



THE INCLUSION ILLUSION

How children with special educational
needs experience mainstream schools

Rob Webster

UCLPRESS

The Inclusion Illusion

‘This timely book presents clear challenges to the limits placed on progress for children with SEND in mainstream schools. It stands alongside calls, back to Warnock’s vision of every teacher being a teacher of SEN, for an end to “exclusion within inclusion”. It urges us to develop *all* staff to fulfil their roles with pupils with SEND. Acknowledging the value of TAs, it urges schools to ensure children who most need a teacher, get the teacher. Based on rigorous research, it rightly calls for bravery. For honesty. For action.’

Professor Maggie Atkinson, safeguarding consultant, adviser and leader, and Children’s Commissioner for England (2009–15)

‘This is an important and valuable book which . . . has the potential to improve the educational experiences of pupils with significant learning and related difficulties. It combines an insightful account of the many issues and difficulties surrounding inclusion with a rigorous analysis of the outcomes and implications of large-scale empirical work.’

Professor Paul Croll, University of Reading

‘I love this book! It tackles the structural challenges of inclusion head on and sets out what must change to create a fairer future for children with SEND. This is essential reading for all evidence-led school leaders, teachers and policymakers who believe in better.’

Margaret Mulholland, SEND and inclusion policy specialist, Association of School and College Leaders

‘Rob Webster has deepened our understanding of how mainstream schools fail to address the needs of children with SEND. Distilling the crucial insights from years of work, he has thrown down a challenge to policymakers that for many children with SEND, simply having a mainstream placement is not the same as inclusion. This book is essential reading for anyone interested in what needs to change to ensure better futures for children with SEND in mainstream schools.’

Brian Lamb OBE, Visiting Professor of Special Educational Needs and Disability, Derby University

‘This book brilliantly demonstrates the kind of education children with special educational needs in mainstream classrooms, with the legal entitlement to an Education, Health and Care Plan, actually experience. Despite talk of inclusion, the classroom settings and organisation ensure that the children are excluded and marginalised from actual mainstream teaching. The over-use of teaching assistants, however well intentioned, is no substitute for the attention of qualified teachers. There is a separation in mainstream classes that ensures that inclusion is indeed an illusion. The book should be read by all teachers, parents and policymakers who care about the education of all children, not just those who are regarded as “typical” or non-problematic.’

Sally Tomlinson, Hon. Fellow, Department of Education, University of Oxford and Emeritus Professor, Goldsmiths, University of London

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*How children with special educational needs
experience mainstream schools*

Rob Webster

 **UCL**PRESS

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Glossary and abbreviations

ARP	Additional Resource Provision
BESD	Behavioural, Emotional and Social Difficulties
CL	Cognition and Learning
Core subjects	Curriculum subjects of English, mathematics and science
CSPAR	Class Size and Pupil Adult Ratio research project
DCSF	Department for Children, Schools and Families. The name of the government department responsible for education in England between 2007 and 2010
DES	Department of Education and Science. The name of the government department responsible for education in England between 1964 and 1992
DfE	Department for Education. The name of the government department responsible for education in England since 2010
DfEE	Department for Education and Employment. The name of the government department responsible for education in England between 1995 and 2001
DfES	Department for Education and Skills. The name of the government department responsible for education in England between 2001 and 2007
DoH	Department of Health. The name of the government department responsible for health and social care in England. Renamed the Department of Health and Social Care in 2018
EBacc	The English Baccalaureate. An accountability measure in England, linked to pupil performance in GCSE English, mathematics, science, a humanity subject and a modern foreign language subject. Other curriculum subjects are not included
EEF	Education Endowment Foundation

EHCP	Education, Health and Care Plan. A legal document that sets out a pupil's additional needs alongside the provision required to meet those needs, following a statutory assessment of need (in England)
HoC	House of Commons
IEP	Individual Education Plan
ITE	Initial Teacher Education
MLD	Moderate Learning Difficulties
Ofsted	Office for Standards in Education. The school inspectorate in England
ORACLE	Observational Research and Classroom Learning Evaluation research project
PACE	Primary, Assessment, Curriculum and Experience research project
RCT	Randomised Controlled Trial
Pupils with high-level SEND	Children and young people with the highest level of SEND, as defined by having either an EHCP or a Statement
SEN/SEND	Special Educational Needs/Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
SENCO	Special Educational Needs Coordinator. The common title for the SEND lead in English schools
SEND Code of Practice	The statutory code setting out the legal requirements and duties of local authorities, health bodies, schools and colleges that provide for people with SEND of ages 0 to 25 years (in England)
SEND support	One of the two current categories of SEND need in England. Defined by the SEND Code of Practice as pupils who have SEND, but do not have an EHCP. The other category is pupils with an EHCP
Statement	Common shorthand for 'Statement of Special Educational Needs'. A legal document that set out a pupil's additional needs alongside the provision required to meet those needs, following a statutory assessment of need (in England). Since replaced by the EHCP
Typically developing pupils	Pupils who do not have SEND

Foreword

This is an important and valuable book which makes a significant contribution to the study of special educational needs and inclusion and has the potential to improve the educational experiences of pupils with significant learning and related difficulties. It combines an insightful account of the many issues and difficulties surrounding inclusion with a rigorous analysis of the outcomes and implications of the large-scale empirical work with which the author is associated. As the book demonstrates, the concept of inclusion has been central to the consideration of special educational needs since the Warnock Report of 1978 and features in all discussions of policy and practice. Over the last decade Rob Webster and colleagues at UCL Institute of Education have conducted a series of large-scale studies focused on the experiences in school of children with Statements of special educational needs and the extent to which these experiences can be regarded as inclusive. This carefully collected and analysed empirical evidence provides a compelling basis for the discussion of the difficulties and limitations of current practice presented here.

The results of these studies show that in the supposedly inclusive setting of mainstream schools, children with Statements often have rather separate educational experiences and less satisfactory pedagogical diets than their peers. Children with Statements may be withdrawn from the mainstream for substantial periods of time and even when they are within the mainstream class their experiences may be heavily mediated by teaching assistants (TAs) who manage their work and their interactions both with teachers and peers. The very heavy reliance on TAs by mainstream schools as a way of coping with the inclusion of children with difficulties emerges strongly from these studies, as does the way it limits these children's experiences.

The research studies described here are on a very considerable scale. A particular strength is the way in which major quantitative studies based on systematic classroom observations have been combined with insightful interview-based projects. This combination means that very

robust accounts of classroom contexts and interaction can be related to the detailed description by participants of their classroom experiences. These studies have been well conducted and carefully analysed and reported. Their conclusions about the limitations of inclusion are convincing. There is also extensive reference to other research studies and analyses and the book provides an up-to-date overview of the field of considerable relevance to teachers, educational leaders and policymakers.

The book concludes with an analysis of the policy implications of the research and ways in which inclusion can be made more of a reality. It deals with the limitations of policy and failures of leadership at all levels and ways in which the operation of school inspections and accountability regimes can inhibit inclusive policies. The book is balanced in its view and is careful not to be overcritical of schools and practitioners. The book also recognises what a difficult field this is and how problematic the education of children with serious difficulties can be. It is particularly timely when provision for special needs is being reconsidered and the central importance of inclusion perhaps needs to be restated.

Professor Paul Croll
University of Reading

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This book is based on a research study that involved many people. The team who helped collect and process the data stretched to around 100 people. Dr Ayshea Craig and Dr Alison Wren conducted most of the fieldwork in the first phase of the study. For the second phase, school visits were conducted by students on the Doctorate of Educational Psychology course at UCL Institute of Education and at the universities of Southampton, Birmingham, Sheffield and Manchester as part of their professional studies. In addition, a small group of educational psychologists (EPs) and assistant EPs in local authorities (LAs) undertook fieldwork. A big thank you to everyone who spent time in schools and classrooms helping to amass the uniquely large data set on which this book relies, and to the course leaders, tutors and EPs who not only helped with the training and fieldwork arrangements, but also facilitated many of my introductions to the LA SEND teams who aided the participant recruitment process. The study was also supported by a small team of dedicated data-entry assistants, transcribers and coders who helped process what amounted to thousands of hours of observation and interview data. Thank you to all of you for your contributions.

I am indebted to the headteachers and staff who welcomed the fieldworkers and me into their schools and classrooms, and to the LA staff who facilitated my initial contacts with schools. Deepest thanks are reserved for the children and young people and their parents/carers whose experiences and views of school life are at the heart of this book.

I was privileged to share emerging findings and reflections from the study with a number of experienced and respected professionals, practitioners and researchers, many of whom gave their time to be part of an expert advisory group. I remain grateful to them for their interest, thoughts and guidance. The advisory group included representatives from the Nuffield Foundation, which funded the two projects that comprised the study. A special thank you to them for seeing the value in this work and committing the funds to make it happen.

A particular spur for writing this book was the process of preparing and completing my PhD by published works, which suggested that a book-length treatment of the study would be worthwhile. My thanks to my supervisors, Professor Cathy Tissot and Professor Rhona Stainthorp, who supervised and steered me through the PhD process at the University of Reading.

For the book itself, my thanks go to Pat Gordon-Smith, commissioning editor at UCL Press, for her advice and support, and to the anonymous reviewers who endorsed and commented on the proposal, and who offered comments to improve the final draft.

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1

Introduction

What is a mainstream education?

This book is about what mainstream education looks like for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) in England. To be precise, it is about what education in a mainstream school looks like for pupils whose needs are sufficiently complex to warrant a Statement of Special Educational Needs (or ‘Statement’ for short) or an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP). For readability, this group is referred to in this book as ‘pupils with high-level SEND’.

Pupils with SEND who attend a mainstream school are said to be ‘included’. Inclusion is a contested concept (Farrell, 2010; Norwich, 2013; Thomas and Vaughan, 2004), so for expediency, it is defined here in sufficiently uncontentious and broad terms as a model of education where pupils with SEND are taught for all or most of the time in classes alongside their peers in their local mainstream school. In this reading, inclusion is the act or the process of ensuring that the experience pupils with SEND have of education, again broadly construed, is closely aligned with that of ‘mainstream’ pupils who do not have SEND. Once more, for readability, this book refers to this population as ‘typically developing pupils’.

Of course, there is no uniform experience of education. Each pupil’s experience of education is unique to them. These experiences occur in and are shaped by the classroom contexts in which they are educated, and while they differ from class to class, these contexts nonetheless have consistent and predictable features. Each class is composed of a collection of pupils, who are sometimes organised into smaller groups. There are teachers and oftentimes other adults in supporting roles, and they have interactions with pupils. These structural features provide a reliable set of indicators for describing an individual pupil’s everyday educational experience from *their* perspective.

The original empirical research presented in this book uses these indicators to compose two contemporaneous pictures of everyday mainstream education: one describing the experience of typically developing pupils, and one describing the experiences of pupils with high-level SEND. What emerges challenges the idea of what it is to be included, if you are a child or a young person with high-level SEND.

Through the results of this research, the reader will see not only how the everyday experience pupils with high-level SEND have of school is characterised by separation and segregation, but also how the extent of this marginalisation affects the quality of education they receive. This is why I say this book is about what education *in* a mainstream school *looks like*. Because for pupils with high-level SEND, *attending* a mainstream school is no guarantee of *receiving* a mainstream education. They may be educated under the same school roof as their typically developing peers, but in vital respects their everyday experiences are remarkably different.

The central contention of this book is that for many pupils with high-level SEND, inclusion is an illusion. The day-to-day reality of 'being included' is not, as tends to be argued or assumed, synonymous with receiving what might broadly be thought of as 'a mainstream education'. Instead, far from being taught alongside their peers, the inclusion of pupils with high-level SEND is revealed to be a concatenation of varying degrees of marginalisation. Some of these exclusions (and the plural form is relevant) are subtle, others more overt. Some are seemingly innocuous, others more consequential. This book argues that the way schools are organised and how classrooms are composed creates a form of 'structural exclusion', which preserves mainstream education for typically developing pupils and justifies a diluted pedagogical offer for pupils with high-level SEND. But it is policymakers, rather than mainstream schools, that this book chiefly indicts over this state of affairs.

This book prompts questions about what inclusion is – what it looks like to those in whose name it is operationalised – and suggests why a more authentic form of inclusion is necessary and how it might be possible. I will unpack structural exclusion later in this chapter, but first it is helpful to define the population and context to which this book and the research behind it relate.

Pupils with high-level SEND

Prior to major reform of the SEND system in 2014/15 (more below), the number of pupils in England with SEND, as a proportion of the

overall population of state-funded mainstream schools, was prone to fluctuation. It declined from 21.9 per cent in 2000 to 16.6 per cent in 2003, rose to 18.9 per cent in 2007, then to 20.7 per cent in 2010, before dipping again to 17.1 per cent in 2014 (DfES, 2004, 2007; DfE, 2013). In the years following the reforms, the proportion dropped to 13 per cent. One possible, though untested, explanation for this decline is that the changes led to more accurate identification of SEND. In 2018, however, numbers began rising once again, and they have increased each year since then (DfE, 2021a).

At the time of writing (March 2022), the most recent official data show that the proportion of pupils with SEND on the rolls of state-funded mainstream schools stands at 14.1 per cent: a figure that represents around 1.16 million pupils. Factor in the roughly 134,000 pupils in specialist settings, and the total number of pupils with SEND attending a state-funded school rises to 1.31 million (DfE, 2021a). Add to this the pupils with SEND in independent schools, and the overall school-aged SEND population in England sums to 1.41 million children and young people.

Just under a quarter of those with SEND (23 per cent) have an EHCP: a legal document, prepared by a local authority (LA), which sets out a pupil's educational needs alongside the provision required to meet those needs. The remaining three-quarters (77 per cent) of pupils, who make up the majority of the SEND population, are classified as 'SEND support'. They have additional needs, but these fall short of the criteria required to secure an EHCP. Overall, 82 per cent of all pupils identified as having SEND in England attend a state-funded mainstream setting (DfE, 2021a). Generally speaking, pupils on SEND support attend a mainstream school, whereas presently half of those with an EHCP attend a mainstream school. Forty-two per cent of pupils with an EHCP go to a special school, and 7 per cent attend an independent private school.¹

A key part of the 2014/15 SEND reforms was the replacement of Statements with EHCPs. Statements were legal documents (also overseen by LAs) that had the same purpose as an EHCP. For most of the pre-reform period, the overall proportion of the pupil population who had a Statement remained stable, at around 1.4 per cent of the primary school population and 2 per cent of the secondary school population (DfES, 2007; DfE, 2013). Since the reforms bedded in, these proportions have been steadily rising (DfE, 2021a). In primary schools, numbers have increased year-on-year since 2018: from 1.4 per cent (2018), to 1.6 per cent (2019), to 1.8 per cent (2020), to 2.1 per cent (2021). Similar incremental rises have occurred in secondary schools: from 1.6 per cent (2018), to 1.7 per cent

(2019), to 1.8 per cent (2020), to 2 per cent (2021). This growth is in line with an overall increase in the total number of pupils with an ECHP, which, having remained stable at 2.8 per cent of the school population between 2010 and 2017 (DfE 2017a), has, in the last few years, risen quite sharply to 3.1 per cent (2019), to 3.3 per cent (2020), to 3.7 per cent (2021).

It must be said that although this book refers to pupils with SEND and pupils with high-level SEND (as defined by having a Statement and/or EHCP), neither is a homogeneous group. The study behind this book centred on school factors connected to teaching, learning, support and classroom engagement. So, while it is important to recognise that there are dangers in overlooking the heterogeneity of this population, for pragmatic purposes, the study necessarily looked at the experiences of pupils with high-level SEND at the general level, rather than at the level of specific learning need. The limitations of the study approach are described in [chapters 2 and 7](#).

A brief history of SEND in England

Across the world, the debate about how best to educate pupils with additional and diverse needs continues. The global consensus, as captured in the most influential international policy document on special education, the 1994 Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), is that education systems and programmes should be inclusive in design and delivery; mainstream (or regular) schools should be welcoming and accommodating to children and young people with SEND. Mainstream schools with inclusive orientations, the Salamanca Statement contends, are not only foundational to building inclusive societies and tackling discrimination, but also the most effective way of helping all children to achieve educationally.

One country that can count itself among those that began creating more inclusive schools long before the Salamanca Statement is England, on whose SEND system this book reports and reflects. The main catalyst for England's inclusion journey was the 1978 inquiry into special education led by Mary Warnock (DES, 1978). In the years prior to the Warnock Inquiry, children with SEND, depending on the severity of their needs, would have either attended a special school for the 'handicapped' or had no formal education at all. Those with the most profound and complex disabilities would have been 'patients' at an infirmary or specialist care facility.

The recommendations from the Warnock Inquiry report found a legislative home in the 1981 Education Act and paved the way for a system of statutory assessment of SEND, which could lead to a Statement detailing needs and provision. Provision is taken to mean that which is additional to, or otherwise different from, the provision normally available in a mainstream school. During the 1980s, then, there was an overall increase in the number of pupils identified as having SEND being educated in mainstream schools, many of whom had needs that were sufficiently complex to qualify for a Statement. Progress towards greater inclusion continued throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, with further changes to legislation. The Education Act (1996), the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (2001) and the Disability Discrimination Act (2005) all helped to strengthen and protect the rights of the child to an inclusive education. The Labour government of 1997 to 2010 did much to prepare the legislative ground for extensive and progressive policies. However, their ambitious 10-year Children's Plan (DCSF, 2007), which aspired to supplant inclusion with personalised learning (Alexander, 2010), never reached implementation.

The shift towards inclusion, and away from educating pupils with SEND in separate settings, can be seen in official data. Between 1979 and 1991, the total number of pupils in special schools fell by 27.5 per cent, from 131,000 to 95,400 (HoC, 2006). Between 1991 and 2000, the number of pupils in special schools declined by a further 5.3 per cent, while the number of pupils with a Statement attending a state-funded mainstream school increased by around 30 per cent (95,000 pupils). The effects of this shift led to closures. Between 1997 and 2005, the number of special schools in England reduced by 7 per cent (HoC, 2006).

Over three decades, the system of statutory assessment, however, evolved into a bureaucratic maze. For parents of children with SEND, the statementing process had become a long, stressful, legalistic – and for some, expensive – stand-off with the LA, which placed the available resources over the needs, and indeed rights, of the child (Hartas, 2008; Jones and Swain, 2001; Lamb, 2009; Penfold et al., 2009). One of the most high-profile critics of the system was Baroness Warnock. She had seen how the legal arrangements had resulted in unintended consequences, and she condemned the system that her inquiry had helped to create as a 'cynical' and 'disastrous' battle for resources (Webster, 2019a).

For children educated in a mainstream school, resources were typically expressed in terms of a number of hours of support from a teaching assistant (TA). TAs were often characterised as non-teaching support staff, appointed to assist the pupil with a Statement throughout

the school day. The quantification of hours was significant, as this satisfied the legal aspects of the statementing process in a way that was thought to be easily auditable. Once a Statement had been awarded and TA hours specified – marking a tangible return on their efforts – parents and the school their child attended were inclined to see the process as largely over, save perhaps for some further skirmishes with the LA over reducing the number of hours, which were often successfully defended.

Over time, TA hours became the accepted currency of Statements, with comparatively less attention given to the nature of other, arguably more important, aspects of provision, such as pedagogy. Fearing that the pedagogic sharp end of provision had been sidelined, Ofsted began raising concerns about what all this meant for pupils with a Statement in the classroom. The schools inspectorate reported that there was a misconception that support from TAs ensured good-quality intervention or ‘adequate progress’ (Ofsted, 2006). In a review four years later, tellingly subtitled ‘A Statement is not enough’, it concluded that too many pupils were being overidentified as having SEND ‘when they simply need better teaching and pastoral support’ (Ofsted, 2010).

Not long afterwards, the Conservative-led government, installed in 2010, brought about ‘the biggest shake up’ of SEND since the 1981 Education Act (Ward and Vaughan, 2011). The reforms, developed in response to findings from Brian Lamb’s independent inquiry into parental confidence in the SEND system (Lamb, 2009), and introduced in 2014, replaced Statements with EHCPs, whose remit stretched beyond education into health and care. The changes, however, were mostly cosmetic, and overall failed to tackle the system’s core dysfunctions and internal contradictions that had exercised Baroness Warnock and others.

In autumn 2019, two high-profile reviews diagnosed the ineffectiveness, inefficiency and widespread dissatisfaction with the SEND system in England. A House of Commons Education Committee inquiry into the ‘implementation and the human experience of the reforms’ concluded that ‘the distance between young people’s lived experience, their families’ struggles and ministers’ desks is just too far’ (HoC, 2019). The second review, conducted by the National Audit Office, found that the Department for Education ‘has limited assurance about the quality of support for pupils with SEND in mainstream schools’, and it ‘does not know the impact of the support provided for pupils with SEND’ (NAO, 2019).

A quarter of a century after the Salamanca Statement was signed, an authoritative global assessment painted a picture of inclusion as very much a work in progress. For each example of headway or a national policy success, the 2020 Global Education Monitoring (GEM) report (UNESCO,

2020) contained another that pointed to a persistent, exclusory practice or a barrier to advancement. What might be regarded as slow progress is perhaps no surprise when one considers firstly, the numerous and nuanced cultural and political battles for hearts and minds that must be won within each individual education system, and secondly, the considerable effort to remake physical spaces, develop the education workforce, and devise practical innovations regarding pedagogy, curricula and assessment. Compared with other countries, inclusive policy and practice for children and young people with SEND is at a more mature stage in England. That said, it is a system that has far from resolved the underlying conceptual arguments, achieved full-scale attitudinal and behavioural change, or met the full range of practical challenges with which education systems elsewhere at the start of their inclusion journey are beginning to grapple.

This book is about the experiences pupils with high-level SEND have of school. So, while an exploration of what happens beyond school is not within its scope, a brisk summary of the fate that can await members of this population in their life beyond school is useful for underscoring why detailed information that could help improve their educational experience and outcomes is vital. O'Brien (2016) lists the arresting statistical differences in the outcomes and life chances of young people with and without learning difficulties in England. Those with SEND are: seven times less likely to find paid employment; twice as likely to live in poverty; four times more likely to have mental health difficulties; three times more likely to end up in prison; and likely to die at least 15 years younger than those without SEND.

Educational failure – in terms of staying in school, leaving compulsory education without qualifications, or having inadequate literacy and numeracy skills – is known to have long-term damaging effects on wider society, as well as for the individuals concerned (Feinstein et al., 2008). Such failure feeds into social problems, and the financial cost to taxpayers, through the involvement of social welfare, health and judicial systems, can be seen as avoidable expenditure. For many critics and practitioners, though, the effective education of children and young people with SEND is, first and foremost, a moral issue. How a society treats its most vulnerable members is an indicator to itself and to others of its authenticity and compassion. School represents the first sustained, formative encounter that a child has of an organised social institution. Schools also function as a microcosm of society (Dewey, 1900). So, whether one is primarily motivated by the economic case for inclusion or the moral case, it follows that the experiences and interactions pupils have in school should reflect and prepare them for the inclusive society to which educators and others strive.

The rationale for the research behind this book

The research behind this book comes from a longitudinal cohort study designed to address the lack of research on the composition of the everyday classroom contexts within which pupils with high-level SEND in England are educated. Of course, there is nothing new about a concern with the education of pupils with SEND. There has, for example, been much interest in policies of inclusion and leadership at the school level (Ainscow, 2007) and in appropriate pedagogies (Gersten and Edwards Santoro, 2009). Research on classroom processes and effective teaching has tended to assume the existence of an underlying direct model, in the sense that the focus has been on a direct association between teaching and pupil attainment (Creemers, 1994; Kyriacou, 2009; Muijs and Reynolds, 2011). However, teachers do not encounter pupils individually, out of context. The teaching of any individual occurs within a classroom context, and that context has some consistent and familiar features (such as other children) that necessarily interact with and influence the directness and direction of the teacher–pupil dynamic.

The influential Australian academic John Hattie (2002) writes that educational structures and the composition of the classroom appear ‘less consequential than ... the nature and quality of instruction in the class’. He frames this position in terms of ‘attending to classroom organisation practices *versus* improving what happens once the classroom door is closed’ [emphasis added]. This, however, is something of a false dichotomy. One of the main motivations for the research behind this book is that what happens in the classroom is informed to an under-appreciated degree by its composition. Indeed, too little attention has been paid to the fundamental, but often taken-for-granted, ways in which schools and classrooms are organised, and specifically, how this informs, influences and inhibits an inclusive education.

Systematic information on the classroom contexts within which teachers teach and pupils (with and without SEND) learn, and which in turn influence the selection and effectiveness of pedagogical strategies, is scant. Little is known of what occurs within classrooms and how it is experienced by those on the receiving end, or how their parents perceive it. This is particularly true and especially important for pupils with the highest level of SEND educated in mainstream settings, for whom such provision has a legislative safeguard.

A major inspiration for the original research reported in this book was the One in Five study (Croll and Moses, 1985) – one of the rare investigations into how pupils with SEND experience classrooms in England.

This research, conducted in the early 1980s, as the recommendations of the Warnock Inquiry were being incorporated into the 1981 Education Act, was concerned with describing the behaviour and interactions of pupils with SEND (as defined by teachers) and how these compared with those of pupils without SEND.

Results from other notable UK observation studies, including ORACLE (the Observational Research and Classroom Learning Evaluation research project: Galton et al., 1999b), the School Matters project (Mortimore et al., 1988), PACE (the Primary, Assessment, Curriculum and Experience research project: Pollard et al., 2000), and CSPAR (the Class Size and Pupil Adult Ratio research project: Blatchford, 2003), all described life in the primary classroom. Studies of secondary classrooms are rarer. Perhaps the most notable examination in secondary settings in the UK was reported in *Fifteen Thousand Hours* (Rutter et al., 1979); the title referred to the amount of time children spent at school from the age of five to leaving at 16. None of these studies, however, differentiated sufficiently between the experiences of pupils with and without SEND. They also reflect periods of time when TAs were a far less prominent feature of the classroom set-up than they were to become.

Relatedly, a particular motivation for writing this book is that information on classroom contexts has high intrinsic value, but its role in the broader debates and research efforts on improving teaching, learning and pupil outcomes is underrated. Capturing and synthesising data on conceptualisations of, and approaches to, teaching, support and differentiation, and the contexts in which all this plays out, is essential for informing not only the processes and practices of inclusion, but also a much-needed reconnection with, and reappraisal of, its principles and purpose. The next section introduces the conceptual framework used to organise and present the data from the study.

Structural exclusion

In the English context, references to exclusion in education typically relate to enforced periods away from school. This is a very clear type of marginalisation, and one to which children and young people with SEND are particularly vulnerable. Pupils with SEND are nine times more likely than their peers to receive a permanent or temporary school exclusion (O'Brien, 2016).

A more nuanced account of different types of exclusion, which goes beyond describing the physical removal of an individual from an

educational setting, has the potential to reveal the various and more implicit forms of marginalisation, and the implications these have for learning and social interaction. Central to this granular take on exclusions is to conceptualise educational processes occurring in hierarchically organised contexts, much in line with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory model. The thesis advanced in this book is based on an extension of that framework, which states that within the 'microsystem' of the school, there are smaller, nested contexts – classrooms and smaller groups of pupils organised within classrooms – that have distinct dynamics. Key features of these contexts differ for pupils with and without SEND, and the experiences pupils with high-level SEND have within these contexts are markedly different from those of their typically developing peers – so much so in fact, that what trades as inclusion actually has more in common with the features and effects of exclusion.

The study behind this book found that the ways in which the classroom learning environment is organised in mainstream settings in order to accommodate pupils with high-level SEND actually results in patterns of separation and segregation. Although this is not the intended outcome, schools, in essence, structurally exclude pupils with high-level SEND. They tend to split them out from their peers who do not have SEND and install barriers to full participation. While this is done with the best of intentions, the effect is the creation of two quite different learning environments – or worlds – and, as a consequence, two quite different experiences: one world for typically developing pupils, which is to all intents and purposes a de facto mainstream experience, and another world for pupils with high-level SEND, which diverges from the former world quite markedly. It is an experience in mainstream, but it is not a mainstream experience.

As we shall see in [Chapter 3](#), the clearest indicators of this structural exclusion can be seen in the ways the classroom environment for each group of pupils is composed, in terms of: (i) the number of pupils in the class; (ii) their range of attainment; (iii) the number of teachers and TAs; and (iv) the frequency with which they interact with pupils. In this reading, 'environment' is not limited to physical features: it includes the interactions pupils have with school staff (and their peers), and the activities in which they participate.

At this point, the reader might query how these elements of everyday classroom arrangements amount to exclusion. Is it not a bit heavy-handed – perhaps even mischievous – to describe such

commonplace features of school life as markers of exclusion? This is where a more nuanced take on exclusion comes in. If, as the definition at the start of this chapter contends, a core precept of inclusion is to ensure that the everyday educational experience of pupils with SEND has parity with that of pupils without SEND, then any departure from this can be viewed as a form of exclusion. Consistent with Bronfenbrenner's model, each indicator represents a point on the inclusion–exclusion spectrum. Some forms of exclusion appear quite innocuous. For example, when a TA interacts quietly with a pupil for a few seconds as the teacher delivers whole-class instruction, they nonetheless cut across and interrupt the teaching from the pupil's perspective, albeit momentarily. Other forms of exclusion, such as what the Italian academic Simona D'Alessio (2011) calls 'micro-exclusions', are more overt forms of separation and segregation. A micro-exclusion describes the withdrawal of pupils with SEND to a space where they are taught away from their peers.

It would indeed be heavy-handed and unfair on schools to cast every diversion from full inclusion – where differences between the experiences of pupils with high-level SEND and their typically developing peers are all but indistinguishable – as somehow undesirable or problematic. There might be valid circumstances under which schools might need to provide a separate experience for pupils with high-level SEND, and some are given in [Chapter 4](#). This book does not seek to indict schools on a spurious charge of estranging themselves from pupils with high-level SEND, or of wilfully ostracising this part of their community. It operates from the premise that schools are largely unaware of, or under-appreciate, the effects of the arrangements they put in place to organise teaching and learning for the year group generally, and for pupils with high-level SEND specifically.

What is central to the thesis of this book is the *extent* and the *frequency* of the exclusions these pupils experience, and the way in which this is facilitated by commonplace structural and organisational arrangements of schools and classrooms. It is in the combination of measures of class size, attainment grouping, and the presence and behaviour of adults that the degree of marginalisation pupils with high-level SEND experience are most striking. Furthermore, the effects of structural exclusion on pupils with high-level SEND are far from benign. A fifth element of structural exclusion, which captures one of its more troubling impacts, concerns 'pedagogical diet'. Let us now take a closer look at the organising themes of structural exclusion, beginning with the features of classroom composition.

Classroom composition

Class size

Think of a busy classroom, anywhere in the world. Whatever else springs to mind – furniture, textbooks, etc. – the image will certainly feature an unspecified number of pupils and a teacher. Class size is such a basic element of the classroom – perhaps the most basic – that it is easy to lose sight of the fact that the number of children in the room can affect the types of interactions and relationships that develop within it (and, indeed, outside it), and the teaching and learning experiences of teachers and pupils respectively.

Using data collected in 2017 by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Blatchford and Russell (2020) report that class sizes in the UK are relatively large compared with other nations. They add that the UK is somewhat unusual among OECD nations, insofar as the average class size at primary school level (27 pupils) is greater than the average class size at lower secondary level (23 pupils). In 2017, the average class size across OECD countries was 21 pupils at primary and 22 pupils at lower secondary. Reflecting the broader demographic changes within the UK, school census data show that the average class size in state-funded primary schools in England has declined slightly since 2015 – from 27.1 to 26.6 pupils – while over the same period, the average class size in state-funded secondary schools has increased by the equivalent of almost two additional children: from 20.4 to 22.3 pupils (DfE, 2021b).

The size of classes has been hotly debated for decades. One of the main justifications for smaller classes is that a lower teacher–pupil ratio allows those with the greatest academic need to receive more individual attention, and in an environment in which they are better able to concentrate (Finn et al., 2003). Given that pupils with SEND fall into this category, it is very probable that they will be particularly affected by the number of children with whom they share the teaching and learning space. The acuteness of this effect is also likely to increase in line with the intensity and complexity of educational need. Furthermore, pupils with high-level learning needs are more likely to have co-occurring medical or health conditions. This means they may be off school due to illness or hospital visits, or to receive treatments, therapies or assessments away from the classroom during the school day. In addition, pupils with SEND are invariably low attainers academically. They are often removed from mainstream lessons to work elsewhere on ‘catch-up’ or ‘booster’

programmes designed to improve their basic skills in literacy and numeracy (Webster, 2021). This is a good example of a micro-exclusion.

As it is possible to track the movements of individual pupils in and out of the classroom, and the time they spend in each context, class size can be a useful (albeit partial) indicator of structural exclusion. There is, however, little information available on how pupils with SEND experience class size in everyday contexts, and how this compares with their typically developing peers. What is known from experience, however, is that typically developing pupils are, overall, out of the classroom much less frequently, and rarely for as long or as often as pupils with high-level SEND tend to be.

The attainment range: setting and within-class grouping

The way pupils are grouped for teaching and learning in English schools can vary between primary and secondary settings. In primary schools, pupils generally spend all day in the same class, often with the same teacher. Within this set-up, teachers arrange pupils into smaller groups (around tables), and these configurations are typically informed by levels of attainment. In secondary schools, pupils are arranged into classes at the year group level, usually by curriculum subject, again on the basis of attainment. This is a commonplace practice known as ‘setting’. It is different to an earlier, and equally widespread, approach known as ‘streaming’ or ‘tracking’, in which pupils are grouped by attainment for all subjects.

Attainment groupings represent the most immediate classroom contexts for learning and represent the second marker of structural exclusion. Attainment grouping follows an implicit rationale: the assumption that teaching becomes more effective or efficient as the attainment range of a class or a group is narrowed. Yet the evidence in favour of this practice, which is more often referred to as setting or grouping by ‘ability’,² remains elusive.

While homogeneous grouping has been shown to have some benefits for high-attaining pupils, it can be detrimental to the learning and self-confidence of average-attaining and low-attaining pupils (Boaler et al., 2000; Francis et al., 2017; Ireson et al., 2002; Kutnick et al., 2005; Taylor et al., 2016). While pupils in high-attaining groups benefit from the positive affirmations of being top of the class, there is a corrosive effect on the emotional and behavioural outcomes (Papachristou et al., 2021), confidence and self-concept for those in what tends to be labelled the ‘bottom’ group (Peacock, 2016), and where teachers’ expectations of pupils are lower (Francis et al., 2019; Hargreaves, 2017).

Furthermore, this way of organising pupils for teaching can widen the achievement gap between low attainers and their peers (Schofield, 2010; Ireson and Hallam, 2009), and entrench disadvantage, as there is little movement between year-level sets or (where used) streams. Once placed in an ‘ability group’, pupils tend to remain there. As Stobart (2014) has shown, 88 per cent of four-year-olds placed in low-attaining groups were still there by the end of their schooling. Francis et al. (2017) echo this, adding that ‘progress or attainment’ seems to make little difference to whether a pupil transitions out of their group. This is odd for an organisational strategy ostensibly predicated on that very factor.

As with class size, the literature on the effects of setting and grouping by attainment on pupils with SEND is very limited. However, because of the extensive overlap with these two populations, it is reasonable to assume that what the evidence has to say about the effects on low-attaining pupils very likely applies correspondingly to those with high-level SEND.

The frequency of pupils’ interactions with teachers and teaching assistants

The third and fourth markers of structural inclusion examined in this book concern the number of teachers and TAs in the classroom, and the frequency with which they interact with pupils, and vice versa. Of particular relevance is the second group of practitioners, whose very presence in mainstream schools is connected to the inclusion of pupils with high-level SEND.

The long-term trend for greater numbers of pupils with SEND being included in mainstream settings has been accompanied and assisted by an increase in the numbers of classroom-based and pupil-based support staff, known variously as teaching assistants or learning support assistants (this book uses the former term). Education systems across the world have seen sizable and sustained increases in TA numbers (Masdeu Navarro, 2015), but nowhere has this growth been more pronounced than in the UK. Over the last 20 years, the number of TAs in mainstream schools in England has more than trebled (DfE, 2017b, 2021c). At the most recent count (DfE, 2021c), TAs comprised 28 per cent of the overall school workforce: 35 per cent of the primary and nursery school workforce, 13 per cent of the secondary school workforce, and 52 per cent of the special school workforce.

School leaders report that one of the main reasons for the increase in TAs is that policies of including pupils with high-level SEND would be impossible to implement without them (Blatchford et al., 2012). Yet

the accompaniment of a TA means that the pupils in greatest need of teacher input end up ‘spending a lot of their time in class with someone who [is] not a trained teacher’ (Croll and Moses, 2000). This picture was confirmed by the longitudinal Deployment and Impact of Support Staff (DISS) project, which was conducted between 2004 and 2009, and was designed to provide much-needed information on the use and impact of TAs in the UK. It found that the intuitive benefits of having TAs in classrooms – in terms of allowing overstretched teachers to focus their time on the rest of the class, in the knowledge that the pupils with SEND who require the most support receive potentially valuable individual attention from TAs – led to TAs tightly orbiting pupils with SEND for much of the day. The effects for pupils with a Statement were greater than those who had SEND but whose needs fell short of requiring a Statement. Essentially, the least qualified staff were assigned primary educator status for the pupils in most need, and their day-to-day support was often provided by TAs, instead of teachers (Blatchford et al., 2012).

A separate analysis I have conducted using data from the primary phase of the present study and from five other large-scale systematic observation studies, which were conducted in mainstream UK primary schools between 1976 and 2012, shows just how much the increased presence of TAs has made over time to the everyday educational experiences of pupils with SEND, compared with those without SEND (Webster, 2015). The results suggest that typically developing pupils spend much more of their time as part of the whole class audience, listening to the teacher teach, than they did in the 1980s and 1990s. Yet over this 36-year span, there had been virtually no change in the average amount of time pupils with SEND spend interacting in whole-class teaching contexts.

Authors of several of the studies included in this analysis suggest that the general trend showing that the typically developing pupil’s experience of the classroom has, in effect, become more passive over time owes something to the introduction of the National Curriculum in the late 1980s. ‘Because of the amount of subject content and standards of attainment that were now required’ (Pollard et al., 2000), teachers have been ‘forced to concentrate more on whole class teaching’ (Moses, 1996; Brown, 2012). Fitting the new statutory requirements into the school day, suggest Galton et al. (1999a), places ‘too heavy an imperative on teachers to cut down the amount of pupil participation in order to “get through” the curriculum content’.

Croll (1996) argued that the way the National Curriculum applied ‘pressures to concentrate on the whole class and the class average would disadvantage’ pupils with SEND. In this reading, ‘disadvantage’ might

incorporate some element of exclusion. Indeed, my aforementioned analysis found that the total amount of time pupils with SEND spent with the teacher had decreased over time, and time with a TA had increased. The heavy implication here is that the extensive and intensive deployment of TAs to facilitate the inclusion of pupils with high-level SEND has yielded the presumably unintended consequence of replacing time with a trained teacher with time with somebody who is not.

Does this swapping out of time with different adults mean that these pupils were, as Croll says, ‘disadvantaged’? One might intuitively argue that arrangements that deny, albeit inadvertently, one group of pupils (those, in fact, in most need) time with their teacher, while ensuring no diminution – perhaps, even, an implicit increase – in the time another group of pupils have with the teacher is congruent with the model of structural exclusion (as so far described), and thus a form of disadvantage. Indeed, Giangreco and colleagues (2005) have argued that it is unlikely that a regime that produced this sort of arrangement would be tolerated for pupils without learning difficulties.

Yet while the quantitative indicators of structural exclusion are used in [Chapter 3](#) to show the degree to which pupils with high-level SEND are marginalised within schools, within classrooms and even during the course of lessons, these data expose very little about the impact of this in a qualitative sense. Given the general trends suggested by previous research, to what extent does structural exclusion affect the quality of teaching for pupils with high-level SEND, and is it to their advantage or their disadvantage? To address this, the conceptualisation of structural exclusion must be extended to account for pedagogical quality.

Pedagogical diet

As noted earlier, teaching and learning do not occur in a vacuum. ‘Pedagogical diet’, as it is termed here, is both a product and a part of structural exclusion. It is informed by and emerges from the combined effects of class size, attainment grouping, and the presence and behaviours of adults in mainstream classrooms. For example, pupils educated in sets and groups for low attainers, which necessarily include those with high-level SEND, are often provided with an impoverished curriculum and pedagogy, compared with their high-attaining peers (Hallam and Ireson, 2005; Kutnick et al., 2002; McGillicuddy and Devine, 2018).

The evidence from the DISS project confirms that there was a qualitative as well as quantitative difference between the pedagogical contexts

within which pupils with and without SEND were taught. Analyses of classroom interactions between teachers and pupils, and TAs and pupils, found that TAs were more concerned with task completion and correction than with learning, and acted reactively rather than proactively (Rubie-Davies et al., 2010). Also, TAs tended to close talk down, rather than open it up, as teachers do (Radford et al., 2011).

Importantly, none of this is to imply suspect motives. TAs' practice is driven by a compassionate and nurturing instinct. They do not want to see the pupils with whom they have formed strong bonds fall further behind. As a result, they are prone to putting pressure on themselves to ensure their young charges keep up and *feel* successful in the lesson context. The problem is that, with little or no guidance to direct them or training to support their practice, this manifests itself in unhelpful types of interaction, such as spoon-feeding and supplying answers. For more on this, see Webster et al. (2021).

Allied to TAs' interactions is differentiation, and the extent to which the tasks and activities pupils with high-level SEND undertake are sufficiently accessible or modified to meet their needs. The allocation on an EHCP or a Statement sometimes carries with it a separate or differentiated curriculum, yet pedagogical practice for pupils with SEND in mainstream settings is under-theorised and under-researched, especially in the UK (Rix et al., 2009). Indeed, it is intriguing how often and how readily differentiation is conceptualised in terms of the organisational arrangements of setting and within-class attainment grouping (Deunk et al., 2015; Graham et al., 2021).

The task of attempting to distil appropriate pedagogies for pupils with high-level SEND was beyond the scope of the study covered in this book. However, it did gather data to describe as well as possible the nature and appropriateness of teaching and support these pupils experienced on an everyday basis. As we will see in [Chapter 4](#), what was found raises some serious questions about the quality of teaching and learning experienced by pupils with high-level SEND.

The purpose and outline of this book

This chapter has concentrated on introducing the components of structural exclusion and showing – empirically and via rational theorising – how it can be used as a framework for describing and examining the experiences pupils with high-level SEND have in mainstream schools. The reader has yet to reach the presentation of results from the study

behind this book, but on the face of it, the discussion so far prompts some concerns about inclusion, fairness and discrimination in education.

The study was one of the largest involving pupils with high-level SEND ever undertaken in the UK. It did not address the identification of SEND or the reasons behind the rise in the high-needs pupil population described earlier. Nor did it cover the processes of referral, application and assessment that can lead to the awarding of an EHCP or a Statement. Instead, the study investigated what happens after one is awarded. This book is ostensibly about the experiences pupils with high-level SEND have of learning and life in school.

The point at which an EHCP, and previously a Statement, is translated into provision is a cause for concern, and an area about which surprisingly little is known in any detail. Research elsewhere suggests that parents of children with high-level SEND tend to be broadly satisfied with their child's school placement (Lamb, 2009; Skipp and Hopwood, 2016), but as we shall see, there are clear and pressing concerns and misconceptions relating to the quality and appropriateness of the provision they receive once they are in their educational setting. The 2014/15 SEND reforms appear to have done little to ameliorate this situation (HoC, 2019).

Technically speaking, the study reported here comprises two research projects, conducted between 2011 and 2017: (i) Making a Statement (MAST), which involved pupils with high-level needs in mainstream primary schools; and (ii) SEN in Secondary Education (SENSE), which tracked these pupils into secondary school, and replicated MAST in these settings.³ Results from each project were written up and published in two research reports (Webster and Blatchford, 2013a, 2017), and across four journal articles (Blatchford and Webster, 2018; Webster and Blatchford, 2013b, 2015, 2019) over a six-year period.

The organic evolution of the research programme and the incremental way in which the findings came into the world via journal articles, together with the word length limitations of those papers, meant that the breadth and depth of the study has never been captured in one place. One purpose of this book, therefore, is to pull these outputs together and provide a coherence to this body of research, which was somewhat lost in the diffusion of its reporting and publication. The impulse to write this book was, however, more than just an aesthetic exercise by an academic mildly bothered by the thought of not having done full justice to their hard-won data. The principal motivation was to provide a means for the busy reader to engage with and absorb important results and findings from across this landmark research in one concise and accessible publication.

Chapter 2 describes the research methodology and the study sample. Thereafter, the results and findings from the study make up the main body of the book.⁴ Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 use the key features of structural exclusion to show, respectively, the extent and the effects of the separation and segregation, which the study found were the hallmarks of the everyday experiences of pupils with a Statement⁵ in mainstream schools. Chapter 5 describes how structural exclusion impacts pedagogical diet, and considers whether the marginalisation described in the previous chapters is justified in terms of providing a *better* educational experience for pupils with high-level SEND. Chapter 6 explores the wider systems and forces beyond the school that inform and reinforce structural exclusion at the school level.

At the time of writing (March 2022), SEND policy in England was (once again) ‘in limbo’ (Booth, 2021). In July 2021, the government missed its third deadline to publish its long-delayed review of SEND,⁶ which it had commissioned in the wake of findings from the highly critical Education Select Committee inquiry and National Audit Office report (2019). Added to this, the disruptive effects of the Covid pandemic and the impact on wider education policy and priorities continued to reverberate. Given this unprecedented uncertainty, and the high likelihood that any detailed critique of SEND policy could quickly date the book, any such in-depth analysis has been avoided. However, the opportunity to revisit the journal articles and reports, plus the raw data, prompted a reappraisal of some of the study’s findings and conclusions. Chapter 7, therefore, contemporises the research in the context of broader trends and projections relating to SEND and inclusion that should be on policymakers’ radar. It also draws out fresh implications for schools on operationalising inclusive practice, which can be made irrespective of what may happen in the policy arena. Finally, directions for future research and some specific implications for researchers prompted by the study are discussed in Chapter 8.

Notes

1. It is unclear from the data what proportion of independent private schools included in this data set are mainstream settings and what proportion are specialist settings.
2. Although setting is often referred to as organising pupils into ‘ability’ groups, this is rather misleading because allocation is usually based on some measure of attainment. There is now a strong and commonly shared view that it can be misguided to assume pupils can be grouped on the basis of some underlying and fixed ‘ability’.
3. To aid readability, this book refers to MAST as ‘Phase One’, or ‘the primary phase’, and to SENSE as ‘Phase Two’, or ‘the secondary phase’.
4. A core purpose of this book has been to package the corpus of data from the study into the most succinct and readable form possible. A consequence of this editorial process is that the qualitative data on a small number of themes covered in the research reports (Webster and

Blatchford, 2013a, 2017) are not included in this book. These include reflections on the 2014 SEND reforms at an early stage of implementation (which now appear somewhat dated), and schools' and parents' views on transitions to, within and from secondary school.

5. The phases of data collection for the study took place either side of the SEND reforms introduced in 2014. The process of replacing Statements with EHCPs was scheduled to take three years. Progress was initially slow (Murray, 2016), and at the time the second phase of the study took place, only a very small number of pupils in the sample had their Statement converted to an EHCP. For accuracy and readability, this book hereafter uses the term 'pupil(s) with a Statement' to refer to pupils who had either a Statement or an EHCP. This term is used interchangeably with 'pupil(s) with high-level SEND' to describe the same group.
6. As this book was in the process of being typeset, the government published the review in the form of a Green Paper, called *SEND review: Right support, right place, right time* (DfE, 2022). It was too late to include the author's reflections on the proposals contained in the Green Paper in this book. However, the reader can view his response in an online article for *Tes* (Webster, 2022).

2

Methodology and sample

Overview of the research design

The data reported in this book are drawn from UK's largest longitudinal cohort study of pupils with high-level SEND. The study deployed a mixed methods design. Analyses of quantitative data on pupils' activities and their interactions with teachers, TAs and peers produced a reliable account of the moment-by-moment experiences of pupils with a Statement in mainstream primary and secondary schools. Qualitative data were collected and compiled to provide a detailed description of each pupil's experiences and stakeholders' perspectives of teaching, learning and school life in general.

There were two phases of data collection. Phase One took place in primary schools when the pupils with a Statement were in Year 5 (aged 9–10), and Phase Two took place four years later, when the pupils were in Year 9 of secondary school (aged 12–13). A researcher shadowed a pupil with a Statement over a week-long school visit. They collected observation data on the pupil and, for the purposes of comparison, on typically developing pupils too. The collection of these data was handled differently in both phases in order to reflect a key feature of structural exclusion in secondary schools: the organisation of pupils into attainment sets. Towards the end of each visit, researchers conducted interviews with the pupil with a Statement, their parent(s) or carer(s) (hereafter, parents), and the school staff involved in the pupil's education and provision. These data formed the basis of pupil-level case study reports prepared by researchers.

This chapter explains the two components of data collection – the systematic observation procedure and the case study approach – and introduces the pupils and schools in the study sample. Finally, contextual notes are provided on the analyses performed for the purposes of this book, and the presentation of results and findings in the chapters that follow.

Fieldwork

Most of the fieldwork for the first phase of the study was completed by a small team of researchers. Fieldwork capacity was supplemented and extended by deploying students on the Doctorate in Educational Psychology programme at UCL Institute of Education. The efficiency and success of this model was used to build the fieldwork force for the second phase of the study. Trainee educational psychologists (EPs) at UCL and the universities of Southampton, Birmingham, Sheffield and Manchester received a full day of training in the data collection approach, methods and tools. Assistant EPs in three LAs were also trained and collected data in schools in their areas. Data collection visits took place in the week after training, with fieldworkers operating either individually or in pairs, sharing the workload accordingly. The trainee EPs reported that they valued and gained from the experience of observing in classrooms, talking with school staff, pupils and parents, and making a meaningful contribution to a large-scale empirical research study.¹

Systematic observation

Looking in classrooms: a brief introduction to systematic observation

For decades, the classroom has provided a rich and dynamic environment for education research. Since the 1970s, defining features of classroom life have been captured with particular effectiveness and reliable accuracy using an approach called systematic observation. Systematic observation allows researchers to take snapshots of the classroom at regular intervals that focus on the observed behaviour of teachers and pupils. Mutually exclusive categories of teacher behaviour (e.g. use of statements, questions or non-verbal interactions), pupil behaviour (e.g. interactions with teachers and peers; working silently) and interactional contexts (e.g. whether the pupil is part of the class or a small group) are coded on a consistent basis, typically minute by minute.

The development of systematic observation studies in the USA in the 1970s coincided with researchers' realisation that existing efforts to describe and understand the features of effective teaching were limited. Greater emphasis was given to teachers' personality and characteristics than what they actually did in classrooms. Systematic observation studies have made a substantive contribution to the understanding of how

classroom behaviours relate to achievement (Walberg, 1991, 1995), and of how teachers can improve their classroom practices (Good and Brophy, 1974; Stallings, 1980).

Since the 1970s, a number of landmark UK studies have used systematic observation to describe what happens in classrooms. Data from these studies show, at different points in time, how teachers have organised the classroom for teaching and learning, and how pupils have experienced the curriculum, teaching and interactions with their teachers and peers. Analyses conducted using these large data sets provide valuable and objective insights into the main features of classroom life, which are often unavailable to everyday experience or received opinion. For example, results from the UK ORACLE study, by Galton et al. (1980), showed that the concerns that abounded within the political right in the early 1980s about the effects of child-centred progressive teaching methods (what they saw as excessive pupil freedoms and neglect of the literacy and numeracy ‘basics’) were largely unfounded.

Systematic observation is a technique that is not without critics. Commenting on the methods used in the ORACLE study, Barrow (1984) sought to undermine its results by claiming that the researchers had overlooked important features of teaching, like creativity, and important background pupil characteristics, such as support at home. Other critiques about the validity of systematic observation as a data collection method have come from those favouring a more qualitative, interpretative approach to classroom research. Delamont and Hamilton (1986), for example, single out the Flander’s Interaction Analysis Category System to make the point that systematic observation techniques do not take account of the intentions of the teachers and pupils whose interactions are the subject of observation. Such analyses lead to criticisms about the generalisability of results. As Blatchford et al. (2005) note, given the time-consuming nature of collecting systematic observations, analyses are typically based on total frequencies of behaviours. Therefore, conclusions made on such a basis can be somewhat limited to broad features of classroom life.

Systematic observation also has its proponents. While not oblivious to its limitations, both McIntyre and MacLeod (1986) and Croll (1986) have mounted stiff defences, arguing that systematic observation is *by design* limited in terms of capturing the more nuanced features of interactions between teachers and pupils and among peers. Consequently, systematic observation methods have been criticised for not providing data at a level of detail that they were never designed to provide. Practical considerations concerning the robustness, reliability and consistency of data must be weighed against the desirable, but comparatively less

achievable, aim of capturing the more hidden, personalised and contextualised aspects of teaching and learning. Where (i) classroom activities are straightforward to identify; (ii) behaviours under observation are limited to binary categories; and (iii) frequency measures are a meaningful expression of behaviour, ‘systematic observation techniques can be used across a large number of classrooms and a long period of time, by a large number of observers, all engaged on a common purpose’ (Croll, 1986).

The strength of the systematic observation method lies in its scale and reduced susceptibility to inflection and interpretation by individual observers. It provides a relatively straightforward, though labour-intensive, means of obtaining descriptive quantitative data. The trade-off is that the pictures painted using these data are typically achieved using broad brushstrokes. Used in conjunction with other methods of data collection, often in large-scale research studies, systematic observation can contribute to the construction of the more contextualised and more nuanced picture of classroom life.

The systematic observation procedure

The present study was largely inspired by the One in Five study (Croll and Moses, 1985). It was also informed by research in the USA from the 1980s and early 1990s by Naomi Zigmond (2006), which used explanatory observational studies to ‘look “inside the black box” at how students with learning disabilities were spending their time and at what instructional and learning opportunities were being provided for them’. Close systematic observation was considered to be the most useful way of obtaining the descriptive data needed to make reliable comparisons of the classroom contexts and interactions involving pupils with and without SEND.

The observation schedule used in the study behind this book described pupil activity on a minute-by-minute basis. The aim was to provide a rigorous, objective and replicable description of contexts and behaviour. The overall procedure used has its origins in iterations used in two earlier longitudinal studies: CSPAR (Blatchford et al., 2003a) and DISS (Blatchford et al., 2009, 2012). It is worth noting that these observation systems, in turn, had roots in the procedures and schedules used in the ORACLE and One in Five studies from decades earlier. The schedule itself consisted of a predetermined category system, with explicit definitions and exhaustive and mutually exclusive criteria for classifying behaviour and contexts.

The systematic observation procedure was the same for all pupils in all schools. The main focus of each observation period was the pupil with

a Statement; they were the object of the majority of observations completed. In each lesson (the observation period), fieldworkers discreetly observed the pupil for the first 10 seconds of each minute. Then, for the rest of that minute, they coded the interactions, activities and contextual information in operation during those 10 seconds.

In primary schools, where pupils with and without SEND were predominantly taught together in the same classroom, fieldworkers ensured that for every fifth minute of each observation period, the focus moved to a comparison pupil: a pupil without SEND, whose experiences would provide a point of reference for the data on those with a Statement. Teachers were asked to identify at least three typically developing, average-attaining pupils in their class, and one of these pupils was used as the comparator for each lesson observation. Comparison pupils were matched in terms of gender to the pupil with the Statement. In the primary phase, comparison pupils were rotated to extend the number of pupils observed, but also to accommodate possible pupil absences. As the pupil with a Statement was the priority for observation, and because only one fieldworker was deployed per visit, it was not possible to collect contemporaneous data on comparison pupils on occasions where the pupil with a Statement was outside the main classroom.

The overall observation procedure was similar for the secondary phase of the study, but anticipating that these schools would set pupils by attainment for core subjects (English, mathematics and science), the collection of data on comparison pupils typically required fieldworkers to observe in separate 'average-attaining' classes. 'Average-attaining' was defined on each school's terms. This avoided defining and applying a distinct definition of 'average' attainment, which was likely to have been problematic to operationalise and standardise between settings. Once again, with guidance from the teacher, fieldworkers selected one typically developing, gender-matched pupil to act as the comparator for lesson observations in secondary schools. Despite best efforts, it was not possible to collect observation data on typically developing pupils evenly across the secondary schools, and in a very small number of cases, comparison observations did not take place. The main reason for this was the availability of some trainee EPs. Some were only able to allocate three days to undertaking the fieldwork. In these instances, observations on pupils with a Statement in core lessons were prioritised. Where pairs of trainee EPs shared a school visit, the workload was divided so that additional observations in the average-attaining classes could be conducted.

The systematic observation schedule comprised low-inference codable items and categories in order to maximise overall consistency and agreement among many different observers. Fieldworkers recorded activities according to explicit decision rules, which formed a significant part of their training. A decision tree helped them to determine which cells on the observation schedule to tick.²

At the start of each lesson observation, fieldworkers recorded contextual items relating to the curriculum subject and, for secondary schools only, the level of attainment in the class. Instead of recording the number of pupils in the class once at the start of the lesson, or counting the names on the register, class size was recorded at regular intervals throughout each observation period. This method, called ‘experienced class size’, provides a more reliable unit for making meaningful comparisons of class sizes, because it is closely tied to a child’s experience on a within-lesson basis. The number of pupils and adults present in the room was, therefore, recorded every five minutes. All other observation categories were coded on a minute-by-minute basis. These were:

- *Location*: whether the pupil was in or away from the classroom
- *Social mode of interaction*: whether the pupil was interacting with a teacher, a TA or a classmate, or not interacting with anyone
- *Interaction context*: whether an interaction involving the pupil and either a teacher or a TA took place on a one-to-one basis, as part of a group or as part of the class
- *Group attainment*: attainment level (high, average, low or mixed) of the group the pupil was in, as defined by the teacher. This was only recorded in the primary phase.

The analyses reported in [Chapter 3](#) are based on a uniquely large data set, totalling 67,928 observations (data points), collected over 1,133 hours of observation, in 1,485 lessons (886 in primary, 599 in secondary). Fieldworkers made 57,467 observations (958 hours) of pupils with a Statement: 30,782 (513 hours) in primary, 26,685 (445 hours) in secondary. As the main focus were the pupils with a Statement, fewer observations were made of typically developing pupils. In total, 10,461 observations (175 hours) were made on comparison pupils: 4,233 (71 hours) in primary, 6,228 (104 hours) in secondary.

Inter-rater reliability

Inter-rater reliability checks assess the extent to which two or more researchers observing the same phenomenon agree with what they have

observed. In the first phase of the study, the core team of three researchers conducted two rounds of inter-rater reliability checks. The method involved the lead researcher (R1) spending half a day in a school with each of the other researchers (R2 and R3), coding observations contemporaneously. Reliability coefficients (kappa) were calculated for the main mutually exclusive categories and examined the extent of agreement between the codes recorded by R1 and R2, and by R1 and R3. Each analysis was based on three hours of observation. Results showed a consistently high or very high agreement for the main observations categories, with kappa scores of 0.80 or higher.

One of the features of the second phase of data collection was that it involved a much larger number of fieldworkers. Inter-rater reliability checks were based on the comparison of observations made between pairs of fieldworkers who shared a data collection visit. In total, 11 pairs of 22 fieldworkers coded observations contemporaneously in schools across the localities. Ten dual-coded lesson observations were selected for analysis: eight involving pupils with a Statement; two involving comparison pupils. The analysis was based on a total of 7.5 hours of observation and involved calculating the level of agreement between the codes recorded by the first and second observer. The results for the main observation variables were again consistently high, with average kappa scores of 0.81.

Pupil case studies

Given their aforementioned limitations, it is common in large-scale studies to use systematic observation in conjunction with other methods of data collection, in order to add detail and colour, tone and shade, to the broad-brush outline provided by the quantitative data. This, then, was the role of the qualitative component of the research design. For both phases of the study, each fieldworker produced a detailed case study report on each pupil with a Statement. The reports were designed to provide a more substantive picture of the educational experiences of pupils with a Statement than could be captured by the systematic observations alone.

The case study reports combined data from several sources. The principal sources, which were used as the basis for the construction of each report, were semi-structured interviews with pupils with a Statement, their parents, the school's SEND lead (the special educational needs coordinator, or SENCO), teachers and TAs. The interview questions flowed from a set of predetermined themes that addressed aspects

Table 2.1 Interviewees by school phase

	Primary	Secondary	Total
Pupils with a Statement	0	44	44
Parents/carers	33	27	60
Teaching assistants	66	54	120
Teachers	56	56	112
SENCOs	40	57	97
Other school staff	0	8	8
Total	195	246	441

of the pupil's day-to-day experience of school, of teaching and learning, and interviewees' perceptions and views on this. Variations of the same questions were put to all interviewees in all settings.³ The interviews were conducted once the fieldworker was acquainted with the situation in each school, and so better able to nuance the questions to reflect their observations. Interviews lasted between 20 minutes and an hour. A total of 441 interviews were conducted across the study. Fieldworkers interviewed 90 per cent (44 out of 49) pupils with a Statement, who were the target of observation in the secondary school phase. Fifteen (31 per cent) of those interviewed at Phase Two of the study took part in Phase One. However, pupil interviews were not conducted at the primary phase. Interviews were piloted, but pupils were too reticent for the data quality to be of much use. A breakdown of interviewees by school phase is presented in [Table 2.1](#).

The interviews were supplemented with data obtained from documentation and qualitative fieldnotes. Fieldworkers had access to documents for the pupil they shadowed, which included their Statement and associated reports, such as annual reviews. These documents provided details of each pupil's current educational needs and, where relevant, their health, care and other needs, together with descriptions of the provision in place to meet their needs. Allocations of TA support, expressed in terms of a number of hours, were also obtained from these documents. Fieldworkers kept on-going fieldnotes of qualitative observations, contextual details, thoughts and impressions on the pupil experience being observed. These notes supplemented and assisted the interpretation of data from other sources. Fieldnotes were organised in relation to a set of overarching themes, reflecting the main observation categories and those covered by the interview schedule.

The case study reports

An often-cited challenge of working with qualitative data is that they are ‘strong in reality’, but difficult to organise (Cohen and Manion, 1994). Fieldworkers, therefore, drew together the qualitative data into a pupil-level case study report, in order to provide a substantive, detailed picture of an individual’s educational experiences. Data obtained from the sources above were organised and written up according to a set of predetermined themes, which were relatable to primary and secondary settings. The themes included: the locations and contexts in which pupils with a Statement were taught; the forms of teaching and support provided by teachers and TAs; and pedagogical planning and decision-making. A total of 97 reports were compiled (48 at primary; 49 at secondary).⁴

The sample

The first phase of the study involved pupils with a Statement who were in Year 5 (9–10 years old). To begin, the lead researcher (the author) worked with LAs to identify eligible pupils. The next stage of the recruitment process involved approaching the headteachers of the schools these pupils attended to request their participation. Those willing to accommodate a field visit then kindly facilitated the process of securing permission from parents and obtaining the necessary consents and clearances. A total of 48 pupils were recruited and the data collection visits to primary schools were carried out over the 2011/12 school year.

The 2013/14 school year not only marked the point at which the Phase One pupils began secondary school, it also heralded the introduction of major reform to the SEND system in England (see [Chapter 1](#)). By the start of the following school year (2014/15), a substantially revised SEND Code of Practice had been put in place, and Statements began to be replaced by EHCPs. It was against this backdrop of transition to a new SEND system that the process of recruiting pupils and schools for the second phase of the study took place.

The research team set a recruitment target of 50 mainstream pupils with a Statement for Phase Two. The sample was constructed initially by re-recruiting as many pupils as possible from those involved in Phase One, thereby creating a longitudinal cohort. In total, 19 of the 48 pupils, 40 per cent of the original cohort, were re-recruited. The sample was topped up with pupils who were new to the study, thereby creating a

cross-sectional cohort. Local authorities were approached in the areas in and around the universities where the fieldworkers were based. For LAs that were not previously involved in the study, the process of identifying and recruiting pupils for inclusion in Phase One was repeated. Thirty additional pupils with a Statement were recruited, making a total of 49 pupils for Phase Two (one short of the target).

It is worth noting that, at the end of primary school, 11 pupils in the Phase One cohort transitioned to a special school.⁵ The remaining 18 pupils (38 per cent of the original cohort) did not participate in the second phase of the study. Half of these 18 pupils were known to have transitioned to a special school, but persistent efforts to re-recruit them were unsuccessful. The reasons for this will be familiar to education researchers. In most cases, schools (as gatekeepers) did not respond to emails and telephone calls from the research team. In the cases where they did and permission to proceed was granted, either the parent or the pupil declined to participate. The re-recruitment process revealed something unexpected and interesting about how LAs and schools tracked the destinations and whereabouts of pupils with a Statement, which is explored in [Chapter 7](#).

Characteristics of pupils with a Statement

The pupils involved in the primary phase had a Statement for either moderate learning difficulties (MLD)⁶ or behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (BESD). These categories of need were selected as they were, at the time, commonly occurring and, more relevantly, likely to allow the detection of school support factors connected to learning and classroom engagement. Other categories of need, such as hearing or visual impairment, were more likely to be affected by, and seen by schools in terms of, 'within-pupil' factors. The majority of pupils ($n=29$) had a Statement for MLD, 18 had one for BESD, and five pupils had a somewhat more complex composition of needs, of which one of the main presenting needs was either MLD or BESD.

As part of the 2014 reforms, categories of SEND were reorganised. Pupils with MLD were subsumed under the new category of cognition and learning (CL), with BESD removed altogether. Therefore, in order to ensure consistency between the two cohorts, pupils with a Statement (or an EHCP) for needs relating to CL were prioritised for recruitment to Phase Two. As noted, a total of 49 secondary-aged pupils (in Year 9) who had a Statement were recruited, the majority of whom ($n=40$) had needs relating to CL. The remaining nine pupils had a primary need in

Table 2.2 Pupils with a Statement by primary need, gender and ethnicity: primary school sample

	Boy	Girl	White	Other
Moderate learning difficulties (<i>n</i> =29)	18	11	24	5
Other need (<i>n</i> =19)	18	1	13	6
Total (<i>n</i> =48)	36	12	37	11

Table 2.3 Pupils with a Statement by primary need, gender and ethnicity: secondary school sample

	Boy	Girl	White	Other
Cognition and learning (<i>n</i> =40)	28	12	32	8
Other need (<i>n</i> =9)	6	3	8	1
Total (<i>n</i> =49)	34	15	40	9

a different category of need.⁷ The composition of the main pupil sample for each phase, in terms of primary need, gender and ethnicity, is shown in [tables 2.2](#) and [2.3](#).

In terms of the representativeness of the sample, at the point of data collection (2011/12), pupils with a Statement for MLD or BESD comprised, respectively, 11 per cent and 13 per cent of all primary-aged pupils with a Statement attending state-funded mainstream primary schools in England (DfE, [2016a](#)). Just under 10,000 pupils (17 per cent) of the 58,535 primary-aged pupils with a Statement were in Year 5: 74 per cent were boys; 26 per cent were girls. Of all primary-aged pupils with a Statement, 78 per cent were white and 22 per cent belonged to another ethnic group. The study's primary school sample was consistent with this national picture.

At the second data collection point (2015/16), pupils with a Statement for needs relating to CL accounted for 16 per cent of all pupils with a Statement attending state-funded mainstream secondary schools in England (DfE, [2016b](#)). Just under a fifth of these 50,884 pupils were in Year 9. Of these, 75 per cent were boys and 25 per cent were girls; 75 per cent were white and 25 per cent belonged to another ethnic group. The study's secondary school sample diverged marginally from these proportions.

In addition to the data on pupil characteristics shown in [tables 2.2](#) and [2.3](#), 46 per cent of the primary phase sample were known to be eligible for free school meals, and 6 per cent had a first language other

than English. These characteristics were, respectively, over-represented and under-represented in the sample, at the point of data collection. Nationally, 29 per cent of primary-aged pupils with a Statement were eligible for free school meals, and 15 per cent had a first language other than English (DfE, 2016a). Again, the proportion of secondary-aged pupils with a Statement known to be eligible for free school meals nationally (26 per cent) was slightly over-represented in the study sample (31 per cent), whilst the proportion of pupils with a first language other than English (12 per cent) was in line with the national picture (11 per cent).

Where available, data were collected on hours of support. Most secondary-aged pupils (78 per cent) had a specific number of support hours expressed on their Statement. Three-quarters (74 per cent) of these pupils had 20 or fewer hours, and 11 per cent ($n=4$) had what might be termed full-time support (e.g. 26 or more hours).⁸ It is not possible to provide a point of comparison for the primary-aged cohort as these data were not collected as part of the first phase of the study. That said, on the basis of experience and previous research (e.g. Blatchford et al., 2012), the hours of support specified on a pupil's Statement tend to remain relatively static once allocated. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to assume that similar patterns of support would have been in place when the pupils were in primary school.

Comparison pupils

The systematic observations involved collecting data on a sample of typically developing comparison pupils who were average in the class in terms of their academic attainment, and matched by gender to the pupil with the Statement. Observations were collected on a total of 263 comparison pupils. In the primary phase, the observations involved 151 pupils: 115 boys (76 per cent) and 36 girls (24 per cent). In the secondary phase, the observations involved 112 pupils: 83 boys (74 per cent) and 29 girls (26 per cent).

Characteristics of the schools

Fieldworkers visited a total of 45 primary schools across London, the south-east and the east of England in the first phase of the study. The majority of schools (84 per cent) were situated in predominantly urban areas. Most schools were two-form entry, nine were single-form entry, and a further nine schools were three-form or four-form entry. For the

best part, data collection involved tracking one pupil with a Statement per school, but in three schools, two children were tracked.

In the second phase of the study, fieldworkers visited fewer schools ($n=34$), but across a greater geographical area. In addition to the regions from Phase One, fieldworkers went to secondary schools in the West Midlands, north-west England and Yorkshire and the Humber. In 25 schools, one pupil was tracked; in five schools, two pupils were tracked; in two schools, three pupils were tracked; and in two schools, fieldworkers tracked four pupils.

In addition to these descriptive characteristics, it is worth noting that just over half of the secondary schools (53 per cent) were academies. All secondary schools were comprehensives, and all but two had a mixed gender in-take. The majority of schools (71 per cent) were located in predominantly urban areas. The size of the secondary schools varied considerably. Pupil rolls ranged from 317 to 2,187, with most schools having between 1,000 and 1,299 pupils.⁹ At the time of Phase One, only a very small proportion of primary schools in England were academies, and the pupil sample was drawn exclusively from maintained schools. Finally, five of the primary schools (11 per cent) and eight of the secondary schools (24 per cent) had an additional resource provision (ARP) for pupils with SEND, which the pupil with a Statement attended for at least part of the week.

Data analyses and the presentation of results and findings

Having so far outlined the rationale and background to the study, and described how it was carried out and who was involved, this book now arrives at the results and findings. The presentation of results combines all data for all pupils with a Statement, irrespective of need. Pupils with SEND are not, of course, a homogeneous group, but initial analyses of the observation data from Phase One indicated that there were few differences between pupils with MLD and BESD. In Phase Two, the majority of pupils (82 per cent) had a Statement for CL, so analyses of data for pupils with needs under a different category would have been limited to just two, three or four cases. Relatedly, analyses of the observation data were also conducted using the sub-sample of 19 pupils with a Statement who featured in both the primary and secondary phases of the study. The intention here was to determine the extent to which results for the longitudinal cohort were consistent with the results for the cross-sectional

cohort. Again, no meaningful differences were found. The presentation of the systematic observation data is, therefore, cross-sectional in nature, comparing the primary and secondary experiences. The experiences of the longitudinal cohort, however, can be seen as indicative of the trends found for the larger cross-sectional cohort.

The presentation of the qualitative pupil case study data is slightly different to the previous project outputs reporting on these data (Webster and Blatchford, 2015, 2019). Each phase of the research amassed a set of case study reports that extended to around 500 pages. Analysing a large volume of data requires a level of systematisation. As Walker (1993) writes, case study researchers frequently gravitate towards quantitative analyses of qualitative data in order to establish the main foci of research, by identifying the typicality and frequency of particular events, and how they are distributed among categories of people and organisational units. For the purposes of efficient interrogation, then, the case study reports at each phase of the research were arranged using predetermined headings. A sub-sample of 25 per cent of the case study reports (per phase) was used to conduct an open-ended inductive analysis, which allowed points of interest to emerge. The situations, incidences, issues, experiences and views that featured across several case studies were then used to construct detailed coding frameworks for each thematic heading. This allowed the research team to make plausible and credible generalisations, while retaining the individuality of particular cases to serve as illustrative examples of specific points. The prevalence of key and recurring features contained in the data was coded. The process of data analysis validated the selection of the predetermined headings, and these then provided a set of emergent overarching themes capturing the main findings from the case studies, for each phase. The fullest expressions of these analyses can be found in the research reports (Webster and Blatchford, 2013a, 2017).

While the aim of this book is to present the qualitative data as a coherent piece, a comprehensive reanalysis of 1,000 pages of case study data would have been a demanding exercise. It turns out that it would have been unnecessary too, and highly unlikely to reveal anything that had not yet already emerged and been reported in the earlier project publications. Instead, a pragmatic approach was taken to the reanalysis of the pupil case study data, using a thematic analysis of those data as they appear in the published outputs from across the study and in my unpublished PhD thesis, which was based on this research. The presentation of the qualitative data from the study, described across [chapters 4, 5 and 6](#) is, therefore, a conjoining and condensing of salient themes and key findings that cut across the primary and secondary pupil experience, and

organised using the overarching framework of structural exclusion set out in [Chapter 1](#). Throughout these later chapters, indications of the prevalence of issues and views across and within schools and phases replaces the quasi-quantitative approach to handling detailed and nuanced qualitative data used in the research reports with consistent terminology to convey a sense of proportionality and generalisability.¹⁰

Notes

1. A summary of reflections from the fieldworkers' who contributed to the second phase of the study can be seen in the appendix of Webster and Blatchford (2017).
2. The systematic observation schedules and decision tree can be seen in the appendices of Webster and Blatchford (2013a) and Webster and Blatchford (2017).
3. The full interview schedules for each phase of the study can be seen in the appendices of Webster and Blatchford (2013a) and Webster and Blatchford (2017).
4. Where a data collection visit was shared between two people, each fieldworker produced their own report, and these were later collapsed into a single extended-length report. The high incidence of duplication was useful in terms of corroborating evidence. Reassuringly, reports on the same pupil did not contain conflicting or contradictory data.
5. Data on these 11 pupils, who were re-recruited and included in the second round of data collection, are not reported in this book, as its focus is on the experiences of pupils with a Statement in mainstream schools. However, the results and findings on the experiences of pupils in special schools can be found in Webster and Blatchford (2017).
6. Pupils with moderate learning difficulties have greater difficulty than their peers in acquiring basic literacy and numeracy skills, and in understanding concepts. They may also have associated speech and language delay, lower self-esteem, lower levels of concentration and under-developed social skills, compared with typically developing pupils.
7. Four pupils had communication and interaction difficulties; three pupils had social, emotional and mental health difficulties; and two pupils had sensory and/or physical needs.
8. Despite intentions in the 2014 SEND reforms to move away from this practice, it remains common for provision for pupils with a Statement or an EHCP to be expressed in terms of a weekly allocation of hours.
9. Data on schools and pupil rolls were obtained from the National School Census, and were correct at April 2016.
10. The presentation of case study data uses the following terms and definitions to indicate the prevalence of phenomena: 'few' = present in 10 per cent or fewer cases; 'several'/'number of' = present in 11 to 20 per cent of cases; 'some' = present in 21 to 40 per cent of cases; 'many' = present in 41 to 50 per cent of cases; 'most' = present in 51 to 75 per cent of cases; 'majority' = present in 76 to 90 per cent of cases; 'clear majority'/'almost all' = present in 91 per cent or more cases.

3

The extent of separation and segregation

This chapter reports the study's numerical data, obtained via 1,133 hours of systematic observation. Analyses using this uniquely substantial dataset compare pictures of how teaching is organised for pupils with a Statement in mainstream primary and secondary schools, with how teaching is organised for average-attaining, typically developing pupils. These pictures of classroom contexts and composition are built up in layers that describe: (i) how children are arranged into classes and grouped within classes; (ii) class size; (iii) the number and role of the adults they share these teaching spaces with; and (iv) how frequently they interact with them and their classmates during lessons. Marked differences emerge between the two scenarios. The extent to which pupils with high-level SEND experience forms of separation and segregation are not observed for their typically developing peers. The key indicators of structural exclusion, introduced in [Chapter 1](#), are identified as the visible drivers of the varying degrees of marginalisation observed.

How schools organise teaching: setting and grouping practices

Setting by attainment

The first set of results explores how secondary schools group pupils into classes at the year group level for the purposes of teaching. To reiterate the hypothesis expressed in the [previous chapter](#), it was anticipated that pupils with a Statement would be taught in classes composed of low-attaining pupils and those with SEND, while typically developing (comparison) pupils would more often be taught alongside other

average attainers. What was of interest to the study was the extent to which pupils in secondary mainstream settings were taught with peers in similar attainment bands.

The results revealed that the predominant model for organising teaching in secondary schools was, as expected, based on the use of attainment or ‘ability’ sets. The data allow for a precise examination of the amount of time pupils with a Statement and typically developing comparison pupils spent in different attainment sets for different subjects. Comparison pupils were almost always taught in average attainment sets for the core subjects of English, mathematics and science. The propensity for setting by attainment remained high when the other English Baccalaureate (EBacc) subjects of humanities and modern foreign languages (MFL) are factored in. Typically developing pupils were taught in average attainment classes for 84 per cent of all observations made in EBacc subjects. Mixed attainment classes, on the other hand, were more common for non-EBacc subjects.

Turning to pupils with a Statement, it was found that they experienced teaching in very different classes. A clear majority of observations made in lessons for English, mathematics and science were made in low-attaining classes. For these pupils, the teaching of EBacc subjects, and indeed teaching across all subjects (64 per cent), primarily occurred in low attainment sets. Relatively few of these pupils were taught in average attainment sets, and virtually none in high attainment sets.¹ Across all subjects, pupils with a Statement were educated in mixed attainment classes in just under a third of observations (30 per cent).

The key finding in relation to the education of pupils with and without SEND in mainstream secondary schools is just how much time they spent being taught in classes with peers in similar attainment bands. This, in effect, provided a discrete educational environment for the typically developing pupils and another for those with high-level SEND. Although they shared the same registration class (e.g. form group or tutor group) at the start of the school day, they were then split out into quite different educational environments. This arrangement put a lot of emphasis on the quality of the teaching and support in the sets for low attainers (see [Chapter 5](#)).

Grouping by attainment within classrooms

In primary schools, it was found, again not surprisingly, that pupils with a Statement and comparison pupils were taught together in the same mixed attainment class. Schools, by and large, did not split out pupils

on the basis of attainment at the year group level, but they did operate a similar system *within* classrooms. For the observations in primary classrooms, fieldworkers were asked to record the attainment level of the groups in which pupils worked. When the pupils were not in a group (i.e. sitting with peers at their 'ability' group table), the coding defaulted to 'mixed attainment' to reflect the heterogeneous level of attainment of the whole class. In primary classrooms, typically developing pupils were particularly likely to be in mixed attainment groups, spending 95 per cent of observations in such groups (5 per cent of observations were in groups for average attainers). Pupils with a Statement, on the other hand, spent less time in mixed attainment groups (73 per cent), and spent 24 per cent of their time in groups for low-attaining pupils. Just 3 per cent of observations were made of pupils with a Statement in high or average attainment groups. The use of within-class attainment grouping in primary settings was much more commonplace for the teaching of English and mathematics for these pupils, compared with their typically developing peers.

Withdrawal from the class

An important discovery to emerge from the analysis of the systematic observation data was the extent to which pupils with a Statement were often educated away from the mainstream class. This was a mainly primary school phenomenon. Whereas typically developing pupils spent almost every moment of every lesson in the classroom with their teacher and each other, pupils with a Statement spent a substantial proportion of time away from the classroom. Over a quarter of all observations of these pupils (27 per cent) were made in locations away from where the main lesson and whole class teaching was taking place. On the scale that these data were collected, one can say with some confidence that the amount of time pupils with a Statement spent outside the classroom totalled more than one day per school week.

In contrast, the vast majority of observations of pupils with a Statement in secondary settings took place within the classroom (96 per cent). The main reason for this appeared to be attributable to the use of setting at the year level. All pupils were taught in a classroom, but the composition of classes for those with and without SEND was, as shown above, clearly different.

Classroom composition: who is in the classroom?

Class size

As part of the observations, fieldworkers recorded the number of pupils and adults in classrooms at regular intervals. Turning first to the pupil counts, a measure of experienced class size (see [Chapter 2](#)) was taken every fifth minute.

As noted, pupils in primary classrooms were not taught in different sets, and so the class size was the same for both groups of pupils. In secondary schools, however, class sizes varied between attainment sets. The clear finding here was that in primary schools, pupils were most often taught together in larger classes, within the range of 21 to 28 pupils (66 per cent of observations). One in five pupils (21 per cent) were taught in classes of 29 or more. The average Key Stage 2 class size at the time of the fieldwork was 27 pupils (DfE, 2012). By way of comparison, just over a third of observations (37 per cent) were made in classes of 25 to 28 children.

In secondary schools, comparison pupils were taught in classes within the range of 21 to 28 pupils for 56 per cent of observations. Just under a third of observations (31 per cent) were made in classes of 20 pupils or fewer. Pupils with a Statement, however, were taught in classes within the range of 21 to 28 pupils less often (23 per cent of the time). Overall, they were more commonly found in smaller classes. A clear majority of observations involving these pupils (74 per cent) were made in classes of 20 or fewer. Moreover, just over half of the time (56 per cent), pupils with a Statement were taught in classes of 16 pupils or fewer, and 38 per cent of the time, they were in classes of 12 or fewer. The average secondary school class size at the time of the fieldwork was 20.4 pupils (DfE, 2016c). This, however, is not terribly instructive, as class sizes are not consistent across year groups or subjects in secondary settings. The reason for this – and the key factor in the differential seen above between pupils with and without SEND – is the propensity for pupils to be set on the basis of attainment.

A finer-grained analysis of the observation data found that comparison pupils tended to be taught in average attainment classes containing at least 21 pupils for 73 per cent of the time. In contrast, the much smaller classes in which pupils with a Statement were most often found were low attainment sets. The vast majority of observations of the low attainment classes (92 per cent) in which these pupils were taught comprised 20 pupils or fewer. Over three-quarters of observations (77 per cent) were

made in classes containing 16 pupils or fewer, and just over half (55 per cent) were in classes of 12 or fewer.

Teachers and teaching assistants

In addition to regulating the number of pupils in the physical space of the classroom, schools can, in effect, reduce class size by adjusting the adult–pupil ratio. This is typically achieved by introducing an extra adult into the classroom to supplement the teacher, in the form of a TA. As part of the observation process, fieldworkers kept a routine count (i.e. every five minutes) of the number of teachers and TAs in the room.

In around three-quarters of observations of lessons in primary classrooms (73 per cent) – where pupils were taught together – there was at least one teacher and at least one TA present. What one might call the historical arrangement of just one teacher leading the class occurred in only 14 per cent of observations. In contrast, this same traditional arrangement was common in the majority of lessons involving typically developing pupils (75 per cent) in secondary settings. In 23 per cent of observations, the teacher leading the lesson was joined by at least one TA. However, the inverse held for lessons involving pupils with a Statement. As with the data from primary schools, in 73 per cent of observations at least one teacher and at least one TA were present. Only a quarter of the time (24 per cent) were there no TAs in the room.²

Putting together the data on the composition of secondary classrooms, it is possible to conclude that typically developing pupils were generally taught in homogeneous, average attainment classes by one teacher, whereas pupils with a Statement tended to be taught in much smaller homogeneous, low attainment classes with a teacher and one TA in the room. The lower number of pupils and the inclusion of an additional adult worked together to ensure lower class sizes for pupils with a Statement and those taught alongside them, many of whom were also on the school's SEND register. These results bring home just how much the presence of TAs has become an established feature of classroom life in mainstream schools.

Pupils' interactions with teachers, teaching assistants and peers

Having used the data from the study to describe the classroom set-ups in primary and secondary schools, let us now consider the interactions pupils with and without SEND had in each setting. These results are

structured around four social modes: (i) pupils interacting with teachers; (ii) pupils interacting with TAs; (iii) pupils interacting with their peers; and (iv) pupils not interacting with anybody.³ These social modes are mutually exclusive and exhaustive; that is, in practice, the codable options covered all eventualities, and fieldworkers could only code one option in each observation interval. Tables 3.1 and 3.2 present the data for the four social modes for the typically developing comparison pupils and those with a Statement, at primary and secondary phase, respectively. The columns labelled *n* give the number of observations

Table 3.1 Interactions by social mode, location and pupil type: primary school sample

	Typically developing				Statement			
	In class		In class		Out of class		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Teacher interaction	1,677	40%	8,028	26%	1,530	5%	9,558	31%
TA interaction	93	2%	4,520	15%	3,923	13%	8,443	27%
Peer interaction	1,361	32%	4,114	13%	1,396	5%	5,510	18%
No interaction	1,102	26%	5,856	19%	1,418	5%	7,274	24%
Total interaction	4,233	100%	22,518	73%	8,267	27%*	30,785	100%

* 2% (*n*=586) of all observations (*n*=30,785) of pupils with a Statement in primary settings were made in an additional resource provision

Table 3.2 Interactions by social mode, location and pupil type: secondary school sample (in-class data only)

	Typically developing		Statement	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Teacher interaction	2,918	47%	11,305	42%
TA interaction	33	1%	4,045	15%
Peer interaction	1,672	27%	4,137	16%
No interaction	1,605	26%	6,186	23%
Total interaction	6,228	100%	25,673	96%*

* 4% (*n*=1,012) of all observations (*n*=26,685) of pupils with a Statement in secondary settings were made outside the classroom

(data points) per interaction type for each pupil group, while the adjacent columns indicate proportionality. While observers recorded whether interactions with teachers and TAs occurred when the pupil was part of the whole class, part of a group, or on a one-to-one basis, these data are not included in [tables 3.1](#) and [3.2](#), but the main results of analyses using these data are discussed below.

To return to location momentarily, [Table 3.1](#) reflects the fact that in primary schools, observations of comparison pupils were only made in the classroom, but observations for pupils with a Statement occurred inside and away from the classroom. [Table 3.1](#) shows the striking finding, mentioned earlier, that pupils with a Statement spent 27 per cent of their time away from the mainstream primary classroom. As only a very small proportion of observations of secondary pupils with a Statement (4 per cent) were made outside the classroom, these data are not included in [Table 3.2](#).

Turning to the four social modes, the analyses revealed some clear similarities in how time was distributed between the comparison pupils in each school phase. [Table 3.1](#) shows that in primary classrooms, typically developing pupils interacted with teachers in 40 per cent of observations, 2 per cent with TAs, 32 per cent with peers, and 26 per cent of the time they did not interact with anybody. Results for comparison pupils in secondary settings, shown in [Table 3.2](#), were broadly similar: they interacted with teachers in just under half of all observations (47 per cent), barely interacted with TAs (1 per cent), and in just over a quarter of observations each, they interacted with peers (27 per cent) and did not interact with anybody (26 per cent).

Turning to the time pupils with a Statement spent in the four social modes in primary classrooms (see [Table 3.1](#)), they spent 26 per cent of observations interacting with the teacher, 15 per cent with TAs, 13 per cent talking with peers and 19 per cent of the time not interacting. In contrast, at secondary (see [Table 3.2](#)), pupils with a Statement spent 42 per cent of the time interacting with teachers, 15 per cent with TAs, 16 per cent talking with classmates and 23 per cent not interacting. So, by the time they reached secondary school, the balance of pupils' classroom interactions had shifted. A greater proportion of interactions were with teachers, while the proportion of time spent interacting with TAs was virtually unchanged. Compared with their typically developing peers, the difference in the amount of interaction pupils with a Statement had with their teachers in secondary classrooms (47 per cent vs 42 per cent) was not as marked as it was at primary (40 per cent vs 26 per cent).

For pupils with a Statement, time spent away from the primary classroom mainly involved interactions with TAs. Indeed, as shown in

Table 3.1, in this context, they were 2.5 times more likely to interact with a TA than with a teacher (13 per cent vs 5 per cent). Although these data are not included in **Table 3.2**, it was found that in secondary school, pupils with a Statement were almost four times more likely to interact with a TA than with a teacher when outside the classroom.

At both time points it was clear that pupils with a Statement spent less time interacting with their classmates, compared with their typically developing peers. **Table 3.1** shows overall that, at primary, comparison pupils had getting on for twice as many opportunities for peer interaction than pupils with a Statement: 32 per cent vs 18 per cent. **Table 3.2** shows that at secondary, the difference was somewhat less marked, but noteworthy nonetheless: 27 per cent vs 16 per cent. These results suggest that the greater proportion of interactions with TAs occurred at the expense of interactions with peers, and to a lesser but no less important extent, with teachers.

Though not included in the tables, the overall balance of interactions with teachers and TAs occurring as part of the class, as part of a group, or on a one-to-one basis was similar across the phases for pupils with and without SEND. Interactions with teachers in primary and secondary settings were most often as part of the class. A finer-grained look at the admittedly small amount of data on interactions in groups showed that pupils with a Statement in secondary settings were as likely to work in a group with a TA as with a teacher, whereas, in primary settings, they were twice as likely to be working in a group with a TA than with a teacher. For pupils with a Statement, interactions with TAs at both time points occurred much more commonly on an individual basis. It is worth remarking that almost one in five of all the interactions involving pupils with a Statement in primary settings were on a one-to-one basis with a TA. In secondary settings, the equivalent proportion was 14 per cent. To reiterate, typically developing pupils had vanishingly few interactions with TAs in any context.

Group size

Although pupils in both primary and secondary settings were found to work less frequently in groups, this is an important social context for teaching, learning and, of course, peer interaction. In each phase of the study, fieldworkers were asked to record the size of the group pupils were working in. Only instances where a teacher or TA was working with the group were counted. This was handled slightly differently for each phase of the study. To simplify matters in primary classrooms, group size was coded

using two broad categories: small groups (comprising two to six pupils) and medium groups (comprising seven to 11 pupils). In both cases, group size included the pupil who was the target of observation. In secondary schools, however, the research team hypothesised (and the data confirmed) that the size of the class pupils with a Statement were taught in would vary with the ones in which their average-attaining, typically developing peers were taught. That being so, relative terms like 'small size' and 'medium size' were thought to be less instructive. So, group size was recorded in terms of the actual number of pupils in the group, including the pupil who was the target of observation.

Although the overall number of observations of comparison pupils was low, both they and those with a Statement were more likely to be working in small groups in primary settings (82 per cent and 83 per cent of observations, respectively). However, comparison pupils were three times more likely to work with a teacher in a group than with a TA. Regardless of group size, pupils with a Statement spent marginally more time working in groups away from the class than in the class (53 per cent vs 47 per cent). In these out-of-class contexts, they were slightly more likely to be working with a TA than with a teacher (29 per cent vs 24 per cent). However, inside the classroom, pupils with a Statement were almost 2.5 times more likely to be working in a group supported by a TA than by a teacher (33 per cent vs 14 per cent).

Again, although the total number of observations of comparison pupils in secondary settings was low, they were most frequently found to be working with teachers in groups of up to four pupils (87 per cent), and they hardly ever worked in groups with a TA. Pupils with a Statement also tended to be in smaller groups when working with teachers – mostly pairs or groups of three – but unlike their typically developing peers, they were almost as likely to work in a group with a TA as with a teacher (49 per cent vs 51 per cent, respectively). This finding contrasts with what was found in primary, where pupils with a Statement were much more likely to be in a group working with a TA than with a teacher.

Direction of pupils' interactions with adults

The observation data allowed further analyses of adult–pupil interactions across social modes in terms of the direction of the interaction; that is, whether the talk flowed from adult to pupil or from pupil to adult. The former would typically represent times when the teacher or TA is explaining something or providing instruction to the pupil, and the latter

represents times when the pupil would, for example, respond to the adult by making a comment or answering or asking a question.

In primary settings, pupils with a Statement had many more opportunities for pupil-to-adult interaction compared with their typically developing peers (14 per cent vs 3 per cent), and they were much more likely to be talking to a TA than to a teacher. Once again, TAs were a rare feature in the moment-by-moment experiences of typically developing pupils. Additional analyses found that when in the primary classroom, a pupil with a Statement was over three times more likely to direct an interaction to a TA than a teacher. When outside the class, they were 10 times more likely to direct an interaction towards a TA than a teacher, though this had a considerable amount to do with the greater presence of TAs and the relative absence of teachers in these contexts.

In secondary schools, observations of interactions between adults and pupils were captured differently from the way they were recorded in primary schools. Fieldworkers coded whether the pupil played an active role in the interaction ('focus') or had a passive role ('audience'). A pupil was the focus of an interaction when an adult was talking specifically to them, or vice versa, whether individually, in a group or as part of the class. A pupil was in the 'audience' mode when the adult was talking to another pupil, or all pupils in a group, or the whole class in which the target pupil was included.

Analyses of these observation data by adult type, both in and out of the secondary school mainstream class, found that the pupils with a Statement were a little more likely to be the focus of the teacher's attention, compared with their typically developing peers (17 per cent vs 13 per cent), and less likely to be part of the audience (54 per cent vs 86 per cent). Pupils with a Statement were, however, much more likely to receive individualised attention (i.e. to be the focus of attention) in their interactions with TAs than they were in their interactions with teachers (26 per cent vs 17 per cent). As shown in [Table 3.2](#), typically developing pupils had a very limited number of interactions with TAs.

Some caution is required here, because the observations on levels of interaction were handled differently in the two phases of the study, so the data are not directly comparable. Nonetheless, assuming that pupil-to-adult talk is a sign of a more active form of engagement in interactions – and, by contrast, adult-to-pupil talk indicates a more passive experience – then the results at both primary and secondary suggest that pupils with a Statement had a more active role in their interactions with TAs than they did with teachers.

Summary

The results of the systematic observation study reported in this chapter show a distinct, quantitative difference between the everyday experiences pupils with a Statement have of mainstream primary and secondary schools, compared with their typically developing peers. Pupils with high-level SEND have an experience of day-to-day school life that is characterised by varying degrees of exclusion. From physical withdrawal from the classroom for large parts – even all – of the lesson, to more subtle, momentary forms of interruption to their learning, it is clear that pupils with a Statement have an experience of education that is characterised by separation and segregation.

The educational experiences of primary-aged pupils with a Statement were epitomised by a separation from the classroom, their teacher and their peers. This was most striking in the data showing the proportion of time these children spent being taught away from the classroom – the equivalent of more than one day a week. Primary classes were ostensibly composed of children from across the attainment range, but they were often clustered into small, within-class groups. While most children sat in mixed attainment groups, those with a Statement were often grouped with pupils identified as low-attaining and/or as having SEND. Consequently, they did not experience teaching in mixed attainment groups as frequently as their typically developing peers.

At secondary school, pupil cohorts were divided into classes on the basis of attainment. Pupils with a Statement were, in the main, split out and taught in low attainment classes, while typically developing pupils were grouped together and taught in average attainment classes. A key conclusion from the study, therefore, is that the discrete educational environments that secondary schools created for typically developing pupils and those with a Statement – and indeed pupils with SEND more generally – had more in common with a system of streaming, which was common in schools in the 1950s and 1960s, than with setting.

A second key conclusion is observable in the results combining setting arrangements, class size and the presence of TAs in secondary classrooms. While typically developing pupils were mainly taught together in homogeneous, average-attaining classes by one teacher, pupils with a Statement tended to be taught together in much smaller homogeneous, low attainment classes with a teacher and one TA in the room. The lower number of pupils and the inclusion of an additional adult worked together to ensure lower class sizes for pupils with SEND. This perhaps explains why pupils with a Statement in secondary settings were as likely

to work in a group with a teacher and with a TA, whereas in primary settings, the groups in which pupils with a Statement found themselves were mainly supported by TAs.

Finally, there were marked differences in the proportions of time pupils with a Statement in each phase interacted with teachers, TAs and peers in the classroom, compared with typically developing pupils. The broad trend was that for pupils with a Statement, interactions with TAs occurred at the expense of interactions with the teacher and peers, with the greatest differences observed in primary classes. In contrast to their interactions with teachers, pupils with a Statement were, at both phases, more likely to be the focus of attention in their interactions with TAs. Overall, typically developing pupils had comparatively little interaction with TAs, which in turn allowed for more interaction with their teachers and peers.⁴

Mainstream schools have invested significant amounts of resource and credibility in building and maintaining what are alleged to be inclusive experiences for pupils with high-level SEND. Yet when characterised in terms of the organisational arrangements of class size, attainment grouping and the relative amounts of time spent with teachers and TAs, what emerges are degrees of marginalisation that not only render these claims somewhat illusory, but also raise serious concerns about the model of inclusion evident within English schools. The question that begins to arise is: what impact do these organisational arrangements have for the pupils with high-level needs who are on its receiving end?

Having used the numerical data from the study to quantify the extent of the structural exclusion that pupils with a Statement experience from day to day, moment by moment, in mainstream settings, the [next chapter](#) turns to accounts from the qualitative data that begin to describe its effects.

Notes

1. These data represented observations of only one pupil in one humanities lesson.
2. Percentages may not sum to 100 per cent due to rounding off.
3. Instances of pupils 'not interacting' were typically defined as moments when they were getting on with their class work. This coding category also covered the less common instances of pupils being harmlessly off task (i.e. fiddling, daydreaming, etc.).
4. It is worth reminding the reader that fieldworkers in primary schools were asked to make continuous lesson observations on the pupil with a Statement. So, if the pupil left the classroom to work elsewhere, the fieldworker followed. As they could not be in two places at once, it was not possible to record what was happening in the main lesson in their absence. These missing data might underplay the composition of interaction experiences typically developing pupils experienced. They could, for example, have had slightly more time in groups with teachers, and slightly less time talking with their peers, than these results suggest. However, were it possible to include these missing data in these analyses, the trends apparent in the results would most likely remain intact.

4

The effects of separation and segregation

The observation data revealed the marked differences in the experience pupils with a Statement have of mainstream education, compared with their typically developing peers. Put simply, they experience a level of separation and segregation that was routine to them, yet virtually unknown to their classmates. However, to truly understand its effects requires an in-depth analysis of the qualitative data that were accumulated alongside the systematic observations. This chapter, then, draws on these data to show how schools viewed the structural arrangements that led to the forms of marginalisation described in [Chapter 3](#), and how this was perceived and experienced by pupils with a Statement.

Effects of setting and grouping by attainment

There was a universal view across secondary school staff interviewed for the study that setting pupils for core and EBacc subjects optimised teaching environments for those with and without SEND. The smaller-sized classes in which pupils with a Statement were predominantly educated provided a quieter and calmer learning environment, compared with the larger classes in which typically developing pupils were taught. As a TA described:

His class is a Foundation class [of 10 pupils]. It models the primary school format in that they are taught most core subjects together. For other subjects – PE, music and drama – they are integrated within the year group ... If we had to put him into a bigger class, his progress would have been a lot slower. (Secondary TA)

It was interesting to note that in most cases, secondary school staff described the use of smaller-sized, 'streamed' classes as the 'first level of differentiation' for pupils with a Statement. The organisation of cohorts into attainment groups – what might be termed a structural approach to differentiation – was seen to obviate the need for differentiation at the lesson task level. Some SENCOs reported that teachers were not able to differentiate tasks effectively:

I think the setting helps because Alisha¹ will be in lower bands. She's in lower groups; she doesn't actually need differentiation. (Secondary SENCO)

The SENCO recognised that many teachers did not know how to differentiate effectively, which had an impact on pupils with SEND. He felt the provision was differentiated, as many classes Bryn attended were streamed. (Secondary case study report)

The low attainment classes in which pupils with SEND were most frequently educated were referred to in many cases as 'low ability' groups. This somewhat freighted term carries implicit meanings about innate and fixed levels of aptitude. Perhaps worse still, pupils and adults alike used the term 'bottom set' almost as regularly. Even though the latter term in particular was used quite casually in interviews, there was evidence that some pupils felt there was a stigma in being taught in these classes, and that this possibly restricted opportunities that were routinely available to their peers in other classes:

I don't really like telling my friends that I'm in the bottom set, because I think they would find me different. I don't find it comfortable telling my friends. (Secondary pupil)

It's alright, but I don't like being in a lower class. People start being rude, they say rude things, and I want to go to a higher one, so then I can do a proper test. (Secondary pupil)

Effects of being withdrawn from the class

As the systematic observations revealed, pupils with a Statement spent over a quarter of their time away from the mainstream classroom. A few pupils were withdrawn to receive therapies to support their speech and

language development, or physical development. Mostly, however, this physical separation was connected to curriculum delivery. Pupils who struggled with the mainstream coverage, and who lacked basic skills in reading and/or numeracy, or who had fallen behind in one or both of these areas, were often withdrawn from the classroom to participate in an intervention or ‘catch-up’ programme. These were timetabled sessions, typically led by TAs, which ran parallel with the class’s daily schedule.

In both settings – though much more in primary than secondary – pupils with a Statement were withdrawn from lessons in order to provide them with a quieter, less distracting environment in which to focus and concentrate on their classwork (that is, the tasks the teacher had set for the lesson). Again, pupils were accompanied by a TA. In a few cases, teachers said that removing the pupil with a Statement from the class to work with a TA was necessary, as keeping them in the class risked ‘holding other children back’:

If it’s noisy, she’s easily distracted. So, if you want the best from her, I think by being somewhere quieter, she will benefit more from that.
(Primary SENCO)

There were arrangements in place in some primary and secondary schools whereby teachers gave TAs permission to withdraw the pupil(s) they supported because of distress or disruption. They would safely remove the pupil from the lesson and attend to them outside. In a few cases, mainly in secondary schools, pupils could be removed from the classroom due to poor behaviour, or they could ask to leave if they felt anxious or upset:

Sometimes we might go in the library, and I might just read a story to her, or she might read to me. It’s just getting her back and refocused. But sometimes she might just need that time out. (Primary TA)

Oftentimes, in secondary settings, the learning support department was described as a ‘safe space’ to which pupils with a Statement could go when they were withdrawn or removed from the mainstream classroom. There was a balance to be struck between the appropriate use of the learning support room as a place to retreat and reset, and routine or excessive use, which could add to the extent and effects of marginalisation:

[Learning Support] is like a double-edged sword. It gives them safety and security, but then sometimes it becomes all encompassing, so are we stopping them from going out and facing the world, and making friends. (Secondary SENCO)

As the comment above implies, there were unintended consequences of withdrawing pupils with a Statement from the classroom. Some staff were mindful of the potentially stigmatising effect withdrawal could have:

He does not like to be out of the classroom. So, when he does the one-to-one work ... he will just speed through it and just be desperate to go back. Or increasingly truculent about coming out, and it's not then purposeful to work with him. (Primary SENCO)

Other primary TAs tended to believe that pupils valued the opportunity to work away from the classroom in a smaller group; as one TA put it: 'it's special to them and they enjoy it'. Yet the composition of some withdrawal groups at times worked against the achievement of learning or developmental objectives. For instance, programmes for pupils with speech and language difficulties delivered away from the class only involved pupils with these needs. The logic behind this was akin to the logic behind attainment grouping, yet by not including classmates with good communication skills, these pupils were left to practise their speech and language skills with peers who had the same difficulties.

Perhaps because they were withdrawn from the class less often than those in primary settings, secondary-aged pupils with a Statement seemed less troubled about the stigmatising effect of withdrawal, and more concerned that they were missing out on teaching. It was not entirely clear the extent to which pupils had a say in, or resisted, being withdrawn from the class, but the high levels of complicity may have been indicative of low levels of pupil agency. Either way, there was good evidence from a number of case studies that withdrawal put them at a disadvantage when it came to making sense of lesson coverage and the tasks set by teachers:

I like staying in class and learning more about stuff I really need to. I don't really like going out ... I don't mind doing it in a lesson I don't like, but if it's a lesson I like, I want to stay in there, but then I have to go [out]. Then I just get annoyed that I have to go. (Secondary pupil)

I'm not as involved as everyone else, because they've been in there longer and understood [the lesson/task]. (Secondary pupil)

Sometimes I miss valuable information [when not] in the classroom. It's better to learn in class, because the teacher knows more than the LSA [learning support assistant], probably, about that subject. (Secondary pupil)

Effects of being supported by a TA

The results of the systematic observations made it clear that the educational experiences of pupils with a Statement were strongly associated with the near-constant accompanying presence of a TA, and that this had implications for the patterns of separation and segregation. The unintended, isolating consequences of this widespread model of support for pupils with high-level SEND were not lost on a number of the TAs interviewed for the study.

When you have a child on a Statement, it can be very alienating if they're always working with one LSA. That's not healthy ... No-one would want to work solely, 20 hours a week with one person, singularly, without any personal involvement in the school community. (Primary TA)

In this context, the comment above from the secondary pupil about missing valuable information is revealing in an additional way. It indicates the different levels of subject and instructional expertise possessed by teachers and TAs, and hints at the more varied – and not necessarily better – pedagogical diet pupils with a Statement received, compared with their typically developing peers. The [following chapter](#) considers the relative 'healthiness' of this diet.

Although primary-aged pupils with a Statement were more often than not in the same mainstream teaching and learning environment as their peers, there was a strong tendency for them to be in the class, but not *of* the class. Supplementary notes from open-ended observations in classrooms, reported in many of the case studies, showed that pupils with a Statement experienced subtle forms of 'within-class exclusion', which typically developing pupils did not experience. There were two main expressions of this, both involving TAs.

The first expression related to the intensity of TA support. A key conclusion, based on the observational data, was that the high degree of pupils' one-to-one interaction with TAs occurred at the expense of interactions with the teacher in whole-class contexts. The tendency for the TA to repeat the teacher's talk verbatim to the pupil(s) they support as the teacher was speaking had the effect of the TA's talk cutting across the ongoing interaction with (or talk from) the teacher. This phenomenon has been labelled 'stereo teaching' (Webster and Blatchford, 2015).

The second subtle form of within-class exclusion was the use of a workstation: a desk positioned at the side or back of the classroom, away

from peers, at which the pupil with a Statement could work relatively distraction-free, and very often with support from a TA. Common mainly in primary settings, this set-up constituted another form of separation from classmates and the teacher. However, in at least a few cases, the needs of the pupil – and, it was said, the collective needs of the class – were such that the use of a workstation appeared to represent the best possible arrangement: distractions were minimised for all, and the pupil's own anxieties about sitting for long periods with other children were alleviated. Similarly, one secondary pupil who had sensory needs had a specially made 'dark room' to help her to concentrate for longer periods.

Summary

The case study data reported here add depth to what was revealed in the results from systematic observations, and offer early insights into the impact of the separation and segregation experienced by pupils with a Statement. The stigmatisation that radiates from commonly occurring arrangements is particularly arresting; in particular, feeling the weight of the socially awkward label of being 'in the bottom set', and the lack of say pupils with a Statement appear to have in where and by whom they are taught. These effects are not benign, nor can they be easily dismissed.

So, in terms of the effects revealed here and via the systematic observation data, is structural exclusion defensible? It seems that for pupils with a Statement, these organisational arrangements produce not just a quantitatively different experience of mainstream education, but also a qualitatively different experience. They are on the receiving end of forms of teaching and support to which their typically developing peers are not exposed. This feeds into the sense that the reality and the rhetoric of inclusion are quite different. It is an important theme to which this book will return, but setting this aside for now, there is a vital question that the results and findings presented so far raise: do these arrangements lead to a *better* pedagogical experience for pupils with a Statement? This question is the starting point for the [next chapter](#).

Note

1. The names of pupils have been changed throughout the book.

5

Pedagogical diet

The analyses presented in [Chapter 3](#) show how two distinct educational worlds seem to coexist in the same mainstream setting. Many readers would recognise the architecture of the world within which typically developing pupils are educated as indicative of a mainstream education. However, the one that shapes and defines the world that pupils with a Statement inhabit is markedly different. Central to this difference are TAs. While TAs were a near-constant fixture in the lesson-to-lesson, moment-to-moment lives of pupils with a Statement, they barely registered in the daily lives of typically developing pupils. Given the results of the systematic observations, it is logical to ask whether this makes a material difference to the experience pupils with high-level SEND have of teaching and learning, and in particular, whether the interactions they have with TAs enhances their pedagogical experience, or otherwise. An examination of the qualitative data from the pupil case studies on the nature and quality of the support provided by TAs in mainstream settings provides an answer to this question and is the main focus of this chapter. Two main elements are considered: (i) providing instruction; and (ii) more procedurally, keeping pupils on task. Revisiting a theme from the [previous chapter](#), this chapter concludes with a summary of the data on pupils' views on the effect and pedagogical value of TA support.

Providing instruction: 'live differentiation'

The allocation and presence of a TA and, in particular, the way in which they provided what might be called 'live differentiation' through their interactions with pupils was a clear and consistent theme across the majority of the case studies. TAs modified and verbally annotated the teacher's talk in ways that made curriculum content, tasks and instructions more accessible. Their decision-making was informed by what they

thought the pupil would be able to access, understand and achieve at any one moment in any single lesson.

In primary classrooms, the two key features of live differentiation were the modification of the teacher's whole-class delivery (e.g. simplifying or breaking things down; setting smaller targets), and repetition. In secondary classrooms, TAs mainly reinforced and (to a lesser degree) extended what the teacher had said by clarifying and repeating information for pupils and asking them questions intended to check their knowledge and understanding:

Task simplification ... breaking tasks down and just getting Charlie going by setting him off in some way. (Secondary TA)

Deanna doesn't understand the language that the class teacher will say. So [the TA] will just pick out the important words and just say: 'Right, you've just got to go and do this, and put that there and there and there.' (Primary SENCO)

Just very simple language ... Try and break it down into information chunks. (Primary TA)

You have to tailor your language as if you were talking to a younger child, just to make sure she has understood. (Primary teacher)

Re-explaining tasks, helping him to make sense of what has been asked of him; breaking tasks down and just getting Eddie going by setting him off in some way. (Secondary TA)

The need for repetition was, in most cases, ascribed to pupils having poor retention skills:

He normally does need it repeating to him, and it does need to be very specific and what you're going to do first; what you're going to do second ... so small steps. (Primary TA)

He does tend to forget quite a lot; and if I don't reinforce it, it tends to go the next week. (Primary TA)

He needed somebody there to be able to explain things when they've had an input, to reinforce things afterwards ... because he cannot do it for himself. (Primary SENCO)

TAs filtered the teacher's front-of-class talk in the moment. They made judgements about which aspects of the talk they thought pupils could comprehend, and where they deemed it necessary, reinterpreted or

rephrased words and phrases in ways they felt the pupils would understand. Some TAs said that this form of ‘thinking on the spot’ was challenging and stressful. The metaphor of ‘bridging’ was mentioned by some interviewees, and it was interesting to note how a number of qualified teachers recognised that modulating teaching talk and differentiating tasks in this way was a considerable skill:

The TA is the bridge ... I see her as bridging what I do for the whole class, into something for Farouk, adapting it for his needs. (Secondary teacher)

Teachers are expected to move things on at quite a fast pace, and you get children with SEN who cannot move at that pace. It’s very difficult and it takes a lot of skill to pitch down what you want those children to do, so that you’re helping them to move on to the next step. And that’s a real skill. (Primary SENCO)

Keeping pupils on task

An aspect of TAs’ talk allied to live differentiation was how they prompted and coaxed pupils in order to keep them on task and focused during lessons. In many case studies, this seemed to be a strong feature of intensive TA support, and an essential function of their role in the minds of teachers and a number of parents:

He does need someone to say: ‘Right, what have you got to do first?’ And then if he can’t understand a process, [the TA] will explain it to him and go through it with him. (Primary teacher)

The TA is there to make sure that he is focused. Basically, making sure he’s staying on task and he understands what the task is. (Primary teacher)

In terms of his attention, making sure he stays on task and his attention doesn’t wander off. (Parent of secondary pupil)

Descriptions of how TAs aided task behaviour were frequently accompanied by accounts of how they avoided pupils becoming dependent on their support, and how to leave space for them to attempt tasks and complete work independently. In many of the cases from primary schools, TAs were described as having a role in building the reserves of independence and self-confidence of the pupils they supported:

[The TA] is there mainly to give him the independence skills. She's supporting him, but she doesn't spoon-feed him. She asks him questions like, 'What do you need to do next?' and 'What should be here?', to really get him to think for himself. (Primary teacher)

[TAs] guide him and, rather than telling him, they will suggest things so that he's got to use his own mind to move forward with things. (Parent of primary pupil)

While fostering independence and avoiding dependence was hardly mentioned in relation to the teachers' role, it was clear that when it came to TAs, there were tensions in terms of where and how this balance was struck, and what effect providing – or not providing – support might have on an individual pupil:

It's not always the case, but the TAs are not supposed to sit with the kids. They're supposed to be in the class, letting them get on with things, but offering support when it's needed. (Secondary SENCO)

At the moment [the TA] is trying to step back and encourage him to do things more independently. So, she's there a lot for moral support for him; he loses a lot of confidence when she's not around, or there's not an adult around that he knows is there for him. And he's less willing to have a go at things and he worries more, so then he's able to focus less. (Primary SENCO)

The systematic observation schedule did not explicitly capture instances of pupils working independently, but the results on the proportions of time they were observed not interacting with either adults or classmates suggest that pupils with a Statement had fewer opportunities to work unaided or uninterrupted, compared with typically developing peers. The difference between the two groups was more marked in primary classrooms (see [Table 3.1](#)).

Evidence from many case studies provided a sense that practices to allow and to support pupil independence varied. Imagining a continuum, at one end lies what might be called 'spoon-feeding', and at the other are features of TAs' practice that allowed pupils time and space to work on their own, thus allowing them to experience and build independence incrementally:

Gino mentioned he likes working with TAs as they 'tell him all the answers'. (Secondary case study report)

If I have an assistant in maths, they will come to me in the first three questions and see I've done it [correctly], so they just leave me to it and by the end of it I've got onto the extension work and maybe finished that. (Secondary pupil)

He's got a lot of confidence now and he picks the hard tasks now ... He knows what the bigger picture is, so he can see where it's all headed. He's constantly like: 'How do I get this grade?'; 'How do I get that grade?' ... He's not confident in his assessment of his own work, but he's confident in that he can push himself sometimes. (Secondary teacher)

Pupils' views on TA support

Pupils were only interviewed during the secondary phase of the study. Positive comments about TA support were at a fairly general level. By and large, most pupils said they 'liked' working with TAs, but their explanations did not go much deeper than this. The excerpt above involving Gino is a reminder that some of the reasons that pupils like TA support can be quite nuanced.

With reference to promoting independence, there was evidence that while some pupils were given space to attempt tasks on their own, others felt restricted by the presence and practices of TAs. A number of pupils voiced quite strong opinions on what it was like to have TAs providing too much, often unsolicited, help. Particularly evident in these comments was the stigmatising effect of TA support, and how it narrowed experiences and opportunities in a way that affected only those with high-level needs, and not their peers:

It annoys me though, because sometimes I think they [TAs] speak to me like I'm dumb. Because they're saying, 'Do you know what that is?' and it's easy work. But then they think I don't understand, when I probably understand more than most other people. They just sit next to me when other people don't get it. (Secondary pupil)

Sometimes when I don't need them [TAs], I'm like: 'Go away. I don't need the help.' (Secondary pupil)

Sometimes I just like working on my own. In lessons where I'm not in the bottom group and I have a helper there, it just lowers my confidence. Because I don't like feeling that I need help and that

everyone else thinks I need help when I don't. It's just sort of embarrassing. (Secondary pupil)

Also evident in the data from several case studies was how pupils modified their behaviour as a result of the often intense support they received from TAs. In one case, a pupil described how he did not ask for help in front of his classmates as he did not 'want to be seen as different'. Instead, he would ask quietly or wait until the end of the lesson to request help. The comment below from another secondary pupil (let us call her Hayley) is particularly revealing and worth unpicking, as it neatly threads together several themes covered in the exposition of results from the study so far:

TAs sometimes write in my book, which I don't like so much. I do write really slowly, but they make me feel rushed when they take over some of the writing at times. I think the teacher thinks that it looks like I haven't done my own work. It feels like cheating if they are writing down everything for me. (Secondary pupil)

Firstly, there is evidence of over-supporting or spoon-feeding (the TA does the writing); this is clearly a source of frustration for Hayley. Secondly, the TA's interventions can make Hayley feel 'rushed', and as though she is 'cheating'. (Chapter 1 considered what motivates TAs to engage in such practices.) There is also evidence of another subtle form of separation that would have been undetectable in the systematic observation. Hayley describes a situation in which the teacher was not obtaining a fair or representative picture of where she was in her learning, because the work was in the TA's handwriting, and probably (but not certainly) used words that the TA had chosen, not Hayley.

It is worth noting that the case study report from which this comment was taken goes on to describe how Hayley 'does not feel comfortable telling the TA that she does not like this'. This one example, then, is the pedagogical diet effect in microcosm. As such, it is helpful to use it in service of a brief summation of some of the key themes and issues arising from the study and encountered in the book so far.

Summary

This chapter raises the question of whether the markedly different everyday experiences that pupils with a Statement have of mainstream school, compared with their typically developing peers, is defensible. Is the

separation, segregation and stigmatisation that characterises structural exclusion, and the pedagogical diet it confects, a worthwhile trade-off, because it results in an overall educational experience that is best suited to the needs of pupils with high-level SEND?

On the basis of the evidence presented here, it is difficult to conclude that this is the case. Extrapolating from the systematic observation data, the reasonable assumption that typically developing pupils received virtually all of their teaching from a trained (and at secondary school) subject specialist teacher leads to the reasonable conclusion that what pupils with a Statement received was of a lower pedagogical quality.

One might make the point that with a class of between 20 and 30 pupils (depending on the phase), the average class teacher does not have the time to spend with a pupil whose learning needs require more of their attention. In this reading, having any form of support from a TA is considered an advantage. The counterfactual typically invoked here is of a pupil with a Statement sitting in the classroom without a TA beside them, unable to keep pace with the teaching and cut adrift from the lesson. This makes a lower-quality pedagogical diet sound as desirable as it is inevitable, because the alternative is nothing.

But look again at the pattern of support that Hayley described. Pedagogically speaking, it is a pattern of support that is inconsistent with effective instruction, but which has become an organisational and educational fact of school life for pupils with high-level SEND. The TA appears to prioritise task completion over learning, and the way in which they 'take over' at times erodes opportunities for Hayley to work by herself, independently. The persistent cutting across of her interactions with her teacher isolates her further, and potentially creates an image of her in the teacher's mind that Hayley feels is unfair and misrepresents her capabilities. The TA has in many ways replaced the teacher, and while the TA is no doubt acting in a well-meaning way, Hayley finds this unsatisfactory. Worse still, it is a situation she is unsure how to challenge.

This model of inclusion – which seems almost entirely reliant on the extensive use of TAs, to the exclusion of just about any other approach – would have been more or less familiar to almost every pupil in the study sample. Yet the set of practices that characterise it seem diametrically opposed to any widely agreed principle or definition of either effective pedagogy or meaningful inclusion. The next two chapters of this book explore the wider structures, arrangements and pressures that explain the evolution and sustainability of this model.

6

Operational confusion

To recap: this book has, so far, conceptualised structural exclusion and described the extent and the effects of it in terms of the separation and segregation that pupils with a Statement experience within mainstream settings. It has shared their perspectives on these experiences, and it has identified TAs as the decisive factor in why their overall everyday educational experiences differ so much from those of their typically developing peers. This book has also raised and addressed the question of whether the marginalisation that characterises the experience these pupils have of teaching and learning makes a material difference to its quality, concluding that it inevitably weakens the pedagogical diet they receive. In the [previous chapter](#), an explicit link was made between this diet and the high amounts of high-intensity TA support, which is, it seems clear, an organisational and educational fact of school life for pupils with high-level SEND. Taken together, the factors above represent a model of inclusion which is widespread, yet highly questionable. Indeed, to label it a model of inclusion at all risks drawing attention away from the exclusionary organisational arrangements and processes of which it is composed. This concatenation of factors raises the prospect that inclusion, as it is typically sold, is an illusion.

The next two chapters of this book widen the scope of the inquiry and consider the systems, structures and forces that precipitate these arrangements and processes. This chapter explores the role and effect of school level decision-making, drawing once again on the qualitative data from the case studies. And in the [following chapter](#), the concept and components of structural exclusion, and the study overall, are situated in the context of the education system in England, and the deeper systemic faults are pinpointed.

Who is responsible?

The central argument put forward in this chapter can be summarised in terms of a question: who has the main responsibility for pupils with a Statement? The SEND Code of Practice states that ‘Teachers are responsible and accountable for the progress and development of the pupils in their class, including where pupils access support from teaching assistants or specialist staff’ (DfE/DoH, 2015: 99). Yet the evidence from the case studies suggests that, operationally speaking, the balance of responsibility and accountability is less clear cut.

Teachers

A useful way of organising the case study data on this topic is in terms of a scale. At one end, teachers were found to have a high level of responsibility for pupils with a Statement in their class; they expressed feeling as much, if not more, responsible for these pupils than they did for typically developing pupils. This was most evident in cases where pupils spent large parts of the week in an additional resource provision (ARP). ARPs had much smaller class sizes (typically 10 pupils or fewer) and a higher adult–pupil ratio (there were usually more TAs in these settings). In the small number of cases concerning ARPs, the teacher in charge often described running it much like a mainstream class:

We try to give them that experience of a mainstream class. They are expected to listen; they are expected to take turns ... The teacher’s there for everybody. (Primary ARP teacher)

She needs to be delivering the provision more than the LSA. Because if India has got complex learning needs, then you would want your most qualified member of staff in there. No disrespect to [the TA] – she’s fantastic; but [the teacher] is the one that’s got the qualifications for complex needs, so that’s what we want to do ... We’re guaranteeing quality going in. (Primary SENCO)

Though few clear examples of mainstream teachers having a high level of involvement were identifiable within the data, in those that were found, there seemed to be an acknowledgement that pupils with high-level SEND ought to receive at least as much teacher time as other pupils:

When I sometimes do one-to-one, sometimes I catch up with particularly those three pupils because I really want to delve to where their blocks are. And I've probably got more expertise in that than [the TA]. (Primary teacher)

Being open and honest about it is probably the best way to go. So I spoke to him and asked him, you know, 'is there anything I need to change about my lesson for you?' ... I like to think that it's gone towards me understanding what he needs in a lesson. (Secondary teacher)

At the other end of the scale, and outweighing cases of 'high responsibility' teachers, were teachers who appeared to have relatively less involvement with pupils with a Statement (compared with other pupils) and expressed having a lower degree of responsibility for them:

He's not big on my radar, to be honest. (Primary teacher)

The most common approach was pitched at the midpoint of the scale: the teacher was seen to have overall responsibility for planning the curriculum and general teaching strategies, while the TA, in effect, took on the actual teaching in terms of the delivery of the curriculum. This approach was informed and influenced, and even justified, by the allocation of a TA. In primary schools, TAs were seen as a pragmatic solution to managing individual pupils with high-level SEND in sometimes large classrooms (i.e. around 30 pupils):

I think it's easy, as a class teacher, when you know you've got children who are finding things very difficult, to give yourself that security of, 'Oh, Mrs So-and-so will always work with that group'. (Primary SENCO)

I know I wouldn't be able to cope with Jess in a lesson ... Like this morning, with her stamping her feet and all sorts; I couldn't then deal with that if I'm trying to teach the other pupils... If [the TA] wasn't there, Jess would sit there the whole lesson and not do anything at all. (Primary teacher)

The teachers would have all done their best, but they've got like 30-odd kids to take care of and they can't be expected to just pay attention to Kai all the time. (Parent of primary pupil)

In some secondary schools, meanwhile, there was a sense that TAs were often ‘there to sit with’ a pupil and to ‘keep them quiet’, while the teacher taught the rest of the class:

Some teachers do like someone to be sat with him all the time ... mainly to do with behaviour rather than attainment.
(Secondary SENCO)

The majority of the teachers interviewed for the study expressed uncertainty about how to deal with the challenges and sometimes complex difficulties posed by pupils with high-level SEND, often pointing to a lack of training. Many primary school teachers said that they had received no specific training to help them support the needs of pupils with a Statement in their class. A few secondary school teachers mentioned having received some input on SEND as part of their pre-service training. Most teachers reported having had no training or only scant and quite generalised training on SEND by way of preparation for their role:

I think sometimes I personally don’t really know what to do with Lily. I don’t know if I don’t understand her Statement ... And when I’m thinking about bringing stuff down to her level, sometimes I just don’t know how to do it. (Primary teacher)

SENCOs described how some teachers were ‘overwhelmed’ by SEND and ‘did not know how to start’, citing time and workload as additional reasons why teachers tended not to plan and provide differentiated tasks:

I often find that teachers are very busy and they can’t think about differentiation all the time. (Primary SENCO)

In theory, it should be the class teacher’s responsibility [to differentiate]. Often, we find it’s the TA in practice who does that.
(Secondary SENCO)

Teachers are required to do their own differentiation, and then the TA’s role is to re-differentiate this if it’s still pitched too difficult.
(Secondary SENCO)

Even where teachers did plan an adapted or differentiated task, it still fell to TAs to take on ‘live differentiation’ (see [Chapter 5](#)) in order to make teaching accessible. Teachers frequently described the TA as the ‘expert’ on the pupil with a Statement. Teachers thought that TAs were ‘better

trained' and possessed the 'more relevant experience'. 'Knowing the child' better than they did – itself a consequence of spending more time with them, often out of the teacher's view – seemed to legitimise the transference of responsibility for educating pupils with a Statement to TAs: something that is in conflict with the SEND Code of Practice. Being under-informed about pupils' needs and their progress perpetuated this practice and appeared to ensure that the teacher's involvement and responsibility remained low.

The effect of all this was for the responsibility for teaching – and in most cases, planning for – pupils with high-level SEND to drift from teachers to TAs. A summary of part of an interview with the SENCO in one secondary school provides indicative evidence of the assumptions that seemed to exist in teachers' minds and the gaps in provision that opened up as a result:

The SENCO said she thinks that teachers are of the opinion that the TAs are there to deal with children with SEN, so they don't have to. She said she feels this is especially the case where there are higher needs, meaning that teachers are less engaged with Mason. This diminishes their responsibility, which the [SEND] Code of Practice reinforces is theirs. They try to distance themselves from accountability, which leaves TAs in a vulnerable position, as it's expected that they will sort and fix everything ... They are the lowest paid staff with the great responsibilities. (Secondary case study report)

TAs: operating in the gaps

A good point of entry into the data on the role TAs have in the lives and learning of pupils with a Statement, and the ways in which this overlaps with, and is distinct from, the role of the teacher, is to consider how it was described by TAs. Across the school phases, TAs used an array of metaphors to convey the purpose of their role in the lives of the pupils they supported. These included being a 'crutch', 'mediator', 'interpreter', 'conduit', 'advocate' and 'keyworker' for pupils with high-level needs. Their role was to 'be there' or 'be on standby', ready to respond when the pupil signalled struggle, 'jogging their memory' or 'providing a prod'. There was a strong sense of nurture underlying TAs' comments:

I'm not the class teacher and I'm not her mum; I'm that person in between. (Primary TA)

TAs who exclusively supported one pupil very often referred to that individual as 'my child' or 'my one-to-one'. Parents, teachers and SENCOs used similar language, reinforcing the idea that TAs were essential to mainstream schools being able to accommodate and educate pupils with high-level SEND. This was clearest in the comments from interviewees about how central TAs were in terms of facilitating the inclusion, or integration, of pupils with a Statement into school and classroom life. This was a powerful and consistent theme in a clear majority of case study reports:

If Nasreen didn't have [the TA] I think she would sink quite quickly.
(Primary teacher)

If [the TA] wasn't there, Oliver would sit there the whole lesson and not do anything at all. (Primary teacher)

Without a TA with him all the time, he wouldn't be able to manage himself. (Primary TA)

Without the TAs, Phillip would not cope in school. (Secondary TA)

Without us she wouldn't progress. (Secondary TA)

Without support he can't survive in school. (Secondary TA)

What is striking about the comments above is the deficit narrative: that inclusion is a matter of the pupil 'coping', 'surviving' and 'managing'. This, again, suggests a scale of support, with, at one end, support from a TA making the inclusion of pupils with a Statement just about possible and their experience of school just about tolerable, and at the other end, TA support enabling these pupils to thrive:

Without TA support, Quinn would be tragically unhappy. He is now very happy and settled. (Secondary SENCO)

In the case of one secondary-aged pupil, the school had, as the SENCO put it, 'poached his TA from his primary school', in order to support his transition into a much larger secondary setting. While this did not seem to be a common practice, it nonetheless illustrates how processes to include pupils with a Statement in a mainstream setting – and in this particular instance, their transition between them – are inextricably linked with the employment and deployment of TAs:

He would still have had to have a significantly differentiated curriculum, which you can't deliver unless you've got an adult there to deliver it for him. (Primary SENCO)

The strength of feeling regarding the impact of TAs might suggest that their role and contribution were well defined, *relative* to that of teachers. However, what emerges from the majority of case study reports is less a sense that TAs did something clearly distinct from what teachers did, but – consistent with what was described in the [previous chapter](#) – more a picture of TAs providing a qualitatively different type of teaching, as they filled in the gaps in provision left by the teacher:

TAs are responsible and professional. They will differentiate, and read and scribe, and whatever Reece's needs. Teachers often leave the differentiation for the children with Statements to the TA. (Secondary SENCO)

While, as the comment above suggests, TAs were generally trusted and empowered to differentiate curriculum coverage, teacher talk and lesson tasks, it was less certain what training (if any) they had received to support this. Indeed, in many cases, TAs in both phases reported having had general training in types of SEND, usually autism and speech, language and communication needs. And in many other cases, TAs said they had received no training to help them support the specific needs of the pupil(s) to whom they were allocated. Some TAs, including those who were new to the role, said that they were expected to 'pick it up on the job'.

In an earlier summary of the balance of responsibility for pupils with a Statement, it was suggested that the common dynamic was one where the teacher planned, and the TA delivered. This is perhaps how teachers viewed it, but when the interview data from TAs are factored in, the evidence from across the case studies suggests a greater creep or encroachment into the teachers' territory than they were perhaps aware of. In many cases, TAs reported taking on some responsibility for planning. This ranged from augmenting or modifying teachers' lesson plans and finding alternative activities and tasks, to devising an alternative curriculum and interventions (this was more common in primary settings than in secondary settings). In terms of lesson-to-lesson planning, the requirement to identify and prepare alternative tasks for pupils with a Statement fell to TAs, with the teacher's involvement appearing quite limited:

I don't have the main role; I see the main role as actually being [the TA's]. I have the overview as to what's going on. So everything [the TA] plans is run past me [and] I will put suggestions in there, but [the TA] will then go away and resource it. (Primary teacher)

[The teacher] doesn't have a lot to do with Shannon ... He doesn't do the planning for her; I do all of that. (Primary TA)

Quite a lot I do at home ... Trawling on the internet, trying to find worksheets and activities that I think would be suitable for Thomas. (Primary TA)

As the expert on the pupil – another expression perhaps of the professional esteem in which they were held by teachers – most TAs were seen as capable of making teachers' teaching, interactions and tasks accessible for pupils with a Statement. Again, this in turn seemed to legitimise teachers' decisions to devolve responsibility for the education of these pupils to TAs:

I'll give them a general idea of the topic we're working on this week ... They're very good; they're very proactive ... If I give them a topic ... they've got such a good bank of resources that they'll be able to go and find things to use. (Primary teacher)

However, data from open-ended fieldnotes included in the case study reports revealed that the tasks set by TAs often seemed unengaging and repetitive. There were a number of instances of pupils with a Statement doing tasks with little or no meaningful pedagogical content (e.g. colouring in).

A lack of time for teachers and TAs to liaise prior to lessons was routinely identified across many schools as a part of the problem and may go some way to explaining why tasks may at times have been undemanding. The comment below from a secondary TA is additionally revealing, as it suggests that the teacher of the class set work that was not sufficiently challenging for at least some pupils:

You don't have time to talk to teachers. You don't have time to sit down and say: 'Actually, what shall we do with him today? I've tried this' ... And there's no time to prepare anything, so it's a case of: 'Right, what are we going to do now? OK, we'll get the books' ... and we just go over the same thing. (Primary TA)

That's a big bugbear, I think, especially of the teaching assistants. You go into every lesson blind. But it's been there for years and it's not going to change. I mean, the only reason it works is because the work is at a level that everyone can access. (Secondary TA)

Despite being positioned as the expert on the pupil, some TAs felt that the lack of direction, preparation and supervision affected the quality of the pedagogical support they were able to provide, and this had a knock-on effect on their confidence and feelings of competence:

I don't personally know if I'm doing the right thing, you know ... I'm just pulling on things that I've done in the past. Whether academically that's the correct thing to do, I don't know. (Primary TA)

TAs also appeared to take on a considerable role in setting targets for a pupil's individual education plan (IEP). An IEP is a school-level document, based on the Statement, used to record and monitor the support a pupil with SEND receives. Unlike Statements, which were reviewed annually, IEPs were typically reviewed on a termly basis. In most of the identifiable cases in primary settings, teachers wrote the IEPs with input from the SENCO, often with a contribution from the pupil's one-to-one TA. However, it was striking that in a number of schools, the situation was the reverse. TAs described a situation where they would write the IEP targets and pass it to the teacher for approval, who would then forward it to the SENCO for final agreement:

[The TA] designs it and then runs it past me, and then I would do suggestions. But it would be [the TA] that does the overview and prepares ideas and what Usman needs; and then she'll run it past me and check that that's OK. (Primary teacher)

At the end of every term, I write a report on what I think has worked and what hasn't, and what I've been doing. And then the SENCO will look at it and says: 'If you think that's working, fine; carry on. But you might want to try this or this.' (Primary TA)

Consistent with the earlier theme of responsibility, it was evident that in some cases, teachers were not meaningfully involved in the operationalisation of the IEP on a day-to-day basis, with the main duty for interpreting and delivering it falling to TAs:

I'm pretty much left to interpret the IEP and put into practice how I think it works for Vinnie. (Primary TA)

I actually leave a lot up to the TAs, because I feel they know her much better than me. They've worked with Willow in previous years and they've just got more time to see what works. (Primary teacher)

Summary

So, who *is* responsible for teaching pupils with high-level SEND? The implication in the question is that the answer is *either* the teacher *or* the TA. However, the evidence from the study suggests that in most cases, the answer is both – but the demarcation between the two roles is blurred and not entirely consistent. The balance of responsibility and accountability that is struck can differ from pupil to pupil. That said, a clear theme emerges from the analysis presented here: the prevalence of ambiguity and open-endedness, and the operational confusion it seems to produce.

Operational confusion is a term that helps to explain the lower-quality pedagogical diet pupils with a Statement receive (see [Chapter 5](#)). Taking the findings of this and the [previous chapter](#) together, teachers, operating on the understanding or expectation that a TA will plug instructional gaps, appear to take on less responsibility for teaching pupils with a Statement. The extent to which teachers' reliance on TAs to provide live differentiation was something they did consciously or unconsciously is not clear, though the inconsistency of this is itself a catalyst for operational confusion. Either way, the consequence was that a significant degree of responsibility for pedagogical planning and delivery fell to, or was absorbed by, TAs. And while they were doing the best they could, the quality of the instruction on offer to the pupils they supported was more well-intentioned improvisation than well-informed individualisation.

To be clear, the study did not collect qualitative data on the pedagogical strategies that typically developing pupils received, so it is unclear whether there were ambiguities (possibly different ones) that affected their experience of classroom teaching. However, as the systematic observation data showed, the fact that TAs were all but absent from their everyday experience means that they were, at the least, not exposed to the instructional diet supplied by TAs. Indeed, even without counterfactual data, it is reasonable to speculate that, with TAs attending to pupils with high-level SEND, typically developing pupils were on the receiving end of more and higher-quality teacher-led teaching, compared with pupils with a Statement. This would further exacerbate the pedagogical divide.

Pedagogical diet is the product of a lack of clarity, coherence and certainty about who is doing what, when and how for pupils with a Statement. It is also an artefact of the unresolved operational confusion

that reinforces implicit and fuzzy notions of ‘teaching’ and ‘support’, and an insufficiently nuanced take on differentiation. These, plus the heavy reliance on TAs, are the distinct markers of the model of structural exclusion in play. All of this fuels the conclusion that the experience that pupils with high-level SEND have of mainstream education is not the mainstream education that the average, typically developing pupil would recognise – or, in all probability, accept.

7

Conclusions

The picture painted in [chapters 3 to 6](#) of the experiences pupils with high-level SEND have of school is quite troubling. It suggests that the widespread model of inclusion in England is a contradiction in terms. The argument advanced in this book, and explored in detail in this chapter, is that up close, inclusion in English schools is largely an illusion – albeit one contrived at policy level to appear otherwise from a distance.

While children and young people with high-level SEND attend mainstream schools, there are structures and processes ingrained within these settings that serve to exclude and marginalise them. The arrangements that led to this *might* be defensible *if* they were necessary for creating an effective pedagogical experience. Yet the evidence from the present study and elsewhere suggests that, if anything, they result in a less effective pedagogical experience, when compared to that constructed and provided for their typically developing peers. It is difficult not to conclude that while they are together under the same roof, the school experiences that these two groups of pupils have are, in critical respects, worlds apart.

Before considering the key conclusions and implications of this research, it is important that the reader is not left with the impression that the schools involved in the study had somehow ‘given up’ on their pupils who find engaging with learning a greater challenge than others. Spending the best part of a week observing at close quarters, together with the discussions the research team had with school staff, parents and the pupils themselves, brought home the efforts that schools make to meet the needs of pupils with high-level SEND. This study draws attention to, and is critical of, the effects of the arrangements put in place for these pupils. But in interpreting the study’s findings, it is important not to lose sight of the everyday context in which the research was conducted and in which schools operate. The last 20 years (at least) of education in England have been characterised by pressures concerning funding

shortages, teacher workload, staff recruitment and retention, the effects of high-stakes accountability, and the implementation of numerous, and sometimes competing, policy initiatives – all of which have a bearing on SEND provision. Therefore, given the wider political forces at play, it would be unfair to impugn schools' decision-making over SEND and inclusion, as if it were somehow independent of this context.

One example is the enduring influence of the Statement. The two phases of this study took place either side of the introduction of extensive reforms to the SEND system in 2014/15. Evidence on the implementation and impact of the reforms suggests that they have done little to improve the situation and system they were designed to replace (HoC, 2019). The arrangement whereby a legal document – an EHCP, *née* Statement – is regarded as essential for securing resources, which are traded for hours of one-to-one support from a TA, is strongly residual and particularly problematic within the system.

So, to be clear, pointing the finger at schools and suggesting that they were somehow 'failing' pupils with high-level SEND would be misrepresentative of those in the study, and indeed, the vast majority of mainstream schools overall. There are problems in the operationalisation of inclusion, which – seen in the study's results and findings – actualise in schools and have effects that are anything but benign. But my argument is that these problems are the combined, compounded and cumulative products of longstanding, deep and systemic fault lines in the English education system that run through schools, but originate elsewhere. The purpose of this chapter is to contextualise the study within this wider landscape, and to explain how various external forces can help to explain much of what has been described in the previous chapters. It also makes some recommendations to address the situation.

Limitations of the study

Before going any further, it is important to consider the limitations of the study. Firstly, the research focused mainly on pupils whose primary additional need related to cognition and learning; they comprised 71 per cent of the study sample. Accordingly, the study's findings cannot claim to represent the full range of complex, and sometimes co-occurring, needs for which EHCPs are written. 'Pupils with EHCPs/Statements' are not a homogeneous group.

Secondly, the study was limited to pupils in one primary-aged year group and one secondary-aged year group. Directions for further research are covered in [Chapter 8](#), but it is worth noting here that obvious

candidates for future work in this area would be replication studies involving pupils in other year groups, pupils with other forms of SEND (e.g. speech, language and communications needs; autism spectrum conditions; physical and/or sensory impairments), and other pupils on schools' SEND registers who do not have an EHCP – a constituency, it is worth saying, that makes up around four-fifths of the overall SEND population in England (DfE, 2021a).

Thirdly, there are inevitable gaps in the descriptive account produced about each pupil, which get lost in, or are missing from, the overall picture. The extensive moment-by-moment observations were based on a selected set of common, low-inference behaviours and artefacts of classroom life. These were chosen for their reliability and comparability between pupils with high-level SEND and typically developing pupils, across primary and secondary mainstream settings. The systematic observations did not address all classroom processes, nor were they intended to. Therefore, there will be valuable and revealing nuances within the experiences of individual pupils that were not fully captured by the methods used in the study.

A further limitation concerns the logic of the systematic observation process used in the primary phase of the study. As researchers were tasked with shadowing the pupil with a Statement wherever they went, observations of the comparison pupils could not be made simultaneously in instances when the former child was withdrawn from the classroom. This means that there are missing data on the typically developing pupils' everyday classroom experience. It may be the case that in primary classrooms, typically developing pupils experienced more teacher-led group work, for example, than the observation results suggest. That said, as around three-quarters of all observations were conducted in mainstream classes, it is unlikely that any variation due to missing data would have had a profound effect on the main trends. A reminder: in secondary schools, typically developing pupils and those with high-level needs were mostly taught, and therefore observed, separately.

Structural exclusion

Summarising the results on classroom composition

This book has used the concept of structural exclusion to present data on the ways in which pupils with high-level SEND experienced the organisation and composition of the school and the classroom learning

environment. The components of structural exclusion, around which the data collection for the study were broadly constructed, were: (i) the number of pupils in the class; (ii) their range of attainment; (iii) the number of teachers and TAs; and (iv) the frequency with which they interact with pupils. The study hypothesised that these configurations in primary and secondary school settings would inform and shape the teaching and learning experience, or ‘pedagogical diet’, and that there would be quantifiable and qualitative differences between the experiences of pupils with high-level SEND and typically developing (average-attaining) pupils.

Putting together the key results on the indicators of structural exclusion, the study found that in primary schools, pupils with a Statement experienced a high degree of separation from the classroom, their teacher and their peers. In secondary settings, meanwhile, there was a form of segregation, with pupils with a Statement taught together in small homogeneous classes for low-attaining pupils, with at least one TA present, while their typically developing peers were taught in larger homogeneous classes, with just the teacher present. Schools rationalised these organisational arrangements in terms of assisting their low-attaining pupils: a group into which those with SEND were very much incorporated. That many pupils with high-level needs were commonly found to be educated in dedicated and smaller sized teaching groups was a pragmatic school-level response to creating what was believed to be an effective, differentiated environment for learning. However, the quality of the pedagogical diet offered in these classes was questionable (see summary below).

Class size

The present study found that pupils with high-level SEND were generally taught in much larger classes in primary school than they experienced at secondary school (at least in Year 9). As noted in [Chapter 1](#), England (and the UK more widely) is something of an outlier internationally, in terms of having larger class sizes at primary school level than at secondary school level. Supposing that pupils with SEND are taught more effectively in smaller classes, then one might reasonably ask: why wait until they are midway through their secondary education before teaching them in much smaller sized classes? Whatever the overall benefits of whole-class teaching – and this is the subject of some debate (Kyriacou, 2009) – there are likely to be situations when pupils with high-level SEND, who often have particular difficulties in following instructions, require individualised educational support. While it is very much the case that more research is needed on the specific effects of class size on pupils with SEND, the evidence from the study shows that teachers face

considerable challenges in providing the necessary differentiation and time for individualised support in larger classes. Blatchford and Russell (2020) suggest that the role of class size is too often characterised as a binary choice: either invest in smaller classes, or redirect resources to improving the quality of teaching (e.g. via professional development). They rightly conclude that this is a false dichotomy, as both are important.

The attainment range: setting and within-class grouping

What emerged from the case studies resonates with the findings from the literature reviewed in [Chapter 1](#), and the well-rehearsed concerns about setting and grouping by ‘ability’. Indeed, a key conclusion from this study was that the principal approach to classroom organisation used in secondary schools looked a lot like streaming, and resulted in pupils mixing for large parts of the school week with peers in a similar, sometimes narrow, band of achievement. It was instructive, if a little concerning, to hear interviewees refer to this as a differentiation strategy, given how the lower pitch of the curriculum, the instruction and teachers’ expectations for pupils in ‘bottom sets’ could reinforce the negative perceptions pupils with high-level SEND held of themselves as learners, in terms of their capabilities and potential. Similar practices and effects were found in primary schools, where within-class groups made up mainly of pupils with SEND formed a key context for learning.

It does not necessarily follow that smaller classes and within-class groups for pupils with high-level SEND ought to be composed exclusively or mostly of pupils with SEND. But alternative social mixes are both possible and desirable. Viewed, for example, in the context of a steady reduction in breaktimes in secondary settings over time (Baines and Blatchford, 2019), the classroom becomes an important site for developing peer relations. Though again, it is not an either/or situation. Greater opportunities for pupils with and without SEND to interact with one another during the school day are necessary. Indeed, there is a case for saying that a more authentic form of educational inclusion is especially important for those with high-level SEND, as they tend to face greater social exclusion from formal and informal out-of-school contexts, such as recreational activities, sports clubs and meeting up with friends. Compared with their typically developing peers, children and young people with high-level SEND tend to have fewer opportunities to experience and derive social acceptance beyond school. In this sense, school may play a much greater role in their lives in terms of being and feeling ‘included’, as it is the one setting that they must routinely attend and where the basic conditions needed to foster a sense of meaningful belonging already exist.

The frequency of pupils' interactions with teachers and teaching assistants

A very clear conclusion from the study concerns the role of TAs as the primary providers of individual teaching and support for pupils with high-level SEND, and the particular influence this has on their everyday educational experience. While there were contextual differences, particularly in secondary schools, in terms of the size of the class and the types of setting and grouping arrangements in place, across both phases, the reliance on TAs showed that they were a key strategic approach to including and educating pupils with high-level SEND in mainstream schools. TAs were an undeniable and central feature in their everyday lives.

The systematic observation results add to the historical picture of a growing trade-off, described in [Chapter 1](#), in terms of pupils with SEND receiving a decreasing proportion of their pedagogical input from teachers, and an increasing proportion of their pedagogical input from TAs (Webster, 2015). A key finding from the present study concerns the amount of time pupils with high-level SEND spent with a TA outside the classroom. A survey of 300 primary school teachers conducted by Croll and Moses (2000) found that two-thirds of pupils with a Statement were withdrawn from mainstream classrooms to work with TAs for an average 3.7 hours per week. The implication here is that withdrawal from the primary classroom, at least for those with high-level SEND, has as good as doubled in just over a decade. This aligns with D'Alessio's (2011) concept of 'micro exclusion', where pupils with SEND are segregated and separated, and taught away from their peers for all or part of the day. Within the classroom, extensive observation data showed how pupils' interactions with TAs cut across, replaced and reduced the opportunities they had to interact with others in the room. This amounted to a subtler and granular form of separation during lessons, which one might call a 'nano exclusion'.

A key conclusion made on the basis of the results reported in [Chapter 3](#) is that the more the everyday experiences of pupils with high-level SEND diverged from those without SEND, the less inclusive that experience appeared, and the less convincingly it could be labelled 'mainstream'. It is, if anything, marginalisation masquerading as mainstream.

Pedagogical diet

[Chapter 5](#) explored the extent to which the crucibles of learning evidenced via the systematic observations made a material difference to the nature and quality of the pedagogy pupils with high-level SEND received.

The central question was whether the trade-off summarised above produced a better pedagogical experience and improved learning outcomes. The clear conclusion from the analyses of the rich case study data was that the support provided by TAs amounted to a lower-quality pedagogical diet. That is, it was below the instructional quality one would expect from a teacher. TAs emerged as a key means of differentiation, bridging the learning in the moment. The pedagogical support pupils with high-level SEND received was typically characterised by modifications to (i.e. simplifying) language and the repetition of teaching tasks and instructions, made in the moment; this was referred to as 'live differentiation'. These findings are consistent with those from studies of TA-to-pupil interaction, which conclude that TAs tend to prioritise task completion and correction (Rubie-Davies et al., 2010), and narrow the space for exploratory discussion (Radford et al., 2011). This, then, leads to the inevitable question of impact.

There is a deep-rooted cultural and pedagogical assumption among schools and parents of children with SEND in the UK (and elsewhere) that the individualised support TAs provide is essential to meeting their learning needs, and to ensuring they make progress (more below). During the early 2000s, the number of TAs in England rapidly increased in line with this view, yet the assumption remained untested. That was until results from the large-scale Deployment and Impact of Support Staff (DISS) project were published in 2009. This research (to which I was a key contributor) was the first study to measure the impact of TAs on learning, and the results revealed the distorting effect that support from TAs had not only on the everyday experiences pupils with SEND had of school, but also on their academic outcomes.

The main results from the multi-method DISS project prefigured and align with the conclusion from the present study about pupils with a Statement having a quantitatively and qualitatively different experience of everyday school and classroom life, compared with their typically developing peers. An impact analysis involving 8,200 pupils in mainstream primary and secondary schools assessed progress across English, mathematics and science for seven different year groups. The results were striking. In 16 of the 21 analyses (three core subjects across seven year groups), the results were in a negative direction. There were no positive effects of TA support for any subject or for any year group (Blatchford et al., 2012). Most troubling of all was that the magnitude of the effect was greatest for the pupils with high-level SEND. The relationship held even after controlling for pupil-level factors likely to be related

to having TA support in the first place (e.g. prior attainment; SEND status) (Webster et al., 2010). In a similar way, Klassen (2001) found that pupils who had a Statement for a specific learning difficulty or dyslexia, and who were assigned TA support for literacy, made less progress than those who did not receive TA support.

The large and small degrees of marginalisation and the lower-quality pedagogical diet that have been found to have a detrimental effect on learning outcomes are the real-world effects of an under-theorised, unchecked and uncritical drift over time towards a model of inclusion that relies almost exclusively on the employment and deployment of TAs. Some wider context is important here. There is a risk that the situation portrayed by the main results and findings from the DISS project and the present study (which, it must be noted, was in large part prompted by this earlier research) could be oversimplified, and that TAs are somehow miscast as ‘the problem’. This is emphatically not the case. This issue is addressed later on in this chapter, but for now, it is sufficient to state that it is the decisions made *about* TAs – and not the decisions made *by* TAs – which best explain both the lower-quality pedagogical diet and the results on pupils’ academic progress.

Operational confusion

Chapter 6 described how TAs were often positioned as the ‘expert’ on the pupil(s) they supported. They were thought to possess more knowledge about them than the teacher, and they were seen as capable of making teachers’ teaching and instructions accessible for them. However empowering that may sound, it did not amount to a well-planned or well-coordinated pedagogical strategy. Instead, something looser and pragmatic was seen, where TAs plugged the gaps left by teachers. Hattie (2002) may have a point when he says that ‘Good teaching can occur independently of the class configuration or homogeneity of the students within the class’, but the evidence from this study suggests that in the case of pupils with high-level SEND, the odds of receiving ‘good teaching’ are much lower.

This book uses the term ‘operational confusion’ to explain how the organisational arrangements that saw TAs given, or otherwise absorb, a high level of responsibility for pupils with high-level SEND were validated and sustained. In their exploration of factors that fuel the narrative of the ‘Velcro TA’, Vivash and Morgan (2019) identify ambiguity as a key theme in the thinking, planning and operationalisation of provision for

pupils with high-level SEND. Reflecting on their interviews with school staff, they write:

When considering both the role of adult support, training and the differentiation between different teacher and TA roles ... there appeared a lack of clarity and specificity about how to achieve some of the suggested provision, and very little consideration appeared to be given within [educational psychologists'] advice as to the skill set or training that might be needed for adults to effectively carry out these roles. (Vivash and Morgan, 2019)

This ambiguity, and no doubt the weaker position TAs have in terms of having insufficient agency to challenge the status quo, acts as a firebreak, insulating teachers from having to spend time engaging with or teaching pupils with high-level SEND – a task for which they felt unprepared. This is a result of what Giangreco (2003) calls ‘the training trap’: the tendency for teachers to relinquish instruction of pupils with SEND to TAs, who have received more or less any kind of training, no matter how scant.

As noted above, the Statement itself, and the currency of TA support hours in which they trade, is a major contributory factor. The analysis of the qualitative data from the study revealed just how essential having a ‘one-to-one TA’ to facilitate inclusion is and suggested that pupils with a Statement were unable to ‘manage’ or ‘survive’ in a mainstream setting without a TA. These sentiments sat somewhat awkwardly alongside comments from the secondary-aged pupils, which drew attention to the close proximity and often high-intensity nature of TA support, the stigmatising effect it carried, and how too much unsolicited support stymied their independence. Pinkard’s (2021) innovative study of pupils’ perspectives on TA support found similar effects for those with an EHCP in primary mainstream settings.

While the legal status of the EHCP/Statement gives families a degree of confidence in terms of securing an appropriate setting for their child and holding the local authority to account for its operationalisation, supposedly easily auditable quantifications of support (i.e. hours) have relatively little pedagogical value (Webster, 2014). Alternative expressions of support, which some administrators might presume to be equally convenient, such as a financial sum, would do little to change the fundamental problems that stem from failing to identify the pedagogical processes and strategies required to meet carefully defined educational outcomes for pupils with complex additional needs.

This situation calls to mind what Sikes et al. (2007) refer to as the 'yes buts' of inclusion, where the inclusion of pupils with SEND is conceived as being contingent on the availability of resources. Yet this somewhat undermines inclusion's integrity as an educational principle. The primacy of hours, plus the legal clout that EHCPs/Statements carry, appear to get in the way of mainstream schools thinking through appropriate instructional approaches for pupils with the most pronounced learning difficulties. Indeed, this study found no evidence of an effective and theoretically grounded pedagogy for pupils with SEND. The main message to those responsible for drawing up EHCPs at the local level, and the policymakers who decide on the framework for this drafting process at national level, is that the emphasis of EHCPs should be on the quality, not quantity, of provision, pedagogy and support. The failure to use the 2014 reforms to shift the focus of EHCPs is instructive and offers a lesson to other education systems that use similar support plans to aid the mainstreaming of pupils with SEND.

While the power and status of the Statement exerted a particular pressure at the ground level of the school, it cannot entirely account for the sense one obtains from the analyses of qualitative data that, in both primary and secondary schools, there appeared to be a deprioritisation of the needs of pupils with high-level SEND and a lack of strategic leadership with respect to SEND. While it is true that headteachers were not included in the data collection, the evidence from interviews with SENCOs, teachers and TAs suggested that it was unclear where SEND ranked in the list of strategic priorities, and how well equipped and motivated school leaders were to drive sustainable change and improvements for SEND at the organisational level. The implications of this are significant. If it is within this unregulated and uncriticised landscape that structural exclusion has been allowed to flourish, then the role and importance of school leadership in driving the improvement of the quality and effectiveness of educational provision for pupils with SEND at the classroom level is indisputable.

What emerges from this study is a sense that there are strategic and operational crosswinds that buffet pupils with a Statement on their educational journey, but which do not assail typically developing pupils on their journey. A key reason for this appears to be that the prevailing educational and political winds favour them and their outcomes. For all the policy narrative about inclusion and the importance of outcomes for pupils with SEND, the accountability system in England, as we shall see, does more to disincentivise inclusion than it does to reward schools for prioritising the needs of children and young people in this group.

Operational confusion is like a bindweed that thrives in the cracks of the SEND system architecture. In England, these fault lines are, in turn, either forced open or left exposed by a broader and unforgiving education system, which demands that schools constantly balance numerous, sometimes conflicting, demands within a context of high-stakes accountability. The relentless pace and pressure that are its cultural signature help to create an environment within which assumptions about who is responsible for planning and teaching pupils with high-level SEND can take root, and for confusion to propagate. Such uncertainty, with seemingly little or no leadership imperative to resolve it, is then implicated in the kinds of inconsistent and incomplete practices that comprise their pedagogical diet, and result in predictably poorer educational outcomes.

Towards structural inclusion: implications for policy and practice

We turn next to the implications the study's key findings and conclusions have for the education system in England. For readers outside or less familiar with the English system, be assured that this is not a niche context in which to appraise the study. England is a fairly typical example of a large education system that, while having a legitimate claim to calling itself broadly inclusive, is bedevilled by longstanding fault lines and unresolved tensions. It makes for a relatable case study example to education systems elsewhere, regardless of how advanced they are in their own inclusion journey.

What makes it relatable is that most of what can be seen in the results of the study are a function of the effects of three persistent dilemmas at the policy level, which have created their own inertia – an inertia that, in a sense, holds progress towards a more genuinely inclusive system hostage. No doubt some readers may argue that there are more than three dilemmas, but I will limit myself to these three sizeable matters. They are: (i) a failure to address the perverse incentives within the accountability system that, loosely put, makes exclusion an easier option for schools than inclusion; (ii) a failure to broaden the palette of provisions and support for those with SEND, so the system is less dependent on TAs; and (iii) a failure to train teachers adequately for their roles teaching pupils with SEND.

The rest of this chapter explores these dilemmas and considers what might be done to address them, and how the pursuit of structural *inclusion* might be energised. Note: while this book has focused on pupils with high-level needs, much of what follows applies to the broader population of pupils with SEND.

Inclusion as solution

Modelling by the Department for Education (DfE) predicts that by 2026, the number of children and young people in England with needs complex enough to require an EHCP will have increased by around 15 per cent. Based on a 2017 baseline, this would add around 20,000 additional pupils to the EHCP population (Webster 2018, 2019b). Indeed, in line with this forecast, the proportion of new EHCPs being written each year is rising steadily; the annual rate of growth is around 10 per cent (DfE, 2021d).¹ Reasonable estimates suggest that at least half of these 20,000 pupils will require a place in a special school. Accommodating the growth in the special school population recorded over the last six years would require capacity to increase by around 50 schools a year. The current average is just five schools a year (Knight, 2022).

Yet while the demand side of the equation is clear, the supply side is not. Despite reporting on pupil projections, the DfE does not collect the data required to map capacity adequately (Booth, 2022). This means that it is by no means certain that extra places in existing special schools are being created, and new special schools are being built, in the places where they are needed most. While Baroness Warnock (2018) may have welcomed former education secretary Michael Gove's pledge to widen school choice via free schools (government-funded schools set up by an organisation or group, including parents), the opportunity to link this drive with the 2014 SEND reforms to create a coordinated national strategy for SEND was completely missed.

The point here is not so much that the English government is failing to build enough special schools,² but that these projections could persuade policymakers to consider inclusion as a serious option for addressing the growing SEND population, by encouraging, perhaps impelling, mainstream schools to adopt more inclusive practices. An added twist to this situation is that, at the time of writing (March 2022), it is unclear whether the surge in parents switching to home-educating their children (removing them from the school register) prompted by the Covid pandemic (Hattenstone and Lawrie, 2021; Weale, 2021) will hold over the longer term. Capacity freed up by home education may narrow in the event that many of these children and young people return to school-based education.

In any event, there are good reasons why policymakers should consider systemic reform that would lead to more inclusive forms of schooling for pupils with SEND. Evidence suggests that inclusive settings confer a range of short-term and long-term benefits. On balance, research findings

indicate greater academic gains for children with mild-to-moderate needs educated in mainstream settings, rather than in separate specialist settings. Gains have been reported in literacy and mathematics, with the positive effects more pronounced in primary schools (Gray et al., 2021). A large systematic review by Hehir et al. (2016) found positive outcomes for children with SEND in terms of social engagement, peer acceptance and behavioural issues, and higher rates of attendance and participation in school, including an increased likelihood of completing formal education. A greater proportion of pupils taught in inclusive environments go on to find employment and live independently, compared to those who are not (Hehir et al., 2016; Kalamouka et al., 2005). Furthermore, most studies on the effects of inclusive education generally show neutral or positive effects on the learning of pupils without SEND. This suggests that mainstream inclusion has no overall negative effect for pupils with or without SEND. However, the impact associated with the inclusion of those with emotional/behavioural difficulties or more severe/complex SEND is less clear (Gray et al., 2021).³

While it is naïve to think that the debate about inclusion is reducible to a straightforward ‘good/bad’ verdict, an overview of the existing evidence suggests that education systems are not hard-wired to resist inclusion, but much more effort is needed to win hearts and minds. The effects of inclusion seem strongest where teachers hold positive attitudes towards difference and diversity, where staff are well trained, where they use strategies geared to diverse needs, and work collaboratively within a problem-solving school culture (Gray et al., 2021) – all of which are moderating factors amenable to change.

SEND and accountability

Starting with the positives, then, solutions to structural exclusion are possible. Necessary though it is to remediate issues and remove barriers at the school level, it is important to recognise and address the wider systemic, structural and cultural factors that exist outside schools, and are known drivers of their behaviour. Pupils with SEND are undervalued and poorly reflected in the processes and metrics of accountability in the English education system. In fact, such are the stakes, some commentators argue that some mainstream schools view pupils with SEND as a liability, posing a threat to securing a coveted league table position or a favourable Ofsted inspection rating (Lehane, 2017; Mansell and Adams, 2016; Norwich, 2014; Nye, 2017; Peacey, 2015). The pressure stemming from the perceived need to maximise results in national tests and exams,

and to ward off what some schools deem to be a threat to their autonomy by forced academisation due to underperformance, has incubated and intensified a form of protectionism. This pressure is the most likely explanation for why secondary schools in the study set pupils by attainment for EBacc subjects and not others (see [Chapter 3](#)).

This protectionism is codified and legitimised in a set of much sharper practices to which pupils with high-level SEND are particularly vulnerable. One of these is school exclusion. Official data show that pupils with SEND account for around half of all permanent exclusions and fixed-period exclusions, and that the fixed-period exclusion rate for pupils with high-level SEND is more than five times higher than for typically developing pupils (DfE, 2018). Then there is off-rolling: the practice of removing a pupil from the school roll, without recourse to a formal exclusion, ‘as a means of improving overall results’ (Ofsted, 2018). And this is not a niche enterprise. A 2018 investigation by *The Times* newspaper found that the GCSE outcomes of more than 30,000 pupils were missing from results tables, despite these pupils appearing on school registers in the past three years (*Tes*, 2018). Furthermore, a representative survey that asked 1,000 teachers about their awareness and perceptions of Ofsted (commissioned by the inspectorate) found that 45 per cent had heard of off-rolling taking place, and 21 per cent had seen it happen (Ofsted, 2018). Added to this, there is what the former education secretary, Damian Hinds (2018), called ‘pre-emptive exclusion’: ‘where parents looking at secondary schools are actively or in some way subtly discouraged from applying to a particular school for their child’.

The common theme here is that there is an undefined, but apparently sufficiently sized group of schools that operate in ways that are antithetical to the aims of inclusion. Perhaps the most pernicious aspect of this protectionism is that these practices are, in effect, rewarded by the accountability system. In 2017, the Children’s Commissioner for England reported that nine out of 10 mainstream schools were ‘benefiting’ from having pupils at risk of underachieving leave: ‘their GCSE pass rates are higher than they would be if these children had stayed with them until the end of secondary school’ (Children’s Commissioner, 2017). Meanwhile, schools that take a more principled approach to admissions can incur ‘reputational damage’ (Galton and MacBeath, 2015).

While no evidence of such exclusory practices was found in the schools visited for the study reported in this book, something unexpected and troubling was encountered in the process of re-recruiting pupils from the original primary cohort. Local authorities (LAs) had seemingly lost track of five pupils from the original cohort of 48, and they could not be

traced. Given the vulnerability of pupils with high-level SEND, and the statutory duty LAs have to provide an appropriate education for them, this is a real cause for concern. The causal factors are unknowable, but given the high level of mobility within the cohort, it is likely that at least some of these pupils went ‘off radar’ in the process of a family relocation, and that information on where they were living and which school they were attending – assuming they were attending a school – was somehow lost between LAs. It is LAs, not schools, that are responsible for such recordkeeping when it comes to children with an EHCP, though maintaining these records relies to a degree on schools and/or families providing the relevant authorities with timely updates. The Government’s response to its consultation on the identification of children missing in education (DfE, 2016d) recognised the need to improve information sharing between LA SEND teams and the increasing number of academy schools, which, as a result of their academy status, are less obliged to share information with their LA. However, it did not address the issue of information sharing *between* LAs. Processes for reporting the movement and transfer of pupils with high-level SEND between LAs and schools must be watertight. On the basis of what emerged through the study’s re-recruitment process, there is a strong case for the creation of a central record of the whereabouts of pupils with an EHCP, in terms of where they are receiving their education.⁴

Structural inclusion

Incentivising inclusion

Bringing about a more balanced and fairer education for pupils with SEND requires inclusively minded people acting in a coordinated way at every level of the system: from national policymakers, through leaders and decision-makers at the middle (i.e. regional) tier, to school leaders and classroom practitioners. In a word, inclusion is fundamentally about what Goddard (2019) calls ‘botheredness’. Transitioning from a system of structural exclusion to a system of structural *inclusion* is a task of inestimable effort and value. So, how might this be achieved?

Starting at the top, policymakers should consider rigorous reform of the accountability system to drive out malign behaviour. A common suggestion is for Ofsted to make provision and outcomes for pupils with SEND a limiting judgement in school inspection. In other words, the overall grade for a school cannot exceed the grade it is awarded for its provision and practice for its SEND community. However, given the pattern and precedent described above, this suggestion would require very

careful thinking through and trialling to avoid further, and potentially confounding, unintended consequences.

A more constructive and positively framed starting point would involve incentivising schools to become more inclusive. Baroness Warnock suggested that Ofsted ‘ought to be giving acknowledgement to those schools which are genuinely inclusive, and take real pride in what they do for children with special needs’ (Ward, 2018). One suggestion stemming from a House of Commons Education Select Committee inquiry (‘Alternative provision and the scandal of ever increasing exclusions’) is for the government to ‘introduce an inclusion measure or criteria that sits *within schools* to incentivise schools to be more inclusive’ [emphasis added] (HoC, 2018). It is an interesting idea, and again it is one that needs careful consideration. Capturing values-based behaviour is tricky to do reliably (Booth and Ainscow, 2002). Schools would want assurances that it would be applied consistently across a range of settings and circumstances, and parents will need to know that it would tell them something meaningful about inclusion. It cannot rely on poor proxies for inclusion, such as a school’s annual spend on SEND, or the amount of time a pupil with SEND works on a one-to-one basis with a TA.

While interesting, the ‘within schools’ element of this proposal makes it potentially limiting. The inclusion of pupils with SEND is not just about maximising their participation in school life. It means being accepted wherever that child or young person is. Inclusion is not a place across town to which you commute. As such, it has a relative dimension. To form a rounded assessment of the inclusiveness of any one school, one would need to know whether it is admitting its fair share of children with SEND from its local community. And for that, comparable data are needed on the inclusivity of its nearest schools. To make sense of a school’s ‘inclusion score’, one would need to see how it matches up against its neighbours. A ‘between school’ measure would therefore offer more than a ‘within school’ measure alone.

At the time of writing (March 2022), however, there appears to be little appetite at the policy level for developing such measures. Indeed, the Department for Education’s current ‘outcome delivery plan’, which specifies its goals and performance metrics (and is used by the Treasury to justify the level of funding it allocates to schools and colleges) contains ‘no dedicated outcome metrics for pupils with SEND’ (Belger, 2021). If, however, there is truth to the adage ‘when a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure’, the goal of expanding and improving inclusive practice might be better served by looking for incentives in additional areas.

Individual agency, for example, may prove to be a more effective lever. If inclusion is about 'botheredness', then one idea might be to institute career progression systems for teachers and leaders that are contingent on evidencing practice that improves experiences and outcomes for pupils with SEND. Classroom teachers going into middle leadership, heads of department destined for the senior leadership team, senior leaders progressing into headship, and headteachers with ambitions to become the chief executive of a multi-academy trust would have to demonstrate how their practice in their current role has improved the lives and learning of the most vulnerable members of their school community, in order to secure their next position. Hard-wiring excellence for SEND into performance management and promotion might also incentivise schools to provide quality professional learning and training in order to improve the everyday practice of their staff.

Broadening the palette of provisions and support

Baroness Mary Warnock (2005) reminds us that 'inclusion should mean being involved in a common enterprise of learning, rather than being necessarily under the same roof'. For example, [Chapter 3](#) described how primary-aged pupils with a Statement could be present in, but estranged from, the lesson; they were in the class, but not of the class. But educating children and young people with a wide range of needs, some of them quite complex, is challenging. It is a fact of school life that there will be occasions when the learning and development of pupils with high-level SEND requires a greater degree of individuation, which is difficult to accommodate in the regular run of mainstream coverage without compromising the quality of one or both. As such, it becomes necessary at times to address the needs of pupils with high-level SEND somewhat independently of the rest of the class. The standpoint of this book is not that any or all forms of separation and segregation are unjust, unwarranted or harmful, but it is clear that the way in which the educational architecture is routinely arranged in mainstream settings to teach pupils with high-level SEND is problematic. It results in too much unnecessary separation and segregation, and a lower-quality pedagogical experience.

Being part of the 'common enterprise' and receiving personalised input are both important, so how might schools square this circle? The answer is to broaden the palette of provisions and support. What follows are some recommendations on how the familiar structural elements of the everyday school and learning environment – class size, grouping and the roles of adults – might be arranged differently, in order to ensure the

overall learning experience for pupils with high-level SEND is more inclusive and less exclusive.

For a start, schools could deliver some lessons in some curriculum areas (initially core subjects) to smaller classes of pupils with SEND. Of course, in the secondary schools visited for this study, small classes of low-attaining pupils and those with learning difficulties were found to be the common environment in which pupils with high-level SEND were taught. However, this arrangement was not being used to optimal effect. To do so requires improving the pedagogical diet, and blending the use of small specialist classes with mainstream mixed attainment teaching. Lessons must be taught by highly skilled, specialised teachers who are trained in effective approaches to: (i) teaching pupils with SEND; and (ii) maximising the advantage of teaching a smaller size class.

While small class teaching for pupils with high-level SEND was the predominant model in secondary schools, in primary settings, it was common for pupils with a Statement to be withdrawn from the lesson to work outside the classroom, often on some form of curriculum intervention. As with the use of small classes, there is, in principle, much to be gained from this approach. There is compelling international evidence that participation in ‘catch-up’ or ‘booster’ programmes, delivered in small groups or on a one-to-one basis, can improve basic skills in literacy and numeracy (Alborz et al., 2009; Nickow et al., 2020; Sharples, 2016; Slavin, 2016). Once again though, the somewhat indiscriminate way in which schools in the study withdrew pupils with high-level SEND from the mainstream class seemed to weaken its overall potential as an effective context for teaching and learning. Chapter 4 contained the example of speech and language interventions involving only pupils with these difficulties, instead of including (for at least some of the time) peers who can model good communication and act as practice partners. The second recommendation then is not about whether schools should make use of out-of-class interventions for pupils with SEND, but *how* to do it effectively. Detailed and specific guidance on this can be found in Webster et al. (2021).

Withdrawal for intervention and small specialist classes are approaches that ought to be used far more judiciously than the evidence from the present study suggests. The essential criterion for deploying either model has to be this: the coverage and input a pupil with high-level SEND receives in that context must more than compensate for the time they spend away from mainstream teaching and curriculum coverage. Furthermore, teachers and TAs must provide a bridge between these contexts, by making explicit and relatable connections for pupils between what they have covered outside the class with what is happening within it.

The careful use of smaller teaching and learning contexts for including pupils with high-level SEND is also connected to the need to improve the social mix in lessons. This is the third area in which some suggestions can be made. Compared with classes organised on the basis of ‘ability’, mixed attainment teaching has greater potential to improve outcomes for all pupils (Kutnick et al., 2005; Taylor et al., 2016). To increase opportunities for peer support, secondary schools could, for example, take the bold step of mixed attainment teaching, for at least some subjects. As a minimum, schools should adopt grouping strategies that mitigate the more harmful effects of streaming or ‘hard’ setting (Francis et al., 2017; Mazenod et al., 2018). In lessons, teachers should ensure pupils with SEND are not routinely grouped together for paired or group work, but have opportunities to interact, work with and learn from other peers.

The final set of recommendation concern the way TAs have become implicated in the strategic decision-making over provision and support for pupils with high-level SEND. In the UK, Wedell (2005) and Webster (2019b) have argued that the increased number and sustained use of TAs have in fact staved off debates about how effectively pupils with SEND are included *and* educated in mainstream settings. Slee (2012) suggests that where SEND policy has concentrated on diagnoses and mechanisms of individual support, it has given teachers ‘permission to withdraw, while specialists or hired aides get on with the task of inclusion’. In the USA, one of the originators of research into TAs, Michael Giangreco (2021) invokes Abraham Maslow’s famous analogy to describe the ‘human tendency to be over-reliant on a familiar tool to the exclusion of other potentially more appropriate tools’. His analysis is worth quoting in full:

In schools where TAs are treated as Maslow’s Hammer, they are a primary, sometimes nearly exclusive, tool to educationally and socially include students with certain disabilities. A student needs more instructional time or support – assign a TA. A new student with a disability (e.g., intellectual disability, autism) will be attending the school – assign a TA. A student exhibits behavioural challenges – assign a TA. A teacher expresses the need for support ... a parent wants to ensure their child is not lost in the shuffle ... a team wants to protect a student from bullying or facilitate peer interactions – assign a TA. (Giangreco, 2021: 281)

TAs are the mortar in the brickwork of schools, holding things together in numerous and often unnoticed ways. The Covid pandemic made this

much more visible, and showed just how pivotal TAs were in allowing schools to keep functioning, and to support pupils and families during lockdown. A survey of just over 9,000 UK TAs found that almost nine in 10 TAs were on site, enabling schools to stay open to vulnerable children and children of keyworkers, while continuing to provide individualised support to those with SEND and deliver targeted interventions (Moss et al., 2021). It is difficult to see how schools would have managed without them during this most turbulent and uncertain of times.

Praise, though deserved, should not let anyone off the hook for the way in which the widespread employment and deployment of TAs to facilitate the inclusion and teaching of pupils with high-level SEND is used as compensation or cover for failures elsewhere in the system. Insofar as schools have the power to improve matters, leaders and teachers need to be mindful of institutional arrangements and classroom practices that result in pupils with high-level SEND having less time with the teacher, relative to other pupils. In terms of broadening the suite of provisions, TAs should be part of a wider, more balanced and coherent set of responses to meeting the needs of pupils with high-level SEND – not the default setting.

At the heart of the operational confusion reported in the [previous chapter](#) is another longstanding and unresolved issue: what are TAs actually *for*? The lack of agreement and clarity about their specific purpose in relation to SEND provision, and the education machine more broadly, means that schools often underutilise and undervalue the capacity their TAs represent. This ambiguity has been fuelled by a long history of TAs being virtually invisible to policymakers. In part, the lack of activity in this area, in terms of professional development and progression, has something to do with legitimate concerns teacher unions and professional associations have about proposals that might cast TAs as encroaching on the teacher's role or diluting teaching. But this is symptomatic of a broader issue: policymakers' limited view of TAs as 'proxy teachers', particularly for pupils with high-level SEND.

Yet the consequences of over-relying on TAs to carry inclusion are clearly evident in the findings from both the present study and the DISS project. Elsewhere, colleagues and I have written extensively on what schools can do to repurpose the everyday opportunities TAs have for extended interaction with pupils (Bosanquet et al., 2021; Webster et al., 2016, 2021). To summarise, instead of replacing the teacher in an instructional capacity, TAs should be recast as scaffolding experts, supporting pupils to engage in learning and develop the skills to manage their own learning independently. This is a deliberate inversion of the

‘complete and correct’ practices identified in previous research (Radford et al., 2011; Rubie-Davies et al., 2010).

What is significant about this alternative approach is how it shifts the purpose and prioritisation of the TA’s support function. The starting point is to acknowledge the teacher as the pedagogical expert in the classroom, and to recognise that TAs’ skills and pupil outcomes are maximised when TAs support problem-solving *alongside* the mainstream curriculum. Training TAs in this approach has been shown not only to improve TAs’ talk behaviours, but also have a positive impact on pupil engagement (Dimova et al., 2021). Furthermore, evidence from the same study found signs of a reversal from what was found in the DISS project, where the tendency to deploy TAs as proxy teachers for low-attaining pupils and those with SEND resulted in those pupils who most needed high-quality teacher input actually receiving the least input, as well as having fewer opportunities to work independently.

Rather than cutting across the teaching, the TA can make space for the teacher to spend time with struggling pupils. A practical example of how this can be achieved is to invert the common classroom scenario where, during classwork, TAs tend to remain in one place working with a group or individual, while the teacher roves about the room, ensuring pupils are on task and progressing. These roles could be flipped, with the TA deployed in a ‘triaging’ capacity, bringing to the teacher’s attention particular individuals who are having difficulty with the task, while the teacher spends extended time with a pupil who is unable to progress with the task or requires some re-teaching.

Improving teachers’ confidence and competence with SEND

Broadening the palette of provisions and support for pupils with high-level SEND necessarily means addressing the specific, longstanding failure to train teachers adequately. Every education system needs its teachers to be confident and competent in relation to SEND. The expert group that provided evidence for Menzies and Baars’ (2015) inquiry into those at risk of exiting the school system (a group they refer to as ‘pushed out’ learners) argue that young people are ‘rarely pushed out because schools do not want to help them; more often it is because these young people’s needs are so far outside the norm that schools, in their current form, are not equipped to support them’. Insofar as this applies to the SEND population, the evidence of teachers’ knowledge deficit around SEND goes back decades.

There is the persistent lack of pre-service training for teachers in England. Annual surveys of newly qualified teachers (NQTs) in England,

conducted for the Department for Education, have consistently shown that following their initial teacher education (ITE) course, NQTs rank their confidence in teaching pupils with SEND as one of their least secure areas. Each of the most recently available surveys, covering 2015 to 2017, found that just over half of NQTs felt secure in this area of their practice (Ginnis et al., 2018; Pye et al., 2016). Incidentally, NQTs' confidence in knowing how to deploy TAs effectively ranks equally low, and can be seen as another ingredient in the operational confusion described in [Chapter 6](#).

In her 1978 landmark report on special education, Mary Warnock acknowledged that 'some 40 years will need to elapse' before the English education system is at a point where all teachers had undertaken adequate SEND training as part of their initial training, and therefore have the requisite skills to teach pupils with SEND effectively (DES, 1978). That milestone was passed some years ago, yet despite some progress, the pattern over the past four decades concerning the adequacy, quality and amount of training in SEND offered to pre-service teachers has been one of repeated missed opportunities. In his skilful assessments of the landscape, Hodkinson (2009, 2019) concludes that the rhetoric from successive governments on the position of SEND in ITE has come to sound 'like a scratched record'.

That SEND should be a staple of ITE and a recurrent topic in teachers' in-service professional learning should hardly need saying, but it is worth noting that this coverage ought to extend beyond overviews of different types of SEND. It should include pedagogy. Lehane's (2017) analysis of the successive SEND Codes of Practice (in England) reveals a persistent absence of conceptual and theoretical underpinning, and a consistent failure to consider what inclusive practice might look like. 'Similarly, there is no mention of models of disability, of the "special pedagogy" debate, nor disability-friendly practice or universal design, nor any interrogation of the relationship between disability and standards, poverty or minority.'

This historical failure might be explained in terms of the inherent contestability and difficulty of defining a clear and grounded concept of 'inclusive practice'. In a careful dissection of the conceptual and practical challenges of defining and operationalising inclusive pedagogy, Norwich (2013) concludes that this term is multi-levelled and multi-directional, and it is used interchangeably to refer to matters relating to what it is (curricula), how it is achieved (approaches to teaching and learning) and where (in which settings) it occurs. This debate additionally melds with theoretical and practical considerations relating to notions and

expressions of ‘differentiation’, and the very existence of, or need for, ‘SEND pedagogy’.

There is, in any event, a paucity of quality research evidence, especially in the UK, about pedagogic practice for pupils with SEND in mainstream settings (Rix et al., 2009). How, then, might this apparent lack of evidence within the literature on what good inclusive practice looks like be reconciled with the clearer, more substantive evidence on impact? One explanation might be that teachers are not adept at accurately reporting and describing what they do (Good and Brophy, 2002; Nuthall, 2007). Another explanation could be that SEND pedagogy/pedagogies have spectral-like qualities: approaches to teaching for pupils with learning difficulties may not be as materially different and distinguishable from approaches that work for all learners as one perhaps intuitively believes (Davis and Florian, 2004). We may lack the empirical evidence to know, but the wisdom of Graham Nuthall is once again useful here in reminding us that, whatever it is, one characteristic of inclusive pedagogy is that it is highly relational:

In my experience, teaching is about sensitivity and adaptation. It is about adjusting to the here-and-now circumstances of particular students. It is about making moment-by-moment decisions as a lesson or activity progresses. Things that interest some students do not interest others. Things that work one day may not work the next day. What can be done quickly with one group has to be taken very slowly with another group. What one student finds easy to understand may confuse another student. In order to navigate the complexity of the circumstances in which a teacher works, it is not possible to follow a recipe. As a teacher, you make adaptations. You must. The important question is: what adaptations do you make? You can do it by a kind of blind trial and error, but it would be much better if you knew what kinds of adaptations were needed, and why (Nuthall, 2007: 15).

Insofar as this points to a recommendation, this book can only restate the essential need for the government to improve the coverage of SEND in ITE and in-service training, finally and firmly. As vital as training is, the time teachers have to engage in professional learning will remain necessarily limited. What, however, are generally more abundant in supply are opportunities to sit with a pupil, to get to know them, their needs, their talents, their aspirations, the things they like and can do, the things they find unfamiliar, the things that provoke their curiosity, and the things

teachers can do to stimulate, challenge and include them. The message for schools then is to ensure these opportunities are maximised (e.g. by deploying TAs in the triaging approach, as above) and to arrive at collective and shared views about how best to respond to the needs of pupils with SEND in their everyday teaching.

The primacy of inclusion policy

There is one final and important point to make, by way of concluding both this chapter and, the last chapter notwithstanding, this book. It is reasonable to deduce from the recommendations made in this chapter, and summarised in [Box 7.1](#), that there is much that schools – either individually or in formal consortia, such as multi-academy trusts – can do to improve inclusive practice, regardless of what happens in terms of national policy. The overarching assessment, based on the research behind this book, is that this is true – but only up to a point.

This book has been clear about where the balance of culpability should lie in relation to the strategic state of inclusion and education for pupils with high-level SEND in England. It is successive governments, not schools, that bear the greater responsibility for the inertia described in this chapter. In fairness, successive governments should claim credit for the progress that has been made. England, and the UK as a whole, has made significant strides towards mainstreaming greater numbers of pupils with high-level needs over the last half century. But, as this book has also made clear, a necessary condition of inclusion is attending and receiving an education within a mainstream setting, but on its own this risks appearing tokenistic. Any meaningful definition and operationalisation of inclusion must also attend to the quality of education. Given the interminable progress on this particular matter, it is an issue for which policymakers are absolutely on the hook.

From 2010, the pace of the academisation programme in England significantly accelerated. While claims about its overall success or otherwise are disputed, it is a fact that, at the time of writing (March 2022), 52 per cent of pupils in England attend an academy school (DfE, 2021b).⁵ Academisation has been sold to schools by the Conservative government on a prospectus of self-determination. They would not only receive greater freedom and autonomy to map their own paths and processes to improvement, but, in the early part of the programme – and not insignificantly – more funding to achieve it. A decade on, and the evidence suggests that it has done little to improve the prevalence or the quality

of education for pupils with high-level SEND. This structural reform sits ‘uncomfortably’ with the 2014 reforms to the SEND system (HoC, 2019). That academies can (for now) legitimately repel overtures from LAs to admit pupils with SEND, while maintained state schools (i.e. non-academies) cannot, is not only another example of the protectionist behaviours in which some academies have been able to indulge, but also demonstrates how the education system actively works against itself, and to the detriment of pupils with high-level SEND.

This is not to say that academies, and indeed non-academies, behave in a uniformly exclusionary manner, nor that they are managed and staffed by people antipathetic to inclusion and pupils with additional needs. It is merely to point out that if inclusive education is a serious goal of any education system, it must be properly legislated for, which, depending on the jurisdiction, may be at the national level or the state or regional level. The message from England seems to be that a coordinated national policy for inclusion is an essential and, almost certainly, more effective driver of improvement than any amount of faith a government may declare it has in schools to be the principal, and principled, engines of change, or wishful thinking that shifting the status quo requires minimal policy intervention on its part.

Although not explicitly stated in the summary in [Box 7.1](#), the implication that wraps around all of these recommendations is that the education system in England is in urgent need of a comprehensive strategic plan for the inclusion of children and young people with SEND. It is not the intention of this book to expound on this, but to join, and to supply some empirical evidence to support, the call for reform. If concluding this on the basis of the results of the present study were not enough, consider the compounding effects of the Covid pandemic. An investigation of special education during lockdown found that pupils who attended special schools experienced not only greater absence, learning loss and developmental losses,⁶ compared with pupils in mainstream schools, but also disruption to – and in some cases, denial of – essential health, therapy and care services (Webster et al., 2022). If this is even part way indicative of what pupils with high-level SEND in mainstream schools experienced during the pandemic, the case for far-reaching reform ought to be as urgent as it is inevitable.

Four decades ago, the Warnock Inquiry report – the UK’s most comprehensive review of SEND ever commissioned and completed – offered the government 225 recommendations designed to improve the educational experiences, outcomes and life chances of children and young

Box 7.1 Summary of recommendations for policymakers and schools

Policymakers at the national level and, where relevant, the regional level should:

- Create a central database for maintaining an up-to-date record of where pupils with an EHCP are receiving their education.
- Develop and trial a ‘between school’ measure of inclusion to complement and contextualise a ‘within school’ measure of inclusion.
- When writing an EHCP, ensure the emphasis is on the quality of pedagogy, not the quantity of support.
- Make improving teachers’ confidence and competence regarding SEND central to all forms of ITE, and a recurrent topic of their on-going, in-service training.

Individual schools and clusters of schools, such as multi-academy trusts, should:

- Make career progression for teachers and school leaders contingent on evidencing practice that has improved experiences and outcomes for pupils with SEND.
- Make judicious use of withdrawal for intervention and small specialist classes for pupils with high-level SEND, ensuring that time in these contexts compensates for time away from mainstream teaching and curriculum coverage.
- Support teachers to adopt grouping strategies that provide opportunities for pupils with high-level SEND to interact, work with and learn from their peers.
- Train and deploy TAs to support pupils to engage in learning and to develop the skills to manage their own learning independently.

people with high-level SEND. It remains as cogent a case for mainstreaming pupils with high-level SEND as it was when it was published in May 1978. Inclusion, however, remains a serious policy in search of a serious government willing to do what is necessary to implement it.

Notes

1. While it is assumed that recent estimates are reliable, it is somewhat unclear whether, at the point that the SEND reforms were being drafted and implemented, the DfE had anticipated such a steep rise in new EHCPs. An analysis using DfE data suggests the state-funded special school population was forecast to increase by 23 per cent in the seven years following the introduction of the reforms (in September 2014). Yet the actual increase turned out to be 35 per cent. The official projection, therefore, underestimated the growth of this population by over 10,000 pupils.
2. In October 2021, the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced £2.6 billion in capital investment for the three years to 2024/5 to create 30,000 new school places for pupils with SEND in mainstream and special schools. This was poised to include the construction of new free schools and improvements to the accessibility of existing buildings (Gibbons, 2021).
3. Research into the relative value and impact of mainstream schooling for pupils with SEND is beset by methodological issues and limitations. A particular limitation is that studies on inclusion tend not to differentiate between outcomes for groups of children with different types of SEND.
4. It is worth noting that the government's Schools White Paper, published in late March (as this book was being typeset), contained a proposal to create a register for all children not in school 'to make sure no child is lost from the system' (DfE, 2022b).
5. Only 39 per cent of all state schools in England are academies, but the majority of these are secondary schools with large pupil rolls.
6. Social and communication skills; behaviour and self-regulation; emotional wellbeing and mental health; physical development; and independence and life skills.

8

Future research directions

This final chapter considers some directions for future research prompted by the main study covered in this book. It begins with a précis of ideas to extend this work, followed by a case for a more expansive longitudinal cohort research study of the school experiences of pupils with SEND. This case extends to arguing for a new and wider study of classroom contexts and processes involving all children, which makes use of the systematic observation method. This book concludes by briefly extolling the additive potential of studies that prioritise the collection of descriptive data, and – in the context of the rising interest in evaluative studies that attempt to identify ‘what works’ – an appeal to the education research community to make greater use of such methods.

Extending the study

In the [previous chapter](#), it was suggested that the present study might be extended with replica iterations involving pupils in different year groups, pupils with different types of SEND, and pupils on SEND support (the roughly 80 per cent of the SEND population who do not have an EHCP). [Chapter 7](#) also flagged the persistent lack of quality empirical data on effective pedagogic practices for pupils with SEND in mainstream settings. Given the limitations of desk-based research on this topic, there is a case for collaborative inquiries involving teachers and researchers, conducted in schools and classrooms. Given that not all teachers are naturally skilled at making their intentions implicit and their actions explicit (Good and Brophy, 2002; Nuthall, 2007), such a study would need to include sufficient opportunities and time with teachers, and pay close attention to methods and techniques for probing and drawing out their conscious and unconscious pedagogic competencies. Certainly, such an

investigation would put greater emphasis on pedagogical approaches than the present study was able to do.

Encouragingly, elements of an architecture for a coordinated and more democratised approach to research and development for SEND, first proposed in an underappreciated section of the 1978 Warnock Inquiry report, nowadays exist (Webster, 2019c). Within the last decade, opportunities for teachers to get involved in and engage with research have become something of a growth industry within education. Researchers too have become better at translating their work into accessible and practical tools and strategies for schools. The evidence-based education movement (more below) has become dominated by the needs of the mainstream school population, somewhat side-lining those in the SEND community. Within this context, and as I have argued elsewhere (Webster, 2019c), it is worth reconnecting with Warnock's ambitious blueprint as a starting point for reigniting research and development activities for pupils with SEND and those that educate them.

A national longitudinal cohort study of children and young people with SEND

Chapter 1 summarised the headline findings from two troubling assessments of the SEND system in England, both published in 2019. Inquiries by the House of Commons Education Committee and the National Audit Office concluded that there was a lack of quality data on the nature and impact of support for children and young people with SEND, and on the experiences they and their families have of school and the education system. The results of the DISS project (see **Chapter 7**) signify why robust data on real-world provision and support are necessary for accountability and for informing decision-making at the national level and the school level. Under empirical testing, the widespread model of inclusion – developed on the basis of the intuitive, but untested, assumption that pupils with SEND in everyday classrooms would benefit from individualised attention from TAs – was found to have serious unintended consequences. The study reported in this book provides further evidence of the extent and effect of this arrangement on pupils with high-level SEND, and again shows the value in obtaining reliable data on the experiences of pupils with SEND.

Without information from descriptive research, one cannot know with confidence the effects of the arrangements put in place for pupils with high-level SEND, or what modifications need to be made to existing

set-ups, in order to improve experiences and outcomes for this constituency. The present study has sought to provide such information, but it has a shelf life. Within a decade, its utility will fade. It may have value as a historical record, but its results and findings will become dated and eventually redundant in terms of informing policy and practice. What policymakers, practitioners and researchers need are data on the SEND population in perpetuity.

Longitudinal studies of children and young people with SEND, however, are rare. While the DfE funds an omnibus survey of the experiences children and their parents have of the education system in England (Knibbs et al., 2018), there is currently no large-scale survey that has SEND as its principal focus. At the time of writing (March 2022), though, the DfE is conducting a feasibility study to ‘inform the viability of a potential future longitudinal study’ of children and young people with SEND (gov.uk, 2019). Although this project has been affected by the pandemic, a key issue it intends to address is how to recruit participants to a prospective long-term project, and crucially, how to keep them in it. Survey response rates and participant retention are probably the most critical factors in ensuring the perpetuity of any longitudinal study, not least one that contains subjects that are often considered to be ‘hard to reach’ (gov.uk, 2019).

Also in development is an Early Life Cohort Feasibility Study, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. This two-year project, which began in April 2021, is testing the feasibility of a new UK-wide birth cohort study.¹ If successful, it is anticipated that a larger main study to collect data on the lives and development of children would be commissioned in 2023. While not specific to the SEND population, the scale and sampling frame of such a study could most likely contain a reasonably sized cohort of children with a range of additional needs. Encouragingly, the UK is a world leader in administering large birth cohort studies. The impact and longevity of the 1970 British Cohort Study and the Millennium Cohort Study, for example, demonstrate UK researchers’ ability to recruit participants to decades-long projects, and retain them. Were the DfE’s feasibility study to prove problematic, this independently funded project might be the better option as the basis for a prospective longitudinal data collection effort focusing on the SEND population. It would also be far less susceptible to government interference or sudden foreclosure.

It is good news that the education community might, in the near future, begin to benefit from insights based on analyses of experiential data on children with (and without) SEND. While this should go some

way to shortening ‘the distance between young people’s lived experience ... and ministers’ desks’ (HoC, 2019), neither of these feasibility studies plans to collect systematic data *within* schools – though at the time of writing (March 2022) it is too early in the design process to say if any prospective main study might do so. The family home aside, schools are the organisational contexts in which children spend the most time. There is no other institution in the life of the child (other than the family) that has more influence on their social, emotional, personal and educational development than school. Considerable advantages could therefore be gained by augmenting a future longitudinal cohort study with an ambitious and on-going school-based data collection effort.

The thesis advanced in this book, structural exclusion, is described as a concatenation of classroom factors and behaviours, and is informed by an ecological approach, which conceives educational processes as being situated in hierarchically organised contexts (see [Chapter 1](#)). Class size, for example, is a context for teaching and learning that interconnects with other organisational features of the classroom, such as within-class groupings and the presence of TAs. These interconnections and the ways in which they are managed – or left unregulated – are key factors when considering the effects on pupils’ educational experiences and outcomes. Blatchford et al. (2003b) coined the term ‘social pedagogy’ to help show how learning in schools is not simply the result of teachers exerting an influence on pupils, but that learning takes place in a distinct physical and social setting, within which complex, multiple decisions are taken about how best to coordinate and manage the various factors involved.

A large-scale inquiry into classroom contexts and processes is long overdue. A sufficiently scaled, representative, longitudinal cohort study of the interconnections between classroom contextual factors and interactions would be important conceptually and practically. Harmonised and aligned with data from large administrative data sets (i.e. the National Pupil Database) and a prospective birth cohort study, such a project would enable comparisons of classroom contexts and experiences between groups of pupils and schools with different characteristics over time. This could include: pupils with SEND and without SEND; pupils with different types of SEND or level of SEND (i.e. EHCP vs non-EHCP); pupils in different Key Stages, regions or types of school (i.e. maintained schools vs academies); pupils in different sized classes; and pupils in (say) secondary mathematics classes that are and are not set by attainment.

The potential of systematic observation

As this book has sought to show, a proven technique for obtaining robust and objective data on the everyday educational experiences of pupils – in situ, in real time, and consonant with the ecological view of the classroom – is systematic observation. Studies that deploy systematic observation, often as part of a multi-method design, have the capability to describe features of classroom life that carry particular power and immediacy. Indeed, few methodological techniques are as robust or equal to the task of providing reliable longitudinal data for describing and comparing aspects of school and classroom life and at scale as systematic observation. The approach to systematic observation used in the study reported here – the lineage of which is traceable back to the category coding systems used in the earlier landmark studies mentioned in [chapters 1](#) and [2](#) – provides a reliable way of collecting pupil-level data on relatively stable variables in order to describe classroom structures and the activities that occur during lessons. It would, of course, require careful consideration in terms of overcoming the logistical challenges of deploying researchers in schools at scale, as well as the inevitable issues concerning data reliability and validity (Rodgers et al., 2021). But with the standardisation of the observation system and data sampling method providing stability over time and between observers, a representative, longitudinal cohort study of pupils' classroom life, which makes extensive use of systematic observation, is at least theoretically possible.

'What works' and 'what is'

Systematic observation studies are often labour and resource intensive, which perhaps explains, at least in part, their relative rarity nowadays. The number of and funding for evaluative research projects in education, meanwhile, has risen rapidly, as part of what has become known as the 'what works' agenda. 'What works' is the colloquial shorthand for the government-led effort to identify and implement evidence-based practices in order to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of public services. Perhaps the most symbolic and significant illustration of this movement in relation to schools is the growth and influence of the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF). Launched in 2011, the EEF swiftly established itself as a major funder and disseminator of education research. Schools in England are encouraged

by, among others, the DfE, to use its outputs to inform the improvement of teaching and learning.

The EEF primarily funds evaluations of whole-school intervention programmes, well-specified classroom strategies, and approaches to instruction. Impact is measured in terms of academic progress. With very few exceptions, these evaluations deploy a randomised controlled trial (RCT) design. The EEF is by no means the only UK funder to favour and fund studies using randomised designs, but its status as the pre-eminent and most influential has prompted suggestions that the way it privileges RCTs distorts the education research landscape (Gorard et al., 2017; Hanley et al., 2016). A criticism of RCTs is that they emphasise analyses of impact at the expense of process; that is, they prioritise addressing the question of *whether* ‘Intervention X’ works over *how* it works – or why it does not work, depending on the case (Connolly et al., 2018). Relatedly, the disproportionate attention RCTs attract carries a risk of devaluing the contribution that evidence obtained using other methods can make to understanding and improving educational effectiveness.

A particular casualty in the preoccupation with research on ‘what works’ – or perhaps, more accurately, what might be possible under certain circumstances – is naturalistic, descriptive research on ‘what is’. The study covered in this book did not seek to measure the impact of what it systematically described in the way that an RCT might, but nevertheless it has its own intrinsic value. The large data set behind it allows reliable comparisons of situations within and across schools and classroom contexts irrespective of any interventions running within them.

In their defence, RCTs measure outcomes rather than experiences. As the critique of systematic observation in [Chapter 2](#) suggests, there is little use in chiding a particular research method for not delivering something for which it was not designed. Educational outcomes, processes and experiences are equally important in understanding the empirical world. So, RCTs are not really the problem. Indeed, if researchers are able to optimise the scale at which RCTs operate, they could potentially extend the use, and help improve the esteem, of descriptive research.

RCTs are powered for impact, and even medium-scale studies tend to involve hundreds of schools and thousands of pupils. However, process evaluations, such as those included in EEF trials, draw data from around just a dozen schools, and half of these will be in the control condition. Oftentimes, because of the relative number of schools involved, the confidence in the results that measure the impact of an intervention is greater and more secure than the level of confidence expressed in the change process. Yet, with so many schools, classes, teachers, TAs and

pupils included in these studies, committing some additional resources to significantly extending the number of participants and data collection involved in a study's descriptive component – in as representative a way as possible – has the potential to greatly improve our understanding of school and classroom contexts and processes. In addition, it may restore some methodological, and perhaps ideological, parity with the evaluative element. Deployed in the context of a parallel process evaluation, such data can help researchers interpret the results of impact analyses that use a randomised design with much greater confidence, and inform the effective implementation of practices that show promising evidence of a positive effect.

Note

1. <https://cls.ucl.ac.uk/cls-studies/early-life-cohort-feasibility-study>.

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“This book brilliantly demonstrates the kind of education children ... with the legal entitlement of an Education, Health and Care Plan actually experience.”

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“This book is essential reading for anyone interested in what needs to change to ensure better futures for children with SEND in mainstream schools.”

Brian Lamb OBE, Visiting Professor of Special Educational Needs and Disability, Derby University

Inclusion conjures images of children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) learning in classes alongside peers in a mainstream school. For pupils in England with high-level SEND, who have an Education, Health and Care Plan (formerly a Statement), this implies an everyday educational experience similar to that of their typically-developing classmates. Yet in vital respects, they are worlds apart.

Based on the UK’s largest observation study of pupils with high-level SEND, this book exposes how attendance at a mainstream school is no guarantee of receiving a mainstream education. Observations of nearly 1,500 lessons in English schools show that their everyday experience of school is characterised by separation and segregation. Furthermore, interviews with nearly 450 pupils, parents and school staff reveal the effect of this marginalisation on the quality of their education. The book argues that inclusion is an illusion. The way schools are organised and how classrooms are composed creates a form of ‘structural exclusion’ that preserves mainstream education for typically-developing pupils and justifies a diluted pedagogical offer for pupils with high-level SEND. Policymakers, not mainstream schools, are indicted over this state of affairs.

This book prompts questions about what we think inclusion is and what it looks like. Ultimately, it suggests why a more authentic form of inclusion is needed, and how it might be achieved.

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