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SEND Matters

A Vision of Inclusion for Pupils
with Additional Needs



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Des Ricketts-Chu

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**A Vision of Inclusion for Pupils
with Additional Needs**

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Contents

1	Rich and Satisfying Lives	3
2	A Future and a Hope	7
3	A Whole School Approach	11
4	Getting the Foundations Right.....	15
5	Prioritizing Everyone by Prioritizing SEND	19
6	No Outsiders	23
	Notes	27

Special Educational Needs and/or Disability (SEND)

Children with SEND represent an increasing number of pupils in mainstream schools. Individual needs vary greatly and one of the biggest challenges faced by schools today is how to ensure that every child is respected, valued and included in school life. This is exacerbated by a broken education system that asks much but offers little in way of real support, both financial and practical. Despite this, schools must find ways to effectively address the needs of the communities they are called to serve. This booklet outlines the way one Church of England school has sought to address this challenge through an approach rooted in a vision of service and inclusion.

Acknowledgments

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Rich and Satisfying Lives

Jesus valued children. He used their innocence and trusting natures to exemplify the way we should approach God the Father, ‘for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these’ (Luke 18.16). He warned of dire consequences for anyone who did wrong by them.

When children were brought to Jesus, rather than let his disciples shoo them away, he insisted they be allowed to come to him so he could bless them. The gospel writers do not dwell on the details of these children. We must assume they were quite young, given that the Jewish tradition sees thirteen (twelve for girls) as the beginning of adulthood. It is not unreasonable to imagine a group of children whose characteristics and personalities were much like those you would encounter in any primary-school classroom.

Given the world described in the gospel narratives contained those with physical disability and physical and mental illness, it is reasonable to imagine that some of the children Jesus welcomed had similar challenges. Certainly, Jesus was clear that there were no barriers as to who was welcome in his Father’s kingdom. The Parable of the Banquet is insistent that all are welcome, and the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats makes it clear that those who choose to follow him would be exemplified by their service towards the most vulnerable in society. Jesus’ insistence that he had come to give ‘life in all its fullness’ (John 10.10) is a promise for everyone, whatever their circumstances, whatever their condition, whatever their age.

Deeply Christian, Serving the Common Good, the document outlining the Church of England’s *Vision for Education*, highlights John 10.10.¹ When applied to education it is seen as being about:

‘educating the whole person,’ what the *1988 Education Reform Act*...sees as physical and intellectual development united with spiritual, moral, social and cultural development.²

If, like me, biblical language sometimes confuses you, it helps to look at how different translations have sought to clarify some passages. ‘Life in all its fullness’ seems straightforward, but I do like the language the New Living Translation (NLT) of the Bible uses: ‘My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life.’³ It may mean the same thing, but this wording expresses

more clearly my ambition for the children in the communities I have had the privilege to work with. In this book, my intention is to describe how I have sought to enable the children I have worked with utilize tools to lead rich and satisfying lives.

Serving Others

God has given each of you a gift from his great variety of spiritual gifts. Use them well to serve one another. (1 Pet 4.10, NLT)

The Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools (SIAMS) framework asks schools to consider, 'What are we doing here?'⁴ This question of purpose is important for anyone working in education, whether or not they work in a church school setting. As a new teacher, I was fortunate to work for a head who encouraged staff to reflect upon this question at the beginning of every school year, a practice I have adopted. It really does help to have a clear idea of what a school's purpose is, so that the school's vision and values will reflect that objective and, expressed well, thereby support the school's work.

At my current school, we believe our purpose is to serve our community. Who is our community? Whoever comes through our door.

As with many church schools, our children's families are not regular church attenders. Furthermore, our staff hold a range of beliefs and belong to different faiths or adhere to no specific belief system. However, in this context we found that the idea of service was universal. This can be seen through the lens of faith or simply as a way of expressing the desire to give something back to society.

Either way, service to your community—serving others—gives you a perspective that can change the way you look at your role. To serve someone is to see them as having an inherent value; the act of service lifts up the recipient of that service. It is an act of love. In a school context, this love is practical and is expressed through seeking to ensure that all children are treated with dignity and respect and enabled to achieve to the best of their individual capabilities so that they may have rich and satisfying lives.

When considering our purpose, we also looked at what we meant by inclusion, for to serve a community means to serve everyone within that community. Whoever comes through our door must be included equally. We concluded that inclusion must be more than simply allowing a child into your school building. This is relevant for all children but requires a sharper focus when looking at children with special educational needs or disability (SEND). A child who is not actively involved in lessons and wider school activities, who

is constantly attached to an adult or who is in a room separate from their peers full time, is clearly not included in its fullest sense. A child with SEND is not just ‘a SEND pupil’—they are a child like all the others in the school and deserve to be treated as such. Anything less may mean that we have failed to acknowledge them as individuals deserving of dignity and respect.

One Starfish at a Time

As the purpose of this book is to focus on children with additional needs, it is important to point out that I am not, nor ever have been, a teacher, leader or governor involved in specialist provision. My work has always been in mainstream schools or academies. It is the case, however, that children with SEND increasingly form a greater part of every school community. This provides significant challenge—and significant opportunity. The challenge is how to address such a wide range of need with increasingly limited resources and funds; the opportunity is to create a truly inclusive, accepting school community that seeks to help all the children within it to lead rich and satisfying lives.

It is easy—and fully justifiable—to rail against a broken system; however, the needs we must address will not wait until the system is fixed. Desmond Tutu spoke of the imperative to go upstream and find out why people are falling into the river rather than keep on pulling people out downstream. There is certainly an urgent need for organizations and individuals concerned with addressing the requirements of children with additional needs to lobby the government for fair and effective change. Stopping people falling into the river will always be better than pulling them out downstream. That said, in schools the needs of children with SEND must be addressed in the now, not some utopian future. If we believe that all children deserve to have rich and satisfying lives, that is not a hope for the future, it is a hope for now.

There is an urgent need for organizations to lobby the government for fair and effective change

There is the famous story of the man who walked along the beach every day before he started work. One day, after a storm, he saw the beach covered in starfish as far as he could see. In the distance, the man noticed a boy walking towards him. Every so often, the boy bent down to pick something up, throwing it into the sea. When he got closer, the man asked the boy what he was doing. The boy replied that he was throwing starfish into the sea. ‘The tide has washed them onto the beach, and they can’t return to the sea by themselves. In the heat of the day, they will die unless I throw them into the water.’ Bemused, the man replied, ‘There are thousands of starfish on this beach. You won’t be able to make much of a difference.’ Bending down, the boy picked up another starfish and threw it into the water. ‘It made a difference to that one,’ he said.

The boy did what he could with what he had—a strong arm and a desire to make positive change for as many as he could. He was not discouraged by the scale of the challenge. His innocence and trust that even a small difference was important enabled him to make a real difference.

We are fortunate that we are not alone in trying to make a difference. There are approximately 135,000 teachers in Church of England schools alone—and their schools make up only 20% of state-funded schools in England. The potential for making positive change in children's lives is phenomenal. Yes, the challenges are enormous, but so are the opportunities. One starfish at a time.

Questions to Consider

- What does serving your community mean to you?
- Identify three examples of the specific needs of your community.

A Future and a Hope

‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ says the Lord. ‘They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope.’ (Jer 29.11, NLT)

In 2025, the number of children with SEND in England rose to more than 1.7 million. This represents an increase of 5.6% on the previous year and means that 1 in 5 children are getting extra support for additional needs. At my current school, on average, around 23% of our children are on the SEND register. In one year group it is 37%.

Nationally, in the same way, children with SEND are not evenly distributed throughout the system. Economic context plays a part in this. Children with SEND are more likely to be eligible for free school meals. In 2023 / 2024, 38.3% of pupils with SEND support were eligible, compared to 21.4% of their non-SEND peers. In 2016 the Joseph Rowntree Foundation report, *Special Educational needs and their Links to Poverty*, showed that ‘Poverty is both a cause and an effect of SEND.’⁵ Often, children with additional needs experience other challenges which impact their ability to access learning.

Given this context, it is necessary for schools constantly to review their approach to SEND. The report made several recommendations. A key one was that ‘School and early years leaders should prioritize SEND.’ At our school, the prioritizing of SEND began six years ago and continues to be a work in progress. It is a challenging, though incredibly rewarding, exercise.

We have found that a child-centred, truly inclusive approach to SEND was the most effective way of serving our whole community and supporting all children to have rich and satisfying lives. Most significantly, we found that children with SEND who were given greater independence thrived socially, emotionally and academically in ways they had not been able to previously. This also meant that their peers viewed them in a different way. Instead of being separate, these children were now fully included in all areas of the curriculum and in all school events. Yes, there needed to be adaptations; however, the benefits of including children with SEND throughout the life of the school have been overwhelmingly positive. For those leaving our school, in terms

of their social and emotional preparedness for KS3, we are confident that we have given them the best possible chance of success.

The 2014 *SEND Code of Practice* is clear that schools and early years settings

should support children and young people with special educational needs or disabilities to prepare for adult life and help them go on to achieve the best outcomes in employment, independent living, health and community participation.⁶

Clearly this is not just about academic considerations. It echoes the expectation that God's plans for each of us are that we have 'a future and a hope' (Jer 29.11, NLT). We feel strongly that enabling children with additional needs to thrive in their interactions with their peers and the adults around them is key to this—far more important, in practical terms, than the school getting the highest SATs results in the local authority.

Confident, happy children, who can communicate their feelings appropriately and face challenges with resilience, will be far better equipped to flourish in a secondary-school environment and beyond. Whilst our ambition for some children may correctly be that they have access to specialist provision, the reality is that there are not enough places in such settings for the vast majority of children with SEND—including those with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs). Even if there were, except for those with the most profound needs, is it appropriate to separate children from their peers and communities? Most will need to become engaged members of communities, developing relationships with their peers up to and during adulthood. Is it not better that they are enabled to develop the skills to achieve this in mainstream primary and secondary schools wherever and whenever possible? We need to look beyond our own interests and focus on the needs of the children we serve. One day they will be adults. Our hope for every one of them must be that they can thrive and go on to achieve the best outcomes in employment, independent living, health and community participation.

Opening Up Horizons of Hope and Expectation

'Good schools open up horizons of hope and expectation, and guide pupils into ways of fulfilling them.'⁷

Recently I was on the interviewing panel for a teaching post. At one point the applicant spoke openly about her own challenges with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and the difficulties she had experienced at school, not having been diagnosed until she was 16. After going to university, she had

worked as a support assistant at a secondary Pupil Referral Unit, for children whose behavioural challenges had resulted in exclusion from mainstream settings. Her experiences there had led her to the conclusion that the earlier these children could be helped, the greater the chance that any help would have an impact. This is why she was now looking to teach in the primary sector. I think her conclusion is correct—but not just for children with behavioural issues. The stronger the foundations of an individual's educational experience, the better that experience will be. This includes children with SEND.

To us, it makes sense to focus on enabling younger children with additional needs to develop life skills whilst supported in a nurturing, well-structured educational environment. Key to this is the ability to develop independence, something we too often take for granted in children without additional needs yet see as beyond the capabilities of many of those with. Both assumptions are mistaken. Independence needs to be fostered in all children. The earlier it is introduced, the greater the likelihood of success. In this way, we can open up each child's horizons as we look to prepare them for a future of hope and expectation.

Unfortunately, for some children with additional needs, these horizons are limited by the low expectations of the adults around them. The primary example we see of this is when children with additional needs are given 1:1 support in mainstream classrooms. In our experience, it is rare even that such full-time 1:1 support is a requirement of an EHCP—in theory, given to the children with the greatest needs—yet schools choose to provide it. This is usually because of pressure from others: staff requesting further provision, parents of the child asking for extra help, parents of other children demanding additional support, or concerns about perceived or real behavioural issues.

Too often, a child with additional needs is seen through the filter of their diagnosis

Ultimately, a school's acquiescence to these pressures is rooted in the perception that the child in question is an inconvenience. Too often, a child with additional needs is seen through the filter of their diagnosis; their diagnosis seen as a problem. They will be managed through a school and sent off to their next setting. The consideration is not towards the child's future (that is someone else's problem) yet the SEND Code of Practice is clear that children leaving our schools should be ready to enter the next stage of their education. They also need to be prepared to enter the world beyond that—a world which will not always seek to accommodate them and where daily interactions with others will need to be navigated effectively. Only a very small number will ever have lifelong 1:1 support.

In light of this, central to our approach as a school is ensuring that no child has full-time 1:1 support. This is to help children develop independence, preparing them socially for the next phase in their education. More importantly, we believe that this enables every child to feel that they are a full, valued member of our school community.

Think of it in terms of teaching a child how to swim. An instructor will provide various aids to support the child. What they do not do is put the child on the side of the baths, swim two widths themselves and then give the child a 10m badge. To learn to swim, you must be allowed to swim. In the same way, to develop the skills that enable you to function independently and well within a community, you must be allowed to function independently and well within a community.

This approach means that we have no member of staff whose job it is to work with one child every school day. Instead, we have staff working with a range of children throughout the school. The assistance these staff members deliver varies depending on individual need. Sometimes these interventions take place within the classroom; sometimes they take place in specific areas throughout the school appropriate to the task. They differ in length from a matter of minutes to more extended sessions, usually 30 minutes at most. The intention is to allow children to spend the maximum amount of time with their peers in their mainstream classroom. We seek to give every child the opportunity to live a rich and satisfying life by removing the barriers to that outcome wherever we can.

Questions to Consider

- Give three examples of how your school prepares children for the next stage in their education.
- Where are your strengths—and weaknesses?

A Whole School Approach

...education needs to have a core focus on relationships and commitments, participation in communities and institutions, and the qualities of character that enable people to flourish together.⁸

At our school, children with SEND are at the heart of conversations, rather than being set to one side whilst the considerations of their non-SEND peers are addressed first. This could mean identifying those children with SEND and placing them with 1:1 support or, as is increasingly the case in many schools, setting up a classroom or hub somewhere and placing children with the most challenging needs in there—out of sight, out of mind. However, are they enabled to flourish within the wider school community? Are their needs being met? And to what degree? Rather than adopting any of these approaches, we chose inclusion rather than segregation or separation.

To achieve this, we had to ensure that staff at the school were trained to facilitate this and that the correct structures and resources were in place to support them.

Many Parts, but Only One Body

In 1 Cor 12.12–27, Paul writes of the need to understand that, whilst we all have differing roles, each is important and valuable in ensuring that the whole functions effectively. He uses the example of our body. What, he asks, would happen if the whole body were an eye? How would we be able to hear? Or an ear? How would we be able to smell?

This example is perfect for a school setting. In a well-run school, every member of staff understands their role and knows that they are important and valuable to the whole. Leaders have a specific responsibility to ensure that this understanding happens. Only through this can they themselves be considered important and valuable. It does not just come with the title.

When considering an effective, inclusive SEND offer, one which seeks to ensure that all children have a rich and satisfying life, leaders need to make certain that every part of the school body works together to achieve that aim. This begins with having a highly effective SEND Coordinator (SENDCo) and giving them the time and training they need to do the job. Through them, staff

need to be enabled to do their job well via effective training and appropriate resourcing with regular, high quality Continuing Professional Development enabling them to support all children including those with SEND. Sometimes, very specialist training will need to be provided, including where a child has a physical disability. For children with additional needs, it is also essential that staff have a practical understanding of the use of the graduated approach to identify the best ways to support a child, using ‘Assess, Plan, Do, Review’ strategy.⁹ Ownership of this enables teachers to understand each child with additional needs that they work with. Done well, in collaboration with colleagues and, where necessary, external advice and support, this will enable the best possible outcomes for children. It will also give teachers confidence, which in turn will make them better teachers.

Responsibility for all children’s learning and progress lies with class teachers. They must ensure that their teaching addresses the needs of the children within their class, irrespective of the nature of any specific need. Every child

All children can make progress across the breadth of the curriculum

is expected to make the progress they are capable of. Whilst we accept that all children will not be working at age-related expectations, it is our experience that all children can make progress, even from low starting points, across the breadth of the curriculum. To acknowledge and celebrate this is

to acknowledge and celebrate each child, whilst the feeling of self-worth and confidence this can give positively impacts their interactions with others. In this, an overemphasis on striving for high attainment in statutory testing is neither desirable nor beneficial.

Class-based Support Staff

We are fortunate to be able to maintain class-based Teaching Assistants (TAs)—one for every class up to Year 2; one shared between two classes from Year 3 upwards. Their time is never spent providing full-time 1:1 support for any individual child. Each has a clear role assisting teaching and learning for all children in their class under the direction of the class teacher. Sometimes this may be with individual children for specific, short inputs, but is usually with groups of children. These groups may consist of children with SEND, without SEND, or a combination of both. The focus is the needs of all children in the class. Depending on individuals and the subject being taught, this will vary in every lesson. Specific needs may mean that a child finds writing challenging, yet that same individual may be exceptional at maths, or science, or music, or PE...the list goes on. Each child is different; each has different strengths and challenges. This is true of all children. Any support offered must take this into consideration. Consistently limiting classroom support to one child does

a disservice to their peers, restricts the individual child's ability to develop independence, and may limit their academic potential.

It is vital to reiterate that, whichever children the TA works with, accountability for every child's progress lies with the class teacher. In management speak, responsibility for action can be delegated; accountability cannot. Therefore, allowing teachers the time to communicate effectively with support staff about planning and resourcing for each lesson is essential. TAs play an invaluable supporting role and this should be recognized. When enabled to do their jobs effectively, their contribution to the academic progress and emotional well-being of children can be phenomenal. The least we can give them is the time and resources to do their jobs well.

Non-class-based Support Staff

To complement what goes on in classrooms, we have equally valuable support staff with different skill sets, who are directed to work with children throughout the school. One is trained in assisting children to promote positive mental health and emotional well-being. Another specializes in helping individuals with Autistic Spectrum Conditions (ASC), supporting them with their learning but, more importantly, with how to manage when they become overwhelmed, including struggling with interpersonal relationships. These can be some of our trickiest children in terms of potential classroom disruption; however, the work that this support assistant does—in collaboration with class teachers and the school's SENDCo—means that such instances are increasingly rare and, when they do occur, each child is equipped with strategies to enable them to self-regulate. Obviously, this is sometimes incredibly difficult for them. They are, after all, emotionally developing young children dealing with big feelings. In these instances, staff may need to offer support; however, the long-term benefits of these children being able to manage their own emotional responses will be far greater than if they were subject to constant interventions and/or 1:1 support.

A Forest School mentor offers a different form of intervention, giving children an opportunity to access their learning in an alternative sensory environment. Two further mentors work with children with SEND throughout the school. One specializes in maths interventions; the other has a more general role, also supporting the high number of Looked After Children (LAC) at the school. We also have a Higher Level Teaching Assistant who provides speech and language interventions for children with significant communication delays, including some that are pre-verbal.

Where necessary, we buy in additional support from our Local Authority's Specialist Inclusion Support Service (SISS) for Social, Emotional and Mental

Health (SEMH) plus Communication and Learning Difficulties. We have support from the SISS Autistic Spectrum Condition (ASC) team; Speech, Language and Communications Difficulty team; the Early Years Area SENDCo; and liaise with the local authority's Education Participatory Advisory Service. Additionally, we commission a speech therapist and use the health services that we can access. Use of an educational psychology service also helps meet need. In some instances, we employ the services of independent SEND support organizations who provide very specialist interventions for some children with more significant needs.

Oversight and Accountability

To coordinate the work of the school's support staff and external agencies, our SENDCo and Pastoral Lead work together ensuring that all children are getting the right support at the right time. Finances are carefully allocated and all monies accurately accounted for. At governance level, SEND at the school falls under the remit of the Behaviour, Attendance, SEND and Safeguarding committee, the chair of which is an experienced SENDCo. The four areas this committee looks at reflect our experience of the interconnectedness of each. Considering them together has proven to be beneficial, enabling staff to have informed discussions considering a child's full context. This effective oversight ensures that we remain focused upon our vision of service to all our children.

Questions to Consider

- Ask a teacher about the learning of one child with additional needs and how they support that learning.
- Can they identify areas in which alternative strategies might help?
- Ask one member of support staff to describe what they could do to support different children if they had extra time.
- Can you give three examples of how governors have demonstrated effective oversight of SEND provision?

Getting the Foundations Right

From childhood, Jesus' Parable of the Wise and Foolish Builders has always stuck in my mind. It is one of his best-known parables and, as ever with Jesus' stories, conveys truth through the use of a simple story. Two men each build a house; one builds his foundations on stone, the other on sand. When the rain comes, the floodwaters rise and winds batter the houses. The house on stone stands firm, the other collapses with a mighty crash. Getting the foundations right—listening to and acting on Jesus' teaching (Matt 7.24)—is the best way to ensure positive outcomes. This emphasis on firm foundations also applies to other areas of life, nowhere more so than in education. In church schools, this has even greater emphasis when we consider that our foundations are built on the teachings of Christ. If we can get a child's earliest experience of education right, then we set the direction of travel.

Our approach towards SEND provision is most intense in the early years

This is why our approach towards SEND provision is most intense in the early years. Get the foundations right there, and we begin to form the child's expectations and perception of school life. Are they going to be dependent on others or will they be allowed to develop independence and autonomy? Here it would be easiest to provide 1:1 support for some children; however, we have chosen to address these children's needs in a different and, we believe, far more effective and long-lasting manner.

As many schools have found, more children are coming to us who are not school ready. There is a range of causes for this, including special educational needs, parenting, home context, trauma or a combination of some / all of these. These children are unable to deal with a structured school day and struggle to interact effectively with their peers. Some cannot cope with play; others cannot communicate their feelings and needs effectively, sometimes due to their communication skills being at a pre-verbal level. This can result in extreme dysregulation, with a child screaming or hitting out; or it can result in the child retreating into themselves and sitting in the corner avoiding interactions.

Within this group there will also be children with quite significant, diagnosed additional needs. Often, these children will have EHCPs stating that they need specialist provision; however, such places are not available and therefore the child ends up in a mainstream setting. These children will usually be subject to

our special Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) support for a longer period; however, it remains the case that they will not have full-time 1:1 support and the aim remains to transition them effectively into a mainstream classroom whilst they are with us.

Nurture in Early Years Foundation Stage

Direct your children onto the right path, and when they are older, they will not leave it. (Prov 22.6, NLT)

Two members of staff work with these non-school ready children: a Nurture teacher and a Nurture TA. These experienced practitioners deal with those children who for several reasons—usually SEND, undiagnosed SEND and/or behavioural and/or home issues—are initially unable to access learning in a mainstream classroom. Based in a large, well-resourced space in the school, with a separate outdoor area, they work with children within a specific time-frame toward the intended outcome that each child is integrated into their mainstream classroom.

Once these children are identified by the school's SENDCo, the Nurture teacher uses the Boxall Profile® SEMH assessment tool to identify the areas of development for each one.¹⁰ This is used to assess and identify every child's level of social skills, emotional skills and difficulties with regulating their behaviours. The tool helps staff identify the best way to support them with the most appropriate interventions. Conversations with parents and carers, the school's SENDCo, class teachers, previous settings and external agencies (if they have been involved with the child and family) are also used to inform planning. This enables staff to have a comprehensive understanding of the child, their context and their needs. Targeted interventions will then take place, both within the Nurture environment and the child's mainstream classroom.

Depending on the individual child, time spent in Nurture at the beginning of the school year will differ considerably. Some will begin the day in their mainstream classroom but go to the provision later in the day. Others begin the day in the Nurture area as the transition into school can prove difficult for them. The latter may spend a short amount of time in the provision before going into their classroom. Yet other children initially spend a significant amount of time in the Nurture environment. This time will be spent with staff carrying out interventions that support the child's additional needs with a focus on social interactions and their ability to self-regulate.

Whatever the requirement of each individual, the aim remains the same: to facilitate them spending as much time in their mainstream classroom as is possible. During the transition from the provision to their usual classes, the

Nurture staff work to aid that adjustment, taking what they have been working on in the provision and modelling the same behaviours in the classroom. It is essential, if you are trying to develop a child's ability to deal effectively with social interactions, that they have a wider, real-world context within which to master that ability. For us, this approach has a very high success rate. As a result, there are a significant number of children throughout the school who have been effectively integrated into their mainstream classrooms for the majority of the school day. Most remain subject to specific SEND interventions throughout their time at the school, which accounts for the time they are not. There is a very high chance that a number of these children would, in other contexts, have been given ongoing 1:1 support, rather than being helped to be independent in a classroom with their peers.

Most children that have had EYFS Nurture support are fully reintegrated into the mainstream EYFS setting by the end of the autumn term. For some, it takes a little longer, whilst others will continue to access the Nurture setting in a structured manner as and when we judge it to be appropriate. In exceptional cases, where children are identified as needing specialist provision, this can be accessed up to the end of Year 1 or longer. In every case, however, the child will be spending as much time as possible within their mainstream classroom, independently accessing the curriculum with their peers.

As a consequence, the expertise of the staff who provide Nurture support can be used extensively throughout the rest of the school. Both specialists run interventions for communication and language and phonics, between them, working with numerous children. The Nurture teacher also leads on mental health at the school and will support other children with this, as and when necessary. This is proving to be an invaluable asset as external mental health services are so desperately lacking.

Different Destination, Same Ambition

As noted, our EYFS Nurture is also for children who have been identified on EHCPs as needing specialist provision as they await a place. These children's needs can be very significant and the school must abide by the content of Section F of any plan, which specifies the special educational provision for the child. Legally, the local authority (LA) must deliver all the distinctive support outlined in Section F; however, this simply means that they will make limited, often inadequate, funds available to schools for that purpose. The expectations given in Section F are always integrated into anything we as a school put in place for the child. Frequently, due to the way the school is geared to support children with SEND, we offer more than is in a child's plan. These children have bespoke curricula, tracked

Frequently we offer more than is in a child's plan

in finely graded steps, to ensure that they make progress. This will include appropriate teacher-led and child-led experiential learning, speech and language support and a sensory diet (an individualized plan of physical activities and accommodations intended to help a child meet their sensory needs).

With regard to the EYFS Nurture provision for children awaiting a specialist provision, the key difference is the amount of time these children spend there. It may well be the case that they have specific time in the Nurture environment timetabled in for as long as they remain at the school. In some instances, this can be for a significant portion of the school day. Whilst they are with us, these children are a valuable part of our community. Whatever their needs, our ambition for them remains the same: 'to give them a rich and satisfying life' (John 10.10, NLT).

Questions to Consider

- Describe how your school supported the transition of one child with additional needs into the wider school environment.
- Give three examples of how your school's EYFS establishes the foundations of independent learning and autonomy.
- Reflect upon how your school community helps a child with more significant needs feel welcomed.

Prioritizing Everyone by Prioritizing SEND

5

The basic principle of respect for the value of each person involves continual discernment, deliberation and action, and schools are one of the main places where this happens, and where the understanding and practices it requires are learned.¹¹

Our experience is that prioritizing children with SEND does not mean that their peers who do not have SEND are held back or disadvantaged. In fact, it is clear to us that all children benefit from an approach that prioritizes the development of children with additional needs' independence, self-regulation and social interactions. In large part, this is through enabling all children to have access to support staff who provide a range of interventions.

The model we use for providing support means that all children can access help more easily, especially for issues relating to social, emotional or mental health (SEMH) challenges. Anyone can face these at any time and having clear, well-practised systems in place to address them makes including all children within this provision very straightforward. In terms of behavioural issues, the reasons for children making poor choices may be rooted in SEND but can be for any number of other reasons. Again, having wide-ranging flexible support processes in place means that all children can access support when needed. Having specific non-class-based staff who work with a range of children throughout the school also means that no one child receives a disproportionate amount of support in a classroom to the detriment of the other children.

This also makes financial sense. We have not removed all 1:1 support and put that money in the bank. Rather, we have financed staff who work with numerous children throughout the school. Funding for SEND is, of course, targeted at support for children with additional needs. Likewise, monies allocated through EHCPs go towards the specific children subject to each plan. The school's overall offer, however, means that excessive additional funding is not spent propping up the SEND budget. One obvious example of where this can happen is when children are given full-time 1:1 support, the cost of which is not covered by the funding available. If repeated for several children, this will directly impact on the support a school can offer elsewhere due to budgetary constraints.

Our use of non-class-based support staff complements the work of their class-based colleagues. Their role is central to everything we do and helps facilitate independence in the mainstream classroom from the moment children enter the school. These staff offer additional interventions that further support children who have additional needs—and others where necessary—in integrating into their mainstream classroom. Through this, we enable class-based support staff and teachers to address the needs

The teacher's focus is to ensure that the learning needs of all children in their class are addressed

of all the children in their lessons, without having to focus predominantly or exclusively on those with SEND. Social and behavioural issues are addressed, as are possible sensory issues which arise with some needs, through

support from the SENDCo who audits environments, provides advice and, where appropriate, resources. The teacher's role is to teach. Their focus is to ensure that the learning needs of all children in their class are addressed through the adaptation of lessons. The class-based teaching assistants' focus is to support class teachers in helping all children to access their learning.

Continuing to Nurture All Who Need It

One aspect of our role as a church school is to help those emotionally burdened to find peace (Matt 11.28–30). This means that we have a strong focus on pastoral support for our children, with some provision specifically targeted at those who are going through challenging experiences. To this end, we have a form of nurture provision in addition to that based in EYFS. This is led by a teacher who, each morning, works with a targeted group of Key Stage 2 children, supporting their learning in core subjects. In the afternoon, their focus is on supporting groups of siblings or individuals whose lived experience has impacted negatively upon their mental health. This includes victims of abuse, family breakdown, bereavement or those having specific mental-health challenges. Others are looked-after children (LAC) or young carers. Many, though not all, have additional needs. The approach is very relaxed, with children engaging in arts and crafts activities or baking whilst informal conversations take place, guided gently by the adult where necessary. The teacher is also trained in Drawing and Talking, a therapeutic approach which provides an effective way for children to process emotional pain or trauma which they may be experiencing. The intention is to support these vulnerable children to develop their ability to communicate confidently, sharing their feelings and concerns. This has a positive impact upon their well-being and enables staff to understand how they can further help them access their learning.

Additionally, a Play Therapist has been employed by the school to help children make sense of difficult life experiences, or complex psychological issues,

through play. They work with children of all ages and their parents or carers. This is a highly specialized area of work which informs the approaches the school takes to the children accessing it. This does not represent an intervention that is intended to impact directly upon a child's academic progress or attainment. It is part of the school's wider approach to addressing the needs of the whole child, with clear evidence that effective, considered pastoral support can have a positive impact upon all areas of a child's life.

Getting Assessment Right for All Children

Prioritizing SEND will mean getting assessment right. Trying to assess the progress of children with additional needs can be discouraging for both children and staff if the same blunt instrument for assessment is used for all children. Getting accurate assessments of children's progress is key to helping class teachers plan effectively for all children. How can a teacher know a child's next steps in learning if they have no idea as to what the child knows already? How can they provide accurate, useful Individual Teaching Plans for a child with SEND? Furthermore, how can teachers speak knowledgeably about children in their class during termly pupil progress meetings so that leaders can offer further help and support where necessary?

For schools using some forms of assessment and tracking it can be difficult to measure the smaller steps in progress that children with SEND have made. Systems specifically designed to address this are available and are an invaluable tool in supporting teachers, alongside standard tracking systems. The effective support of all children requires the use of such tools, without which teachers will not be able to identify next steps in learning, understand the efficacy of interventions, nor be able to celebrate the progress children make.

To ensure that we can effectively track the progress of all children, we use two systems to track the progress of children with additional needs which complement the main system we use:

One highly effective resource—currently available at no cost from Cherry Garden School in London—is used for tracking the progress of children with more significant needs, those usually destined for specialist settings.¹² Originally targeted at children with additional needs in EYFS, this system helps staff to assess the progress of these children for as long as they are with us. As well as measuring linear progress in small steps, it also identifies lateral progress. This is where a child demonstrates the use of a skill in a different context (generalization), more easily (fluency), over a longer period (maintenance), or when a child shows greater independence in applying a skill. For children with more profound additional needs, lateral progress is very significant

and needs to be recognized. Less specialized tracking systems do not cater for this.

Progress for most of our children with additional needs is tracked using the nationally available Birmingham SEN Toolkit, a set of resources used to track the progress of children who are working considerably below the level of their peers.¹³

In both cases, use of these tracking systems means that staff can celebrate each small step of linear and lateral progress rather than relegating some children to be consistently perceived—not least in their own eyes—as making poor progress when compared unfairly to their peers. Whilst, for some children with additional needs, working at age-related expectations is beyond their capabilities, this does not mean that they cannot make considerable progress which should be celebrated. This should not be seen as patronizing—such small steps are important and often represent outcomes based on considerable application and hard work.

It is important to note that not all children with additional needs will struggle with the academic elements of their time in school. Many will excel. This comes with the realization that all children are different—whether or not they have additional needs. Being able to track all children effectively acknowledges this and extends respect and dignity to each child's individual achievements.

Questions to Consider

- Give three examples of how support structures at your school allow flexible responses to changing individual needs across the school.
- Ask a teacher what they understand of the needs of three children in their class.
- What does their response tell you about how well-resourced staff dealing with SEND need to be?

No Outsiders

We are made for goodness. We are made for love. We are made for friendliness. We are made for togetherness. We are made for all of the beautiful things that you and I know.

We are made to tell the world that there are no outsiders.

All are welcome: whatever the colour of your skin, rich, poor, educated, not educated, male, female, gay, straight, all, all, all.

We belong to this family, the human family, God's family.

(Archbishop Desmond Tutu)¹⁴

Some Examples of What Inclusion Looks Like

The non-verbal boy singled out and celebrated for their dancing during a workshop led by the Birmingham Royal ballet; the girl with autism who was a part of three of our winning sports teams (football, netball and rowing); the child with cerebral palsy whose favourite subject is PE; the individual who came to us with very significant speech and language difficulties who went on to sing a solo at our Easter service; the non-verbal, sensory-seeking child who happily danced with her peers in the nativity; the boy with autism destined for specialist provision performing a speaking part in the Mother's Day service in front of the whole school community; all children taking part in sports days, swimming and Bikeability; children with additional needs voted for by their peers as house captains, peer listeners, collective worship leads, school councillors; all children accessing all trips and residential; all children happily sharing their work and being celebrated for it by their peers without judgment; the pride shown by children who can see the progress they are making; the friendships made between the unlikeliest characters, when they are given the opportunity to do so; children gaining confidence, developing independence and resilience; the acceptance of difference, the kindness shown, the joy shared, the hopes expressed. Kids being kids with other kids regardless of their individual needs or challenges. No outsiders.

This is what inclusion looks like. This is what we work towards. This is the environment our approach to SEND has created.

The many interventions we put in place are intended to achieve one outcome: that all our children—all, all, all—are enabled to live rich and satisfying lives, inasmuch as we are able to influence this.

Our school's approach to SEND provision can be challenging. We do not have the answers to every child's needs. We remain a mainstream school—albeit with an inclusive approach. There are doubtless many schools out there who do more and do it better. We do what we can with the limited resources we have. Specialist provision is just that: specialist, and we do a serious disservice to our communities if we pretend that we can meet the needs of all children, particularly those with Severe Learning Difficulties (SLD) or those who require specialist provision in the immediate or long term.

When looking at inclusion in a mainstream setting, we need to be realistic about what we can accomplish, but also ambitious for what can be achieved. This may seem paradoxical, but I do not think it is. I am not looking at children who have Severe Learning Difficulties or those with profound needs whom professionals have identified as needing specialist provision. I am talking about the many children with additional needs who can and should be part of a mainstream school community—those who will never meet the threshold for specialist provision at primary school age and who attend our schools (or should attend our schools) already.

As leaders, we need to question what we are seeking to do when looking at our SEND offering. Is our ambition to do the minimum expected of us for children with additional needs, whilst focusing on getting the best SATs results ever to placate our parents, governors and Ofsted? Or is it our ambition to serve our whole community to the best of our abilities? If it is the former, then many children with additional needs will be seen as a potential barrier; if the latter, then children with additional needs will be seen as an opportunity fully to embrace service to our communities.

Unintentionally Othering Children With Additional Needs

One school I know used to have several hubs into which children with additional needs were placed according to their profiles. This was done with good intentions and a sincere desire to address the needs of these children; however, the strategy had one specific consequence which I feel is worth noting. After a change in leadership, the school altered its approach to SEND provision considerably. As a result, most of the children who had formerly been in the hubs were placed back into classrooms alongside their peers who did not have additional needs.

Prior to this, their peers—with no ill intent whatsoever—had called these children ‘hub kids.’ I have no idea what it was like to be a hub kid but I do know that this label represents a barrier between children supposedly part of a single community. They weren’t thought of as ‘us’; they were thought of as ‘them.’ Unintentionally, these children were being othered by an approach intended to support them.

Integrating children with additional needs fully into the life of a school benefits both them and their peers. In my experience, children are accepting of difference when presented with it, if they are allowed to be. Othering children with additional needs is a deeply unfortunate, unintended outcome of some forms of well-intentioned provision in mainstream settings.

The Consequences of a Broken System

You may have noted that I wrote that *most* of the children who had formerly been in the hubs were placed back into classrooms with their peers. For historic reasons there were several children at the school with SLD who were subject to EHCPs which did state that ongoing, full-time 1:1 support was required. Such children cannot practically be introduced into a mainstream classroom. They require very specialist support and constant supervision. As a society, we are failing these children by not providing appropriate places for them. The broken system currently in place nationally means that local authorities are increasingly putting pressure on mainstream schools to take children such as these.

At one point, we were required to accept an older child at our school with profound needs who required the constant assistance of two adults. Without this support, the child represented a safeguarding risk to anyone in their vicinity. As a school we initially sought to accommodate this; however, it became untenable and so we came to an agreement with the local authority that the child would be educated off site, supported by two specialist agency staff. We advocated strongly for this child and, eventually, a place was found for them at a specialist provision appropriate to their needs. Whilst we could not provide the expert support necessary for this child, we could push for this move. The Bible makes it clear that we should advocate for those who cannot speak for themselves (Prov 31.8–9). Even 2500 years ago, the writer of Ecclesiastes knew that ‘matters of justice get lost in red tape and bureaucracy,’ (Eccl 5.8, NLT)—something the parents of many children with SEND know only too well.

I do not feel that, as a school, we failed this child. Mainstream settings can only do so much. As a church-school family, we want no outsiders. Inclusion is our focus; however, mainstream schools cannot carry the burden of the

most vulnerable children with SLD in our society—and neither should they be expected to do so. Those children are to be valued as much as any other, but it is only by providing them with appropriate care and support in specialist settings that this can be shown.

Father to the Fatherless, Defender of Widows

In the New Testament book of James, the author writes that ‘Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father means caring for orphans and widows in their distress and refusing to let the world corrupt you’ (Jas 1.27, NLT). In biblical terms, the widow and the orphan represent the most vulnerable and marginalized in society. The writer of the psalms describes God as ‘Father to the fatherless, defender of widows’ (Ps 68.5, NLT). At a time when there was no financial safety net, widows and orphans had to rely on others for help and support. It is a consistent message throughout the Bible that the vulnerable, the marginalized, matter to God. They should matter to us. Children and adults with additional needs are often vulnerable and they are frequently marginalized. It would be deeply unfortunate if *schools* were responsible for marginalizing the most vulnerable members of their communities. We have a moral obligation to address the needs of all children. As educators we are in the privileged position of being able to do something. Yes, we may be like the small boy throwing starfish into the sea, but we can make a difference. One starfish at a time.

Questions to Consider

- Outline the day-to-day experiences of one child with additional needs at your school, as seen through their eyes.
- Does this suggest any further adjustments to the provision that is made for them?

Notes

- 1 *Church of England Vision for Education: Deeply Christian, Serving the Common Good* (London: Church of England Education Office, 2016), available at <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/education-and-schools/education-publications/deeply-christian-serving-common-good-2016> (accessed May 2025).
- 2 *ibid*, p 6.
- 3 *The Holy Bible*, New Living Translation (London: SPCK Publishing, 2025).
- 4 The National Society, *The Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools Framework* (London: Church of England office/Methodist Schools, 2024) available at <https://www.nse.org.uk/statutory-inspection-of-anglican-methodist-schools/inspections> (accessed May 2025).
- 5 B Shaw, E Bernardes, A Trethewey and L Menzies, *Special Educational Needs and their Links to Poverty* (York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2016), available at <https://www.jrf.org.uk/child-poverty/special-educational-needs-and-their-links-to-poverty> (accessed May 2025).
- 6 Department for Education, Department of Health, *SEND Special Educational Needs and Disability code of practice: 0 to 25 years* (London: Grangis LLC, 2022) p 120, available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/send-code-of-practice-0-to-25> (accessed May 2025).
- 7 *Deeply Christian, Serving the Common Good*, *op cit*, p 7.
- 8 *ibid*, p 7.
- 9 The graduated approach seeks to address the needs of children in a systematic manner incorporating four stages: assess, plan, do, review. Individual needs are assessed, interventions planned, implemented, and then reviewed to ensure their efficacy. Where needed, changes will be made and the cycle begin again. When implemented effectively, the graduated approach results in targeted support which impacts positively on children's learning, whatever the nature of their specific needs.
- 10 See <https://www.boxallprofile.org/> (accessed May 2025).
- 11 *Deeply Christian, Serving the Common Good*, *op cit*, p 7.
- 12 See <https://www.cherrygardenschool.co.uk/supporting-parents-and-professionals/> (accessed May 2025).
- 13 See <https://www.localofferbirmingham.co.uk/pupil-and-school-support/sen-tools-kits/> (accessed May 2025).
- 14 D and M Tutu, *Made for Goodness: And Why This Makes All the Difference* (New York: Harper Collins, 2011).

With an increasing number of children being identified as having additional needs, how can schools ensure that all are fully included in school life? What does 'life in all its fullness' look like for children who find some elements of life more challenging? How can we best prepare these children for life both in and beyond the classroom? This book presents how one church school has chosen to address the potentially overwhelming SEND challenges faced by schools today.



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