Ambition Institute

Inclusive Teaching Framework

March 2026

Contents

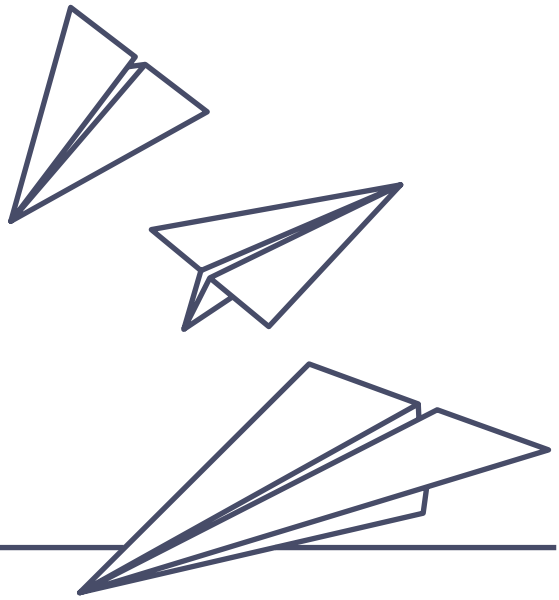
Overview

The Inclusive Teaching Framework sets out essential knowledge to help teachers understand and meet a wider range of pupils' needs in mainstream classrooms.

The framework draws on the best available evidence and builds on ideas many teachers will have encountered through national professional development programmes or other evidence-led resources.

We have developed these insights in close partnership with specialists including the National Association of Principal Educational Psychologists, Speech and Language UK, The Difference and the Royal College of Occupational Therapists. We have also shaped the framework through feedback from experts across the education sector.

This resource is for teacher educators (people who lead the professional development of teachers) in mainstream schools. It is a starting point of what knowledge teachers need to help create inclusive classrooms, building on their core teaching skills. Our next step will be to provide some examples to illustrate how this knowledge can be put into practice.



Our partners

Speech and Language UK

Royal College of Occupational Therapists

National Association of Principal Educational Psychologists

The Difference

Introduction

Every classroom brings together pupils with a wide range of needs. Many children's needs are currently met through effective teaching, but some are not making the progress they could.

Pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) are some of the most educationally disadvantaged children in our school system. Whether we look at academic outcomes, attendance, exclusions, feelings of belonging, or destinations data, too many pupils with SEND do not achieve their potential.

We know supporting pupils with additional needs often means navigating barriers within the education system, such as limited access to specialist support, external services, or funding. Teachers and school leaders across the country are working tirelessly to give every pupil the best possible chance to achieve and thrive. They consistently tell us they want more help to strengthen support for pupils who face barriers to learning, including those with SEND.

Where we started this project

For many years, teachers and leaders in mainstream schools have sought out specialist knowledge to help them meet pupils' needs.

However, without a shared knowledge base to draw on, schools have often found themselves building their own resources from scratch. This increases workload, means teachers are uncertain if they are taking the best approach, and creates a lack of coherence in how different schools are meeting children's needs.

Recognising these challenges, the idea for the Inclusive Teaching Framework grew from conversations with our partners back in 2024. Together, we identified that schools would benefit from more support to:

> Understand child development and common areas of pupil need, like speech and language, motor, and sensory needs.

> Build knowledge in specialist areas like speech and language therapy, occupational therapy and educational psychology. It is not enough for this knowledge to sit with specialists alone; it needs to inform support for teachers and leaders, so it can guide their everyday practice.

We set out to create a shared resource for schools: a framework that builds collective understanding and enables teacher educators to train every teacher in the additional knowledge they need to make their classrooms more inclusive.

Why teachers need additional insights

The Inclusive Teaching Framework builds on the knowledge teachers gain through initial teacher training, early career induction and the national professional qualifications. These programmes have already supported the development of around half the teaching workforce.[1] This has established strong, evidence-informed foundations about how children learn and what makes good teaching.

The programmes also provide a basis for inclusive teaching by focusing on areas like adaptive teaching, the role of working memory, and the importance of positive teacher-pupil relationships.

However, classrooms include an increasingly diverse range of needs, and the government's intentions as set out in the 2026 Schools White Paper are for more children to be educated within mainstream schools.

Teachers therefore need support to connect this foundational knowledge with relevant specialist expertise. The Inclusive Teaching Framework aims to make this connection by bringing together core principles of effective teaching with carefully selected specialist knowledge. For example, a core principle of teachers' early training is the importance of effective feedback in supporting learning. The Inclusive Teaching Framework connects this principle to speech and language development – highlighting research that shows that teachers' everyday conversations with pupils can provide informal feedback to develop children's language and talk.

By strengthening everyday teaching for all pupils, we believe more children will be supported to achieve and thrive at school. Equipping teachers to meet pupils' needs early can also reduce the risk of needs escalating and gives schools the best chance to support every pupil to succeed.

[1] Since 2021/22 there have been 76,000 early career teachers, 67,000 early career framework mentors, and 107,000 unique participants in national professional qualifications, totalling approximately 250,000 having engaged in these national professional development programmes, out of a workforce of 510,000 in 2023/24.

What is in the Inclusive Teaching Framework

The Inclusive Teaching Framework brings together knowledge from specialist fields and connects it to what the sector already knows about high quality teaching. We have organised this knowledge in the way we believe is most likely to support teachers and leaders: by different areas of pupils' needs.

The framework includes five areas of pupil need, which cover a broad range of pupils' experience at school:

1. Speech and language: How children's language and talk emerge through development.
2. Sensory: How children experience and perceive the world around them – from balance to touch.
3. Motor: How children develop, move and express themselves physically.
4. Executive function: How children think and process information.
5. Social and emotional development: How children experience their social world and their feelings.

For each area, we share insights drawn from evidence and from specialists. Each insight is supported by an explanation to aid understanding, plus a list of references.

Why we take a needs-based approach

Every pupil has needs and these can change over time for many reasons, and in different ways. For example, some pupils might need additional support to understand and manage their emotions, while others might find it much easier to concentrate in a classroom with less visual information.

Teachers and leaders should be equipped with the skills and knowledge to anticipate, notice and respond to the underlying needs of their pupils. A needs-based approach to their professional learning has a number of advantages:

> It supports every pupil and helps teachers and leaders to understand the underlying needs that might underpin common diagnoses they see in the classroom, like autism, ADHD or dyslexia.

> If teachers and leaders can anticipate and notice pupils' needs early, they are more likely to catch them in good time and before things escalate.

> If teachers and leaders can identify where pupils have the same needs, they can address them at the same time. For example, knowledge of working memory helps educators to meet the needs of pupils with dyslexia and pupils with dyspraxia, while also benefiting all children in the classroom.

In using pupils' needs as the organising principle for the framework, it is not our intention to downplay the importance of diagnoses. Teachers and leaders should be familiar with common diagnoses and be able to respond confidently and reassuringly when parents/carers ask for help with something with which their child has been diagnosed. We believe that a needs-based approach to professional learning is the most effective way to help teachers support all pupils, including pupils with complex needs who may or may not reach the threshold for diagnosis.

Ideas for using this framework

The Inclusive Teaching Framework is designed to provide a shared language and structure for understanding the pupil needs likely to be seen in mainstream classrooms.

We envisage it being used by teacher educators and leaders in schools, colleges, trusts, local authorities and teaching school hubs to help develop evidence-informed professional development on inclusive teaching. They can read and reflect on the framework in several ways, for example:

> An inclusion lead using it to establish shared language and concepts around inclusive teaching.

> A senior leader using it to identify knowledge gaps among staff and to design or procure training to fill those gaps.

> A professional development lead across a group of schools using it to design a staff training programme.

> A professional development provider using the structure as the basis for an inclusive teaching programme.

We believe these types of approaches offer stronger support for teachers and inclusive teaching, rather than expecting teachers to apply the framework to their own practice independently.

These are suggestions for use, and we are interested to know how it is being used and to receive any feedback. Ultimately, we are keen to share these insights to enable teacher educators everywhere to equip teachers with the knowledge and strategies they need to support all pupils to succeed.

Link with government policy

The 2026 Schools White Paper and SEND consultation outlined the government's policy direction for education.

The proposed reforms focus on making mainstream education more inclusive and reflect the growing demand across the sector for additional support and access to specialist knowledge. They include:

1. Identifying areas of child development in which the government wants educators to build their knowledge, with the aim of creating a shared language for supporting pupils.
2. Introducing new professional development on SEND and inclusion for all staff in schools, early years settings and colleges, which will draw on these areas of child development.
3. Building the evidence base for SEND, using these areas as an organising structure.
4. Introducing Experts at Hand, which gives schools access to a dedicated allocation of specialists, such as educational psychologists, occupational therapists, speech and language therapists and others.

We hope the Inclusive Teaching Framework provides a useful contribution as the sector works through these reforms, and can support teacher educators to:

1. Understand the key insights teachers need to know across different areas of child development.
2. Develop evidence-informed professional development on inclusive teaching.
3. Use the best available evidence to support teachers, as the evidence base continues to evolve and grow.
4. Help put Experts at Hand into practice. The framework can provide a shared language for specialists, teachers and school leaders. This could strengthen collaboration between schools and experts, and bridge specialist and educational knowledge.

About our methodology

We worked in close partnership with specialist individuals and organisations to develop the Inclusive Teaching Framework. Together, we have reviewed the best available evidence to distil the additional insights teachers need to adapt their practice and meet a wider range of needs in the classroom.

It is challenging to establish an evidence base in this area. The research sits across several disciplines with overlapping ideas, and is not always linked to what the education sector already knows about high quality teaching. Different specialist areas may also define evidence-informed decisions in different ways, which can make it harder to navigate the research.

For this framework, we filtered evidence using clear criteria: insights had to build on well-established concepts, be supported across multiple high quality studies where possible, align with existing education frameworks, and be relevant to mainstream classroom practice. We intend to refine the framework over time as the evidence base continues to develop.

The full methodology at the end of this document has more information about our approach.

Speech and language

Ambition Institute

in partnership with

Speech and Language UK

Summary

Speech and language describe the ways in which children understand and use spoken language to think, learn and relate to others.

This area refers to how children process and make meaning from language (receptive) and how they formulate and share their ideas with others (expressive). Understanding that expressive and receptive language capabilities can differ within the same child can help teachers to understand underlying needs that are both common and easily masked. For example, this could be understanding why some children can express ideas but struggle to understand what a teacher is saying.

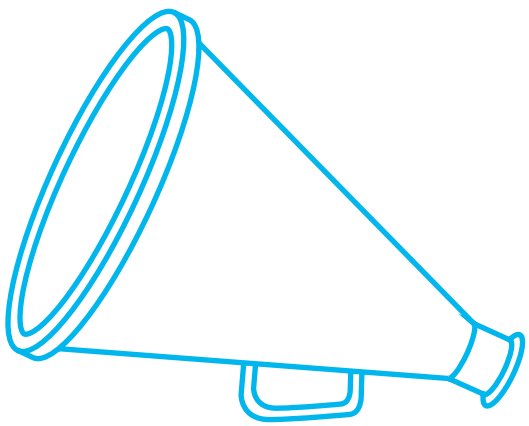
Speech and language play a key role in other aspects of learning and social and emotional interaction, which means that challenges with expressive or receptive language can also influence difficulties in reading or with mental health.

Understanding this area can help teachers recognise that everyday opportunities for talk, questioning, and visuals are also universal supports that influence speech and language development for all pupils. For example, structured, meaningful opportunities for classroom talk, and everyday adult-child interactions (such as prompts and cues) provide the practice and feedback that accelerates expressive and receptive language development.

This knowledge of speech and language can help teachers understand how well-chosen visual cues (such as gestures, symbols and diagrams) can temporarily ease auditory processing demands, providing a stable reference that supports understanding while language develops.

This area considers how the curriculum itself can be used to catalyse language development by providing structured opportunities to practise using complex vocabulary and sentence structures in both spoken and written forms. Finally, this area helps teachers to understand how speech and language develop, integrate early intervention opportunities, and anticipate opportunities for interaction and practice that are central to children's development.

We are indebted to the work and guidance of Stephen Parsons, Anna Branagan, Emma Jones and Laura Brown in the production of these insights.



Underpinning ideas

Expressive and receptive language are different

Expressive language (how we communicate our thinking) and receptive language (how we understand others) are different. This means we can find one harder than the other.

We learn language at different rates

Practice with language can affect the speed that language develops. Good quality, structured and meaningful conversations can advance language development.

1. Visual cues can help overcome receptive language challenges
2. Carefully phrasing questions and explanations can make learning easier
3. Classroom talk can help develop expressive and receptive language skills
4. The curriculum can act as a lever for speech and language development
5. Everyday teacher-child conversations can support speech and language development

Key insights

1 Visual cues can help overcome receptive language challenges

Combining speech with visuals (the modality effect) can improve comprehension for all learners, especially those who find it hard to process language by listening alone. While written words are visible, reading also relies on language skills.

Visual cues – such as pictures, symbols, gestures or objects – can help children who experience challenges with receptive language. They can aid understanding of what is said for two reasons. First, spoken language is fleeting; visual cues provide a stable reference point to help make sense of what they hear. Second, children hold and process visual information differently. Integrating these cues alongside spoken language can support their understanding of what has been said.

2 Carefully phrasing questions and explanations can make learning easier

The way teachers phrase questions and explanations affects how children process and understand spoken information. When language is complex, for example using unfamiliar words, intricate sentence structures or idioms, it is harder to make sense of what is being said. This can affect how children try to respond to a question or the extent to which they can understand an explanation.

Using simple sentence structures, avoiding complex grammar or idioms, and allowing more time for children to process information helps all pupils, especially those who experience greater challenges with attention, working memory or receptive language.

3 Classroom talk can help develop expressive and receptive language skills

Children become better at understanding others (receptive language) and communicating their thoughts and emotions (expressive language) through practice. Classroom talk benefits all children, especially those who find language challenging, providing opportunities for practice which reinforces any targeted support within everyday learning.

Regular, structured classroom talk gives children opportunities to practise understanding, such as tracking conversations, clarifying meaning, and forming and expressing ideas clearly. Teachers can plan meaningful classroom talk by linking it to curriculum content. This provides valuable support for both language development and content learning, making classroom talk a powerful tool for building communication skills.

4 The curriculum can act as a lever for speech and language development

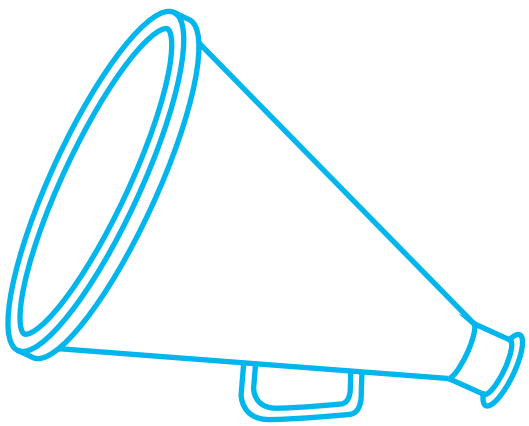
Children need opportunities to develop expressive language. The curriculum offers these naturally, with subject content providing rich vocabulary, complex sentence patterns and varied forms of communication, such as explanation, argument and narrative.

Using the language within subject curricula helps children build expressive and receptive language skills. For example, subject-specific words in maths and science, and stories or arguments in history and literature, encourage children to use complex language with a wide variety of sounds and meanings that can support broader speech development. Written texts further expose children to sophisticated vocabulary and structures, supporting overall language growth.

5 Everyday teacher-child conversations can support speech and language development

Children need regular chances to hear, practise and develop their understanding and use of language in everyday contexts. This supports both expressive and receptive language across all age groups and can complement targeted interventions.

Teachers can provide these opportunities through everyday conversations. This might be in lessons or more informal moments. Similarly, teachers can provide informal feedback during interactions with children. These exchanges can lower the stakes and encourage further interaction. Everyday conversation should respect and build on pupils' existing capabilities and varieties of talk, rather than presenting it as right or wrong.



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Sensory

Ambition Institute

in partnership with

Royal College of Occupational Therapists

Summary

This area considers how children experience their environment (the world around them) through their senses. In addition to sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell, the senses include proprioception (awareness of the body in space, derived from muscles, ligaments and joints) and the vestibular sense (balance, derived from the inner ear).

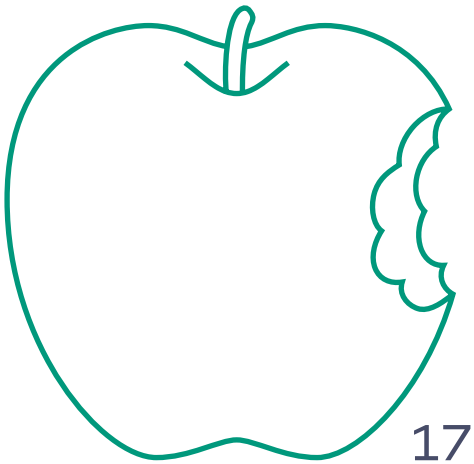
Everyone experiences the environment differently through their senses. These differences can include hypersensitivity (experiencing input more strongly) or hyposensitivity (less easily). Some children are more sensitive to certain inputs or seek them out; others miss or filter them. Environments affect learning because the sensory information they provide influences a child's ability to focus on and process information.

Understanding sensory needs helps teachers to identify the impact of unnecessary or unhelpful sensory information, such as cluttered visuals, background noise or distracting lighting. Sensory information is crucial for coordinating the movement and precise actions required in all subjects (such as using a ruler, manipulating science equipment, or writing by hand).

Understanding how differences in noticing and interpreting sensory information can affect children's experience and actions can help teachers to respond and adapt. In addition, knowledge of this area can help teachers understand how differences in how children experience sensory information can produce strong reactions, frustration, or avoidance of activities (like noisy spaces or messy play).

Finally, this area explores how providing scaffolding and supported opportunities for practice over time can help children develop their underlying sensory responses.

We are indebted to the work and guidance of Anele Griessel, Dr Sally Payne and Alison Double in the production of these insights.



Underpinning ideas

We have more than five senses

There is debate about exactly how many senses human beings have, but there is broad agreement about many of them, including sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell, awareness of our body in space (proprioception), and balance (vestibular sense).

We each experience our environment differently through our senses

How we experience our environment is affected by our ability to notice and interpret sensory information, need for predictability, how our brain responds to sensory input, and our skill in managing our exposure to sensory information. Some people experience one or more forms of sensory information more strongly (hypersensitive) or less easily (hyposensitive).

Sensory experience is influenced by many factors

We all respond differently to sensory information. This is influenced by many factors, including how we receive and process sensory information, personal preferences, our emotional state, fatigue, previous experiences, and our broader development. This means that we can experience the same environment differently, potentially affecting how we feel, act and learn. All these factors interact with each other, making it hard to predict the consequences of actions.

1 Sensory environments matter, so predicable, simple environments can support learning

2 Senses enable precise, coordinated actions, and targeted practice helps build these skills

3 Scaffolding and practice can support sensory needs

4 Understanding sensory differences helps teachers better interpret and support children's behaviours and interactions with others

5 Trusted adults can help support every child in the classroom to manage the interplay between senses and emotion

Key insights

1 Sensory environments matter, so predicable, simple environments can support learning

Children's learning is shaped by the sensory environment – the mix of sights, smells, sounds, heat and light present in a space. The sensory environment and its predictability affects how effectively children can engage, allocate attention and process information.

Limited attention and working memory can make it challenging to ignore background sensory stimuli. This can make it harder for children to notice and respond to what matters in the classroom.

Simplifying sensory environments can support learning for all children, including those who experience sensory information more strongly.

2 Senses enable precise, coordinated actions, and targeted practice helps build these skills

Children need to notice and interpret sensory information to carry out precise, coordinated actions in school, such as writing, using equipment and moving around the classroom.

These actions depend not only on sight and touch, but also on their awareness of body position (proprioception) and balance (vestibular sense).

Differences in how children notice and interpret sensory information can affect their ability to judge force, maintain grip and move accurately. For example, children may find everyday tasks like using a tool in technology or moving in PE more challenging. This can influence their confidence and motivation over time.

Children can benefit from support and time focused on the specific skill being learned (such as writing by hand), rather than general motor activities.

3 Scaffolding and practice can support sensory needs

How children process and respond to sensory information can be developed through practice and scaffolding.

Temporary support (scaffolding) can help children manage sensory responses while sensory regulation develops. For example, a child might sometimes use noise-cancelling headphones for a time-limited, specific situation (like unpredictable or unexpected noise) as part of a broader desensitisation strategy.

Providing practice involves working in partnership with parents/carers and the school SENCO. This might involve helping children understand and manage their gradual exposure to sensory input over time. Practising like this can help children build confidence and learn strategies for self-regulation.

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4 Understanding sensory differences helps teachers better interpret and support children's behaviours and interactions with others

Differences in how children experience information from their senses can affect how they move, maintain personal space and interact with others. For example, differences in proprioception (awareness of body position) might influence a child's spatial awareness, contributing to them bumping into others or not maintaining personal space. Similarly, differences in vestibular input (balance) might manifest as frequent running or restlessness, which might be misinterpreted as intentional rule-breaking or distraction.

Understanding how children experience sensory information, alongside other factors (like emotional state and social understanding) might help teachers better understand children's actions and how they can be supported.

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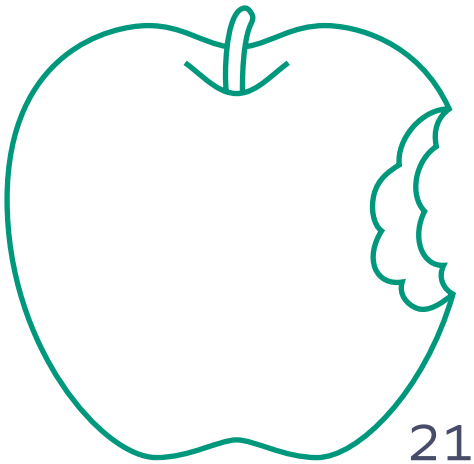
5 Trusted adults can help support every child in the classroom to manage the interplay between senses and emotion

Children's sensory experiences and emotions are intertwined; what they see, hear or feel can affect their emotions, and their emotional state can change how they respond to sensory input.

Differences in how children experience sensory information, such as heightened or reduced sensitivity, can affect emotional reactions and self-regulation. These responses can be affected by factors like mood, context or fatigue. For example, a buzzing and bright light might cause greater frustration or distraction if a child is already upset or tired.

Over time, children can become more used to sensory stimuli and be supported to develop strategies to manage their emotions. Explicit support from trusted adults often plays a role in helping them build these skills.



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Motor

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Summary

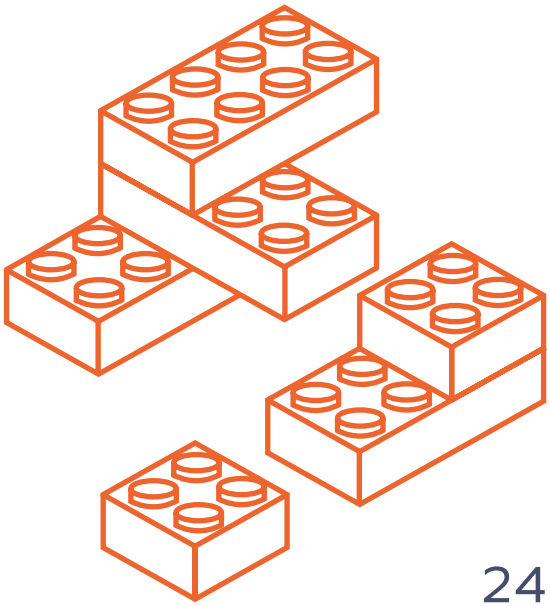
Motor skills involve the planning, control and coordination of the body's muscles to perform tasks – from whole-body movement to fine hand control.

This area includes children's gross motor skills (posture, balance, whole-body control and large movements) and fine motor skills (precise hand and finger movements) and how they interact to produce movement. For example, fine motor skills rely on the core strength and control provided by larger muscles (like those in the shoulder, forearm and torso), as well as sensory feedback and cognitive processes like planning, sequencing movements and maintaining attention.

Developing fine motor skills enables tasks such as writing to become more automatic and take less effort. This means children can think about the content they are learning. Understanding how motor skills develop and can affect learning helps teachers to better understand children's needs and actions. For example, a child who does not sit up straight may be finding this difficult or tiring due to a lack of core strength.

This knowledge can help teachers to understand how to support children to develop their motor skills. For example, this could be through explicit modelling, task-specific practice (breaking skills into parts), and considering when to pair classroom scaffolds with targeted input to help children to access learning.

We are indebted to the work and guidance of Anele Griessel, Dr Sally Payne and Alistair Crawford in the production of these insights.



Underpinning ideas

Actions require us to combine different types of motor skills

Motor skills involve the coordination and control of the body's muscles to perform a task. These skills can be divided into two broad groups:

- Gross motor skills (such as waving a hand) use larger muscle groups.
- Fine motor skills (such as buttoning a shirt) use smaller muscles.

Many physical actions involve a combination of fine and gross motor skills. For example, writing by hand requires both gross (movements in the shoulder and elbow) and fine motor skills (precise movement of the hand).

Motor skills facilitate learning

Writing and drawing both rely on fine motor skills, as well as cognitive processes like planning, sequencing movements and maintaining attention. When we develop fine motor skills, we can perform tasks such as writing and drawing more automatically. This reduces the mental effort needed for each movement, freeing up attention for learning and thinking. Improving motor skills can support some cognitive processes and vice versa.

1 Supporting and building core strength and posture enables precise movement such as writing

2 Fine motor skills for everyday tasks build on multiple components. Focusing on specific, small steps supports children to learn and build those skills

3 Practice can help all children to perform motor skills more easily and with less effort

Key insights

1 Supporting and building core strength and posture enables precise movement such as writing

Children need core strength and postural control for learning and everyday classroom activities. Muscles in the torso, lower back, pelvis and hips provide stability for balance and posture, which in turn support fine motor skills like writing, drawing and using tools.

Without enough core and upper body strength, children may struggle to sit upright or use their hands effectively. This can affect participation and may be mistaken for inattention. Stable posture also supports attention, as discomfort or fatigue from instability can make it harder to focus.

Most children can improve core and upper body strength through regular practice and exercise, which helps develop better postural control and fine motor precision. If specialists recommend core strength development, this should be paired with targeted support for the specific learning task. For example, if a pupil struggles with writing by hand, they should receive writing by hand instruction alongside core strength activities.

2 Fine motor skills for everyday tasks build on multiple components. Focusing on specific, small steps supports children to learn and build those skills

Many activities vital for learning, such as handwriting, copying shapes, and manual work in art or design technology, rely on fine motor skills. These skills depend on several components:

> Stable posture, supported by larger muscles in the core and shoulder.

> Control and dexterity of the small hand muscles for precise movements.

> Sensory information, like sight and touch, combined with motor control to coordinate actions.

Typically, gross motor skills develop before fine motor skills, and children develop at different speeds. Difficulties with fine motor skills can have several causes. These include challenges with planning and control of movement, responding to sensory information, and executive functions such as planning and working memory.

Teachers can support children by focusing on specific skills, breaking actions into smaller steps, providing models and offering opportunities to practise.

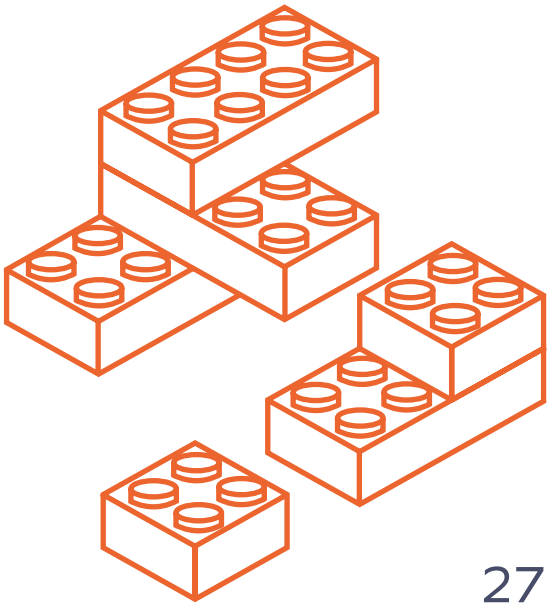
3 Practice can help all children to perform motor skills more easily and with less effort

Children need practice and support to develop motor skills, including those that involve coordinating movements on both sides of the body or require careful planning and sequencing. While some motor skills may develop through everyday experience, others – such as cutting with scissors, using a ruler, or accurate ball skills – often require explicit guidance, targeted practice and feedback.

Some children may need more support to master certain skills, including those that their peers appear to develop organically.

Children rely on underlying motor skills for learning, and when these skills are still developing, they may need to use more attention and working memory. This can make learning academic content more challenging.

Children develop motor skills more effectively through targeted, task-specific practice than through general motor exercises. All children benefit from supported practice, even if the amount and type of support needed varies from child to child. Breaking down skills into smaller steps, practising them in varied contexts, and focusing on specific components helps children build confidence and learn to perform tasks automatically.



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Executive function

Ambition Institute

in partnership with

National Association of Principal Educational Psychologists

Summary

Executive functions are the mental processes involved in managing thoughts, behaviours and emotions to achieve goals.

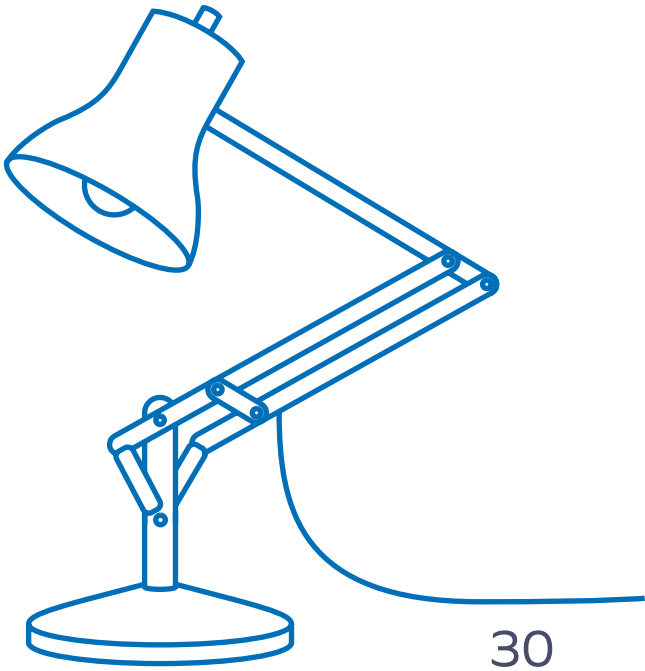
This area supports teachers to understand the core executive functions: working memory (holding information in mind and manipulating it); inhibitory control (avoiding automatic responses and managing distractions); and cognitive flexibility (switching attention, strategy or perspective). These underpin higher-order functions such as planning and organisation.

Understanding this area can help teachers recognise that core executive functions continue to develop into adulthood, and how they can affect learning and wider experience of school. The use and development of executive functions can vary widely between children, across tasks, and according to the environment. Executive functions can be developed in specific contexts through modelling, practice and feedback. Children's ability to use executive functions is affected by sleep, stress and the predictability of the environment.

This knowledge can help teachers to anticipate and respond to differences that emerge, and adapt their classroom activity and structures to support underlying needs in this area.

Executive function interconnects with sensory, motor, and speech and language processes. For example, attention and self-regulation can support comprehension and participation.

We are indebted to the work and guidance of Sarah Cottinghatt, Dr Pippa Busch and Dr Sue Franklin in the production of these insights.



Underpinning ideas

Executive functions enable success

Managing attention, planning and managing time enable us to orchestrate our thoughts, behaviours and emotion toward our goals. These higher-order executive functions are often considered to be made up of three core executive functions in combination:

- Working memory involves holding information in mind and manipulating it.
- Inhibitory control enables us to ignore distractions and resist unwanted responses.
- Cognitive flexibility allows us to switch between ideas or approaches.

Everyone's ability to use executive functions varies

Executive functions start developing in early childhood and continue into adulthood. We develop these skills at different rates, shaped by the support and guidance we receive. We all find certain aspects of executive function easier or harder, such as resisting temptations or seeing things from another perspective. This can change depending on factors like age, energy, emotions, motivation and environment. For example, it is often easier to resist snacking when we feel well-rested.

1. Supporting inhibitory control can help manage attention
2. Working memory can act as a bottleneck for learning
3. Scaffolding can support cognitive flexibility, enabling shifts in attention or perspectives
4. Planning and organisation are learned not innate
5. Secure, predictable environments, sleep and fitness support executive functions

Key insights

1 Supporting inhibitory control can help manage attention

Children's ability to manage attention depends on inhibitory control, a core executive function that allows them to ignore distractions, resist impulses and choose appropriate responses. Inhibitory control works with working memory and cognitive flexibility to support children to direct, sustain and switch attention as needed.

Inhibitory control develops gradually over time through many specific situations and varies across contexts and ages. The environment is important in enabling inhibitory control and its development – from rules and relationships with adults, to how tasks are set up to reduce distractions.

Teachers and schools can support this by scaffolding tasks in ways that reduce distraction and establishing rules, routines and interactions to support practice over time.

2 Working memory can act as a bottleneck for learning

Learning requires children to hold information in their working memory. However, working memory capacity is very limited, so it acts as a bottleneck, restricting how much new information can be processed at once. When working memory is overloaded, children may struggle to follow instructions, grasp new concepts, or appear distracted.

Children process language (spoken or written words) and visual information (such as images and diagrams) separately in working memory. When too much information is presented in one form, or when spoken and visual information conflict, children may find it harder to understand.

How much language or visual information a child can hold in their working memory is influenced by their age, attention, self-control and prior knowledge. This insight can help teachers to connect new learning to prior knowledge, introduce new information gradually, and align language with visual information.

3 Scaffolding can support cognitive flexibility enabling shifts in attention or perspectives

Children use cognitive flexibility to vary their thinking and behaviour according to different contexts. It helps them to cope with change, shift attention or consider different points of view.

Cognitive flexibility develops throughout childhood and relies on working memory and inhibitory control.

Cognitive flexibility varies according to the individual and the environment. For example, stress and fatigue can affect flexibility.

Critically, cognitive flexibility appears to be tied to specific contexts and situations rather than as an overarching trait. For example, children might show greater flexibility in situations where they have had prior practice or more opportunities to practice.

All children can be supported to demonstrate cognitive flexibility through the scaffolds that adults put in place. This includes providing advance warning before changes in routine or modelling the thought process required to take on board other perspectives, with opportunities for practice and feedback.

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4 Planning and organisation are learned not innate

Planning and organisation are important for learning. Children need them to manage their learning, for example, when organising an essay, deciding how to use blocks to build a tower, or designing an experiment.

Although some of this development happens through experience, children also need explicit support such as modelling, feedback, and reinforcement. This involves practice in specific contexts as planning and organisation are not generic skills.

Children rely on core executive functions when planning and organising. These include holding ideas in working memory, avoiding distractions (inhibitory control) and considering different options (cognitive flexibility).

Knowing this helps teachers recognise and respond when children struggle with planning and organisation. For example, responses might include reorganising information, using scaffolds such as visual reminders, or giving children time to talk through and refine their plans.

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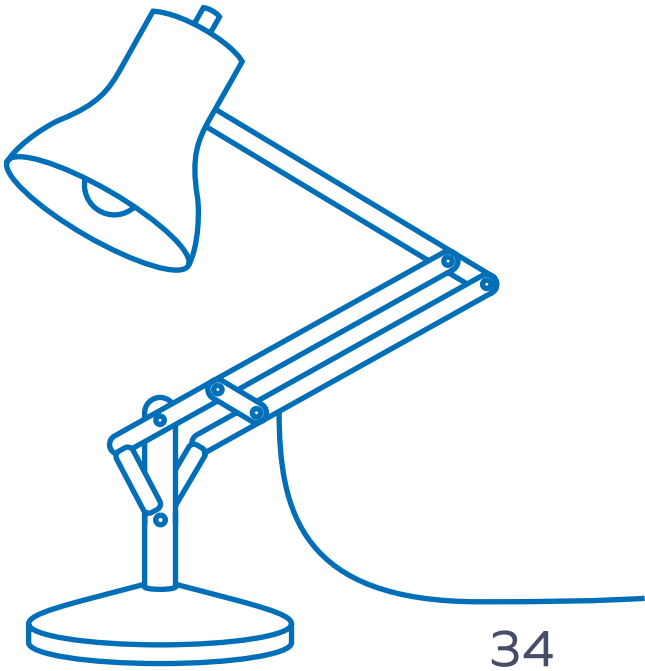
5 Secure, predictable environments, sleep and fitness support executive functions

How well children can manage attention and plan and enact self-control at school is influenced by their environment, emotional state, sleep and physical fitness.

Safe, lasting and predictable relationships and routines help children feel secure and reduce emotional reactions that can disrupt executive functioning. When children experience stress, anxiety, or lack of sleep or physical fitness, they can find it harder to focus or remember instructions because attention and working memory are affected.

These everyday factors show that executive functioning is not fixed but closely tied to a child's environment and wellbeing, making support both in and out of school essential.



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Social and emotional development

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The Difference

Summary

This area explores how children understand and manage emotions, build relationships, and navigate social situations as learners and members of the school community. It includes regulation (which links the environment and how children manage emotions, thoughts and behaviours) and how children identify, understand and express emotions in themselves and others.

It also covers social cognition, such as the capacity to recognise that others may have different thoughts and feelings (Theory of Mind), which is central to navigating social interactions. These components set the backdrop for learning and wider school development. However, they continue to develop well into adulthood.

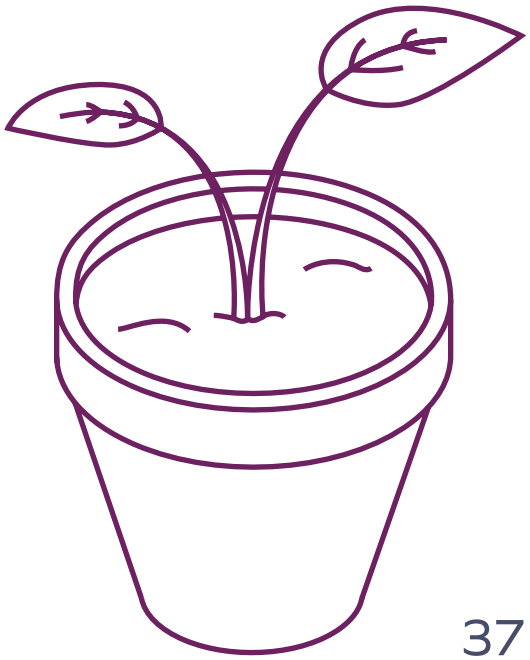
Understanding how the environment can affect and support development is critical. Maintaining curiosity about the reasons behind a child's actions can help teachers to notice patterns and triggers, enabling adaptive responses aimed at the underlying need. Adult-child interactions, predictable routines and supporting language development create the conditions for safety and engagement.

Understanding the social and emotional demands that the classroom carries – such as being evaluated, collaborating and coping with frustration – helps teachers to anticipate and support children during challenge.

Finally, the interactions, systems and structures of the school and teachers provide an essential scaffold for self-regulation to happen and develop. This is co-regulation.

This area overlaps with speech, language and communication (expressing and discussing feelings) and with executive functions (attention and control), yet is distinct in its primary focus on emotion, relationships and social participation.

We are indebted to the work and guidance of Dr Pippa Busch and Rose Webb in the production of these insights.



Underpinning ideas

Social and emotional development continues into adulthood

Skills like self-regulation, recognising emotions and managing relationships take time to build, and these continue to develop throughout our lives. This means children may be earlier in their development than we expect and may have gaps in their social and emotional learning. They may need extra support to meet the expectations of school life.

Learning is an emotional and social process

Learning involves taking risks, building relationships and coping with setbacks. These experiences can trigger many emotions, and place demands on our emotional regulation and social skills. Classrooms, schools and homes are diverse spaces with a wide range of norms and expectations. Children may require support navigating these differences. The extent to which the school environment helps children feel safe and secure, both socially and emotionally, will shape how much they benefit from teaching.

The environment is linked to social and emotional interactions

How we express and regulate emotions and interact socially are closely linked to our environment. Behaviours and relationships are influenced by what others feel (their emotional state), say and do, as well as the expectations set. The way adults respond and relate to children can affect if, how and when children share feelings and can regulate.

1. Maintaining curiosity about behaviour(s) helps understand needs
2. Co-regulation precedes self-regulation
3. The environment can support social interaction
4. Language supports children to express and understand emotion
5. Teachers can help children manage the emotional and social charge of the classroom

Key insights

1 Maintaining curiosity about behaviour(s) helps understand needs

Children's behaviour is often influenced by the interaction between their environment and their underlying emotional, cognitive or social needs, especially when language or self-regulation skills are still developing. Actions like calling out, withdrawing or struggling with tasks can be shaped by a mix of individual factors and environmental influences. These include relationships, routines, the child's previous experiences, noise and peer dynamics.

By remaining curious about reasons and needs behind behaviour, teachers can identify interactions, patterns and environmental triggers to better understand the developmental needs driving children's actions.

2 Co-regulation precedes self-regulation

Managing emotions, thoughts and behaviours (known as self-regulation) is important in school. Self-regulation continues to develop into adulthood, so it is likely to be a challenge for most pupils, especially when learning, or navigating peer relationships.

Adults, relationships and the school environment play a crucial role in helping children to continually develop self-regulation, through co-regulation. This is when adults guide children's emotions through responsive support. Predictable, proportionate responses, modelling calmness and teaching structured routines are all acts of co-regulation. With proactive, consistent support, children can lean on adults' guidance and stability while learning to manage their emotions independently.

3 The environment can support social interaction

Sharing, resolving disagreements, and cooperating in groups are complex social skills that are key to school life. To develop these, children rely on language, executive functions such as inhibitory control, and understanding abstract social cues (such as tone of voice or expressions).

These skills also depend on children being able to recognise and anticipate that others may think or feel differently, a skill known as Theory of Mind. This develops throughout childhood and is important for building positive relationships and behaviours like helping and cooperation.

Children's social understanding is not fixed; it develops with experience. Teachers can create an environment which supports all children with social interaction, for example by structuring group or paired activities, or providing explicit support in understanding themselves and each other, their feelings and points of view.

4 Language supports children to express and understand emotion

Recognising, describing and sharing emotions (often described as emotional literacy) helps children regulate their feelings, reflect and communicate. The small and intentional steps adults take, such as explicitly teaching children to identify emotions within specific contexts, supports self-regulation and enables them to communicate their feelings and needs. The adult-child relationship and classroom environment can help children feel safe and can provide space for validating and discussing feelings.

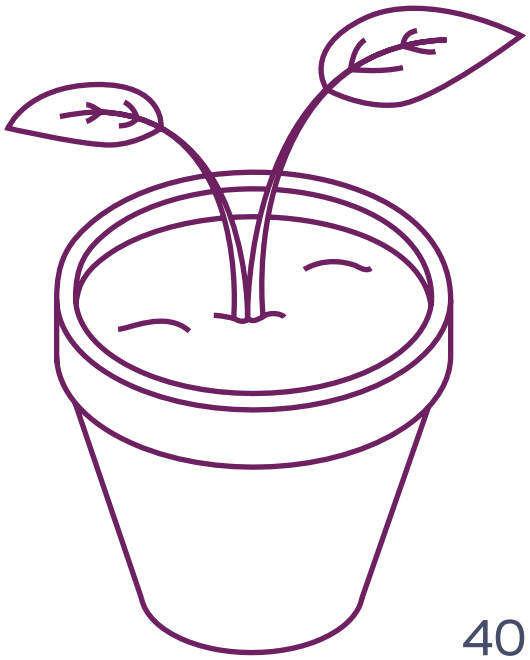
Emotional literacy is tightly linked to speech and language development, and difficulties with language can increase the risk of social-emotional challenges. Using approaches that explicitly support language development can therefore help children build emotional literacy and wider wellbeing.

5 Teachers can help children manage the emotional and social charge of the classroom

Every classroom activity places emotional and social demands on children, which can affect learning by occupying attention, memory and motivation.

Emotions shape what children attend to, their motivation and how well they remember information. Intense emotions like fear or anger can overload working memory and impair learning. Social demands, like following norms or working with others, can also require children to use executive functions, and can be challenging if they feel threatening.

Understanding how this influences learning and how children experience these demands can help teachers to anticipate and respond to different needs. This might include intentionally designing the interactions and routines that help children feel safe, supported and able to succeed.



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Methodgy

When selecting which insights to include in the Inclusive Teaching Framework, we focused on what would make the most difference in the classroom.

It was difficult to select these insights for reasons including:

1. Research populations: Often groups of children that demonstrate a wider, more complex set of needs are under-researched or not included in studies on the effectiveness of education interventions.
2. In-group difference: Within any group, whether it be a SEND primary area of need or a diagnostic category, there will be differences between pupils within the group. This makes it harder to draw definitive generalisable conclusions about what is likely to support pupils with these needs.
3. Consensus: There is also a lack of consensus about what SEND means, and how it is used in education: a child with the same profile of need may be identified with SEND in one school but not in another.

With these challenges in mind, we developed the Inclusive Teaching Framework using the following principles:

Principle one: Partner with specialists

The framework is the result of partnership with specialist practitioners and organisations, including occupational therapists, speech and language therapists, educational psychologists and specialist teachers. The organisations involved were:

> National Association of Principal Educational Psychologists

> Royal College of Occupational Therapists

> Speech and Language UK

> The Difference

We drew on specialists' expertise to make professional judgements about which knowledge meets high standards of evidence and will have the greatest impact. We combined this with our experience as a national provider of professional development, and our understanding of the evidence standard needed in education frameworks. We also brought our expertise about what a teacher needs to know in order to adapt practice and what is manageable for them to learn.

Principle two: Thorough research

When working with the evidence base in each area, we used some key filters to identify the knowledge most appropriate for this framework.

Evidence filter: Does it build on well-established concepts?
We interrogated whether insights rest on long-standing, well-defined mechanisms and constructs within the domain. For example, working memory, fine and gross motor skills, and inhibition control are well-established constructs to understand how people learn and interact with the world.

Evidence filter: Can the insight can be substantiated across multiple, high quality studies?
Working with our partners, we checked that the insights were evidenced within peer-reviewed academic literature and that they aligned with existing frameworks, such as the initial teacher training and early career framework.

We have drawn on evidence from, for example:

> Established large-scale studies, where possible, repeated over time.

> Systematic reviews or meta-analyses.

> Smaller studies, where findings converge or highlight potential or emerging trends.

We focused on constructs which are:

1. Used consistently across the domain, supported by evidence across multiple sources, and follow the methodological expectations within the domain.
2. Nuanced, such as where researchers have explicitly recognised that their findings are relevant to specific age groups, contexts or needs.

We chose not to prioritise insights and evidence when:

1. They were limited to an individual theory and could not be supported beyond the original text.
2. The underpinning construct and/or evidence was not widely recognised or reliable in the field, either because it could not be repeated elsewhere, or because strong counterevidence raised doubts about its reliability.

Evidence filter: Is it relevant to mainstream settings?
We have sought research that establishes how each insight and its underlying ideas have been applied in universal, mainstream provision – and research that supports scalable actions appropriate to a mainstream context. Where relevant, we have ensured that ideas work within culturally diverse classrooms.

Evidence filter: Does it align with principles of high quality teaching?
We have checked that each insight aligns with core principles of high quality instruction and learning, such as those in the national professional development frameworks. For example, one principle is that teaching and support are most effective in context. Another is that there are known and reliable instructional approaches – such as modelling, reducing cognitive load, and explicit instruction – that can benefit all novice learners as they acquire new knowledge and skills.

Principle three: Focus on knowledge likely to make the biggest difference

The framework focuses on knowledge and insights, rather than a toolkit of strategies. Ultimately, it is the knowledge that underpins strategies that will enable teachers and school leaders to cut through the noise and build expertise.

We prioritised insights that build on teachers and leaders' prior knowledge. We felt this was important to ensure that any training based on this framework would be manageable for teachers to implement. The goal is to enable teachers to feel more confident and empowered when they make decisions about how to support the pupils in their classroom.

The framework identifies the insights with the most robust evidence base that we hope will have the most impact for children across the school age range.

Principle four: A starting point

We developed the knowledge base underpinning this framework with care and thought, and tested the presentation with over a hundred specialists, teachers and leaders. However, we know it cannot be a finished product, and that the evidence base will continue to evolve and grow.

The framework is intended as a starting point for teacher educators, enabling them to make thoughtful decisions about how best to equip teachers to adapt their practice and better support pupils who face barriers to learning. It does not attempt to cover all aspects of inclusion in schools and should be used alongside wider resources that are available to support inclusive practice, including but not limited to the Equality Act and guidance from the Education Endowment Foundation.

About the authors

Dr Neil Gilbride CPsychol is the lead author of the Inclusive Teaching Framework. Neil works at Ambition Institute. His work in inclusion and decision making in education and schools stretches over 20 years across practice, leadership, research and professional development. He is also an Honorary Senior Research Fellow at the University of Worcester and a Chartered Psychologist of the British Psychological Society.

John Jackson is a Fellow at Ambition Institute and co-author of the Inclusive Teaching Framework. He has over ten years of expertise mobilising evidence from research to support teachers to develop their practice across different career stages. He has held a variety of roles in education, as a maths teacher, school leader and learning designer. He is currently writing a book about using evidence to guide decision-making in maths teaching.

With thanks to the organisations who have partnered with us on the Inclusive Teaching Framework

Speech and Language UK

Royal College of Occupational Therapists

National Association of Principal Educational Psychologists

The Difference

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Throughout the process, we have been supported by an editorial team within Ambition Institute who have worked tirelessly to produce these insights. We are grateful to Dr Anne Heavey, Katy Patten, Lee Robertson and Katie McHugh for their persistence, work, boundless energy and confidence in this project.

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We are indebted to the individuals and organisations who have worked tirelessly with us in deep partnership to develop these insights. These include Dr Sally Payne and colleagues from the Royal College of Occupational Therapists; Carol Payne, Kay Underwood and colleagues from Speech and Language UK; Dr Sue Franklin and colleagues from the National Association of Principal Educational Psychologists; and Jamie Rogers and colleagues from The Difference.

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Share your feedback on the Inclusive Teaching Framework

We want to know what you think about the Inclusive Teaching Framework, and how you use it. We are also developing resources and programme ideas that support the sector to understand and apply these insights. In addition, we have designed this document in line with guidance on print and digital accessibility so that it can be accessible to all. We welcome feedback on accessibility and can provide the document in alternative formats if required.

Contact us at innovation@ambition.org.uk to share your feedback or to discuss how we can support you.

Explore our programmes

Our evidence-informed professional development programmes help teachers and school leaders at every stage of their career to keep getting better. If you would like to find out more about our work visit www.ambition.org.uk

About Ambition Institute

A great teacher changes the future every day. They can be the critical factor in a child's success, especially for those who have had a tough start in life.

At Ambition Institute, we support teachers and school leaders at every stage of their careers, helping them to keep getting better.

We are a charity providing training and professional development based on the most rigorous research and evidence about what really works.

Together, we're shaping the future of education to give every child the best start in life.

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