5), and reinforced the idea of individual education plans for student with SEN (Whalley, 1989, p. 47).

Alan Hodkinson, however, argues that the 1998 green paper *Excellence for all Children* was the starting point for inclusive education in England (Hodkinson, 2005, p. 16). The *Excellence for all Children* green paper provided advice for schools regarding how to implement inclusive practices and SEN provisions (Department for Education and Employment, 1997, pp. 1–2).

There are also several other policy documents that are significant when discussing inclusive practice in England. Two key documents that catalysed inclusive education in England were *The Special Needs and Disability Act* and the *Inclusive Schooling* statutory guidance from 2001. *The Special Educational Needs and Disability Act* focuses on the importance of inclusion in the classroom, and 'requires schools to have regard to guidance on the statutory framework for inclusion' (Department for Education and Skills, 2001b, p. iii). *Inclusive Schooling* provided further information regarding how inclusion should be implemented in schools, and suggested that inclusive practices should be implemented in a way that benefits pupils with SEN but does not interfere with the experiences of those who do not have SEN (Department for Education and Skills, 2001a). In the 2010s, two important documents that catalysed inclusive education were *The Equality Act* in 2010, and *The Children and Families Act* in 2014. *The Equality Act* further extended pupils' rights to a fairly adjusted education, through prohibiting discrimination in education and recognising that reasonable adjustments must be made for pupils with disabilities (The Equality Act, 2010, Part 6). *The Children and Families Act* in 2014 details provision for children, families, and people with SEN. This act also

introduced EHCPs, and outlined more expectations for SEN provisions from schools and local authorities (HM Government, 2014).

A variety of definitions have been proposed for inclusive education in the UK. The Office for Standards in Education defines an educationally inclusive school as one which 'the teaching and learning, achievement, attitudes, and well-being of every person matters' (Office for Standards in Education, 2000, p. 7). Alan Hodkinson defines inclusion in English education as 'a catalyst that requires schools and society to identify and overcome the barriers that inhibit children's choices and ability to achieve their full potential' (Hodkinson, 2005, p. 19). Hodkinson also suggests that inclusion must be implemented with an awareness of the origins of exclusion coming from an 'intolerance to difference' (Hodkinson, 2005, p. 19), drawing upon Tony Booth and Mel Ainscow's Index for Inclusion (Booth & Vaughan, 2002, p. 7). He also highlights that definitions of inclusive education are often difficult to accept because they only relate to locational inclusion, where the practice of inclusion becomes the integration of all students in mainstream schooling rather than changes to the curriculum and teaching (Hodkinson, 2005, p. 18). The Index for Inclusion that Hodkinson draws from defines inclusion in schools as learning alongside others and being active in the education community (Booth & Vaughan, 2002, p. 3). However, other research has continued to find ambiguity when attempting to define inclusive education. Krischler et al. found that definitions of inclusion differ depending on personal attitudes and cultural context (Krischler et al., 2019, p. 646). Further research by Hodkinson and Devarakonda highlighted how teachers experienced a 'terminological ambiguity and conceptual confusion' regarding inclusive education (Hodkinson & Devarakonda, 2011, p. 53).

There have also been many critiques made of inclusive education in England across history. Notably, there were critiques of *The Education Act of 1981*, such as the argument that individualising support makes it harder for young people to access support, due to their needs not being known by the school (Whalley, 1989, p. 47). Furthermore, Mary Warnock herself critiqued *The Warnock Report*, arguing that the statement was a 'disastrous mistake' and that the separation of educational need from other social factors that could influence education such as social depravation 'now seems preposterous' (Clough & Corbett, 2000, p. 16). There were also critiques of the *Excellence for all Children* green paper. A main critique was that the paper did not address issues with the education system in the UK that affect pupils, and that 'as long as the organization of

schooling, the curriculum, and assessment and testing procedures remain unchallenged, equal educational opportunity will remain a myth' (Lloyd, 2000, p. 133). Moreover, there are critiques against the full integration of pupils with disabilities in the mainstream school environment in England. Hornby argues that many challenges could occur when arguing for a full integration of pupils with SEN into comprehensive schools, including potential difficulties in pupils accessing the mainstream curriculum if it has not been reasonable adjusted (Hornby, 2011, p. 326). Hornby also suggests that full integration can cause issues with funding and requires a high level of teacher training to be successful (Hornby, 2011, p. 327). Nnamani and Lomer's article analysing the problems associated with the integration of pupils with SEN in mainstream schools also identified inadequate teacher training as a barrier (Nnamani & Lomer, 2024, p. 1046).

3.3. The Potential Impact of Inclusive Education

There are many opportunities and challenges that implementing inclusive education can create. The positive impacts discussed in literature often relate to the social learning opportunities inclusion creates, and how inclusive education can enhance soft skills or reduce intolerance. Hehir et al.'s summary document that reviews evidence from over 280 studies on inclusive education finds 'substantial short- and long-term benefits for children's cognitive and social development' for a variety of pupil populations where pupils with SEN were integrated with their peers (Hehir et al., 2016, p. 26). A review of inclusive education parameters and opportunities by Jacob and Olisaemeka outlines many perceived benefits of inclusive education, such as 'increased communication and social interaction opportunities, age-appropriate models of behaviour skills' and 'access to the rich core curriculum' (Jacob & Olisaemeka, 2016, p. 192). Furthermore, a systematic review by Dell'Anna et al. exploring the outcomes of pupils without SEN in inclusive education settings found that pupils developed more social acceptance and empathy towards pupils with SEN (Dell'Anna et al., 2021, p. 944).

There has also been literature that critiques the idea of inclusive education. Dell'Anna et al.'s research, alongside the aforementioned development of social acceptance and empathy, also found that academic achievement worsened for pupils without SEN in some cases with the implementation of inclusive classroom practice (Dell'Anna et al., 2021, p. 952). Research on the exclusionary effects of inclusion by Reeves et al. found that inclusive practices in education are often deficit-oriented, defining pupils by their disability or educational need rather than supporting their needs.

This deficit-oriented model was argued to lead to pupils with disabilities being excluded by their peers (Reeves et al., 2022, p. 614) and the 'othering' of pupils with disabilities (Reeves et al., 2022, p. 613).

The attitude of the teacher is also another factor that can create opportunities and challenges when implementing inclusive education (Crispel & Kasperski, 2021, p. 1080). Teachers who expressed positive attitudes towards inclusive education and during their practice acted as role models for pupils and helped them build their confidence (Sam, 2019, p. 405). In research by White et al. where pupils with autism were asked what helped them transition from secondary education to post-school life, autonomy in decision making and the development of 'life skills' were identified as common themes, (White et al., 2024, p. 6) and supportive teachers enabled pupils to feel a sense of confidence and autonomy in decision-making (White et al., 2024, p. 8). Further research by Purtell et al. regarding teachers attitudes and the impact of this on pupils found that pupils with SEN remembered prosocial messages from the classroom presented by teachers, and that helped to reframe neurodivergence as positive (Purtell et al., 2024, p. 1).

3.4. Barriers to Implementing Inclusive Education

UNESCO published the report *Towards inclusion in education: Status, trends and challenges,* which discusses the impact of *The Salamanca Statement* 25 years on. This document recognises indicators of progress such as the number of children excluded from education decreasing from 2000 onwards (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation, 2020, p. 16). However, the document also highlights how 617 million students still were not reaching reading and mathematics minimum requirements in 2016 (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation, 2020). In the document *The Salamanca Statement Anniversary: 30 Years of Progress?* UNESCO recognise how deep disparities in education still remain, and factors such as socio-economic background, sexuality, disability, and ethnicity still dictate and limit education opportunities for young people across the globe (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation, 2024, p. 3).

There are also several barriers' teachers face when trying to implement inclusive practices. In research where teachers were interviewed regarding their perceptions and beliefs about the inclusion of pupils with disabilities in mainstream education identified

barriers to inclusion such as classroom size and lack of training (Tiwari et al., 2015, p. 134). Additionally, Crispel and Kasperski interviewed teachers and found that there is a binary between maintaining high academic achievement and making all pupils feel included, and that teachers find it challenging to balance these two factors (Crispel & Kasperski, 2021, p. 1079). Another identified challenge teachers face regarding the implementation of inclusive practice is access to sufficient resources, as many found the school system is insufficiently resourced to facilitate support (Hasson et al., 2024, p. 201).

4. Methodology

This chapter details the methods used and analytical approach of this study. The chapter begins by discussing the post-positivist paradigm and grounded theory, both of which I draw from throughout this research. This is followed by introducing the two methods used in this research. The first method, document analysis, is introduced, alongside the process used to identify relevant documents for this study. The second method, semi-structured interviews, is then introduced, including the formulation of the interview questions, the participant recruitment process, and interviewing techniques. This is followed by a detailed description of the analytical approach of the research. The chapter closes with a brief discussion of further validity and ethical considerations I made, and some potential limitations I recognise with the research.

4.1. Post-Positivist Paradigm

When writing this study, I drew from the post-positivist paradigm. Post-positivism is a paradigm which can be summarised as research conducted by a value-neutral researcher, believing in an objective reality with observable phenomena that can researched and empirically tested (A. Mills et al., 2010, p. 701). Post-positivist research emphasises the complexity of human behaviour and dismisses the positivist paradigms' idea of one objective reality that is capturable by research (Antonesa, 2006, p. 16). Post-positivism also recognises that there could be unintended research biases that interfere with findings due to the researchers subjective experience of reality (A. J. Mills, 2010, p. 701), although value-neutral research is desirable (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 110).

Post-positivism centres 'investigating your own epistemologies and understanding' as a researcher (Antonesa, 2006, p. 18). As mentioned, through creating this conceptualisation, I aim to remove my own preconceived notions relating to inclusive education and create a conceptualisation that is informed by those currently practicing in education and the history of inclusive education rather than a conceptualisation informed by my own experiences or beliefs surrounding inclusive education. However, I also recognise that reality is imperfectly represented through research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 111) due to subjective experiences of reality and researcher-based limitations such as selection bias. These limitations are discussed further in the limitations section of this chapter.

This research aims to be value-neutral and not draw any value-based conclusions on inclusive education. The thematic document analysis and interviews were conducted from a neutral perspective, with no judgement made regarding the validity of the government's guidance or answers provided by interviewees. I assume a 'learning rather than a testing role' to reflect multiple experiences of reality rather than to test a hypothesis of inclusion (Antonesa, 2006, p. 18). I provided a balanced view of inclusive education that presented positive and negative perspectives in the literature review to also reflect this commitment to not attributing value-based judgements to inclusive education.

4.2. Grounded Theory

Alongside post-positivism, I also draw from grounded theory throughout this study. Glaser and Strauss define grounded theory as 'the discovery of theory from data – systematically obtained and analysed in social research' (Urquhart, 2013, p. 16). . Urquhart et al. identifies four characteristics of Grounded Theory Method:

1. The main purpose of grounded theory method is theory building

2. Researchers should have no preconceived theoretical ideas before researching

3. Analysis and conceptualisation are created through comparison

4.'Slices of data' should be chosen theoretically to build the theory (Urquhart et al., 2010), (Urquhart, 2013, p. 16)

'With its balance of descriptive and interpretive analysis' (Naeem et al., 2023, p. 8), Ground Theory links closely with the post-positivist paradigm, as you can be reflexive during the research process, and fairly communicate different experiences of reality as they appear in the dataset. The idea of having no preconceived theoretical ideas also aligns closely with the post-positivist idea of being value-neutral, which is a core part of this research.

I also draw from the idea of 'slices of data' in my research approach. I started this research without any preconceived notions and built upon my theoretical understanding of inclusive education throughout the research. I used the government guidance documents and interviews as my main slices of data but also used other relevant slices of data such as the history of inclusive education in England and internationally, and other established theories such as intersectionality, further detailed in chapter seven.

4.3. Methods

4.3.1. Document Analysis

I chose to use government guidance documents related to inclusion published by the Department for Education in England. Due to one of the studies aims being to understand how inclusive education is currently being conceptualised by the Department for Education, the government guidance documents were deemed as a way of gaining insight into Department for Education's general attitudes, approach towards inclusive practice, and aims for inclusive education. This technique also was chosen because of the 'stability of the data,' where the researcher is less likely to influence output since the data is already pre-existing (Morgan, 2022, p. 66), an idea which is in alignment with the post-positivist idea of removing researcher bias. Document analysis is also commonly used as a secondary method alongside qualitative methods, like semi-structured interviews, to add more rigour to a study (Cardno, 2019, p. 626).

All guidance documents were found under the 'guidance and regulation' section of Government Activity documents on GOV.UK. To identify relevant documents, the filtering systems on GOV.UK were used. The topic 'Education, Training and Skills' was chosen. Due to this study aiming to analyse inclusive education in the school environment, guidance had to be underneath one of the four subtopics deemed relevant to the school environment: 'Pupil wellbeing, behaviour and attendance', 'SEN and High Needs', 'Starting and Attending School, and 'Education of disadvantaged children.' A period of documents released between 08/03/2021 to 21/05/2025 was added. This timeframe was chosen due to the COVID-19 pandemic's disruption to the mainstream school environment. This paper uses documents released or updated after the return to regular schooling after the COVID-19 Lockdowns (8 March 2021 - ('All Students to Return to School and College from 8 March', 2021) to understand recent conceptualisations of inclusive education. After using the automated filters, 70 documents were assessed for eligibility. A key word and phrases search was used to identify which documents mentioned inclusive practice. The chosen key words and phrases were influenced by terminology used in previous guidance for inclusive practice – particularly terminology used in *The Equality Act* in reference to reasonable adjustments (The Equality Act, 2010) and the discussion of schooling in the *Children and Families Act* (HM Government, 2014). From the 12 documents remaining after the key word search, the executive summaries were read. Seven documents were selected.

Key Words and Phrases for Selection Criteria
Inclusion/Inclusivity
Accessibility
Auxiliary aid
Barriers to learning
Pastoral Support
Reasonable Adjustment(s)

Figure 2: Key Words and Phrases used in Document Search

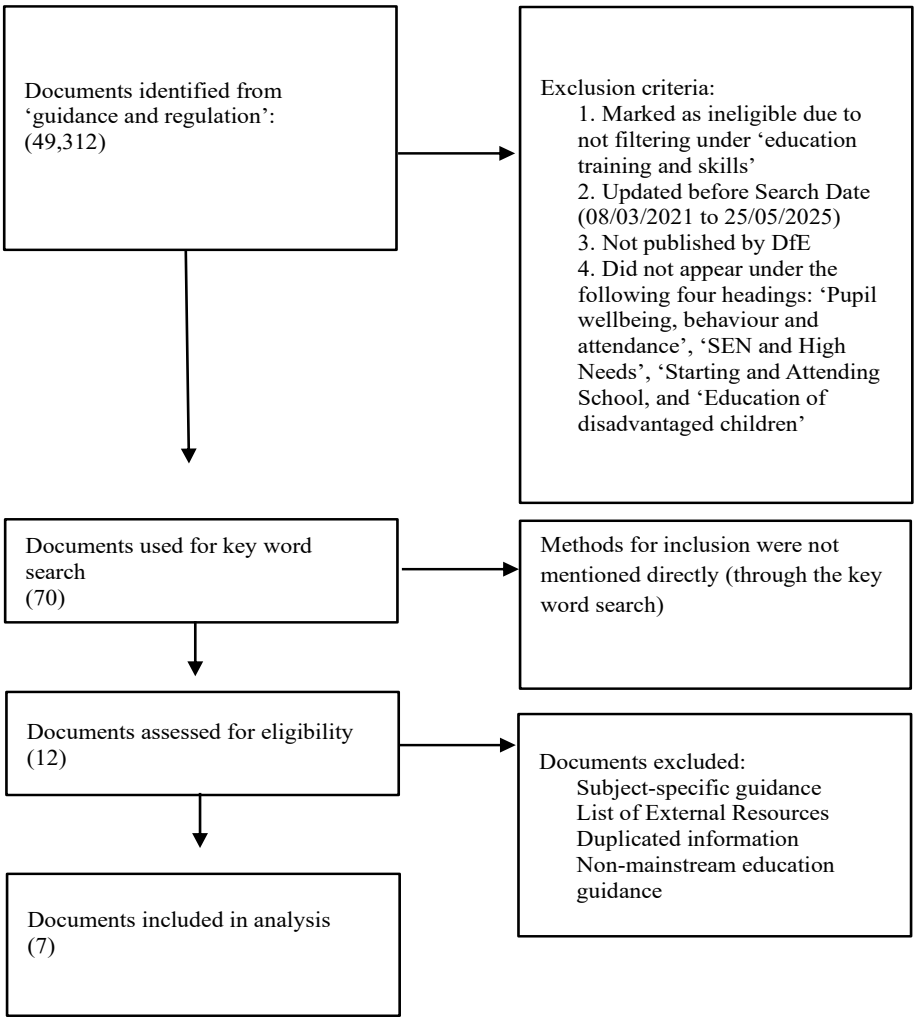


Figure 3: Document Selection Flow Chart

The seven documents included in the final thematic analysis were the following:

1. *High Needs Provision Capital Allocations Guidance* (Department for Education, 2025d)

2. *Special educational needs and disability code of practice: 0 to 25 years* (Department for Education & Department of Health, 2015)

3. *Working together to improve school attendance* (Department for Education, 2024d)

4. *Behaviour in Schools: Advice for headteachers and school staff* (Department for Education, 2024c)

5. *Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023: A guide to multi-agency working to help, protect and promote the welfare of children* (Department for Education, 2015)

6. *Promoting children and young people's mental health and wellbeing* (Children & Young People's Mental Health Coalition, 2015)

7. *SEND Review: Right support, Right place, Right time* (Department for Education, 2022).

4.3.2. Semi-Structured Interviews

I also used semi-structured interviews as a main research method. Semi-structured interviews allow generalisations to be made so you can draw comparisons and conclusions, but leaves space for clarity on answers (May, 2011, p. 135). The interviews were thirty minutes long, which allowed enough depth for answers but was respectful of participants temporalities (Rosen, 2023), and was also considerate of my position as an independent researcher and the time and resources available to me. When conducting the interviews, the following interview sequence provided in the book *Real World Research* was used as a framework:

1. An **Introduction**, alongside an introduction to the interview (see appendix e)

2. **Warm-up** period for the interviewee to introduce themselves and ask any preliminary questions

3. The **Main body** of the interview (see appendix e – particularly questions 1 to 5)

4. A **'Cool-off'** (see appendix e - particularly question 6)

5. **Closure,** where the interviewee was asked about snowball sampling (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p. 290)

The target population for this study was people who are currently teaching in mainstream primary, secondary, or further education schools in England. This was with the aims of reflecting the realities of teachers at a variety of levels and locations. When recruiting participants, I used purposive and snowball sampling. Purposive sampling refers to 'the deliberate choice of a participant due to the qualities the participant possesses' (Etikan, 2016, p. 2). This study required participants to have the qualities of currently teaching in a mainstream school in England, in alignment with this studies aim of understanding how teachers are currently conceptualising inclusive education and using this in their practice. The study and target population were shared online (see appendix b), and participants who fit the target population requirements and were available contacted me by my university email to be interviewed. My supervisor and I contacted people who were in our respective networks and fit the target population. After the initial volunteers were interviewed, snowballing was used to recruit more participants from the target population. I deemed six to ten participants a justifiable sample size, as research suggests that six participants are required in qualitative research to understand the 'essence of an experience' (Staller, 2021, p. 900). This sample size also allowed me enough time for conducting, transcribing, and analysing the interviews. However, due to time constraints, only five participants were able to participate in the study. This is recognised as a limitation in this study, further detailed in the limitations section.

I conducted the interviews digitally via Microsoft Teams and consulted CURECs Best Practice Guide 10 *Conducting Research Interviews* before the interviews took place. Conducting the interviews remotely ensured more accessibility for the target population, and allowed more spatial distribution amongst the population, as a range of teachers from different regions of England were able to take part rather than having a central location to visit for interviews (Daniel, 2012, p. 31). As the consent form allowed only audio recording to take place (see appendix d), recordings were conducted via Microsoft Teams but were recorded on a dictation machine. The interviews were then transcribed onto a Microsoft Word document that was stored on the Universities' Nexus365 Cloud-Based

service and deleted from the dictation machine. Only I had access to the dictation machine.

The questions asked in the interviews were informed by the findings from the thematic document analysis. The six interview questions asked to the teachers were the following:

1. What does 'Inclusive Education' mean to you?

2. What are some of the ways you have been inclusive through your own teaching?

3. What are some barriers you have faced when implementing inclusion in your teaching practice?

And was there sufficient support provided to you when facing these barriers?

4. Do you think you are provided with enough resources (this could be financial resource or information such as guides to inclusive practice) to teach in a way that is inclusive for all students?

5. Do you think there is more emphasis on Academic Outcomes, Career Outcomes, or Life Outcomes for pupils?

***OR** is the emphasis equal/on something else?*

6. Is there anything else regarding the concept of inclusive education that you would like to share?

Without adding any value-judgements or sharing my own perspective on inclusive education, all six question were provided to fulfil the 'learning rather than testing role' in reference to the experience of the teacher in the classroom (Antonesa, 2006, p. 18). I wrote the questions with the aim of them being open-ended and learning as much from the teacher's lived experiences as I can. The purpose of question one is to understand an overview of how the teachers define inclusive education. Similarly, question two aims to understand how teachers practice inclusive education. Questions one and two aim to get an overview of the teacher perspectives. Question three and four are related to potential barriers to implementation and resource, due to barriers to implementation being a sub-question in this research. Question three aims to understand whether the resources discussed in the government guidance documents, such as funding and staff training, are being experienced by teachers in practice, and what resources teachers find valuable in

their practice. Question four expands on the idea of resource and practical experience. Question five aims to understand the outcomes prioritised by teachers for their pupils and was informed by the axial code of outcomes found from the government guidance documents. Lastly, question six's option to add additional information beyond the structured questions is provided with the aim of capturing multiple realities, in alignment with the post-positivist principle that there is not one objective reality to capture through research (Antonesa, 2006, p. 16).

4.4. Analytical Approach

The coding technique I used to thematically analyse the documents and interviews is drawn from grounded theory, particularly inductive coding and the usage of open codes, axial codes, and selective codes (Williams & Moser, 2019, p. 53). Inductive coding was used to explore 'categories and codes which emerge[d] form the data' (Elliott, 2022, p. 106), to have a more accurate reflection of the information found in the datasets, without trying to fit details into a pre-existing codebook, or applying my preconceived ideas to the data. The selective codes found from the open and axial codes are the themes discussed in the findings (Williams & Moser, 2019, p. 50). I did this inductive coding in NVivo 15. After all documents and transcripts were read, the queries function on NVivo 15 was used to identify word frequencies to detect any undetected themes or details that may have been missed due to researcher bias.

4.5. Validity, Ethical Considerations, and Limitations

Before conducting this research, ethical approval was gained from the Central University Research Ethics Committee (see appendix a). All documentation used for the thematic analysis are in the public domain on GOV.UK. All content is available for use and adaptation under the Open Government Licence v3.0, if the source of the information is acknowledged (*Open Government Licence*, 2014). For the interviews, participants were provided with three documents prior to the interview: Participant Information Sheet (appendix c), Interview Guide and Questions (appendix e), and Consent Form (appendix d). This was with the aim of gaining informed consent before the research took place. As stated above, the recordings were made on a dictation machine that only I had access to and were deleted after transcription. The consent forms and transcriptions were stored on The University of Oxford Nexus365 cloud-based service and will be kept for three years, as per university guidelines. No personal data is used throughout this document, and no direct quotations are taken.

Due to this project being a master's dissertation, there were limitations relating to being an independent researcher and the time available. It may have been a more rigorous process if a secondary reviewer followed the process outlined in the flow diagram to ensure no studies were wrongfully included or excluded, and to ensure selection bias did not occur (Randles & Finnegan, 2023, p. 5). In terms of the interview process, there were a limited number of participants who chose to take part in the study. The five interviewees did range from primary to secondary to sixth form college teachers, and the teachers were from different schools across the country, so there were a breadth of opinions captured, and the interviews themselves had enough depth so thematic analysis could take place. However, it is recognised that this is a small sample size. A larger sample size would strengthen this paper and is recommended in the considerations for future research section. Moreover, due to the sample selection being voluntary, the people who chose to volunteer for the study may already have an interest in inclusive education, and therefore this research may not represent all teachers' views. This could have been changed if the research were conducted on a larger scale, with randomised participant selection to further understand the conceptualisations of teachers who did not already have an interest in inclusive policy.

5. Findings from the Government Guidance Documents

This chapter presents the findings from the seven selected government guidance documents that discuss inclusive education. The aim of this chapter is to explore the three themes that emerged from the thematic analysis of the guidance documents, and to answer research sub-question one: *How is inclusive education conceptualised by the Department for Education?*

Overall, the government guidance covered a wide range of information but primarily focused on ways to improve the pupil's experience of school. At the core of improving this experience was multi-agency work, staff training, and funding, and multi-agency communication was key for the successful implementation of inclusive education. Expectations for pupils were also approached in an inclusive way, and there was a clear aim of fostering a whole-school culture that promotes safety and belonging for pupils, and school being a way to enhance life outcomes rather than purely focusing on academic or career prospects.

5.1. Summary of selected documents

The following table provides a summary of the seven selected documents. The table contains the name of the document, the date of publishing and last update (if updated), the target audience for the guidance, and a summary of the key points in each document. This chapter will refer to each document to understand the themes that emerged across the guidance.

Name of Document	Date of Publishing	Target Audience	Summary of Key Points
High Needs Provision Capital Allocations Guidance (HNPCA)	March 2025	Local Authority, School Leaders, School Staff	• This is an un-ringfenced grant given to local authorities to improve education for pupils with complex needs • It is recommended that local authorities use the grant to invest in mainstream schools to improve SEN provisions
Special educational needs and disability code of practice: 0 to 25 years	January 2015 (Updated September 2024)	All Organisations and Staff who support young people with SEN	• Each chapter of this guidance addresses an area of practice related to SEN and disability • The role of the local authority is to communicate types of support and develop 'The Local Offer' and EHCPs • The role of early years providers, schools, and further education is primarily to help with early SEN identification • Preparation for adulthood is discussed, including employment, independent living, health, and community
Working together to improve school attendance	May 2022 (Updated August 2024)	Local Authority, School Staff, AP Providers, Statutory Safeguarding Partners	• This guidance encourages high attendance due to its correlation with high attainment and safeguarding • The strategy to improve attendance is collated into six categories: **Expect**, **Monitor**, **Listen and Understand**, **Facilitate Support**, **Formalise Support**, and **Enforce**
Behaviour in Schools: Advice for	February 2024	Local Authority, School	• A whole-school approach to good behaviour is outlined

headteachers and school staff		Leaders, School Staff	• A good behaviour policy should follow the following five principles: **Accessibility**, **Coherence**, **Inclusivity**, **Consistency**, and **Supportiveness**
Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023: A guide to multi-agency working to help, protect and promote the welfare of children	March 2015 (Updated December 2023)	All Organisations and Staff who work with young people	• This guidance sets out key roles for individual organisations and agencies to deliver effective arrangements for help, support, safeguarding, and protection • Multi-agency communication is encouraged to ensure safeguarding takes place • Children's Social Care Assessments and Section 47 Child Safety Enquires, and their contents are discussed
Promoting children and young people's mental health and wellbeing	March 2015 (Updated November 2023)	School Leaders, School Staff	• The decline in young people's mental wellbeing is discussed, justifying a change in policy • The core principle in this whole-school approach to mental wellbeing is **leadership and management** • The seven surrounding principles are: **Ethos and Environment**; **Curriculum, Teaching, and Learning**; **Pupil Voice**; **Staff Development, Health, and Wellbeing**; **Identifying Needs and Monitoring Impact**; **Working with Parents, Families and Carers**; **Targeted Support**; and **Appropriate Referrals**
SEND Review: Right support, Right place, Right time	March 2022 (Updated March 2023)	Local Authority, School Leaders, School Staff,	• This guidance summarises the three aims for improving the experience of education for pupils with SEN

		Parents and Carers	• The three aims are: Create a **single national SEN and AP provision system**; **Provide more provisions from early years to adulthood**; **A**nd **a reform of AP**

Figure 4: Table Summary of Selected Government Guidance

5.2.Themes from Government Guidance Documents

The following section will discuss the identified themes from the document analysis in depth. Below is a hierarchical chart showing what each theme contains, based on the open, axial, and selective codes identified in the thematic analysis.

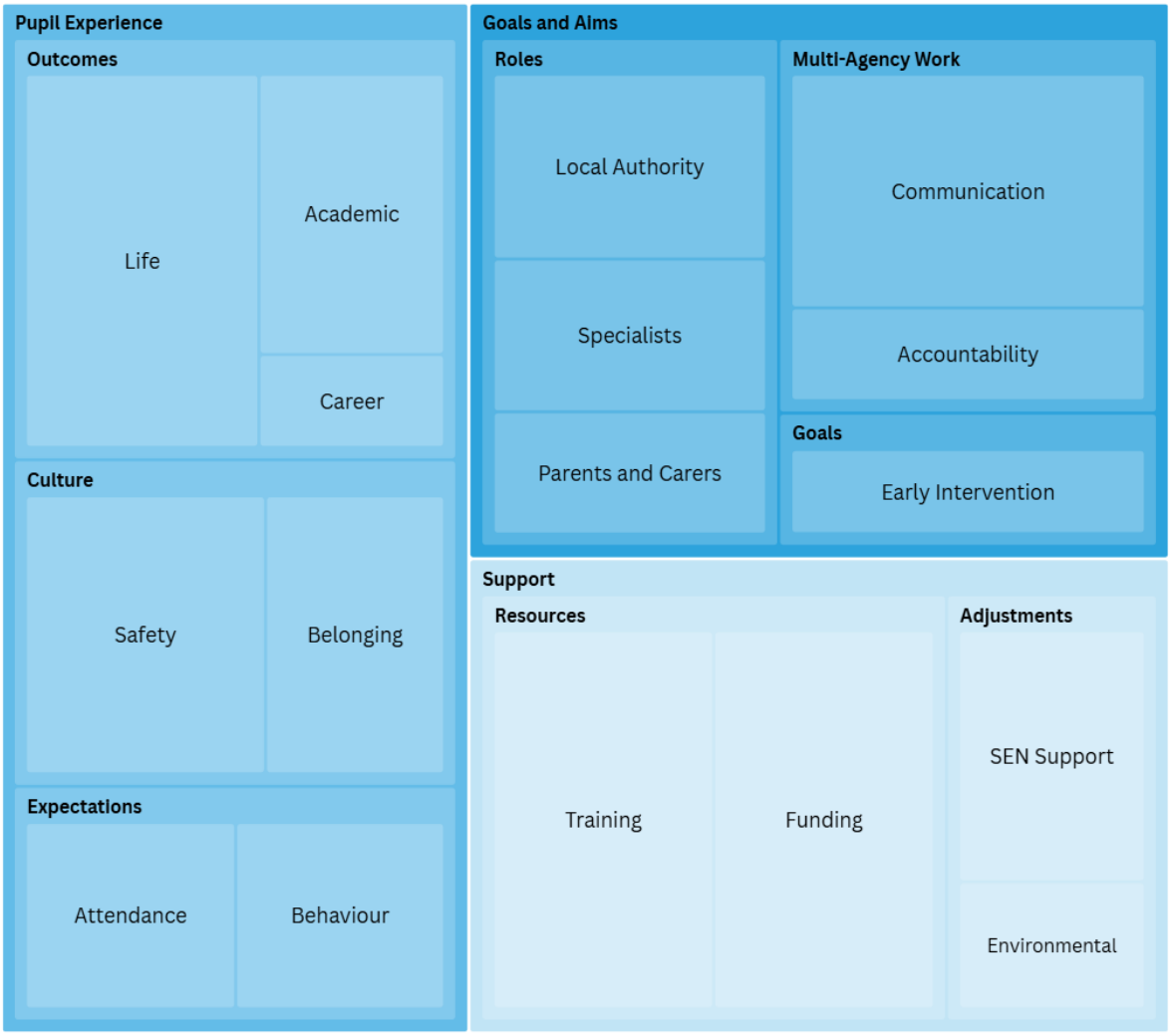


Figure 5: Findings from thematic analysis of documents

5.2.1. The Pupil Experience

The most prevalent theme that emerged from the government guidance was the pupil experience. This theme refers to in-school expectations set for pupils, the general school culture or ethos, and the potential outcomes for pupils from their school experience.

Pupils' expectations across the school day were a key part of this theme, notably from the included documents *Working together to improve school attendance* and *Behaviour in Schools: Advice for headteachers and school staff*, although also mentioned across the other five documents. The importance of these expectations being in place was

emphasised throughout the documents, such as *Working together to improve school attendance* highlighting the link between good attendance and high attainment, and how high attendance can ensure pupils are being safeguarded (Department for Education, 2024d, p. 9). Whilst a variety of reasons were presented regarding the importance of pupil expectations, the approach was often considerate of the various reasons why pupils may be struggling with attendance or behaviour. The Department for Education encourages an inclusive approach to tackling low attendance or bad behaviour. This is clear from Principle C of the *Behaviour in Schools* guidance, which is: 'inclusive: consider the needs of all pupils and staff, so all members of the school community can feel safe and that they belong' (Department for Education, 2024c, p. 9). This is also evident in *Working together to improve attendance,* where two of the key components required for improving low attendance are listening to and understanding barriers to attending school, and the facilitation of support systems for the pupil and their parents and carers (Department for Education, 2024d, p. 10).

The discussion of outcomes was also found across all documents. This was split across three main outcomes: Academic Outcomes; Career Outcomes; and Life Outcomes. The most prevalent outcome discussed across the government guidance documents was life outcomes, which appeared in six documents (excluding *Behaviour in Schools)*. The idea of life outcomes often referred to improving happiness or wellbeing at a young age to ensure a happy and healthy experience of adulthood for pupils. An example of this is the guidance *Promoting Children and Young People's Mental Health and Wellbeing* linking 'emotional health and wellbeing' of young people with 'physical and social health and their mental wellbeing in adulthood' (Children & Young People's Mental Health Coalition, 2015, p. 3). The least prevalent outcome was career outcomes, although this may be due to documents often focusing on Early Years or Primary School provisions.

As mentioned in the 'expectations and goals' theme, this emphasis on working together was also connected to the idea of creating a positive 'school culture' that promotes safety and belonging. The government guidance frequently emphasised creating a school environment that is safeguarded and promotes wellbeing in pupils. An example of this from *Promoting Children and Young People's Mental Health and Wellbeing* is the encouragement for schools to include young people in the decisions made relating to the school. This guidance suggests that 'Involving students in decisions that impact on them can benefit their mental health and wellbeing by helping them to feel part of the school'

(Children & Young People's Mental Health Coalition, 2015, p. 19). Another example of this is from the *SEND Code of Practice* which outlines its vision for young people with SEN and disabilities, which is that 'they achieve well in their early years, at school and in college, and lead happy and fulfilled lives' (Department for Education, 2014, p. 11).

5.2.2. The Department for Education's Goals and Aims for Education

Another theme that emerged from the government guidance documents was the Department for Education's goals and aims for education. These goals and aims were primarily related to early intervention for pupils with suspected SEN and disability, working effectively with multiple agencies and parties, and holding theses agencies and parties accountable.

The roles and responsibilities of multiple parties and agencies was a key point of discussion across the government guidance. The local authority was the most prevalent party discussed, and is said to be responsible to 'provide support for children who are unlikely to reach or maintain a satisfactory level of health or development, or their health or development will be significantly impaired without the provision of services, or the child is disabled' (Department for Education, 2015, p. 51). The *SEN Code of Practice* also highlights how the local authority is responsible for informing residents about the 'Local Offer' which refers to the support available for young people in a local authority (Department for Education, 2014, p. 24). The significant role parents and carers play in a pupil's life was also discussed across all seven documents. The role of parents is described as 'crucial in helping schools develop and maintain good behaviour' (Department for Education, 2024c, p. 13), and key 'in influencing children and young people's mental health and wellbeing' (Children & Young People's Mental Health Coalition, 2015, p. 25). The importance of integrating specialist support networks into education settings was also prevalent in the thematic analysis. An example of the specialist support discussed was the 'young people's mental health provision' introducing 'new Mental Health Support Teams, to work across schools and colleges within a local area to provide targeted support' (Children & Young People's Mental Health Coalition, 2015, p. 3). This idea of integrating specialist staff in the school environment is in alignment with research on inclusion that identified the crucial elements of inclusion are cooperation with specialist staff and the creation of an inclusive school climate (Zelina, 2020, p. 100).

Although various individual roles and responsibilities were discussed, the main emphasis was on working together or multi-agency communication; All seven documents mentioned that working together is important to safeguard pupils. This was most significant in the 'working together' documents - *Working Together to Safeguard Children* and *Working together to improve school attendance.* Clear and multi-agency communication was an important part of successfully working together to provide the best educational experience for pupils. This communication ranged from communication between the school and the parents and carers of the pupils, to the communication across multiple networks or agencies such as the local authority, NHS staff, school leadership teams, and Health and Social Care providers. It was suggested in *Behaviour in Schools* that this communication must be accessible and easily understood (Department for Education, 2024c, p. 9).

Another key goal for education discussed in the government guidance was early intervention for pupils with suspected disability or SEN needs. *The SEND Review* identifies a 'vicious cycle of late intervention, low confidence and inefficient resource allocation' (Department for Education, 2022, p. 3). This guidance suggests that because of late intervention becoming a challenge, early intervention is a prioritised goal for the Department for Education. Moreover, one of the responsibilities outlined for early years providers, schools, and further education providers in the *SEN Code of Practice* is early intervention and the provision of the correct support for pupils (Department for Education, 2014, p. 86)

5.2.3. Support Structures for Schools

The final emergent theme from the government guidance was external support structures. There were a variety of support structures the Department for Education outlined to have in place for schools, such as funding, staff training, and guidance for potential adjustments for the classroom environment, often with pupils with SEN in mind.

The Department for Education encouraged having highly trained teaching staff in schools and promoted resources to continue professional development for teachers. This was mostly in the form of signposting staff training documents that could be read in addition to the government guidance document in question, such as in the *SEN Code of Practice* (Department for Education, 2014, pp. 276–277) and *Promoting Children and*

Young People's Mental Health and Wellbeing (Children & Young People's Mental Health Coalition, 2015, p. 31).

The provision of funding was also prevalent, although notably in the *HNPCA Grant* guidance. The purpose of funding varied, with *Promoting Children and Young People's Mental Health and Wellbeing* outlining funding being provided for 'Mental Health Support Teams' with the goal of providing 'specific extra capacity for early intervention and ongoing help' in schools (Children & Young People's Mental Health Coalition, 2015, p. 3). *Working Together to Safeguard Children* outlined the provision of funding with the goal of successfully delivering 'multi-agency safeguarding arrangements' (Department for Education, 2015, p. 38), in alignment with the Department for Education's central goal of encouraging working together and multi-agency communication.

There was also a focus on the support for pupils with SEN and disabilities that the Department for Education has in place. This refers to a range of support structures such as reasonable adjustments, auxiliary aids, and inclusive design or the classroom environment or curriculum. Six out of the seven documents mentioned efforts to make the classroom space more inclusive (excluding the *SEND Review).* An example of this inclusive classroom design from the *HNPCA Grant* is the encouragement of using the grant to create a more accessible school environment, where guidance such as the as 'guidance on design for neurodiversity' (Department for Education, 2025d, p. 7) is signposted to consider when using the grant.

6. Findings from the Teacher's Interviews

This chapter presents the findings from the semi-structured interviews with the five teachers currently teaching in mainstream education in England. The aim of this chapter is to explore the two themes that emerged from the thematic analysis of the interview transcripts, to answer research sub-question two: *How do teachers conceptualise Inclusive Education and use this in their practice?*

Overall, for all teachers, and as with the government guidance document findings, inclusive education referred to the overall improvement of the pupil's experience. This improvement was across a range of measures, including happiness, opportunity, and accessibility. The way teachers were inclusive in their practice was by taking a child-centred approach, taking extra initiatives to understand the pupils background and ability, and adjusting their curriculum, classroom setting, or physical resources in accordance with pupil background and ability. Despite the barriers that they faced, teachers used their initiative to implement inclusion and improve the pupil experience.

6.1. Interview Participants

The following table provides information regarding the participants who took part in this study. The table contains a participant pseudonym, the participant's type of school (i.e., primary, secondary, or further education) and what subject they teach. No further identifying information such as the location or name of the school is provided in this table, due to the promise of full anonymity stated in the interview introduction (see appendix e).

Participant Pseudonym	Type of School	Subject Taught
Charlie	Further Education Sixth Form College	Religious Education
Rory	Secondary School	Biology
Sydney	Primary School	Primary Teacher (all subjects)
Frankie	Further Education Sixth Form College	Physics
Dylan	Secondary School	Physical Education and Geography

Figure 6: Participant Information

6.2. Themes from Teachers Interviews

The following section will discuss the identified themes from the teacher interviews in depth. Below is another hierarchical chart showing what each theme contains. This is also based on the open, axial, and selective codes identified in the thematic analysis.

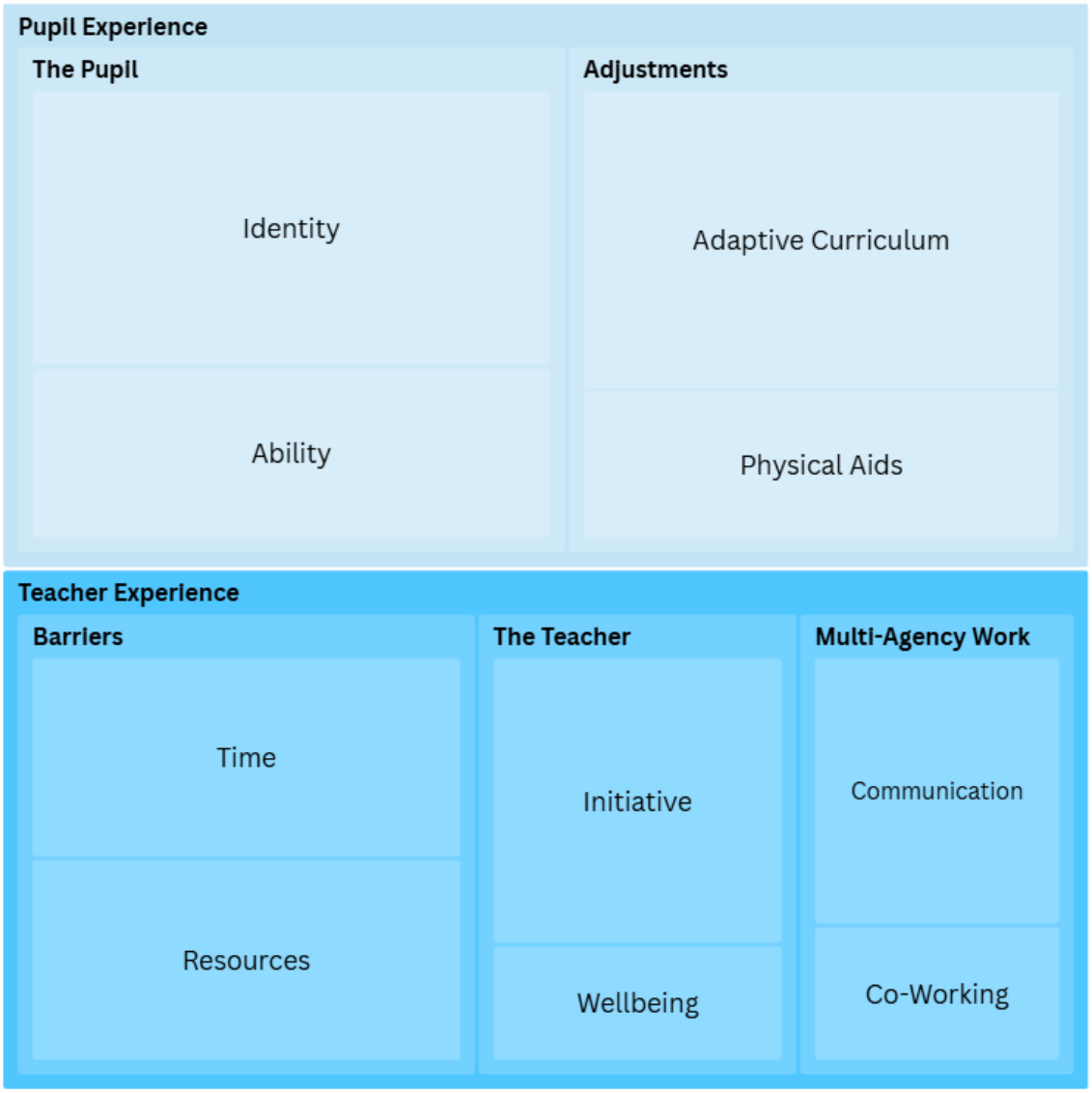


Figure 7: Findings from thematic analysis of teachers' interviews

6.2.1. The Pupil Experience

One of the themes that emerged from the interviews, similarly to the government guidance, was the pupil experience, which was at the core of the teachers' discussions of inclusion. This referred to the pupil's experience as an individual, including their personal characteristics and identity, and their experience in the school environment. This was often paired with discussion of how pupil characteristics may affect ability.

Across the transcripts, a range of characteristics were mentioned covering pupils from minoritised racial and ethnic backgrounds; LGBTQ+ pupils; Pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds; Pupils with learning disabilities; Pupils with SEN; and Pupils with visual or hearing impairments.

There were a variety of methods mentioned by teachers regarding how they created an inclusive pupil experience. The most favoured inclusive practice was creating an adaptive curriculum, which all five teachers mentioned doing. In a shift away from differentiation, adaptive teaching has become a key method to support pupils with varying levels of ability. Adaptive teaching encourages a pupil-centred approach to teaching, where teachers are responsive to the pupils' individual needs and adapt based on this. This shift from a whole-group differentiation to individual adaptation is because of many potential challenges with grouping pupils, such as lowering expectations, or setting expectations that are too high (National Association for Special Educational Needs, 2022, p. 5). Moreover, adaptive teaching allows teachers to recognise the barriers students face and develop their teaching in response to these barriers (National Association for Special Educational Needs, 2025, p. 2). Teachers also mentioned physical aids such as Sydney providing a Numicon for their pupil who was working below the expectations in mathematics, or Rory providing plasticine for modelling the process of mitosis.

The anecdotes of inclusive practice shared by teachers centred the pupils' personal characteristics and identity. In response to question four about the provision of resources, Frankie mentioned a story of a pupil with SEN and from a vulnerable background who they tried to support by getting an EHCP in place, but this was not possible to be completed in time for the exam period due to a lack of resources. In response to question two about how teachers have personally exhibited inclusive practice, Rory mentioned a pupil with a disability who required information to be shared through key words or terms rather than full paragraphs or sentences.

6.2.2. The Teacher Experience

The second theme that emerged from the teachers' interviews was the teacher experience. The teacher's experience was also significant to inclusion for teachers, including elements related to the teachers personality or wellbeing, such as the efforts to create extra initiatives or the barriers they faced and how they overcame these barriers, and how teachers experienced engaging with other elements of the school such as training

and development opportunities, the funding they receive, and the specialist support integrated in the school.

The teachers recognised that their personal interest in inclusive education is often what drove them to implement inclusive practices. These practices often went beyond set expectations. For example, Charlie and Frankie discussed the lack of representation for diverse groups in the curriculum and resources, which Frankie counteracted by asking for more updated versions of science textbooks that represented women in science, and Charlie counteracted by learning about intersectionality through reading and audiobooks and creating an LGBTQ+ club for pupils. Dylan recognised that pupils in their class could not afford to purchase PE kits, so they counteracted this by community fundraising.

The importance of working together across the school was also a common theme in the interviews. Teachers especially recognised the importance of specialist support in their practice. Specialist support from a variety of healthcare professionals including speech and language therapists, counsellors, and medical doctors was deemed as a necessary part of making the pupils' experience in education inclusive. For example, Frankie recognised that making frequent contact with the integrated speech and communication team in their school was important for supporting pupils with visual and hearing impairments or SEN. Dylan and Sydney recognised the significant role speech and language therapists play in their inclusive practice, and working with these professionals helped them to create better targeted support, such as adaptive curriculums.

Teachers also recognised the many barriers that they faced when trying to implement inclusion. The discussion of barriers appeared in the response to all six questions, and Charlie, Rory, Frankie, and Dylan used question six as an opportunity to reinforce the barriers they faced. The following six barriers were mentioned: academic pressures from senior leadership teams; classroom size being too large; parents and carers not supporting inclusion; lack of TAs; poor teacher wellbeing; and lack of time. These barriers can be broadly categorised as either time or resource related.

7. Exploring A Conceptualisation of Inclusive Education in England

This chapter presents and discusses the conceptualisation of inclusive education in England that has been conceptualised through this study. This chapter aims to answer the main research question: *How is inclusive education conceptualised by government guidance and teachers in England?*

The following conceptualisation is built upon the history of inclusive education in England but primarily uses the themes that emerged from the government guidance documents and teachers' interviews. To create this conceptualisation, I consulted the SAGE textbook *Making Sense of the Social World: Methods of Investigation* (Chambliss & Schutt, 2019). As mentioned, I also present this conceptualisation as a reflection of the data I have collected and information I have read, rather than conceptualising my own thoughts on inclusive education.

Overall, inclusive education in England can be conceptualised as: *An intersectional approach to education, which prioritises creating a positive experience for pupils by utilising teaching practices, physical aids, and specialist support networks that value pupil diversity, happiness, and safety.* The conceptualisation is presented visually, with the size of each circle representing how prevalent the component was in the document analysis and interview analysis. There are four key variables to this conceptualisation: Pupil Characteristics and Intersectionality; The Pupil Experience; Inclusive Teacher Practice; and External Support Structures. Each variable and its components are also visually presented and discussed in depth in this chapter.

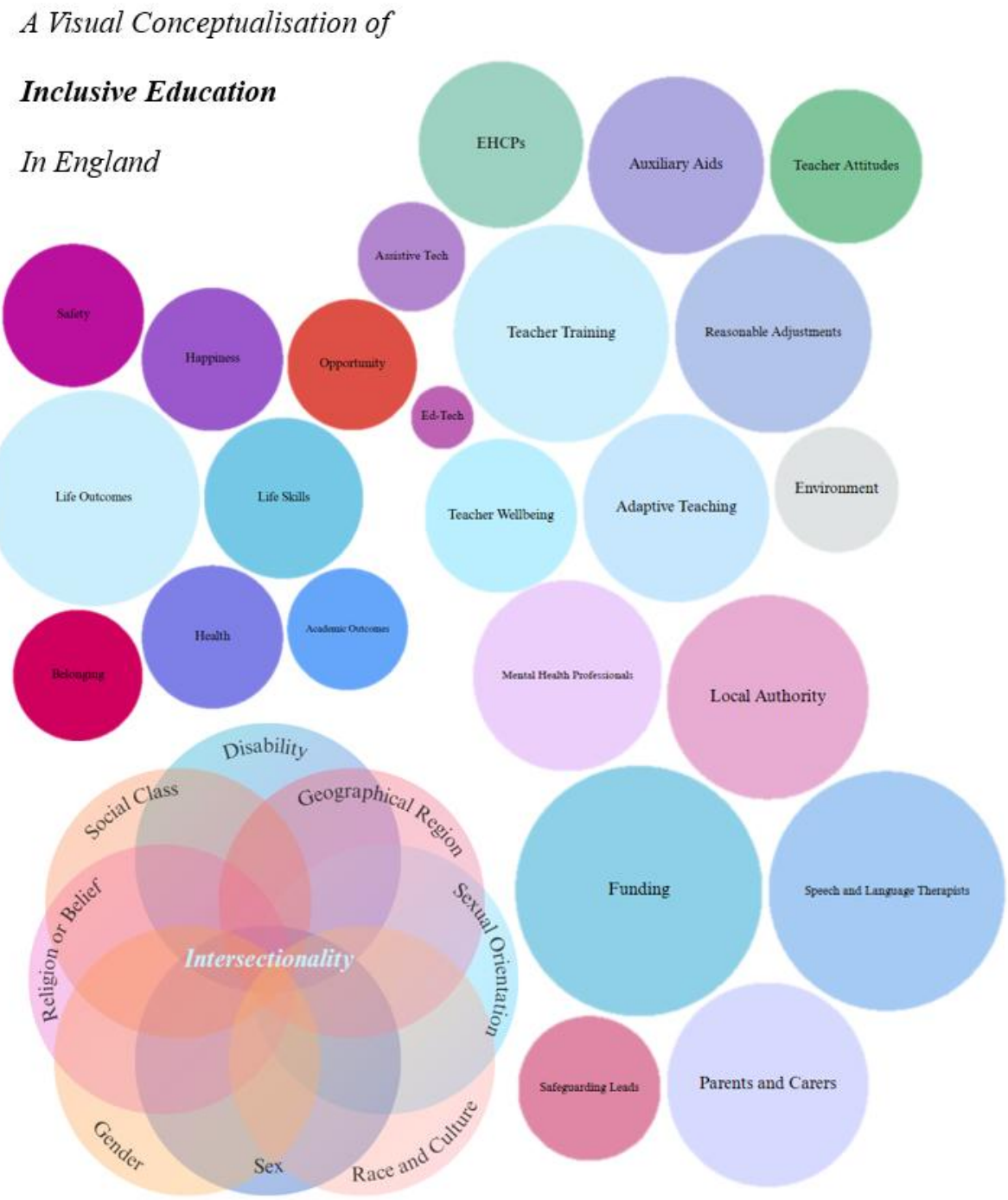


Figure 8: Visual Conceptualisation of Inclusive Education in England

7.1. An Intersectional Approach to Inclusion

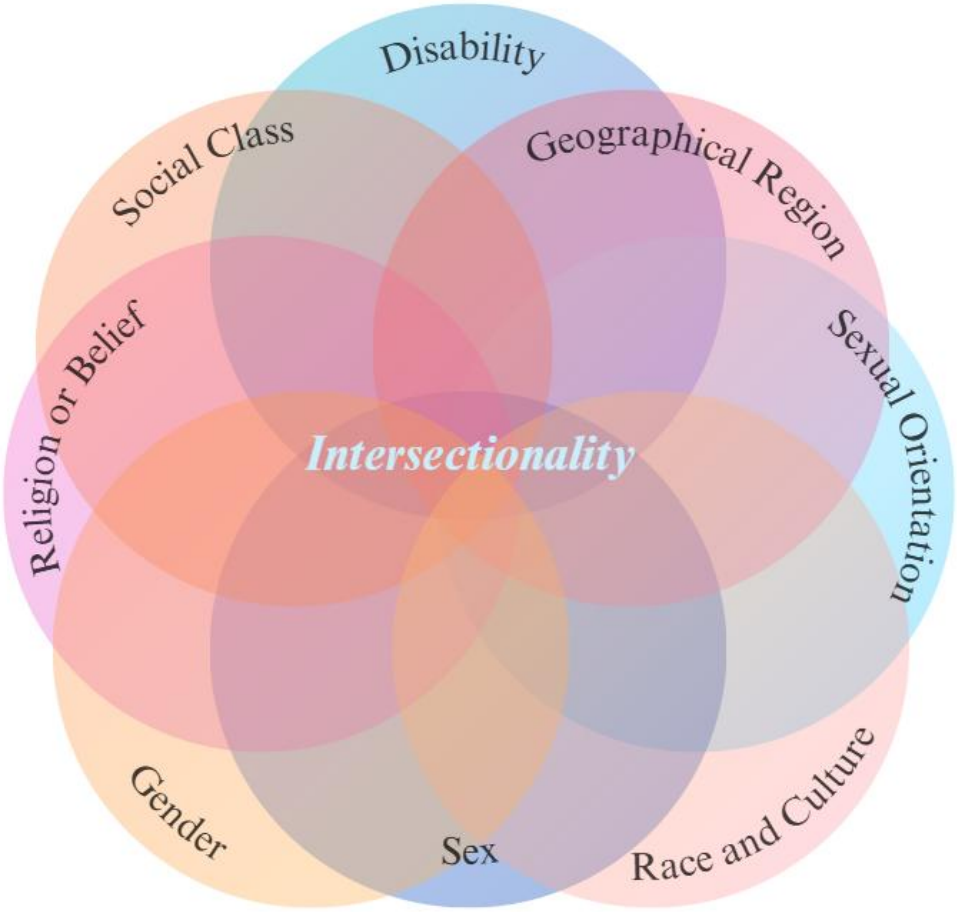


Figure 9: The variable Pupil Characteristics

The theory of intersectionality refers to the idea that parts of our identity intersect, and this can change how we experience the world. The idea was first discussed by Kimberle Crenshaw, in reference to the systematic oppression black women experience, and how this differs from a white woman or a black man's experience (Crenshaw, 1989). Intersectionality has been used as a lens to understand the multiple systems of oppression that people can be experiencing at once due to their personal characteristics (Disch & Hawkesworth, 2016, pp. 386–387).

Intersectionality is considered a valuable 'slice of data' to contribute to this conceptualisation (Urquhart, 2013, p. 18). This is because a pupil's experience of the education system can differ greatly based on their personal characteristics, as highlighted

by teachers in their interviews and in government guidance. This difference in experience based on personal characteristics is also apparent in the attainment gaps that exist in England based on a variety on characteristics such as having a disability, race, gender, and geographical region (Department for Education, 2024b). Personal characteristics and identity were also mentioned in the teacher interviews, and teachers noted that a pupil's characteristics adapted their approach to teaching the student.

Six out of the nine protected characteristics in the Equality Act were mentioned by teachers, including **disability, gender reassignment, race, religion or belief, sex,** and **sexual orientation** (The Equality Act, 2010, p. 5). Teachers also mentioned **social class** or **geographical region**. Class and region can also negatively impact attainment (Department for Education, 2024b) or access to wellbeing support (Children's Commissioner for England, 2024, pp. 17–19), therefore these characteristics are also included in this variable of inclusive education.

Overall, the key personal characteristics and facets of identity considered are the following:

1. Disability
2. Gender (Reassignment)
3. Geographical Region
4. Race
5. Religion or Belief
6. Sex
7. Sexual Orientation
8. Social Class

Understanding these characteristics is important when implementing inclusive education. Using intersectionality as a lens to view these characteristics is a useful way of understanding the pupil's life beyond the school environment and to identify potential support networks to involve in the pupil's life.

7.2. Improving the Pupil Experience

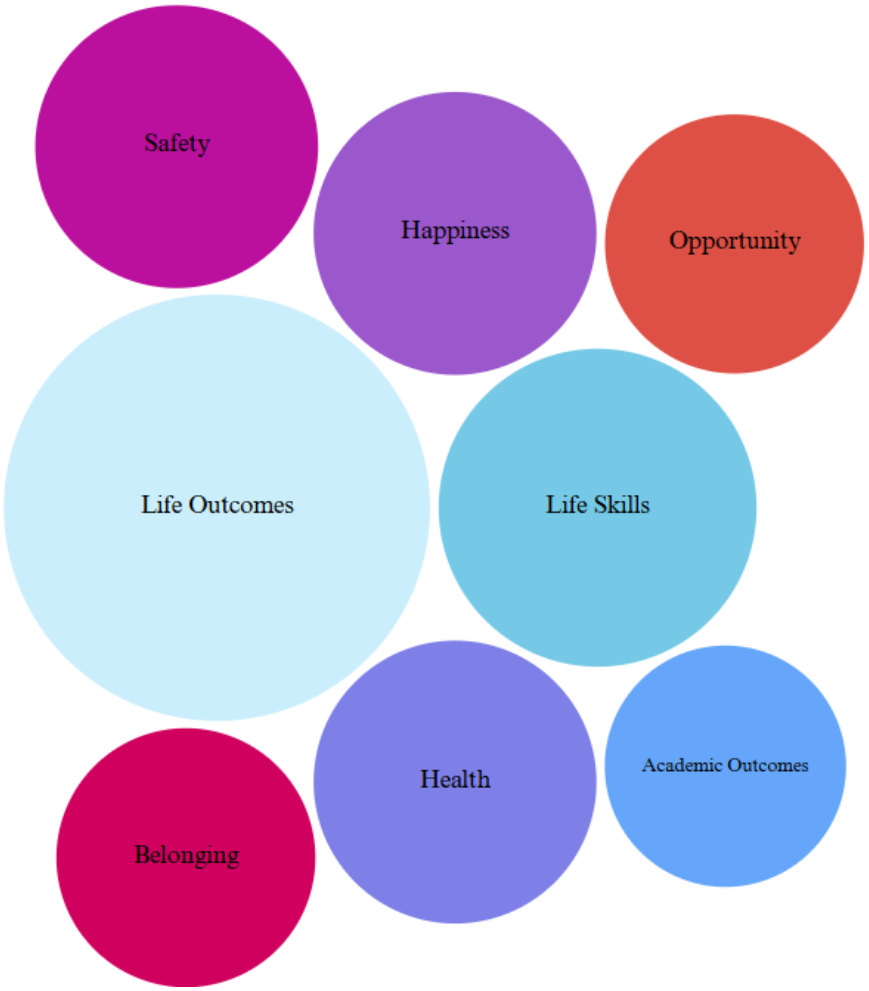


Figure 10: Key Components of the variable Pupil Experience

A general theme of improving the pupil experience to ensure pupils are feeling happy and supported in and out of school was found in both government guidance and teachers' interviews and was a key variable of creating an inclusive educational experience. All teachers wanted to ensure that pupils were feeling safe and supported at school, and this was also a key theme in documents such as *Promoting children and young people's mental health and wellbeing* and *Working Together to Safeguard Children.* The pupil experience goes beyond the school environment and refers to improving more abstract concepts such as happiness or belonging.

There are eight key components to this variable:

1. Life Outcomes

2. Life Skills

3. Health

4. Happiness

5. Safety

6. Belonging

7. Opportunity

8. Academic Outcomes

‘Life outcomes’ is the most significant component of this variable, as it was the answer to question five regarding what outcomes they prioritise for their pupils for all teachers and was the most prevalent type of outcome discussed in the government guidance. The term life outcomes can encompass any of the other seven components. For example, Charlie, Rory, and Frankie recognised good health and happiness as a good life outcome, whilst Sydney and Dylan identified financial literacy as an important skill to teach, such as how the British taxation system works or how to pay for items in a shop. Alongside health and happiness, Frankie identified media literacy as an important life skill to teach for good life outcomes. The government guidance also prioritised pupil health and happiness in their discussion of outcomes. Academic outcomes were mentioned across government guidance, but life outcomes were prioritised. In teachers’ interviews, Charlie, Rory, and Frankie did recognise that during exam periods the focus does shift towards academic outcomes, which is why it remains part of this conceptualisation but is a less significant component to the pupil experience.

There was also an emphasis on life skills, and the development of life skills related to the idea of good life outcomes. These life skills ranged from the financial and media literacy skills mentioned by Sydney, Dylan, and Frankie to preparation for adulthood such as how to find employment or find a sense of community (Department for Education, 2014, p. 28). This also tied in with the idea of opportunities, and both government guidance and teachers recognised the importance of understanding the pupil’s individual wants, needs, and interests so they could find suitable employment, education, or training opportunities.

In terms of the concept of a sense of community, both government guidance documents and teachers recognised that this need for a sense of community starts from a

young age, therefore fostering a sense of community or belonging in the school was highlighted as an important part of the pupil experience. Both government guidance and teachers recognised working together as a way of fostering a sense of community, and ensuring pupils feel they are supported, safe, and belong in the school environment. This sense of community was clearly exhibited by Dylan's community fundraising to help pupils have PE Kits, and Charlie's LGBTQ+ club. This was also clear in government guidance from the *Promoting children and young people's mental health and wellbeing* guidance having 'Ethos and Environment' as a key principle for supporting pupil wellbeing (Children & Young People's Mental Health Coalition, 2015, p. 14).

7.3. Inclusive Teacher Practice

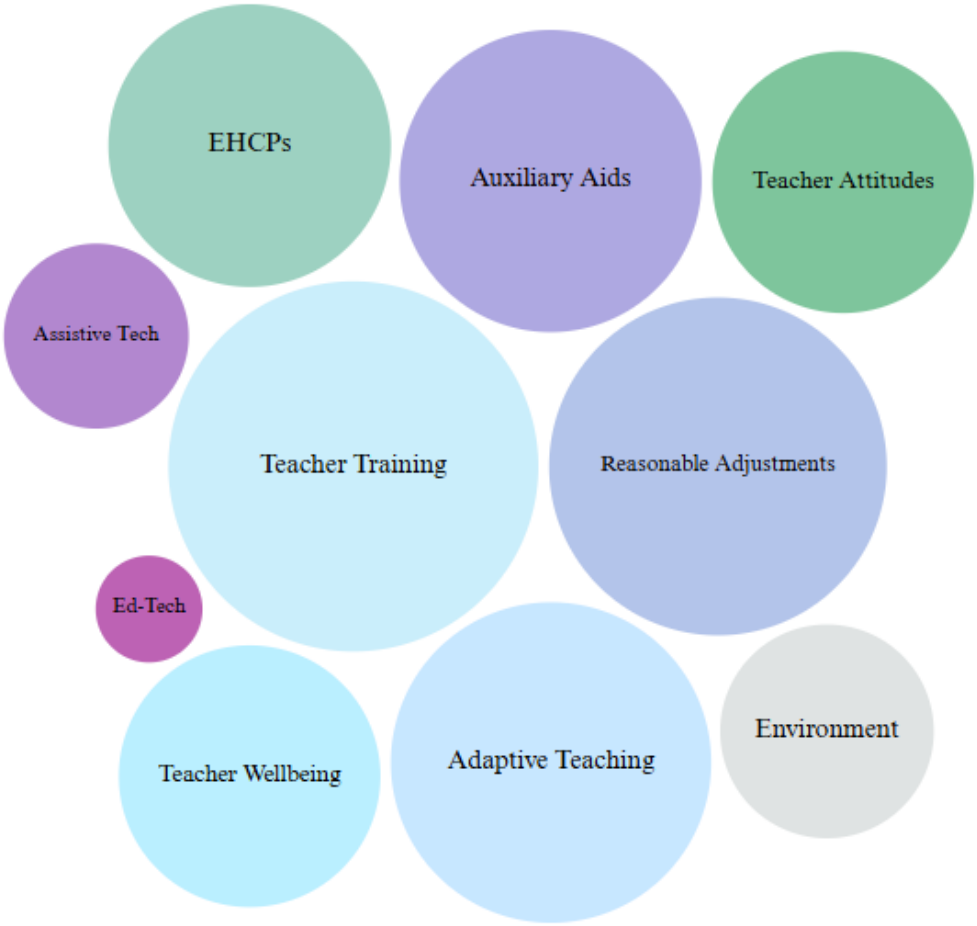


Figure 11: Key Components of variable Inclusive Teacher Practice

Another key variable to creating an inclusive education system was inclusive teacher practice. This referred to teaching practices such as adaptive teaching but also

goes beyond pedagogy and refers to who the teacher is, such as teachers' attitudes and wellbeing, and physical changes to enhance inclusion, such as environmental changes, auxiliary aids, and technology.

There are ten key components to this variable:

1. Teacher Training
2. Reasonable Adjustments
3. Adaptive Teaching
4. Auxiliary Aids
5. EHCPs
6. Teacher Wellbeing
7. Teacher Attitudes
8. Environment
9. Assistive Technology
10. Education Technology

The most significant component to inclusive teacher practice was staff training. Having highly trained school staff who were aware of how to implement inclusive practice was desired by the Department for Education, and training documents were signposted across government guidance documents. Furthermore, all teachers suggested that having access to more training resources could help to enhance their practice, and having more time to explore options for training independently was also desired.

In terms of components such as teachers' attitudes and wellbeing, all teachers mentioned a personal interest in inclusion that motivated their reasoning for implementing inclusive practice. Teachers such as Charlie and Sydney also mentioned how their wellbeing tied into this motivation to go beyond their set expectations to implement inclusive practices, and positive wellbeing usually meant more motivation to be inclusive. This is in alignment with literature on inclusive education, which emphasises the importance of both teacher wellbeing (Hasson et al., 2024, p. 201) and a positive attitude towards inclusive education (Crispel & Kasperski, 2021, p. 1080) for successful implementation.

The physical environment created in the school is also another key component of inclusive teaching practice. Having a classroom environment where teachers can support all pupils was deemed important for inclusive education. This also refers to the physical changes encouraged in the HNPCA grant that enhance inclusivity, such as spatial sequencing and clear wayfinding, inclusive acoustics, and spaces for re-regulation (Department for Education, 2025d, p. 7).

The usage of EHCPs was also encouraged across government guidance. Chapter Nine of the *SEN Code of Practice* details EHCPs and the key role they play, especially for pupils with a variety of needs (Department for Education, 2014, p. 141). However, a systematic review of research addressing education and care practices, and outcomes for pupils with disabilities in the UK, identified several concerns with using EHCPs. This included difficulties communicating with pupils with profound and multiple learning disabilities to understand their needs (Clarry et al., 2023, p. 191), disparities between the quality of EHCPs depending on local authorities (Clarry et al., 2023, p. 192), and a lack of pupil voice when creating the EHCPs, where others communicated the pupils needs for them (Clarry et al., 2023, p. 193). Furthermore, Frankie and Rory discussed in their interviews that there was not enough time to read through all EHCPs, which made implementation harder, and created further time barriers for the teachers. Dylan also mentioned this difficulty but found a solution with creating short-form notations on seating plans, based on EHCP content. EHCPs are a key part of understanding pupils needs, but there are potential challenges with their usage and implementation. It may be useful to use EHCPs alongside another means of support such as an adaptive curriculum, further discussed in the recommendations for practice section of this study.

Various physical items or technology with the aim of implementing inclusive education were mentioned across the government guidance documents and teachers' interviews. Rory, Sydney, Charlie, and Dylan noted using physical items to aid learning, such as plasticine, a Numicon, and different coloured paper. Government guidance references physical aids or assistive technology such as scanning pens, dictation software (Department for Education, 2025d, p. 7), and symbol-based materials (Department for Education, 2014, p. 115).

Another method of supporting pupils mentioned in the HNPCA grant document, and by Charlie and Frankie, was the usage of Ed-Tech, but due to the mixed support, this

is considered a less significant component of inclusive teacher practice. Charlie and Frankie had a generally unfavourable opinion on the usage of Ed-Tech, especially the usage of Artificial Intelligence to create resources such as adaptive teaching plans. This unfavourable opinion on the continued usage of Ed-Tech was also expressed in the UNESCOs report 'An Ed-Tech Tragedy' which suggests that ' the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated issues with the implementation of Ed-Tech, especially for disadvantaged pupils (West, 2023, p. 129). Although Ed-Tech could be useful in some contexts, it is encouraged to be used reflexively, due to its potential to limit inclusivity.

7.4. External Support Structures

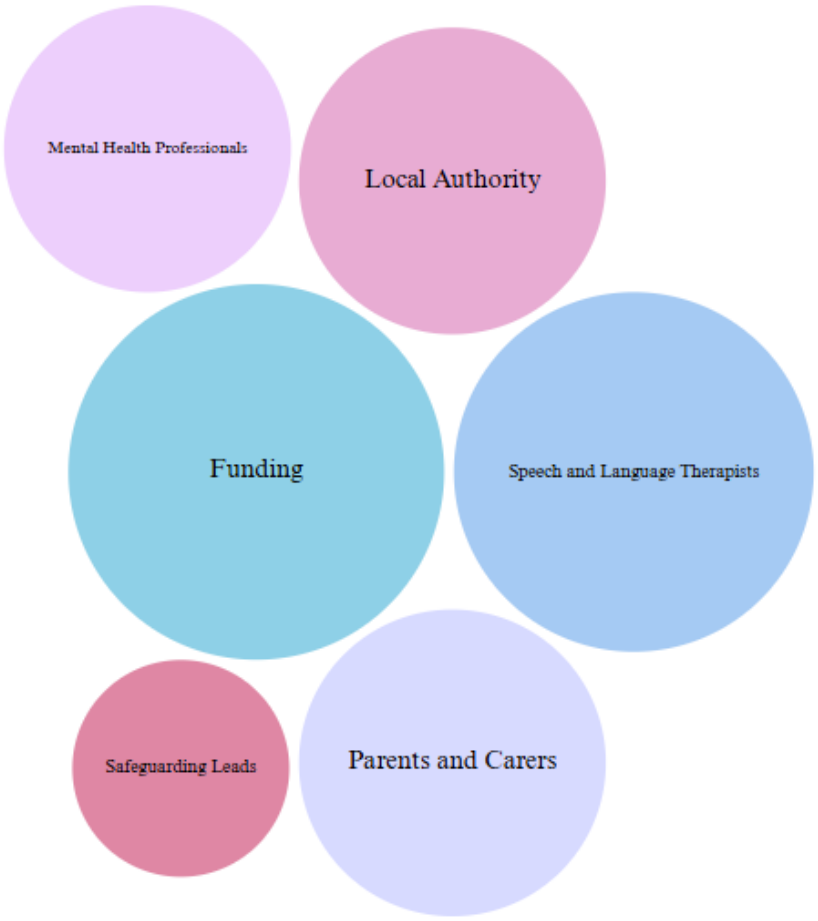


Figure 12: Key Components of variable External Support Structures

The final variable that is part of this conceptualisation of inclusive education is external support structures. This refers to support that exists outside of the school but is often integrated into the school environment to enhance inclusion, including a variety of

agencies or support providers such as specialist support provided by the NHS, the local authority, parents and carers, and funding provided by the Department for Education.

There are six main components to this variable:

1. Funding

2. Speech and Language Therapists

3. Local Authority

4. Parents and Carers

5. Mental Health Professionals

6. Safeguarding Leads

Funding is the most significant component to this variable, as this was mentioned in both the government guidance and teachers' interviews frequently. Having enough funding to implement inclusive practices was deemed a prerequisite for inclusive education. This component is further discussed in the barriers to implementation section.

Various professionals from outside of the school environment are key components of implementing inclusive education. These professionals often have the aim of improving the safety, health, and happiness of young people and therefore improving the overall pupil experience. Frankie, Rory, and Dylan noted the positive impact of speech and language therapists on their practice, and how these professionals help them to know what resources to gather, and how to create adaptive curriculums that were considerate of a pupil's complex needs. Other mental health professionals such as educational psychologists or psychiatrists are also key for implementing inclusion, as mentioned in *Promoting Children and Young People's Mental Health and Wellbeing* and *The SEND Review.* Safeguarding leads were also significantly mentioned in *Working Together to Safeguard Children* and the *SEN Code of Practice*. However, when implementing specialist support in schools, especially one-to-one support, removing the pupil from the classroom to receive support could further distance the pupil from their peers, opposing inclusivity rather than encouraging it. Research by Tiwari et al. argues that taking pupils with disabilities out of the classroom for one-to one-support reinforces a deficit model of viewing disability (Tiwari et al., 2015, p. 134), and that this method does not work towards the goal of an equal education for all (Tiwari et al., 2015, p. 133). Considering

this potentiality, it is important to find a balance between the removal of pupils from the mainstream classroom to receive support and not removing the pupil too often, so they feel unincluded in the school community.

The local authority is also another key component of inclusive education. The support is available for young people through the Local Offer and EHCPs is outlined by the local authority, and they can also be a conduit for communication between young people, their parents and carers, and the school. However, the influence that the local authority has on education policy has been argued to greatly differ depending on geographical context (Simkins et al., 2015, p. 9). Furthermore, deprivation has been suggested to impact the ability of the local authority to provide public services, due to increased demands or difficulties retaining highly qualified staff which leads to poor delivery of services (Gutiérrez Romero et al., 2010, p. 141). Considering this impact of geographical region on the delivery of support, alongside the potential impact of geographical region on the pupils' life, it may be useful to consider supporting local authorities that are affected by deprivation to create a more equitable provision of inclusive education practices across England. Methods to do this are further discussed in the recommendations for practice section.

The importance of encouraging parents and carers to support efforts for inclusive practice is also a key component of inclusive education. The *SEN Code of Practice* emphasises the importance of working with parents and carers, and how this communication is necessary to provide a young person with the best outcomes possible (Department for Education, 2014, p. 19). All five teachers also recognised the importance of having parents and carers support inclusion. This component is also further discussed in the barriers to implementation section.

7.5. Barriers to Implementation

This chapter discusses the key barriers to inclusive education that were identified through the government guidance documents and teachers' interviews. This is with the aim of answer research sub-question three: *What are the barriers to implementation for inclusive education?* Although both government guidance and teachers' interviews are drawn from when discussing these barriers, the main source for identifying barriers was question three of the interviews: *What are some barriers you have faced when implementing inclusion in your teaching practice?* These barriers are presented as something to consider when implementing inclusive education into school environments, or developing inclusive practices based on the above conceptualisation.



Figure 13: Barriers to Implementing Inclusive Education

7.5.1. Time

Time was the most significant barrier to implementation identified. For Charlie and Sydney, a time barrier existed within the classroom, where various factors such as lack of TAs present, classroom sizes being too large, a focus on academic achievement pressured by senior leadership staff, or behaviour management being prioritised left less time for the teachers to implement inclusive practices. For Frankie and Rory, a time barrier existed within the school day, with minimal opportunity in the school day for planning, preparation and assessment time, or to read about students' needs through EHCPs or their school records. Overall, having enough time was a prerequisite for inclusive practice.

7.5.2. Teacher Wellbeing

Teacher Wellbeing was an important factor for implementing inclusive practice. This was a factor viewed as integral for encouraging good mental health and wellbeing in pupils for both the teachers in the sample and in government guidance (Department for Education, 2024c, p. 21). If teachers were not feeling supported, they reported that it was difficult to support their students. This barrier of teacher wellbeing also tied in with all other identified barriers, especially time. Spending too much time working and therefore feeling overworked was a key contributor to poor teacher wellbeing.

7.5.3. Parents and Carers

Communication with parents and carers and parents and carers supporting the ethos of inclusion is crucial when implementing inclusive practices. Charlie, Sydney, and Rory highlighted how parents can become a barrier to implementing inclusion in some cases. Parents and carers sometimes actively opposed teachers' efforts in inclusive practice, which stopped teachers' being able to implement inclusive practices completely for some pupils.

7.5.4. Funding

Teachers highlighted that without having the funding to provide the required resources to pupils, it became significantly more difficult to teach in an inclusive way. The lack of funding from the school is what encouraged teachers such as Rory to buy their own resources, and Dylan to community crowdfund. Furthermore, Sydney and Frankie recognised their positionality being in schools with more funding than the average, and how this funding often operated as a way of reducing other barriers to implementation. Rory reflected upon the stark differences between their previous career in an independent fee paying school, and current career in a state school, and how funding can be a substantial barrier to implementing inclusive practices.

7.5.5. Lack of Training

As teacher training is a key component to inclusive education, consequently, a lack of training was identified as a key barrier to implementing inclusive education. All five teachers in the sample highlighted how they wanted more training opportunities. In response, Charlie and Frankie both commented on how they researched independently on diversity, equity, and inclusion to fill this gap in knowledge. This lack of training also

refers to the lack of specific training in inclusive practice, which all five teachers commented on. The training, if provided, was often too broad to be applicable to specific students, or not relevant to their lived experiences as an educator.

7.6. Recommendations for Inclusive Practice

This section will use the conceptualisation of inclusive education and considers the identified barriers of inclusive education to conclude this discussion chapter with four suggestions for inclusive education practices in mainstream education in England. These recommendations aim to be evidence-based, actionable, and relevant to the current educational context of England. These recommendations, however, are just starting points for educators to consider, and are not an exhaustive list. The study itself hopes to inspire the inclusive practice and teachers to create their own ideas with the conceptualisation available as a resource.

1. Close the gap between government guidance and teachers

This study found that the Department for Education and teachers had similar aims for inclusive education, and the themes that emerged from both analyses were not dissimilar. Both the Department for Education and teachers wanted to centre the pupil experience and improve health, happiness and safety at school. However, there were some clear discrepancies between what teachers perceived government guidance to contain and what the guidance does contain. An example of this discrepancy includes teachers' response to question five relating to outcomes for pupils, where teachers perceived government guidance to prioritise academic outcomes over life outcomes, which the thematic analysis of government guidance found to be untrue. Another example is the requests for guidance: Rory requested more guidance for education recovery post-COVID lockdowns, although there is an education recovery support guidance signposted in the *Promoting Children and Young People's mental health and wellbeing* guidance (Children & Young People's Mental Health Coalition, 2015, p. 39) and Sydney requested more guidance for working with young people who have severe disabilities in primary school settings, which is detailed in *The Engagement Model* guidance (Standards & Testing Agency, 2024). The requested guidance for inclusive practice does exist, but it is clearly not being communicated with educators who request the guidance.

Clearer communication regarding what the government guidance contains to teachers is the first recommendation this study makes. Previous research regarding

teachers' conceptualisations of inclusive education found a similar perception that the Department for Education's political agenda counters inclusive education (Hodkinson & Devarakonda, 2011, p. 61). Providing teachers with government guidance that is relevant to their practice and that deconstructs the perceived binary between the Department for Education and teachers would help to implement the inclusive practices that both the Department for Education and teachers want to implement.

2. Create more individualised support plans

Due to this study finding that intersectionality is important for understanding inclusive education, this study also recommends the usage of individualised support plans and individualised education practices in the classroom. This recommendation is also informed by the Department for Education's emphasis on providing EHCPs, and teachers' supporting an adaptive curriculum. An adaptive curriculum can counteract some challenges associated with using a standardised curriculum, such as a lack of flexibility and individuality (Zhao et al., 2023, p. 43), and is supported as a method of teaching inclusively by the National Association for Special Educational Needs (National Association for Special Educational Needs, 2021).

Both EHCPs and adaptive teaching could also be used collectively, which may counter some of the critiques of EHCPs presented above. An EHCP can help a teacher understand the background of the pupil and their educational needs. This understanding can be the starting point for developing an inclusive and adaptive curriculum for a pupil.

3. Continue the integration of specialist support in mainstream education

The integration of specialist support in mainstream education environments was supported by teachers and the Department for Education. Specialist support including speech and language therapists, counsellors, and educational psychologists were deemed valuable to the school environment, and helped teachers know how to successfully support pupils with complex needs. Research also supports the idea of these specialist support systems in schools, especially one-to-one support systems due to their potential to support pupils who are disillusioned with school (Education Endowment Fund, 2025). Maintaining multi-agency communication with these specialist support networks, senior leadership teams, and teachers is also a key component of the successful integration of specialist support in mainstream education. Due to the value of specialist support in schools, the third recommendation this study makes is continuing this integration of

specialist support in mainstream education. However, due to the potential of the removal of pupils from the mainstream environment to receive specialist support potentially acting against inclusivity, it is suggested that this specialist support is used reflexively, keeping the pupils wishes and best interests in mind.

4. Provide more equitable funding and grants

The final recommendation this study makes is related to the barrier of funding and closely draws from *The HNPCA Grant*. The dissemination of funding and grants with the aim of enhancing inclusion could help to implement more inclusive practices and make the school environment more accessible or enjoyable for all pupils. These grants could enhance inclusion in many ways.

The HNPCA Grant is an example of how a grant can help to enhance inclusion in the physical environment of the school, which was identified as an important variable for inclusive education under the theme of inclusive teacher practice. Some grants with a similar function have been provided before, such as the *Condition Improvement Fund* that aims to address significant health and safety issues or buildings in poor condition (Department for Education, 2025a).

Another example of an inclusive aim for a grant could be to reduce educational inequity based on geographical region, where as previously mentioned currently a 13.7 percentage point range of variation in those achieving grade five or above in English and Maths at GCSEs exists depending on region (Department for Education, 2024b). Providing more funding in areas that experience high levels of deprivation could help to provide pupils with auxiliary aids, assistive technologies, or specialist support like those mentioned in recommendation three.

Overall, the fourth recommendation this study makes is aimed at local authorities and the Department for Education more than teachers and suggests the dissemination of funding or grants that can help implement the inclusive practices that are outlined in government guidance documents.

8. Conclusion

8.1. Recommendations for Future Research

This study, although encouraged to be used to develop change in the English context, should be transformed if being utilised in another national context. This framework is not created with the aim of being applicable to all educational contexts. However, this research design of using a thematic analysis of government guidance and teachers interviews together to create a conceptualisation could be transferred to other national or localised context. This could also be a useful tool for comparing another national contexts' perspective of inclusive education with England's perspective.

Furthermore, as mentioned in the methodology chapter, it may be useful to have more participants in future research like this study. The lack of participants is a key limitation that I recognise with the study. Having more participants could help to create generalisations for groups of participants to compare conceptualisations of inclusive education between groups. This could be a comparison between different school types to see if primary and secondary school teachers hold different perceptions of inclusive education, for example. In terms of the document analysis, having a larger scope for the document analysis could be useful for future research. Because of my position as an independent researcher, the number of studies able to be analysed was limited. Having a larger timeline may be useful, as this can track changes in inclusive education over time in more depth.

8.2. Concluding Thoughts

> *"The hope of complaint could be thought of as a weary hope, not agentic, bright, forward, and thrusting, but a hope that is close to the ground, even below the ground, slow, low, below; a hope born from what is worn." (Ahmed, 2021, p. 289)*

This study was born from a position of frustration but concludes from a position of hope. Something that stood out to me whilst researching, from as early as the literature review stage, was a collective desire to create positive change in education. At the centre of both government guidance and teachers' interviews was the important role education plays in promoting health, happiness, and safety for young people. What was especially apparent in teachers' interviews was that this drive for promoting happiness goes beyond

set expectations. Teachers aimed to do the best they could for pupils, learning to work around barriers, and holding onto a feeling of hope in the face of challenge.

This study has answered the research question *How is inclusive education conceptualised by government guidance and teachers in England?* And has provided a conceptualisation of inclusive education in England. The study proposes that overall, inclusive education in England can be conceptualised as: *An intersectional approach to education, which prioritises creating a positive experience for pupils by utilising teaching practices, physical aids, and specialist support networks that value pupil diversity, happiness, and safety.* This conceptualisation fulfilled the three main elements outlined in the research aims section by considering the history of inclusive education policy in England and current practices of inclusion outlined in government guidance and by teachers, by assuming a learning rather than testing role and not attributing value to the information used in the conceptualisation, and providing recommendations for practice that are evidence-based and actionable.

Alongside the main research question, this study also answered three proposed sub-questions: *How is inclusive education conceptualised by the Department for Education? How do teachers conceptualise Inclusive Education and use this in their practice?* And *what are the barriers to implementation for inclusive education?*

Although some recommendations are suggested, these are provided as a starting point for educators to consider. The conceptualisation provided can be used to develop further inclusive education practices and was created with the hope of being a practical tool to develop inclusive practices in mind. Overall, conducting this study has emphasised to me the power of inclusive education as a tool for transforming the lives of young people; I hope to emphasise the same principle in readers, educators, and people who are currently operating from a position of frustration. Your frustration is a powerful tool that you should not attempt to dismiss. Frustration and complaint are tools of resistance (Ahmed, 2021, p. 7), let that drive you to challenge inequity, be inclusive in your practice, and create positive change.

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Appendices

Appendix A: CUREC Approval

Ethics reference: Education (Educ) DREC - 1241335

Dear Aliya Khalid,

On behalf of the Committee, I confirm that the above research study described in the application and other supporting documentation submitted to the committee has been carefully considered by the Education (Educ) DREC in accordance with the University's regulations and policy for ethics approval of research involving human participants, human tissue and/or personal data. The opinion is as follows:

Opinion of Research Ethics Committee: Favourable Opinion

Subject to the following conditions:

Decision Date: 3 Apr 2025, 16:56

Opinion End Date: 3 Apr 2026

If favourable, insurance-provided indemnity arrangements will be in place between the decision date and opinion end date and you may now commence your study activities. Should you plan to continue the research beyond the end date above, it is your responsibility to ensure that you request, and receive, an extension (via amendment) from the committee for indemnity to remain in place. You may be required to provide a justification.

Please note the following:

Amendments: Should there be any subsequent changes to the reviewed study, applications for amendments can be made via the Oxford Ethics Application System (Worktribe Ethics).

Reports: Studies considered by OxTREC are expected to submit an *annual progress report* on each anniversary of study approval, until the study is completed. An end of study report is also required.

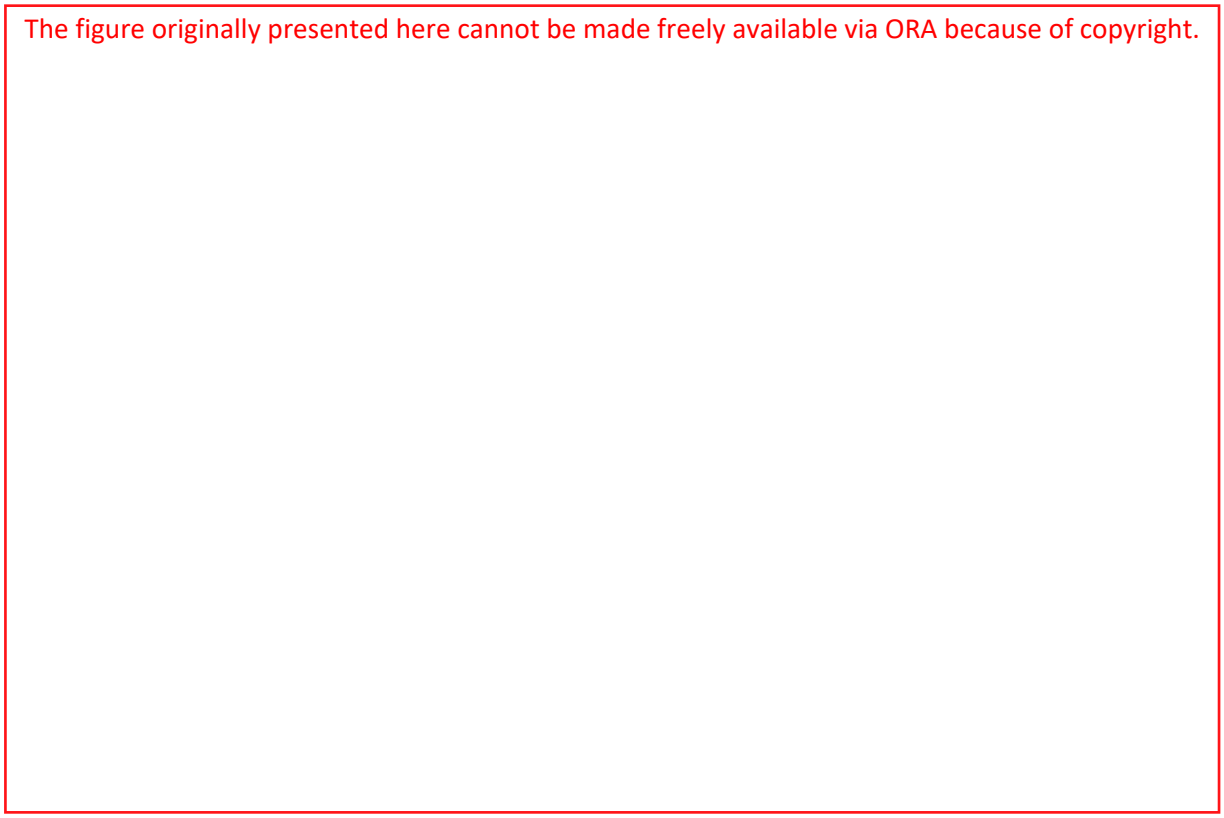
Audit: This study may be selected for audit at the discretion of the Research Governance, Ethics and Assurance Team.

Data safety: It is the responsibility of the PI to ensure that all data collected during the course of the study is stored and transferred safely and securely in accordance with University requirements. Further guidance and advice are available from the Research Data Team. Additional information is available at https://researchsupport.web.ox.ac.uk/governance/ethics

Yours Sincerely

Education Ethics Officer

Appendix B: Recruitment Poster



Appendix C: Participant Information Sheet

How is inclusive education conceptualised by government guidance and teachers in England?

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Central University Research Ethics Committee Approval Reference: [EDUC_1241335]

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide whether you are interested it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether you wish to take part.

Research Background, Aims, and Purpose

This research project – How is inclusive education conceptualised by government guidance and teachers in England? – aims to explore how inclusive education is conceptualised by government guidance documents and teachers in England. The project will explore the role teachers play in creating an inclusive classroom environment, including what inclusion means to them, and the challenges and opportunities created by implementing inclusive classroom practices. These interview findings will be compared with how inclusive education is conceptualised in government guidance, to identify differences and similarities in policy and practice.

How were participants chosen for this research?

The potential participants that have been asked to take part in this research project includes those who are currently in a teaching role in a mainstream school in England. Participants have been recruited through volunteer sampling - via an email detailing the research background and interview questions sent to those who fit the participant criteria, and a social media post on LinkedIn.

Do I have to take part?

No. It is up to you to decide whether to take part. You can withdraw yourself from the research, without giving a reason, by advising me of this decision. If you choose to withdraw, the data collected (the transcript of the interview and consent forms) will be destroyed and will not be used in the final project. The decision to withdraw must be advised by the end of June 2025.

What will happen to me if I take part in the research?

The research will require one thirty-minute interview on Microsoft Teams, where six questions will be asked to you regarding inclusive education. Consent for the interview will be asked before the interview takes place, through a form to sign digitally. The interview itself is semi-structured and follow-up questions may be asked regarding your answers. With your consent, I would like to audio record the interview so I can have an accurate record of our conversation for transcription. This recording will be deleted after transcription. You may ask to pause the interview at any time if necessary.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks in taking part?

As a participant, you will remain anonymous in the final research, alongside your place of work, so there will be low risk of identification. Some of the topics covered includes the mental health of young people and Special Educational Needs. If these topics or themes

are distressing to you in any way we can move onto the next question or pause the interview.

Are there any benefits in taking part?

While there are no immediate benefits for those people participating in the research, it is hoped that this research will lead to a clearer understanding of the role teachers can play in creating a classroom environment, the challenges teachers face when implementing inclusive practices, and gaps between inclusive policy and inclusive practice.

What information will be collected and why is the collection of this information relevant for achieving the research objectives?

I am interested in your experiences of teaching and your views regarding inclusive education. The information you provide will help me better understand the implementation of inclusive practice to answer my research question - How is inclusive education conceptualised by government guidance and teachers in England?

Myself as the primary researcher and my supervisor will have access to the research data. All data will be stored digitally on the University of Oxford Nexus365 and will be encrypted and password protected. The consent forms you complete in person will be taken immediately from the site to a locked filing cabinet and later destroyed. Other research data like the transcripts will be stored for three years after publication or public release of the work of the research by my supervisor, as per university policy.

Will the research be published? Could I be identified from any publications or other research outputs?

The findings from the research may be written up in a master's dissertation. If the research project is later published on an online database, there will be no identifiable information in the final research, and you will be kept entirely anonymous. However, with your consent, I may use some quotes from our conversation in the final written project.

A copy of my dissertation will be deposited online in the Oxford University Research Archive where it will be publicly available to facilitate its use in future research.

Data Protection

The University of Oxford is the data controller with respect to your personal data, and as such will determine how your personal data is used in the research. The University will process your personal data for the purpose of the research outlined above. Research is a task that is performed in the public interest. Further information about your rights with respect to your personal data is available from the University's Information Compliance website at https://compliance.admin.ox.ac.uk/individual-rights.

Who has reviewed this research?

This research has received ethics approval from a subcommittee of the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee. (Ethics reference: EDUC_1241335).

Who do I contact if I have a concern about the research or I wish to complain?

If you have a concern about any aspect of this research, please contact myself through the email shannon.brazil@sant.ox.ac.uk or my supervisor aliya.khalid@education.ox.ac.uk,

and we will do our best to answer your query. We will acknowledge your concern within 10 working days and give you an indication of how it will be dealt with. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please contact the University of Oxford Research Governance, Ethics & Assurance (RGEA) team at rgea.complaints@admin.ox.ac.uk or on +44 (0)1865 616480.

Further Information and Contact Details

If you would like to discuss the research with someone beforehand (or if you have questions afterwards), please contact:

Shannon Brazil
University email: Shannon.brazil@sant.ox.ac.uk

Appendix D: Teacher Consent Form

Consent to take part in ***How is inclusive education conceptualised by government guidance and teachers in England?***

Central University Research Ethics Committee Approval Reference: [EDUC_1241335]

Purpose of Study: To explore how inclusive education is conceptualised by government guidance documents and schoolteachers in England.

	Please initial each box if you agree with the statement
I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above research. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions, and have had these answered satisfactorily.	☐
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any point until **30/06/2025**, without giving any reason.	☐
I understand who will have access to personal data provided, how the data will be stored, and what will happen to the data at the end of the project.	☐
I understand that I will not be identifiable from any publications	☐
I consent to being audio recorded.	☐
I understand how audio recordings will be used in research outputs.	☐
I understand how to raise a concern or make a complaint.	☐

_____ _____ _____

Full Name (Participant) Date Signature

_____ _____ _____

Full Name (Researcher) Date Signature

Appendix E: Interview Questions and Guidance Sheet

Interview Introduction

Thank you for participating in this interview for my research project - How is inclusive education conceptualised by government guidance and teachers in England? I appreciate your engagement and support.

This interview will be around thirty minutes, and I will ask you six questions regarding inclusive education. There may be some follow-up questions from me to further clarify your answers.

Your identity will remain anonymous, and no identifying information will be used in the final transcription (i.e., your place of work or name). There will also be no direct quotations used; your interview will be analysed thematically.

There is an audio recording being taken of our interview on a separate device. This is for me to be able to transcribe our interview and analyse this for my final project. After transcription, the audio recording will be deleted, and the transcription will be uploaded to the University of Oxford Nexus365 cloud-based service.

If you wish to skip any questions, that is okay. Let me know after I ask the question, and we can move on to the next. If you wish to take a break, please let me know. If you wish to revoke consent, please email me at shannon.brazil@sant.ox.ac.uk by the end of June 2025 and I will delete the transcription and remove your answers from the final paper.

. *Interview Questions*

1. What does ‘Inclusive Education’ mean to you?

2. What are some of the ways you have been inclusive through your own teaching?

3. What are some barriers you have faced when implementing inclusion in your teaching practice?

- And was there sufficient support provided to you when facing these barriers?

4. Do you think you are provided with enough resources (this could be financial resource or information such as guides to inclusive practice) to teach in a way that is inclusive for all students?

5. Do you think there is more emphasis on Academic Outcomes, Career Outcomes, or Life Outcomes for pupils?

- **OR** is the emphasis equal/on something else?

6. Is there anything else regarding the concept of inclusive education that you would like to share?