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DISCUSSION PAPER

Inclusive Teaching—Securing Strong Educational Experiences and Outcomes for All Students

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Abstract

This discussion paper examines the serious challenges facing England's SEND system: poor student outcomes, strained resources, and system inefficiencies affecting over 1 million young people (NAO, 2024). We consider five signs that the system is under strain, explore five potential drivers of this situation, and in response, propose five guiding principles designed to reframe our approach to classroom teaching. These principles—which represent a shift from *individualism* to *inclusion*—offer a coherent, classroom-based suite of strategies to improve educational experiences and outcomes for all students, especially those with SEND.

[*] Version 1.0, May 2025 | Peps@Steplab.co

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[†] **Acknowledgements:** We are deeply appreciative of the extensive and valuable feedback provided by many of our colleagues in education—the community is strong and together we make progress.

Introduction

Despite significant investment and the best intentions of educators and policymakers, the special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) system in England—which supports over 1 million children (NAO, 2024)—is struggling to deliver the desired outcomes for many. The impact of these shortcomings is profound, affecting not only academic trajectories but also wellbeing and life chances, and often diverting significant attention and resources away from supporting teaching and learning. Tackling the root causes of these issues and reforming the system is urgent if we are to improve the lives and prospects of every child in our care. This paper aims to contribute to this crucial conversation by:

- Highlighting **five key signs** that illustrate just how much strain the current system is experiencing—and its impact on students, families, and schools.
- Exploring **five drivers of systemic failure** that may help explain *why* these challenges persist despite efforts to tackle them.
- Proposing **five guiding principles** designed to foster more effective inclusive teaching for all—in ways that are sustainable.

We offer this analysis and these principles as a catalyst for further dialogue within the sector. As such, we welcome rigorous, constructive feedback and suggestions on the ideas presented. To further clarify the application of the proposed teaching principles, practical case studies comparing different classroom approaches are presented in Part 4.

It is important to recognise that these principles focus specifically on the pedagogical and cultural aspects within a school's influence and are **not presented as a complete solution to the wider SEND system challenges**. Students with more complex or specific needs will continue to need specialised support that goes beyond these universal strategies. Indeed, the intention of this framework is to strengthen universal provision precisely *so that* finite resources can be better targeted towards those students who need them most.

Finally, while inclusive education is multifaceted, involving policy, funding, health services, and community support, this paper focuses solely on *classroom teaching and culture*—this is our area of expertise and effective teaching is one of the biggest levers we have at our disposal for improving education (Mccrea, 2023). However, we acknowledge the vital work being done on other systemic factors and emphasise the need for alignment and integration across all areas over time for greatest chances of success.

Part 1—Five Signs the System Is Under Strain

Students with SEND deserve an education that empowers them to live lives of choice, dignity, and opportunity (Newmark & Rees, 2022). However, despite widespread dedication from many professionals, the current system faces significant challenges in meeting the diverse needs of these children and their families. Here are five (of many) key indicators of this strain:

1.1 Poor Outcomes

Attainment gaps are persistently poor. Children identified with SEND at age five are, on average, over a year behind their peers academically. This gap widens to approximately two years by the end of KS4 (EPI, 2025), limiting further education and employment opportunities.

This extends to attendance, with data from 2023/24 showing Year 11 students with an education, health, and care plan (EHCP) or SEN Support were roughly twice as likely to be persistently absent (missing 10%+ sessions) compared to students with no SEN[‡] (47% and 43% vs 25% respectively) (FFT, 2025a)—although we recognise that some absences are related to a student's specific condition in ways that make them unavoidable.

Beyond academics, exclusion rates are disproportionately high; analysis of DfE data for 2020/21 found that students receiving SEN support were five times more likely to be permanently excluded than those without (GOV.UK, 2022; The Children's Society, 2022)—although it's recognised that the behaviours contributing to exclusion are often intertwined with the factors leading to an SEMH identification.

Beyond longterm trajectories—where students with SEND are significantly overrepresented among young people not in education, employment, or training (NEET) (Career Connect, 2023)—the immediate *experience* of education can also be negative. Students with SEND often report lower well-being and belonging (Freire, 2024), contributing to findings where over a quarter of children overall do not report enjoying school (Children's Commissioner, 2024a).

[‡] Throughout this paper, we use both SEND and SEN, primarily to accurately reflect the terminology used in the research and reports that underpin our claims (as these sources may use one term or the other).

1.2 Lack of Capacity and Resulting Conflict

Accessing necessary support often involves lengthy and arduous processes, causing significant stress for families as children risk missing out on the help they need. Compounding this, parents often face an exhausting process to secure diagnoses, driven by the perception that these labels are the primary gateway to additional resources (like EHCP funding or exam accommodations)—a situation that highlights the immense effort required to navigate a system where support is not always readily accessible based on need alone. For example, wait times for critical assessments, such as for autism in community health services, mean a significant minority of children (17%) wait over four years for a diagnosis (Children's Commissioner, 2024b), potentially delaying support during important developmental windows.

Frustration with delays and perceived inadequacies in provision pushes many parents to take their case to tribunal; while only 2.5% of EHCP decisions were appealed in 2023, 98% of those appeals were found wholly or partly in favour of parents/carers (PAC, 2025). The adversarial nature of this process, along with the statistic that only half of new EHCPs were issued within the 20-week statutory limit in 2023 (PAC, 2025; NAO, 2024), erodes confidence that children are receiving the support they need.

1.3 Potential for Inequitable Access

Data revealing disparities in access arrangements, such as 42% of students in independent schools receiving 25% extra time in exams compared to 27% in state schools (Ofqual, 2024), raises serious questions about equity. Further evidence indicates that access to higher-level statutory support also varies geographically by deprivation level; research found that among primary school children with SEND, those in the most affluent areas were significantly more likely to have an EHCP (around 22%) compared to those in the most deprived areas (around 17.5%) (Campbell, 2023).

Although multiple factors—such as parental resources and school practices—contribute to these disparities, emerging patterns suggest that the system privileges those with greater capacity to navigate it, rather than distributing support according to need (Campbell, 2023). Furthermore, this reliance on diagnosis as the gateway to support can inadvertently draw school attention and finite resources towards securing and managing labels, rather than focusing primarily on assessing and meeting the specific learning needs of the child, potentially exacerbating inequity. All this risks eroding fairness and public confidence.

1.4 Teacher Workload and Lack of Preparedness

Despite their dedication, many teachers feel unprepared to meet the diverse needs within their increasingly complex classrooms; 44% of mainstream teachers don't feel confident supporting children with SEN (PAC, 2025); nine out of ten (88%) teachers state they need more help to support their students with SEND (Teacher Tapp, 2024). In addition, general concerns persist about the adequacy of initial teacher training and ongoing professional development around SEND, particularly in equipping teachers to find, evaluate, and implement evidence-based practices effectively (Nuffield, 2024).

Compounding this are the significant bureaucratic demands associated with current SEND processes—paperwork, frequent meetings, detailed tracking for EHCPs—coupled with accountability pressures. For instance, a DfE report highlighted 'an increase in tasks associated with the rise in the number of students identified with SEND' as a key trend impacting teacher time (DfE, 2023). This administrative burden increases workload—consuming valuable planning, assessment, and teaching time—and can diminish teachers' sense of professional agency, making them feel like administrators rather than expert educators (Warnes, 2021).

1.5 Unsustainable Rising Costs

The financial pressures on the SEND system are substantial and growing. Dedicated high-needs funding reached £10.7 billion in 2024-25, a 58% real-terms increase between 2014 and 2024 (NAO, 2024). Despite this, demand consistently outstrips funding, leaving local authorities grappling with significant shortfalls—contributing to an estimated £4.6 billion cumulative deficit in the Dedicated Schools Grant expected by March 2026 (NAO, 2024; PAC, 2025).

Furthermore, these figures may not fully capture the total financial burden, as they often exclude the initial contributions required from schools' core budgets (the first £6,000 per student) and the significant resources dedicated to supporting the large cohort of students receiving SEN Support without an EHCP. Indeed, over half of the increase in total school funding between 2019 and 2024 was absorbed by growth in high needs funding (IFS, 2025).

This escalating demand is clearly shown in **Figure 1** below, which charts the increasing prevalence of EHCPs among primary-aged students.

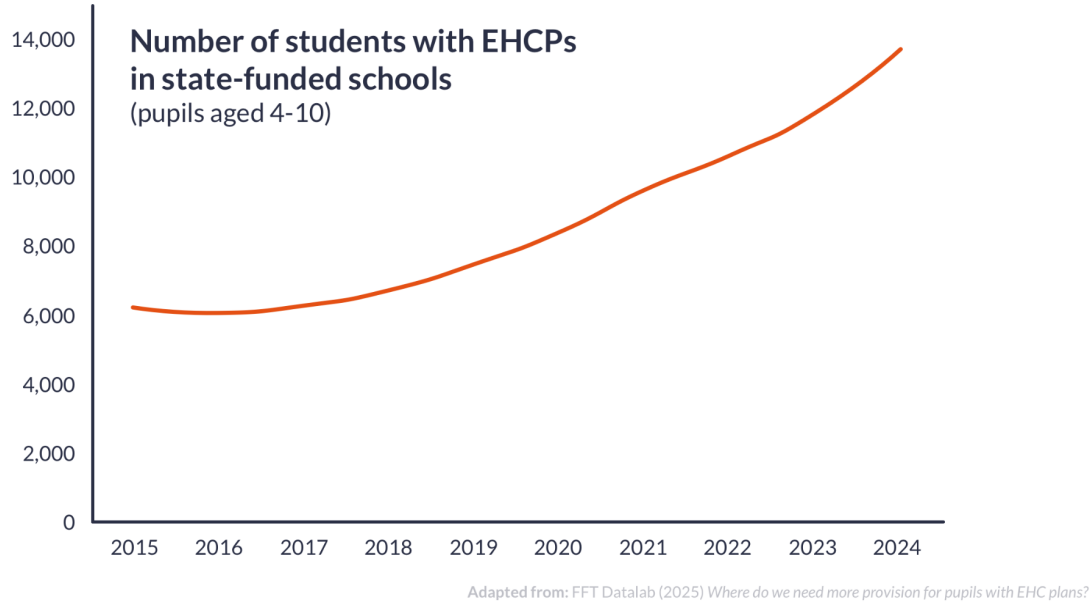

Fig. 1 — Growth in students with EHCPs (FFT, 2025b).

This growing financial strain forces difficult choices, often requiring schools to redirect funds from their core ('mainstream') budgets, impacting provision for all students. Furthermore, the volatility and scale of these deficits, with an estimated £3.4 billion annual funding gap forecast for 2027-28 (NAO, 2024; PAC, 2025), make longterm planning exceptionally difficult and threaten the solvency of many local authorities (PAC, 2025), while diverting significant attention and resources within schools (IFS, 2025).

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Taken together, these indicators depict a system buckling under significant pressure, struggling to deliver equitable outcomes and experiences despite unprecedented investment and professional dedication.

Part 2—Five Potential Drivers of System Failure

If we're going to change the trajectory of these outcomes, it's vital that we understand *why* the system is experiencing such strains. Many of these pressures appear linked to the challenges and potential unintended consequences arising from an over-reliance on aspects of a 'medical model' approach—which emphasises individual diagnosis and labelling, and views the 'problem' or 'deficit' as residing solely within the individual. This focus can lead to a situation where diagnostic labels risk 'commodifying' children's needs, becoming a necessary currency to access finite resources within the system. Here are five drivers which are likely to be contributing to the situation:

2.1 Diagnostic Expansion

Significant increases in the number of students identified with SEN, coupled with shifts in perception around certain diagnoses, are placing unprecedented pressure on the system. Between 2015 and 2024, the number of students with EHCPs increased by 140% (to 576,000) and those receiving SEN Support increased by 14% (to 1.14 million) (NAO, 2024).

While reflecting positive developments like reduced stigma and greater awareness, this rapid expansion presents challenges. It is likely driven by multiple complex factors:

- **Broadening Diagnostic Criteria**: Formal changes in diagnostic manuals (eg. changes in how autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is defined in DSM-5 and ICD-11, such as merging previously separate categories like Asperger syndrome and incorporating sensory sensitivities) have widened the criteria, meaning more individuals now meet the threshold (WHO, 2019; 2025).
- **Increased Awareness and Screening**: Greater societal, parental, and professional awareness, alongside more systematic screening activities in schools and healthcare, inevitably leads to higher identification rates (NAO, 2024). Reduced stigma likely also plays a role, potentially making families more willing to engage with assessment processes and accept support.
- **System Incentives**: The explicit link between diagnosis and additional resources (funding, support, accommodations) can inadvertently create incentives to pursue and assign labels (see 1.3).
- **Construct Validity Issues** (see 2.2, next): Difficulty in clearly defining and measuring certain conditions contributes to potential over-identification.
- **Potential Rises in Underlying Prevalence:** A proportion of the increase may stem from a genuine rise in developmental difficulties or conditions associated with SEN,

potentially linked to broader demographic or medical trends (such as changes in maternal age at childbirth or improved survival rates among premature or low birth weight infants).

This rapid growth has contributed to the dilution of specialist resources across a much broader cohort of students. This compromises the intensity and quality of provision, especially for those with the most complex and acute needs, further entrenching inequities. While these factors contribute to rising numbers, separate concerns exist regarding the validity and reliability of some diagnostic constructs themselves, which are explored next.

2.2 Construct Validity

Construct validity' refers to the fundamental question of whether a label accurately and reliably represents a distinct underlying condition or need. Significant concerns exist regarding the construct validity underpinning aspects of the current SEND system. This often exemplifies a broader tendency within the system to locate perceived dysfunction within the individual student, rather than examining the contribution of environmental or instructional factors. These concerns are evident in several areas, starting with the definition of SEN itself.

- **The Definition of SEN:** The statutory definition states a child has SEN if they have a learning difficulty or disability calling for special educational provision (DfE, 2015). A learning difficulty or disability is then defined, in part, as having "significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of others of the same age" or a disability hindering use of "educational facilities of a kind generally provided for others of the same age" (DfE, 2015). This definition thus relies on relative and potentially subjective comparisons rather than objective criteria, creating inherent ambiguity at the foundation of the SEND category itself.
- **Avoiding Overgeneralisation:** Not all diagnostic categories used within the SEND system lack high levels of validity. Many conditions (eg. sensory impairments, specific genetic disorders, physical disabilities) have clear diagnostic criteria and profound impacts on learning, requiring specific, well-established support. The concerns raised here focus on the inconsistent application or questionable validity of certain labels or identification thresholds within education—particularly when these labels or thresholds might confuse the effects of teaching quality, or normal developmental differences, with a specific special educational need.
- **Challenges with Specific Diagnostic Labels:** For instance, while conditions such as dyslexia and ADHD are supported by considerable bodies of psychometric research, substantial variability exists in how professionals conceptualise dyslexia and the

assessment methods used—sometimes incorporating misconceptions about dyslexia itself and how it should be assessed (Daniel, 2024). It is important to note that questioning the label's validity does not negate the reality that individuals diagnosed (correctly or incorrectly) often experience significant difficulties and may benefit from specific support (such as processing time or accessible formatting). The critique in this paper is aimed at the systemic issues and the limitations of a label-focused approach, not at diminishing the genuine challenges faced by children or the concerns of those supporting them. Indeed, it is precisely because these challenges are so significant that a more effective and equitable system is urgently needed.

- **School-Level Practices Driving Identification Variance:** The significant variation in SEND identification rates between otherwise similar schools points towards inconsistent application of criteria and differing school-level practices, rather than purely reflecting differences in student populations (EPI, 2025). School practices, which account for roughly two-thirds of the variation in SEN Support and EHCP rates, can involve differing assessment thresholds, internal referral procedures, approaches to early intervention, or levels of reliance on external agencies.
- **Evidentiary Patterns and Broader Causes of Inconsistency:** These inconsistencies are underscored by specific examples, such as significant regional and socioeconomic variations in ADHD incidence rates (Hire, 2018). Furthermore, the uneven growth across different primary SEND categories in recent years—with conditions like ASD surging while others like physical disabilities remain relatively stable (DfE, 2024; NAO, 2024)—indicate that factors beyond underlying prevalence changes are at play. A combination of diagnostic ambiguity, shifting awareness and thresholds, variations in diagnostic procedures, socioeconomic factors, and systemic incentives likely contributes to these observed patterns of inconsistency (Hire, 2018).

Poor construct validity is deeply problematic, whether the issue lies within the foundational definition or specific labels. It risks misdirected interventions, inefficient resource allocation, and the negative consequences of inaccurate labelling (2.4), potentially hindering efforts to provide the most effective support based on clearly understood needs.

2.3 Diagnostic Overshadowing

This concept, borrowed from medicine, describes how a prominent diagnosis can inadvertently mask or distract from other important factors or needs. For example: An ADHD diagnosis might be used to explain homework difficulties while overlooking other potential factors like inadequate study skills, task comprehension issues, or even insufficient sleep. The label becomes the default explanation, hindering exploration of

other solvable problems. This overshadowing can manifest in several ways:

- **Resource Allocation Driven by Label:** Resources and interventions often follow the diagnostic label itself, rather than the specific learning needs identified within the educational context. Research, for instance, shows children diagnosed with ASD received significantly more hours of support than children diagnosed with Developmental Language Disorder (DLD), even when the DLD group presented with lower language and literacy scores (Dockrell, 2019).
- **Variable Intervention Effectiveness:** Interventions anchored to diagnostic labels sometimes rely on inconsistent or outdated evidence and may not align with the realities of the classroom. Their impact is further limited when support plans go unreviewed and when diagnoses are based on assessments conducted outside the learner's usual environment (Dockrell, 2019). These weaknesses become more acute when the labels themselves lack robust construct validity (see 2.2). For instance, a student diagnosed with ADHD might have a recommendation for 'fidget toys' based on the label. However, if the student's primary difficulty in a specific lesson is *understanding complex instructions*, the fidget toy (an intervention linked to the label) may be ineffective or even distracting (Graziano, 2018)—and fail to address the actual barrier in that learning context. Indeed, the broader evidence base for such interventions is often characterized by studies with low external validity, meaning their findings may not generalise widely, and any observed effects—whether null, positive, or negative—are frequently highly dependent on the individual student and the specific environmental context (Kriescher, 2022).

2.4 Label Backfire

The role of diagnostic labels within the SEND system poses a tricky balance. On one hand, labels are frequently pursued to secure support and understanding (Algraigray, 2017)—and often provide vital validation and access to resources for many individuals. Furthermore, for teachers equipped with evidence-informed insights into a specific condition, a diagnostic label can help focus their initial attention on understanding how a student might experience the classroom and inform decisions about appropriate adjustments to try first. However, it's equally important to critically examine the potential downsides and systemic pressures associated with labelling, risks that are more often overlooked, such as:

- **Lowered Expectations**: Research suggests teachers may inadvertently lower academic expectations for labelled students (Algraigray, 2017). Parents and teachers have also been found to hold lower university aspirations for children labelled dyslexic compared to matched peers (Knight, 2021).

- **Internalised Beliefs**: Students can internalise these lowered expectations or perceived limitations, impacting self-efficacy ("I can't do maths; I'm dyslexic") even in unrelated subjects (Knight, 2021). These beliefs can become deeply integrated into a child's developing sense of identity, potentially having far-reaching negative effects on self-concept and aspirations that persist longterm, even if the underlying need was transient or developmental in nature (Timimi, 2025).
- **Social Stigma and Belonging**: The presence of a label can negatively alter the interactions between a student and their situation, especially if poorly managed. This can emphasise differences, leading to risks such as social exclusion, reduced peer acceptance, or bullying. This can negatively impact a student's sense of belonging—a factor critical for both general wellbeing and effective learning (Freire, 2024; Boekaerts, 2010; Algraigray, 2017).
- **Threshold Issues**: The binary nature of diagnosis means students just below the threshold, despite potentially significant challenges, may miss out on support tied exclusively to the label.
- **Entrenching Bias**: Labelling processes can reflect societal biases, potentially perpetuating inequalities in representation across demographic groups. For example, certain minority ethnic groups are persistently over-represented in specific SEN categories related to behaviour (Strand, 2006; 2009; Morgan, 2015).

Taken together, these significant risks and downsides can culminate in an excessive focus on *labels* rather than underlying *needs*, inadvertently hindering efforts to provide the most appropriate and effective support for students.

2.5 Teacher Disempowerment and Distraction

The complexity and administrative weight of the current SEND system may be unintentionally disempowering teachers:

- **Bureaucratic Load**: Significant teacher time and attention are consumed by paperwork, meetings, data collection for processes like EHCPs, and navigating referrals, detracting from planning, professional development, and teaching time (Warnes, 2021).
- **Constrained Professional Judgment**: An over-reliance on external diagnoses or specialist recommendations generated outside the classroom context can throttle teachers' professional judgment. This can be compounded by a culture where the responsibility for students with SEND is perceived to lie primarily with specialists (TAs, SENCos, external agencies) rather than centrally with the classroom teacher,

positioning SEND support as separate from core teaching duties. This dynamic can manifest, for example, when multiple EHCPs mandate similar, generic, or potentially inefficient strategies (such as requiring repeated 1-to-1 explanations for multiple students within each lesson)—limiting teacher capacity to apply their own expertise and observations to mange learning effectively for all students (Algraigray, 2017).

- **Erosion of Agency and Confidence**: Feeling constrained by rigid processes, reporting a need for more training (Teacher Tapp, 2024), underconfident (PAC, 2025), or feeling their insights are undervalued compared to external reports can reduce teachers' sense of efficacy and professional agency (Warnes, 2021). The pressure to understand and implement numerous specific SEND strategies alongside core teaching duties also likely increases teacher mental load, potentially diluting focus and impacting morale.

This combination of feeling underprepared, overburdened, and pressured to find solutions can also leave the system, schools, and individual teachers vulnerable to adopting ineffective or unproven interventions, training programs, or resources sometimes marketed as quick fixes for complex challenges.

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These drivers may interact to create the systemic strains detailed above. For example, the expansion in diagnosis (2.1) directly fuels unsustainable costs (1.5) and stretches resources thin. Concerns around construct validity (2.2) and inconsistent identification practices can lead to misdirected support, contributing to poor outcomes (1.1) and inequitable access (1.3). Furthermore, diagnostic overshadowing (2.3) and the potential for label backfire (2.4)—such as lowered expectations or stigma—can mean the system becomes less responsive to individuals' actual needs (1.2), further hampering outcomes (1.1).

Finally, the resulting complexity contributes to teacher disempowerment and overburden (1.4, 2.5), diverting focus from the high-quality teaching essential for all students. This analysis underscores the need for a fundamental shift in approach, moving beyond tweaking the current model towards more effective, inclusive solutions.

Part 3—Five Principles of Inclusive Teaching

Before detailing these five principles, it is crucial to reiterate their specific focus: enhancing the quality and inclusivity of *core classroom teaching and school culture*. The challenges outlined in Parts 1 and 2 are undoubtedly systemic, interwoven with complex issues around funding structures, the EHCP process, resource allocation, specialist provision infrastructure, and even broader societal factors influencing child development and wellbeing.

The principles presented here are *not intended as a complete solution to the multifaceted challenges within the SEND system*. They represent a vital, evidence-informed pedagogical shift that empowers educators within their sphere of influence, aiming to make mainstream provision more effective and accessible for the widest possible range of students. However, sustainable improvement at scale will require such classroom-focused efforts to be complemented by *significant, concurrent work at the policy and system level to address funding, infrastructure, and the social context*. These principles aim to strengthen the universal base, making the entire system more effective, so specialised resources (including funding and expertise) better target students with complex or specific needs who require them.

Moving towards a more effective, equitable, and sustainable model requires shifting our focus *even more* towards proactive, high-quality teaching designed to benefit all students from the outset. This necessitates rethinking some foundational assumptions and embracing a framework centred on enhancing core classroom practice itself to be more inclusive and effective for the widest possible range of students. While the narrative focusing on unique approaches for every individual is understandably alluring, the following five principles leverage the significant, evidence-based commonalities in how students learn to build a more robust and universally effective foundation.

3.1 Embrace Cognitive Similarity

Core Idea: While every student brings unique experiences, strengths, and needs to the classroom, understanding the fundamental similarities in how we all learn provides a powerful foundation for inclusive teaching. This principle recognises that the core mental processes involved in learning—how we pay attention, process information, and build understanding—are remarkably consistent across individuals. In short, *how we learn is more similar than it is different* (Willingham, 2012). Focusing on these shared mechanisms doesn't ignore individual differences; rather, it allows us to design core instruction that is effective for the widest possible range of students from the start.

This shifts the focus from viewing students primarily through the lens of *individual deficits* towards strengthening universal provision based on *shared needs*. For instance, all students operate with limited working memory capacity; and while this limit is known to vary significantly across individuals (Gathercole, 2006), instructional approaches designed to manage cognitive load (such as breaking down complex tasks or providing clear explanations) benefit *everyone*, particularly those who might otherwise struggle.

Achieving genuine inclusion requires more than individual adjustments; it necessitates building a cohesive classroom and supportive school culture. This culture, grounded in shared values, aligned practices (such as school-wide routines and consistent approaches to behaviour), positive relationships, and norms that embrace diversity, creates the safe, calm, and predictable environment where the universal strategies discussed in this paper can truly flourish.

Even the statutory definition of special educational provision—as that which is "additional to or different from that made generally for other children or young people of the same age" (DfE, 2015)—while intended to secure necessary support, risks framing SEN support as inherently separate. This 'additional or different' perspective can inadvertently reinforce a dichotomy between 'mainstream' and 'special' practice, contributing to some of the systemic pressures outlined in Part 2, such as the drive for diagnosis or the sense that meeting diverse needs requires fundamentally separate approaches.

Implication: Instead of viewing SEND support as primarily separate, we should prioritise making core teaching practices inherently more inclusive and effective by focusing on *commonalities in how students learn*. Additional reasonable adjustments—like assistive technology and specialised interventions—remain essential for students whose needs aren't sufficiently met by high-quality universal teaching alone. But by strengthening this universal foundation, the needs of students who require support beyond universal provision become more discernible. This, in turn, enhances our capacity to effectively identify and provide the targeted support those individual students may still require.

In Practice: This principle underpins the four principles that come next, guiding teachers to consider how universal strategies and accessible design can meet the needs of the widest possible range of students from the start, fostering a culture where strong core teaching *is* the first and most important layer of support.

3.2 Prioritise High-Impact Core Instruction

Core Idea: Building on the principle of cognitive similarity, the quality of everyday, whole-class instruction has a disproportionately large positive impact on students with additional needs. While all students benefit from good teaching, those who find learning more challenging are most disadvantaged by unclear instruction and gain the most from highly effective, explicit approaches (Boundy, 2024; EEF, 2021; McLeskey, 2017).

The principle of cognitive similarity is empowering—it means that the core skills of great teaching *are* the core skills of great SEND support. By focusing on universally effective instructional strategies, teachers can feel more confident and capable in meeting the needs of *all* students in their classroom. Furthermore, strengthening core inclusive practices benefits all students by proactively addressing common barriers such as literacy gaps, behavioural disruption (through clearer structures and routines), and potential disengagement contributing to absence, thereby reducing the likelihood that such challenges are primarily viewed through a SEND lens. For instance, providing explicit, clear instructions helps all students understand the task, but is particularly vital for those who might easily become confused or lose focus (EEF, 2021).

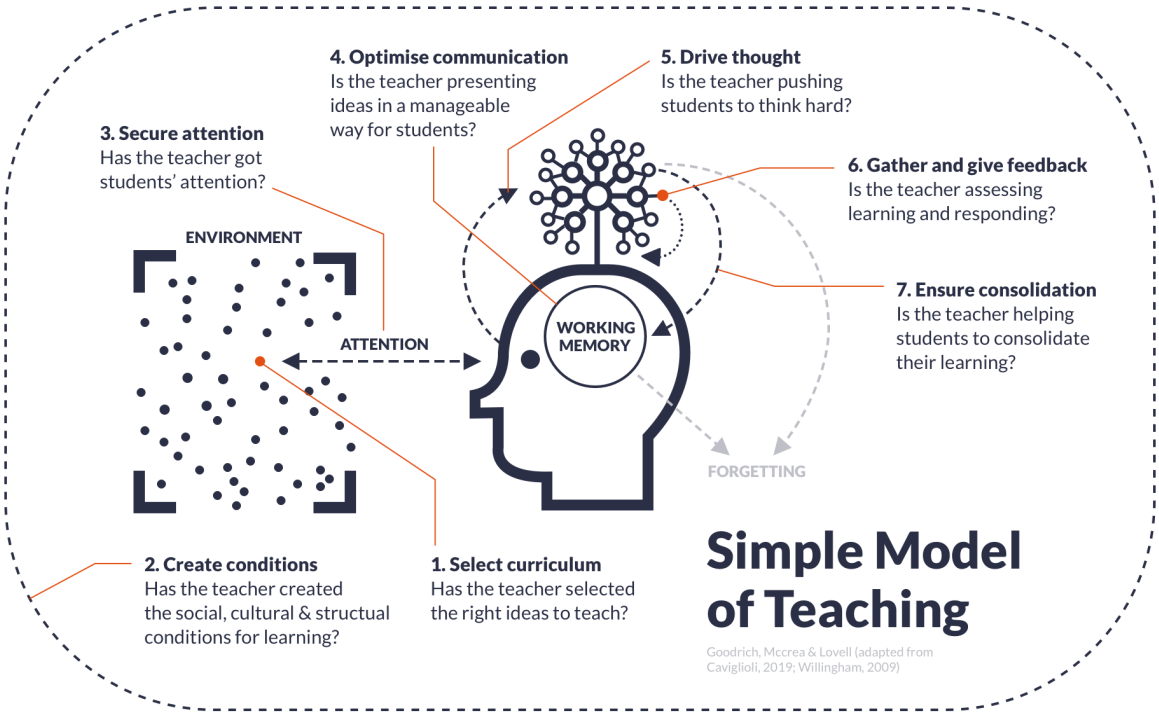

Fig. 2 — A Simple Model of Teaching (Goodrich, 2024).

See **Figure 2** above for an illustration of the core cognitive processes involved in learning and the questions they raise for teachers. This is, of course, a simplified model of teaching, but the job is so complex that simplification is often an effective strategy for improvement.

Implication: The most powerful lever for supporting all students, including those with SEND, is the consistent implementation of evidence-informed teaching strategies aligned with these common cognitive mechanisms. These are not merely "good for everyone" but frequently *essential* for enabling students with SEND to access the curriculum and make progress, reinforcing the SEND Code of Practice assertion that "additional intervention and support cannot compensate for a lack of good quality teaching" (DfE, 2015).

This means focusing on universally effective strategies rather than pursuing approaches which emphasise personalisation (like debunked 'learning styles' or certain tenets of Universal Design for Learning) which lack robust evidence (Boysen, 2021; Pashler, 2009). It is important to distinguish this from providing necessary and appropriate reasonable adjustments or targeted adaptations based on assessed need (see 3.4).

In Practice: Concentrate professional development and classroom effort on high-leverage practices known to benefit all students by supporting core cognitive processes. This includes approaches such as:

- Providing structure, routine, strong relationships and a strong sense of belonging.
- Implementing explicit instruction, building connections, and managing cognitive load (eg. activating prior knowledge, using worked examples, breaking down tasks)
- Securing attention and motivation (eg. minimising distractions, effective use of voice, high-participation strategies, high success rates).
- Strengthening memory and metacognition (eg. choral response, distributed retrieval practice), built upon frequent checks for understanding.

Focusing on these fundamentals may also alleviate teacher workload.

3.3 Make Lessons Accessible by Default

Core Idea: This principle involves proactively making lessons, resources, and the physical learning environment as inherently usable and understandable as possible for the widest range of students from the outset. Mirroring universal design in architecture (like ramps benefiting wheelchair users, parents with prams, and delivery workers) or technology (like captions helping in noisy environments or for those with hearing impairments), the goal is

to anticipate and remove potential barriers during the *planning phase* (EEF, 2021). In short, accessible lessons are *perceivable*, *understandable*, and *doable* by all students.

Implication: This requires teachers to consider accessibility across different domains during planning, aiming for clarity, structure, and predictability, and ensuring materials and tasks meet these criteria.

In Practice: Build in accessibility by ensuring lessons are:

- **Perceivable:** Ensure information can be readily sensed by optimising the physical learning environment and resources. This includes: using clear, sans-serif fonts of adequate size with appropriate spacing; ensuring high contrast between text and backgrounds; maintaining uncluttered layouts and managing visual stimuli; ensuring good sightlines to the board for all students; minimising glare from lights or windows; managing distracting noise and optimising classroom acoustics; ensuring audibility of teacher and resources; considering factors like classroom temperature, ventilation, and strong smells; and providing clear visual aids.
- **Understandable:** Use clear language; define vocabulary; break down instructions; present information gradually (eg. using slide animations or live modelling via a visualiser); provide models/examples/non-examples; establish routines; and check understanding frequently so the meaning and structure are clear.
- **Doable:** Ensure manageable tasks; provide scaffolding (eg. sentence starters, templates); allow sufficient processing time; and ensure necessary physical or technological equipment is available and accessible.

For more, see the **Accessible Design poster** at the end of this paper (download a hi-res version directly from Evidence Snacks) and lesson materials from Oak National Academy.

Benefit: This proactive approach has the potential to minimise the need for numerous reactive adaptations, reduce the likelihood of negative label effects (2.4) and help mitigate diagnostic overshadowing (2.3) by ensuring focus remains on removing tangible learning barriers rather than solely on the label itself. It also stands to ease teacher workload, benefit all students by creating a clearer learning environment, and improve social outcomes by normalising diversity and support (Kart, 2021).

This proactive approach reduces the need for numerous reactive adaptations, alleviating teacher workload. The valuable time and cognitive resources freed up resources can then be redirected toward students who genuinely require intensive or specialized interventions (see 3.4), targeting finite specialist capacity where most needed.

3.4 Adapt Minimally and Appropriately

Core Idea: When high-quality core instruction and accessible design are insufficient for a specific student to access learning, adaptations are necessary. However, this principle advocates for making these adaptations the *minimum necessary* to bridge the identified gap and enable the student to engage with the core learning objective alongside peers.

Implication: Rather than resorting prematurely to separate learning tracks, the principle of minimal adaptation encourages leveraging high-quality core instruction and accessible design first. When these are insufficient, adaptations should be carefully chosen based on the specific barrier and may entail revised curricular goals. These adjustments need to be precisely targeted and proportionate; regularly reviewed for effectiveness using formative assessment; and ideally faded as the student develops knowledge and skills.

This approach avoids the problems with traditional 'differentiation' methods. Some of these methods—such as giving overly simplified tasks or using support strategies like withdrawal groups—remove students from the main learning environment. This can cause students to miss key curriculum content. These practices can unintentionally lower expectations, restrict curriculum access, reduce opportunities for interaction, and effectively segregate students (EEF, 2021).

This approach reflects a graduated response, situating the essential cycle of *planning, adapting instruction (doing), and reviewing student understanding* firmly within the teacher's professional practice and moment-to-moment decision-making. It reframes this 'Plan-Do-Review' cycle not as a periodic, bureaucratic SEN review process, but as an ongoing, dynamic part of the teacher's mental model for responsive teaching—ensuring adaptations are timely and integrated seamlessly into the lesson flow.

In Practice: Focus on temporary supports/scaffolds provided within the main classroom context rather than fundamentally changing cognitive demand or removing the student from the lesson where possible. Crucially, this relies on high-frequency, whole-class checking for understanding woven into the lesson. Techniques such as the use of mini-whiteboards, targeted questioning, or quick 'show-me' responses allow the teacher to gather real-time data on comprehension across the class.

When these checks reveal that some students haven't grasped a concept, the teacher can then make immediate, minimal adaptations. For instance, instead of pulling students out or giving a different task, they might quickly:

- Briefly model the process again on the board or re-explain a key point using a different analogy or representation.
- Provide a quick verbal scaffold or sentence starter to the specific students struggling.
- Pair students strategically for a brief discussion to clarify understanding before moving on.

Examples: Providing a partially completed graphic organiser (minimal adaptation) versus asking for bullet points instead of an essay (potential over-simplification); allowing text-to-speech software for accessing complex text (enabling access) versus always reading aloud and hindering independent skill development; considering in-class targeted support before resorting to withdrawal for separate activities that might cause students to miss crucial core instruction.

3.5 Empower Effective Teacher Assessment

Core Idea: While formal diagnoses offer useful background, they are just one piece of the puzzle. Truly inclusive teaching hinges on teachers using effective formative assessment to understand each student's learning in real-time (EEF, 2021). This means teachers exercise nuanced professional judgment, informed by diagnostic information but critically shaped by their direct, ongoing observations of a student's specific strengths, needs, and responses within the dynamic classroom context, crucially drawing upon a broad understanding of the diverse potential barriers to learning. This approach ensures that while a diagnosis can provide some insights, it does not overshadow the immediate and specific learning needs identified in the classroom.

Implication: Empower teachers with the expertise to make informed, context-sensitive decisions based on identified student needs. This involves moving away from rigidly applying generic diagnosis-based protocols. Instead, diagnostic information should serve as *only one input* into a richer, holistic understanding of immediate learning needs, primarily identified through ongoing formative assessment. Relying solely on a diagnostic category, without this classroom-based assessment, can lead to misdirected efforts or resource misallocation (Dockrell, 2019).

In Practice: Teachers gather crucial contextual data through careful questioning, analysis of student work, and collaborative discussions. This ongoing assessment, which can also be supported by specific diagnostic instruments (such as a reading fluency diagnostic), allows teachers to identify the specific reasons a student struggles in their particular classroom

context—for instance, why transitions are hard due to noise or unpredictability.

This more detailed understanding enables targeted adjustments rather than relying on generic, diagnosis-led strategies. For example, vague recommendations sometimes found in EHCPs, such as "Implement multisensory and kinaesthetic approaches to teach new concepts... use visual strategies to support the understanding of spoken language" (personal correspondence), lack the specificity needed to be effective without understanding the precise barrier the student faces in that situation, often stemming from generic advice or potentially flawed beliefs about learning.

Enabling teachers to excel in formative assessment requires systemic support: providing high-quality, relevant professional development, and reducing bureaucratic burdens that detract from this vital work. This allows educators to focus their expertise on responsive teaching, enhancing their professional agency and counteracting disempowerment.

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These five principles form a coherent framework for building inclusive classrooms. **Figure 3** below illustrates this structure, showing how high-impact universal instruction creates the foundation for accessible design and targeted adaptations.

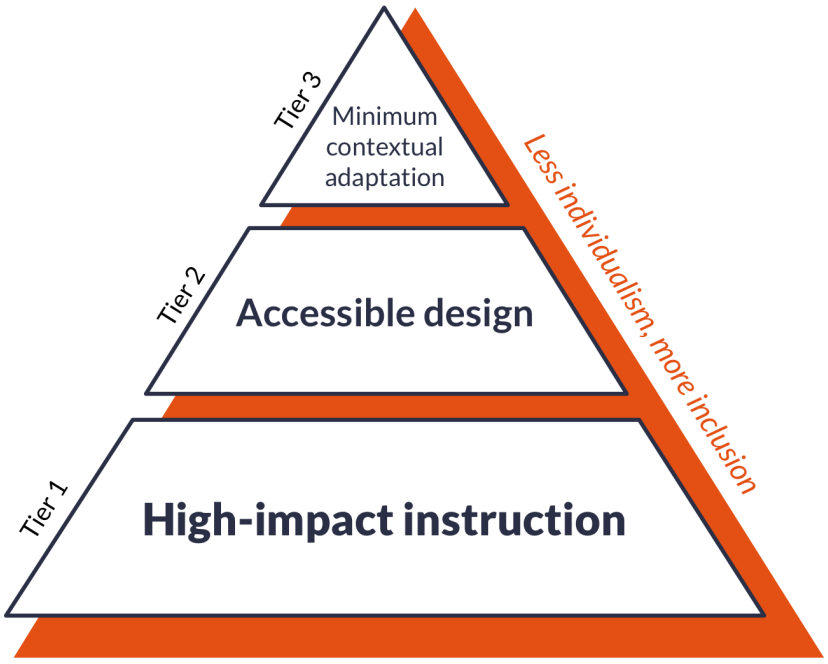

Fig. 3 — Principles of effective inclusive teaching.

Part 4—Example Case Studies

To make the shift proposed by these principles more concrete, let's consider two brief vignettes illustrating the potential difference in a typical classroom scenario—a Year 8 history lesson focused on analysing a primary source document about life in Roman Britain.

Classroom 1: A Reactive, Individualised Approach

Planning: Mr. Smith knows Leo has an SEN Support plan mentioning 'dyslexia-like difficulties' and struggles with reading pace. He searches for a simplified summary text about Roman life for Leo and prepares a separate worksheet with fewer, simpler questions. He plans for the rest of the class to read the original source extract and answer more complex analysis questions.

In the Classroom: Mr. Smith gives the main class the original source and instructions. He then takes Leo aside, explains his different text and worksheet, ensuring he understands the simpler task. While the class engages with the complexities of the primary source, Leo works quietly on his separate material. During the class discussion analysing the source's bias and meaning, Leo has little to contribute as he worked with different content.

Outcomes & Teacher Experience: Leo completes his task but feels disconnected from the main lesson and his peers. His access to the historical skill of primary source analysis is limited. Mr. Smith feels stretched managing the different tasks and worries about the quality of Leo's historical understanding versus just 'keeping him busy'. He later spends time documenting the differentiated provision for Leo's records, adding to his workload. This approach potentially reinforces lower expectations (2.4) and requires significant teacher effort for separate resource creation (2.5).

Classroom 2: Applying Inclusive Teaching Principles

Planning: Ms. Sharma plans the same lesson objective: analysing the primary source on Roman life. She focuses on making the core task accessible from the start (Principle 3.3). She ensures the source extract handout uses a clear font, pre-teaches key vocabulary to *all* students, and structures the analysis questions logically, providing a template or graphic organiser for *everyone* to structure their thoughts. She plans explicit instruction on how to identify bias in a source (Principle 3.2).

In the Classroom: Ms. Sharma explicitly teaches the strategy for analysing the source to the whole class. All students use the *same* source text. Knowing Leo finds sustained reading challenging (using teacher judgment informed by context, Principle 3.5), she ensures he can access the same complex text through minimal adaptations (Principle 3.4). Depending on resources and Leo's specific needs at the time, this might involve strategies like providing pre-highlighted key sections of the text, chunking the source document into smaller parts with guiding questions for each, ensuring access to text-to-speech software if available. The graphic organiser, available to all, also helps him structure his analysis alongside his peers. Ms. Sharma uses high participation strategies (eg. choral response, paired talk) to maintain class attention and feelings of belong, alongside frequent checks for understanding (eg. using mini-whiteboards) to monitor *all* students' progress.

Outcomes and Teacher Experience: Leo uses the tools to engage with the *same* historical source and participates in the class discussion using his completed organiser, feeling included (Principle 3.1), and building core historical skill alongside his peers. Ms. Sharma feels her instructional time was used efficiently on high-quality teaching for all. The proactive accessible design reduced the need for reactive, separate planning, easing workload and empowering her professional judgment. The focus remains on high expectations and shared cognitive processes (Principle 3.1 & 3.2).

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These vignettes aim to highlight the concrete differences between a reactive, individualistic approach and a proactive, inclusive one, moving beyond the abstract idea of 'just teach well' to show *how* these principles translate into distinct classroom actions and experiences. They highlight how shifting towards the proposed principles may create a more genuinely inclusive environment, improve access to the core curriculum for all students, enhance learning outcomes, and potentially reduce teacher burden.

For further exemplification of effective inclusive teaching, see the ‘Great Teaching, Unpacked’ documentary, which is watchable for free at **steplab.co/film**.

Conclusion

The challenges facing England's SEND system are complex and require more than marginal tweaks or simply increased funding within existing structures, especially given forecast cumulative deficits (£4.6bn by 2026; NAO, 2024; PAC, 2025). A profound shift is needed from a *reactive*, *deficit-focused*, *diagnosis-driven model* towards a *proactive*, *inclusive approach* centred on high-quality, universally designed core instruction. While this pedagogical transformation is vital, it must be understood as complementary to, and not a replacement for, necessary systemic reforms necessary to tackle the significant wider issues within (and beyond) the SEND system (CST, 2025).

By embracing cognitive similarity (3.1), prioritising high-impact core instruction (3.2), and designing for accessibility by default (3.3), we create a foundation that can reduce pressures linked to diagnostic expansion (2.1) and validity concerns (2.2). When combined with principles of minimal adaptation (3.4) and effective formative assessment (3.5), we can better mitigate the risks of diagnostic overshadowing (2.3), negative label effects (2.4), and teacher disempowerment (2.5). Crucially, the successful implementation of these classroom-focused principles is amplified when embedded within a supportive and consistent whole-school culture that actively promotes inclusion and belonging for all.

It is vital to reiterate that these principles enhance, rather than replace, specialist interventions. While strong universal teaching benefits the vast majority, some students will always require support beyond mainstream practice. A key benefit of strengthening this universal provision is freeing up finite specialist resources (time, expertise, funding) to be better targeted towards those with the most complex needs, ensuring the specialised support system functions effectively for those who depend on it most.

Finally, many aspects of these principles are largely within the control of educators and leaders, offering a tangible path towards more equitable and effective education *now*. While the evidence base continues to evolve, and the complexities demand humility, these principles represent a promising direction to improve outcomes, enhance equity, foster genuine inclusion, and create a more sustainable system for the benefit of all students, especially those with SEND.

👊

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