Project Report: Inclusive Environments for Every Child

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Inclusive Environments for Every Child is a research project led by ImpactEd Group in partnership with Challenge Partners, designed to support schools and trusts in understanding how inclusive their environments are for all pupils, particularly those with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).

Through this work, we aim to identify the factors that shape inclusive school environments, providing actionable insights into the barriers and enablers that influence whether pupils with SEND are able to engage, achieve, and thrive.

About the project

The Inclusive Environments for Every Child project has been shaped over more than a year by the people who gave their time and expertise to it. A steering group of leaders in education, special educational needs and disabilities, and school improvement guided the work throughout. Chaired by David Bartram OBE, the group helped shape the questions worth asking, and tested the framework against the realities of school life. The pupil, parent, and teacher surveys at the heart of the project were designed in close collaboration with the group and refined before going into schools. We are grateful for the challenge and care they brought, and to Challenge Partners and the participating schools, whose involvement made the research possible.

The steering group comprised:

- David Bartram OBE, Chair
- Beryce Nixon OBE, CEO, Exceed Learning Partnership
- Ed Hillyard, Headteacher, Holmer Green Senior School
- Dr. Kate Chhatwal OBE, CEO, Challenge Partners
- Katharine Howard, Executive School Improvement Lead, Windsor Academy Trust
- Pippa Irwin, Headteacher & Executive Principal, Beverley School
- Rachel Hargreaves, CEO, Ascent Academies Trust
- Rob Carpenter, CEO, Inspire Partnership
- Serena Madhvani, Headteacher, Hornchurch High School
- Tanya Douglas, Headteacher, Chace Community School
- Will Cannock, Trust SEND Lead, The Charter Schools Educational Trust

These are early insights, not final conclusions. They draw on a single window of data collected in Spring 2025-26, covering pupil survey responses from 13 schools that chose to take part. The patterns described here are associations rather than causal effects, and a self-selecting group of schools in one period will not represent every setting. They are best read as a first look at where inclusion appears to strengthen or come under strain, and as a guide to the questions worth pursuing in more depth.

We are sharing them now, at the close of the first cohort, because several of the patterns seem emergent enough to warrant further investigation. There are many directions which future research could take: widening the sample across more schools and successive cohorts; tracking pupils longitudinally through the primary-to-secondary transition; linking pupils' reported experiences to attainment, attendance and other outcomes; and exploring through qualitative work why the physical environment scores consistently low and how disadvantage compounds for pupils with more than one characteristic. We would welcome conversations about taking any of these areas of research forward.

About these insights

This project responds to a significant challenge: ~1.5 million pupils with SEND are educated in mainstream settings out of the ~1.7 million SEND population in all schools[1]. However, schools often lack robust, structured evidence to assess where their provision is working well and where targeted improvements could have the greatest impact. Moreover, what constitutes an "inclusive" school in practice remains insufficiently defined, making it difficult for leaders to prioritise and direct their efforts effectively.

To address this, the project gathers perspectives from three key groups within each participating school:

- Pupils
- Parents and carers
- Teaching staff

This Project Report draws on data collected in Spring 2025–26 from 13 participating schools. It focuses specifically on pupil survey responses, exploring how demographic characteristics, including SEND status, eligibility for Pupil Premium, gender, English as an Additional Language (EAL), and year group are associated with pupils' experiences of inclusivity within their school environments.

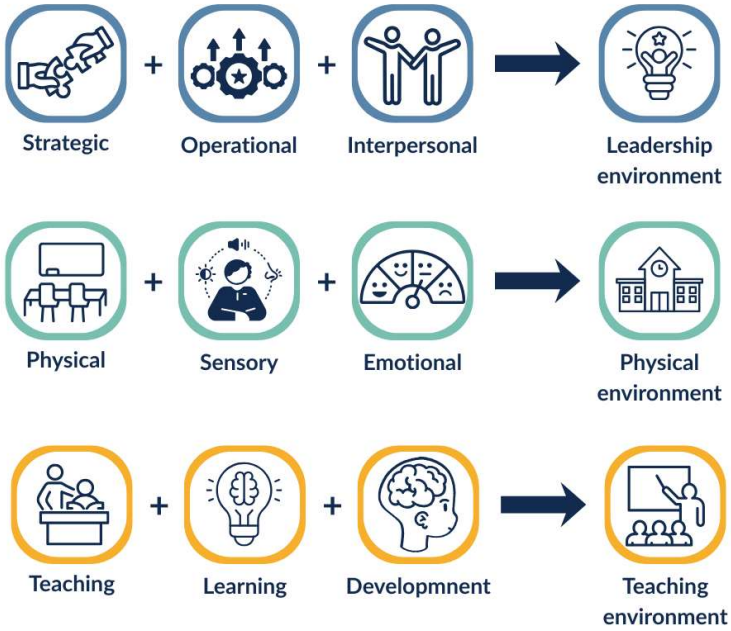
Analytical aims

Sample: The pupil dataset includes responses from 6,568 pupils from Year 3 to Year 13. Of these, 1,329 have an identified SEND and 2,217 are eligible for Pupil Premium. The sample represented 364 primary pupils and 6,204 secondary pupils. Due to the small sample of primary school pupils, we do not make statistical comparisons between primary and secondary pupils but instead focus on the sample as a whole across key demographic groups (e.g., SEND vs. non-SEND). Finally, in

[1] Department for Education (2025) *Special educational needs in England: academic year 2024/25*. Available at: https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/special-educational-needs-in-england/2024-25 (Accessed: 31 May 2026).

terms of the sample, whilst it is not nationally representative, it provides valuable insights and helps to identify key themes and areas for further exploration.

Survey design: The survey used a 0-10 scale, with 0 representing 'do not agree at all' and 10 'completely agree'. The survey included items grouped in three domains, each with three subdomains that reflect key dimensions of an inclusive school environment:



Within the *leadership domain*, the *strategic* subdomain focuses on whole-school inclusion and recognition (e.g. "People here notice when I am good at something" and "I am included in a wide range of different activities at school"), while *operational* items capture how effectively systems support transitions and everyday functioning (e.g. "I settled into this school year easily" and "I know where to go in school if I have a problem"). The *interpersonal* subdomain then emphasises relationships and pupil voice, for example whether "teachers have asked me about what helps me to learn" and whether pupils feel comfortable sharing their opinions.

In the *teaching domain*, the *teaching* subdomain focuses on instructional practices and access (e.g. "Teachers explain things in a way that helps me understand" and "Teachers help me feel confident about my learning"), while *learning* items assess pupils' metacognition and understanding of progress (e.g. "I know when I have made progress in my learning" and "I usually understand what I need to do to improve my work"). The *development* subdomain captures teachers' responsiveness to individual needs and emotional awareness, including whether "my teachers know what I need to help me learn" and "my teachers know when I am struggling and when I am doing well."

Finally, the *physical domain* reflects both practical and experiential aspects of the school setting. The *physical* subdomain includes items on accessibility and support (e.g. "I can easily hear and see everything I need to in the classroom" and "There is someone I know I can go to in school if I feel overwhelmed"), while the *sensory* subdomain focuses on environmental conditions such as noise,

lighting, and displays that enable concentration. The *emotional* subdomain then extends this to belonging and representation, with items such as "I feel like a real part of my school" and whether pupils see themselves reflected in displays and materials. Together, these domains and subdomains provide a comprehensive framework for capturing pupils' experiences of inclusion, support, and engagement across the school environment. Further information about these domains and the underlying research can be found in our published Research Brief.

Demographic factors: For this update, we focused our analysis on the domain and subdomain scores above and the following demographic factors:

- Year group
- SEND status
- Pupil premium (PP) eligibility
- Gender
- EAL

Research aims: The aim of the analysis was to examine how these demographic factors relate to pupils' reported experiences of their school environments. Specifically, this included a series of regression [2] with domain and subdomain average scores as outcome variables, controlling for the other domains. Regression models examine how a particular factor (e.g., SEND) is associated with an outcome (e.g., perceptions of the school environment), taking into account other relevant factors (e.g., other socio-demographic variables or survey outcomes).

The analysis examined:

- The relationship between demographic factors and domain scores.
- The relationship between demographic factors and subdomain scores, after accounting for the other domains.
- The interactions between pairs of demographic factors: SEND and Pupil Premium, Pupil Premium and gender, and SEND and gender, and whether belonging to more than one of these groups shows disadvantage beyond what each characteristic predicts alone.

In what follows, we present the key findings and reflect on what these mean in practice for schools and trusts working to build more inclusive environments.

Finding 1: Physical environment is a persistent weak spot

The *Physical domain* is consistently the lowest-scoring domain. This holds across all pupil groups, suggesting that physical environments are a persistent concern regardless of school type or pupil background. Within the *Physical environment*, the subdomains tell different stories:

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[2] Regression models are a statistical technique used to examine the relationship between an outcome of interest (e.g. pupils' scores on the *Leadership domain*) and multiple explanatory factors simultaneously. All models in this analysis control for pupils' scores on the other two environment domains, year group, gender, SEND status, EAL, and Pupil Premium eligibility. Coefficients, referred to in the text as *"effect on [outcome]"*, represent the estimated difference in domain scores associated with each characteristic, holding all other variables constant.

- The *Sensory subdomain* is the weakest area, with the lowest averages across the sample. This subdomain gathers pupils' perception of noise levels, lighting, and temperature.
- The *Emotional subdomain*, which captures pupils' sense of belonging and representation, also scores relatively low.
- The *Physical subdomain*, which covers access to resources and physical comfort, has a higher score, though still below the other environment domains' scores.

Finding 2: Variations in how pupils with SEND experience the teaching environment

At the overall domain level, SEND pupils and non-SEND pupils score similarly, only showing statistically significant[3] differences in the *Teaching environment*. However, at the subdomain level we observe more differences.

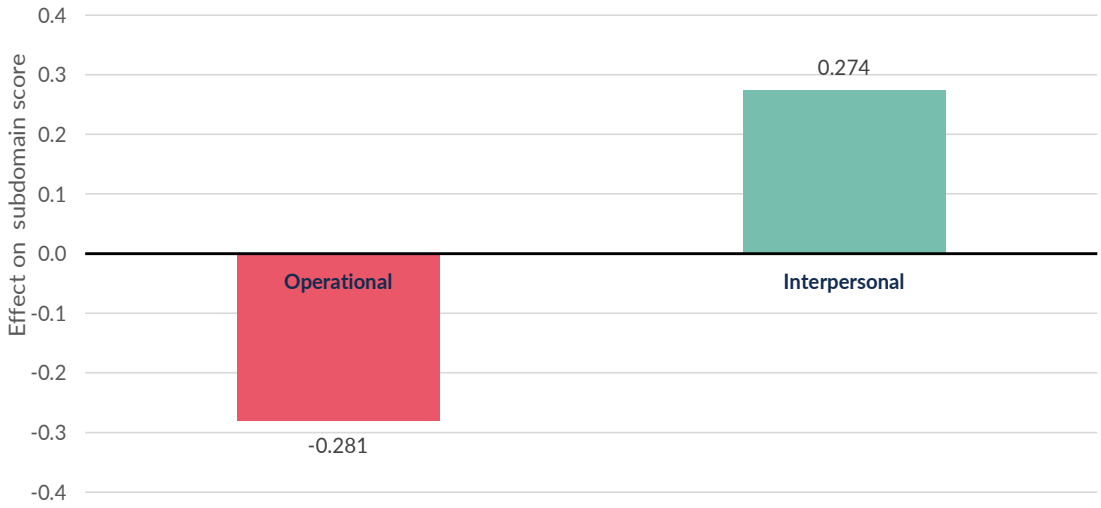
Leadership environment

While we don't see significant differences between SEND and non-SEND pupils in the *Leadership environment* as a domain, these differences do show up at the *Operational* and *Interpersonal subdomains*.

SEND pupils are significantly more likely to score lower than non-SEND peers in the *Operational subdomain*, where pupils are asked about whether the start of the school year went well and whether they know where to go if they have a problem. On the other hand, SEND pupils consistently scored higher than non-SEND pupils in the *Interpersonal subdomain*, covering if teachers ask them what helps them learn and if they feel comfortable speaking to their teachers.

[3] Throughout this report, statistical significance refers to a p-value threshold of 0.05.

Figure 3: Impact of SEND demographic on Operational and Interpersonal subdomains



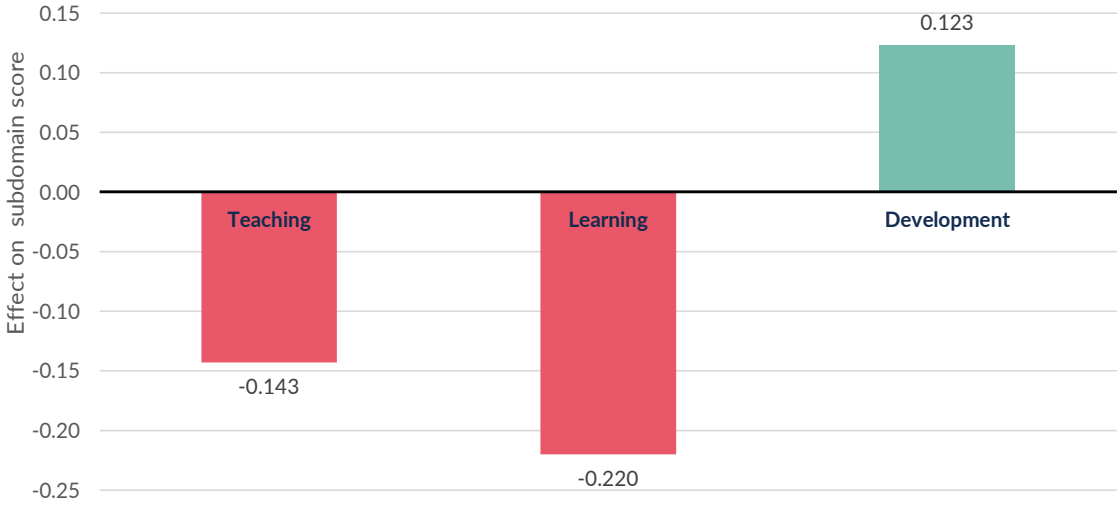
"My teachers have asked me about what helps me to learn" is the only question where SEND pupils outperform their peers (+0.53), which could reflect the structured conversations happening through EHCPs and SEND support plans.

Teaching environment

On average, SEND pupils score significantly lower than non-SEND pupils in the *Teaching environment*.

At the subdomain level, SEND pupils are more likely to score higher in the *Development subdomain* compared to non-SEND peers. This subdomain covers pupils' perceptions that their teachers know how they feel, if they're struggling or not. However, SEND pupils score significantly lower in the *Teaching* and *Learning subdomains*.

Figure 4: Impact of SEND demographic on Teaching, Learning and Development subdomains

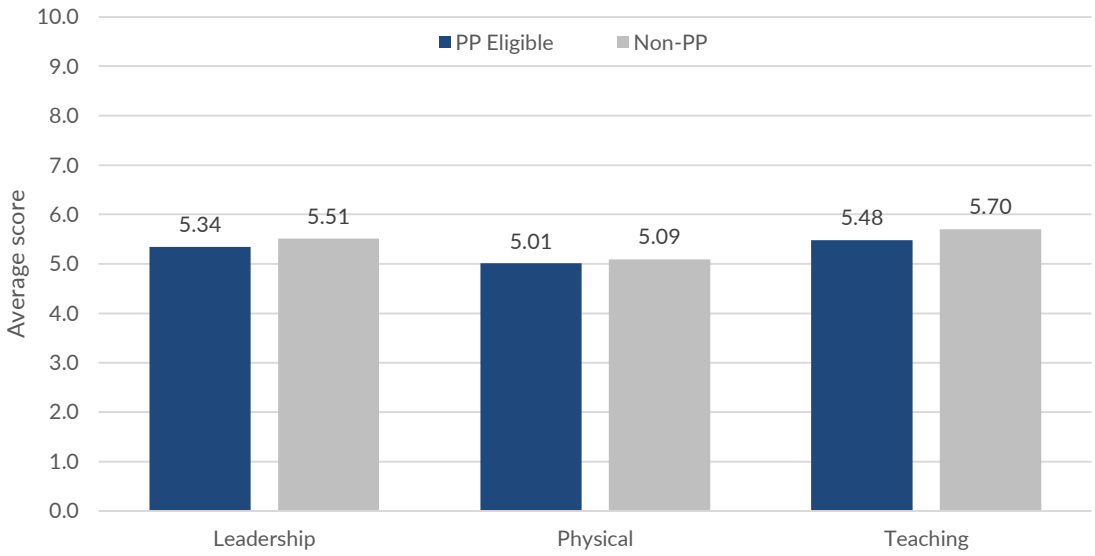


The *Learning subdomain* covers pupils' perception on making progress, understanding what they need to do to improve, and know what to do when something is difficult. The *Teaching subdomain* covers pupils' perceptions on their teachers helping them feel comfortable and using the right tools to help them. Furthermore, *"I have access to technology that supports my learning"* shows the largest gap between SEND and non-SEND pupils (-0.52) in *Teaching environment*.

Finding 3: Pupil Premium, a consistent gap across all domains

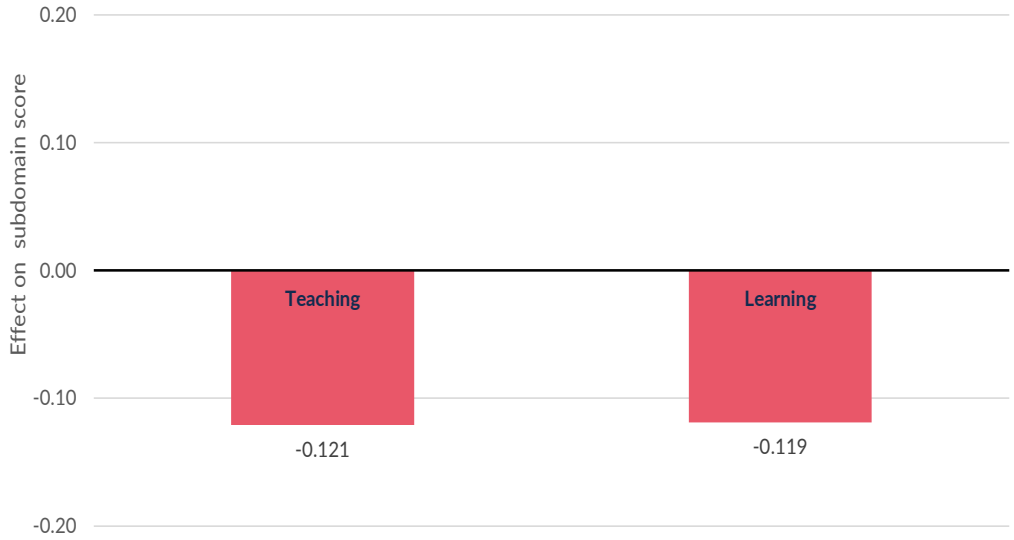
Beyond SEND status, Pupil Premium eligibility shapes how pupils experience their school environments. PP-eligible pupils consistently score lower than their non-Pupil Premium peers across all three domains at a statistically significant level.

Figure 5: PP vs. non-PP Inclusive Environments Scores (out of 10)



The regression analysis shows this is not simply explained by year group or other domain scores: Pupil Premium eligibility independently predicts a negative effect on the *Teaching* (−0.121) and *Learning* (−0.119) *subdomains*' scores within the *Teaching environment*. These are modest differences in absolute terms, but meaningful because the effect holds even after accounting for all other factors in the model, including SEND status and year group. In other words, Pupil Premium-eligible pupils are less likely to feel confident about their learning, know how to improve, or know what to do when something is difficult.

Figure 6: Impact of PP demographic on Teaching and Learning subdomains



Finding 4: When SEND and Pupil Premium overlap, there is the greatest impact on the physical domain

Among the interaction effects tested, SEND pupils who are also Pupil Premium-eligible stand out in the *Physical subdomain*, where they report a negative effect (-0.16). The items in this subdomain ask whether pupils can easily hear and see what they need, access classroom resources, and feel physically comfortable. We didn't find statistical significance for this interaction in any other subdomain, even in those where having SEND and being Pupil Premium-eligible independently predicted lower scores.

Finding 5: Pupil-Premium boys face an additional gap in the Learning subdomain

One further interaction is statistically significant: Pupil Premium-eligible boys see a negative effect (−0.224) on the *Learning subdomain*. This subdomain covers knowing when you have made progress, understanding how to improve your work, and knowing what to do when something is hard. This finding points that Pupil Premium-eligible boys are particularly likely to feel uncertain about their own progress and what to do when learning gets difficult.

Finding 6: Different experiences for boys with SEND and Pupil Premium-eligibility

Pupil Premium-eligible boys who also have SEND scored meaningfully lower than their peers in *Leadership Environment*. This pattern was not found for other groups; for instance, Pupil Premium-eligible boys without SEND did not show the same dip, which suggests this is not simply about disadvantage or SEND in isolation, but about the intersection of all three characteristics together.

This finding was only statistically significant for the *Leadership Domain*, which points to something particular about how this group experiences whole-school leadership culture, including whether they feel included, supported, and that adults understand their needs.

Implications for schools and systems

These findings are drawn from one cohort of 13 schools, so they are best read as prompts for reflection rather than confirmed system-level conclusions. That said, several patterns are consistent enough across the sample to be worth taking seriously.

Implication 1: Physical environment matters for inclusion across all groups

The Physical domain scores lowest across every phase and every pupil group. This is not a finding about one school or one type of pupil; it holds consistently. It is worth considering whether estates and facilities teams are sufficiently involved in inclusion planning. Inclusive design is rarely framed as core infrastructure, but the data suggest it may deserve to be.

Implication 2: Gaps for SEND pupils reflect a "knowing–doing" divide

SEND pupils score higher than non-SEND peers on relational items (whether teachers ask what helps them learn, whether they feel comfortable speaking to staff) but lower on learning and teaching items (whether they know how to improve, what to do when stuck, whether they can access the technology they need). The relational groundwork appears to be in place for many

pupils; the gap is in translating that into effective learning experiences. This points to metacognition and learning clarity as areas worth examining in SEND provision.

Implication 3: Intersecting characteristics compound disadvantage, particularly for specific groups

Pupils with more than one disadvantaging characteristic tend to experience additional gaps beyond what each characteristic predicts alone. If these patterns hold in larger samples, they would suggest that treating SEND, Pupil Premium eligibility, and gender as separate variables in data and accountability frameworks may cause schools to miss the pupils most at risk. These findings are worth monitoring as the cohort grows.

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