“Bloody Minded Ethical Leadership About Doing the Right Thing for the Right Reasons”: How Secondary Headteachers in one English County Define and Operationalize Inclusion - a Qualitative Grounded Theory Study

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Submitted in part requirement for the Doctorate in Educational Psychology (EdPsyD)

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May 2026

Word count (excluding title page, contents, acknowledgements and appendices): 61325

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Abstract

Background: International agreements make inclusion an education priority, but a lack of definition makes implementation challenging. In 2025, the UK government made inclusion central in its white paper and updated school inspection framework. This study explored how current headteachers defined and operationalized inclusion. **Method:** Six serving secondary school headteachers in one English county co-constructed their meaning of inclusion and how they make it work in school through intensive interviews. Constructivist grounded theory revealed underlying processes by applying line-by-line coding to the transcripts. Constant comparison of codes and data between participants led to focused coding and proposed categories. These were expanded, refined and compared through theoretical sampling with specific questioning of four further headteachers. **Results:** Two theoretical models were created. *Headteacher Definition of Inclusion Model* describes how headteachers define inclusion across four categories: *Developing All CYP Fully, Seeing Behaviour as Need, Generating Belonging* and *Embracing Diversity* but filter their capacity to deliver this for individuals through practical limitations in *Best Efforts to Include All*. *Theoretical Model of Headteacher Operationalization of Inclusion* reveals headteachers seek to make their schools more flexible to meet wider needs through *Researching Individual Needs, Creating a School Family and Providing Relational Staff* but *Define Limits* to inclusion to protect the education and inclusive rights of the wider community. Students whose presentations are perceived to threaten the safety or education of others have their inclusion managed through temporary separation and if they persist face increasingly restrictive measures or exclusion. **Conclusion**: Headteachers are committed to modifying school to include as many students as possible because they see it as a critical tool for protecting students against exploitation and securing their best possible outcomes but feel duty bound to protect the inclusive rights of the whole community where they are not compatible with those of individuals.

Key words: INCLUSION-HEADTEACHERS-GROUNDED THEORY-DEFINITION-OPERATIONALIZATION

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Contents

List of Tables **9**

List of Figures **10**

List of Appendices **12**

List of Abbreviations **13**

Overview **14**

Acknowledgements **15**

Chapter 1 Literature Review **16**

Basis for Literature Review **18**

Debates on the Definition of Inclusion **19**

International Agreements on Inclusion **23**

Warnock Report 1978 ..... **25**

UK Legislation and Guidance **26**

Government White Paper of 2026 ..... **33**

Linking Teacher Attitudes to Inclusion **36**

Measuring Teacher Attitudes to Inclusion **37**

How Teacher Attitudes May Interact with Teacher Behaviour **38**

What Legislation Expects of UK School Leadership **43**

Potential for Impact of School Leadership **44**

Theories Positioning Inclusion in Schools **47**

Conclusion **49**

Chapter 2 Empirical Paper **53**

Rationale for Research **53**

International Agreements' Influence on Schools **54**

The Definition of Inclusion is Unclear and Evolving **54**

Headteachers are Required to Lead Inclusion **56**

Enacting Inclusion is Highly Complex within UK Legislation and Guidance **56**

Evolving Local Authority Priorities Influence Headteacher Priorities **58**

Summary **60**

Axology..... **60**
Research Aims and Questions..... **61**
Methodology and Methods..... **62**
Ontology and Epistemology..... **62**
Methodology..... **63**
Design..... **66**
Ethical Considerations..... **67**
Participants..... **68**
Recruitment..... **68**
Participant Demographics..... **68**
Data Collection..... **70**
Intensive Interviews..... **70**
Theoretical Sampling..... **71**
Data Analysis..... **72**
Theoretical Saturation..... **72**
Constant Comparison..... **73**
Theoretical Sensitivity..... **74**
Memo Writing..... **74**
Diagramming..... **75**
Process of Grounded Theory Construction..... **75**
Step 1 Initial or Open Coding..... **75**
Line-by-line Coding..... **76**
Step 2 Focused or Selective Coding **77**
Step 3 Theoretical Coding..... **78**
Theory Construction..... **79**
Maintenance of Rigour..... **80**
Findings..... **81**
Research Question 1: How do Secondary Headteachers in England Construct School Inclusion?..... **81**

Everything School Does..... **84**
Best Efforts to Include All..... **85**
Criminal or Dangerous Behaviour..... **86**
Conditional Trust..... **88**
Disruption of Others' Learning..... **89**
Resisting Permanent Exclusion..... **90**
Developing All CYP Fully..... **91**
Aspiring for Equity..... **92**
Equality of Opportunities..... **93**
Educating for Adulthood..... **94**
Facilitating Bespoke Curricula..... **95**
Being Known and Understood..... **96**
Seeing Behaviour as Need..... **97**
Responding to Individuals..... **99**
Using Relational Consequences..... **100**
Generating Belonging..... **101**
Facilitating Participation..... **103**
Protecting the Vulnerable..... **103**
Embracing Diversity..... **104**
Raising Awareness..... **105**
Celebrating Differences..... **106**
Rejecting Categories..... **107**
Research Question 2: How do Secondary Headteachers in England Make Inclusion Operational in their Schools?..... **108**
Wider Needs of CYP Entering Mainstream..... **108**
Defining Limits..... **110**
Managing Finances..... **111**
Maintaining Safety and Order..... **113**
Creating Flexible Provision..... **114**

Researching Individual Needs..... **115**
Communicating with Staff..... **116**
Being Flexible with Behaviour..... **117**
Keeping Consistent..... **119**
Making the Curriculum Representative..... **120**
Tailoring Curriculum for Individuals..... **120**
Creating a School Family..... **122**
Acting Relationally..... **123**
Keeping it Personal..... **124**
Maintaining Community Membership..... **125**
Empowering Voice..... **126**
Providing Relational Staff..... **126**
Recruiting Relational Staff..... **127**
Training Relational Staff..... **128**
Modelling for Staff..... **129**
Holding Staff to Account..... **131**
Managing Outliers..... **131**
Creating Bespoke Spaces..... **132**
Removing From Lessons..... **133**
Providing Community Respite..... **134**
Maintaining the Limit..... **135**
Managing Moves off Roll..... **136**
Resorting to PEX..... **137**
Discussion..... **138**
Summary of HDIM..... **139**
Theoretical Links to HDIM..... **140**
Developing All CYP Fully..... **144**
Being Known and Understood..... **146**
Generating Belonging..... **149**

Protecting the Vulnerable..... **150**
Embracing Diversity..... **150**
Concluding Thoughts..... **153**
Summary of TMHOI..... **154**
Theoretical Links for TMHOI..... **155**
Providing Relational Staff..... **156**
Resolving Ethical Tensions in TMHOI..... **159**
Decision Points 1 and 2..... **162**
Concluding Thoughts on TMHOI..... **167**
Overall Conclusion..... **168**
Chapter 3 Reflective Account of Study..... **172**
Describe the Experience..... **173**
Reflection..... **175**
Influencing Factors..... **178**
Could I Have Done Better?..... **180**
Learning..... **182**
Concrete Experience..... **183**
Reflective Observation..... **184**
Abstract Conceptualization..... **184**
Active Experimentation..... **184**
Summary of Learning..... **185**
Limitations..... **185**
Implications for Practice..... **187**
Teacher Training..... **188**
LA and BAIP..... **189**
LA and Ofsted Agenda..... **190**
Headteachers and Schools..... **191**
Educational Psychologists..... **191**
Future Research..... **193**

References..... **194**

Appendices..... **221**

List of Tables

Table 1: Participant Demographics..... **69**

Table 2: Overview of Interview Details..... **71**

Table 3: HDIM Categories Mapped onto Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943)..... **152**

Table 4: TMHOI Categories Mapped onto HDIM Categories..... **156**

List of Figures

Figure 1: Phases of Sampling Interviews..... **69**

Figure 2: Grounded Theory Data Analysis Process..... **73**

Figure 3: Headteachers' Definition of Inclusion Model (HDIM)..... **82**

Figure 4: Sub-categories of *Best Efforts to Include All*..... **86**

Figure 5: Theoretical Model of Headteacher Operationalization of Inclusion (TMHOI)..... **109**

Figure 6: Sub-categories of *Defining Limits*..... **111**

Figure 7: The Four Categories Comprising *Creating Flexible Provision* with their Respective Sub-categories..... **114**

Figure 8: Sub-categories of *Researching Individual Needs*..... **116**

Figure 9: Sub-categories of *Creating a School Family*..... **122**

Figure 10: Sub-categories of *Providing Relational Staff*..... **127**

Figure 11: Sub-categories of *Managing Outliers*..... **132**

Figure 12: Sub-categories of *Maintaining the Limit*..... **136**

Figure 13: Opposing Thoughts Within Participants' Definition of Inclusion..... **142**

Figure 14: Self-protection Measures Interacting with Participants' Definition of Inclusion..... **143**

Figure 15a: Behaviour Cycle Maintained..... **148**

Figure 15b: Behaviour Cycle Broken..... **148**

Figure 16: Interaction of Stakeholders' Conceptions of What Constitutes Belonging with *Conditional Trust*..... **150**

Figure 17: Sequential Depiction of Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Human Needs..... **153**

Figure 18: How Sub-categories of *Providing Relational Staff* May Satisfy Factors within Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 2005) to Generate Inclusive Behaviour in Staff..... **158**

Figure 19: Participants' Description of Tension when Balancing Therapeutic Responses with Duty to Maintain Safety and Order..... **160**

Figure 20: Constructed Views on the Pressures Headteachers Experience to Limit Inclusion..... **163**

Figure 21: Application of *Managing Outliers* to Match Need..... **163**

Figure 22: Interaction of *Conditional Trust* and *Facilitating Participation* with *Creating Bespoke Spaces*..... **164**

Figure 23: Johns Model of Structured Reflection (2017)..... **172**

Figure 24: The Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb & Kolb, 2009)..... **183**

List of Appendices

Appendix 1:	UEA Ethics Approval	**221**
Appendix 2:	UEA Ethics Amendment for Recruitment	**223**
Appendix 3:	UEA Ethics Approval of Theoretical Sampling Questions	**225**
Appendix 4:	Request for Gatekeeper Approval	**227**
Appendix 5:	Request for Presentation at Headteacher Forums	**228**
Appendix 6:	Line-by-line Coding Example	**229**
Appendix 7:	Focused Coding Example	**230**
Appendix 8:	Researcher Memo Examples	**231**
Appendix 9:	Theoretical Coding Example	**234**
Appendix 10:	Diagramming Examples	**236**
Appendix 11:	Participant Information and Consent Form	**240**
Appendix 12:	Participant Recruitment Covering Letter	**246**
Appendix 13:	Purposive Sample Semi-structured Interview Schedule	**247**
Appendix 14:	Theoretical Sample Interview Schedule: Definition	**248**
Appendix 15:	Theoretical Sample Interview Schedule: Operationalization	**249**
Appendix 16:	Participant Debrief Sheet	**250**

List of Abbreviations

AP	**Alternative Provision**
BAIP	**Behaviour and Attendance Improvement Partnership**
CPD	**Continuing Professional Development**
CYP	**Children and Young People**
DfE	**Department for Education**
EAL	**English as an Additional Language**
EHCP	**Education Health and Care Plan**
EP	**Educational Psychologist**
GT	**Grounded Theory**
IE	**Inclusive Education**
HDIM	**Headteacher Definition of Inclusion Model**
LA	**Local Authority**
MAT	**Multi-Academy Trust**
NHS	**National Health Service**
Ofsted	**Office for Standards in Education**
PEX	**Permanent Exclusion**
SAL	**Speech and Language**
SALT	**Speech and Language Therapist**
SE	**Self Esteem**
SEN	**Special Educational Needs**
SEND	**Special Educational Needs and Disabilities**
TMHOI	**Theoretical Model of Headteachers Operationalization of Inclusion**
UNCRC	**United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child**
UNESCO	**United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization**
UNICEF	**United Nations Children's Fund**
UEA	**University of East Anglia**
UK	**United Kingdom**

Overview

This doctoral thesis in Educational Psychology consists of three separate chapters.

The literature review outlines the many debates that continue to surround inclusion – how it has variously been defined in the past and what tensions lie within its conflicting concepts that continue to make it hard to enact. It considers factors that may influence inclusion in secondary schools in the UK such as international agreements, current UK legislation, the influential Warnock Report (1978), recent government guidance such as the white paper *Every Child Achieving and Thriving* (Gov.uk, 2026a) and the professional expectations on school leaders. It then reviews research into the relationship between teacher attitude and behaviour towards inclusion and existing theories describing the relationship between headteachers and inclusion.

The empirical chapter builds a rationale that headteachers are charged with being *the* key agents in the expression of inclusion in modern schools and there is a need for current research exploring how they are doing this in light of changes to the expectations through the recent white paper and updated Ofsted frameworks (Gov.uk, 2025a). It then outlines how constructivist grounded theory was used to study two central processes adopted by secondary headteachers within one Local Authority. Firstly, how they *define* inclusion and secondly how they make it *operational* in their schools. The co-constructed findings are presented and two new local theories proposed to explain these processes.

The reflective chapter explores the impact of this journey on the researcher by applying John's Model of structured reflection (2017) to consider the experience itself, to make personal reflections, to analyze inherent biases and background influences, before offering critique of the study. It concludes with discussion of the core learning framed within the Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb & Kolb, 2009). Finally, it offers reflections on the study's limitations, implications for practice and ideas for future research.

Acknowledgements

Training to be an EP, including writing a thesis, has often seemed a long and all-encompassing journey. However, none of it would have been possible without the support of many other people, all of whom I am enormously indebted to. Firstly, I would like to thank my participants for taking an interest in my work. You generously donated your time to generate invaluable data that I could not have gained any other way. Thank you all for your honesty and trust in me, this literally would have been impossible without your efforts.

I am grateful to the DfE for funding the TEP course that has allowed me to retrain in my forties for a new career as an EP. I particularly want to thank my research supervisor, Andrea Honess, whose honest, wise and insightful guidance kept me focused and steadied the ship so often – sometimes just hearing I was on the right path was worth its weight in gold! I would also like to thank Kim Bartholemew for her reassurance and feedback. I want to thank my UEA tutors, Sarah Raspin, Joey Szabo-Hemmings and Chris Clarke, whose collective advice kept everything feeling as manageable as possible. Thanks also to all the lecturers and contributors at UEA too; I have loved this course and feel privileged to have learnt from you. Finally, I would like to thank my fellow trainees – we got there in the end!

Thank you to my placement supervisors – Becky, Jo (and briefly) Kathe for being so welcoming, generous with your experience and knowledge, and friendship. I would have been nowhere without your support. I must also thank the two PEPs from my placement, Matt and Joanna (who I am eternally grateful to for being my inspiration to apply to be an EP in the first place!), for their help as gatekeepers and thoughts on local inclusion. Thanks as well to the rest of the EP team for your friendship and accepting me so readily.

Finally, I want to express my love and gratitude for the ongoing support of my family: my mum, Jacqui, for her eternal faith in me (and for buying me the folding bike to get to UEA!), my sister, her family, and my in-laws. But especially I want to thank my lovely, patient and caring wife, Ali and my two children, Poppy and Tommy, who, as always, have stood by me every step of the way. This is yours too.

Chapter 1 Literature Review

Over the last fifty years, and particularly in the UK since the Warnock report (1978), inclusion has been, and still is, a much-discussed topic. Across the globe, international dialogue has progressively clarified an interpretation of inclusion that all children should be provided equal access to an education, irrespective of individual needs, and that this was not only fairer but also *economically* more efficient in the long term (UNESCO,1994, article 2; Schuelka, 2018). The concept of inclusion in education has been legally enshrined across the globe through an iterative process, largely confirmed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UNICEF, 1989) that clearly outlines the legal rights of *every* child, including the right to an education, irrespective of ability (Article 28) which was accepted by every member of the United Nations - except the United States of America – and became part of UK law in 1992 (UNICEF, 2026). In 1994, the Spanish government allied with the United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to drive the concept of inclusive education (IE) forward with its '*Education for All'* agenda at a world conference including 92 governments. The emphasis was literally on making *all* schools accessible to *all* pupils, including those deemed to have Special Educational Needs (SEN) and resulted in The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) which the UK signed. In 2015, acknowledgement that these ambitions were a long way from being achieved, led UNESCO to call The World Education Forum in the Republic of Korea. 160 countries, including the UK, reaffirmed commitment to previous education and rights treaties and created the *Incheon Declaration for Education 2030* which overtly stated a need to *'Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all'* (UNESCO, 2015, p.1). However, despite international acceptance inclusion has proven to be extremely complicated to enact due to vague definitions and competing tensions within national fiscal and education policies (Kozleski et al., 2007).

In 2024, the newly elected UK government made it known that the financial situation that they inherited, along with election promises not to raise taxation, precluded significant short-term investment in public services (Stacey, 2024). Initially addressing the NHS (BBC, 2024), the focus is on securing better value for money. Applying the same model to

education, many argue *inclusion* builds capacity in schools and improves financial efficiency (Pring, 2024). Although inclusion appears to require increased investment (UNESCO, 2015), research (Asian Development Bank, 2010) has shown that educating children and young people (CYP) with additional needs alongside their peers is significantly more cost effective than funding a dual system of mainstream and specialist schools, partly due to reduced running costs. However, the key financial benefits from inclusion are longer term as it increases national productivity and economic growth (UNICEF, 2015) through improved educational success for all CYP that manifests as higher employment rates, wages and taxation, and reduced benefit claims (Banks & Pollock, 2013). The government formally committed to inclusion as a core principle of educational reform through the publication of the white paper 'Every child achieving and thriving' (Gov.uk, 2026a) and the new Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) Inspection Framework (Gov.uk, 2025a; 2025b).

Since headteachers' own standards make them '*custodians of the nation's schools*' (Gov.uk, 2020, p.1), it can be assumed that their professional investment in establishing and maintaining inclusive practice will be central to how it manifests for children in the UK. As the key decision makers, exactly how *they* define inclusion and IE alongside competing constraints of modern schooling - austerity, scrutiny, marketisation and competition - will reflect how it is operationalized on a daily basis. In short, how and why headteachers define inclusion as they do may become the most crucial factor in the future of the nations' schools.

This study draws its relevance from the government's recently declared interest in inclusion; they have reactivated debates about its definition and their re-modelled expectations on mainstream schools places a focus on how it can work. Some research has explored these areas in the past, but it is important to gain perspectives of the current generation of headteachers as they will be the principal enactors of these reforms. In order to build a rationale for research, this scoping literature review considers four areas: the debates around the definition of inclusion; what UK legislation and guidance asks school

staff to do; how teacher attitudes to inclusive education have been explored and how this may impact its implementation; and the role of school leadership.

Basis for Literature Review

This literature review was constrained because inclusion is poorly defined and a controversial term whose usage means many different things to different stakeholders. This meant systematic searches using defined search terms were not appropriate. This literature review used a combined purposive identification of documents regularly used by headteachers with an iterative approach derived from reviewing the reference lists of some starting books and papers in order to scope the breadth and extent of this ill-defined topic.

The literature review falls into two sections. Since the focus of the research was to be UK secondary school headteachers' perspectives, *their* resources were considered first. Therefore, the review started by reviewing professional documents that headteachers *must* engage with, and so will have ready access to, when running their schools lawfully: relevant UK legislation, Department for Education (DfE) guidance documents, professional standards (Teacher and Headteacher) and Ofsted inspection frameworks. Initial research into the DfE website for their guidance on inclusion and IE revealed they recommended one specific research paper *'Implementing inclusive education'* by Schuelka (2018). Therefore, this paper appeared *the only* research-based guidance being explicitly offered by the DfE to headteachers in this area and so its reference list formed the initial basis of research reviewed.

For the second phase, extensive use was made of reference lists from a range of starting books and papers. The scoping review was developed iteratively; as papers were read, lines of interest and enquiry were developed, references checked and hence further papers were selected. Because of limited UK-based relevant research and the influence of international agreements on UK schools, international papers were included where they enhanced understanding of the line of enquiry. A UEA Library search using the terms SCHOOL-INCLUSION-MEANING yielded little but did locate '*Reconsidering inclusion; sustaining and building inclusive practices in school'* by Ekins (2016) which was on the

essential reading list for UEA trainee teachers. This and its reference list were used to start the iterative scoping review and was supplemented by references from papers already known to the researcher. Finally, a search of UEA library using search terms LEADERSHIP-INCLUSION-HEADTEACHERS-MAINSTREAM yielded one PhD from the University of Leeds by Rapti (2016) that used mixed methods to look at headteacher perspectives on inclusion in Greek primary schools, which offered a different approach to a related area.

Like all processes, inclusion must be defined to be enacted. Therefore, this scoping literature review starts by exploring how people interpret the meaning of the word inclusion to reveal the internal tensions that mean it still defies the creation of a firm definition. UK education operates in an international climate that has placed an increasing priority on IE, so this literature is then considered to understand what meaning this imposes and what the UK has agreed to provide through its schools. This is compared to the national context of UK schools firstly by reviewing the influential 1978 Warnock report and then current UK legislation and guidance documents that govern how headteachers must manage IE. Since inclusion is a challenging aspiration, it is important to consider what motivates teachers and headteachers to pursue it. This review then focuses on literature discussing teacher attitudes towards inclusion, how these have been measured, what their impact is on operationalizing inclusion and the potential for school leadership.

Debates on the Definition of Inclusion

This section will examine the approaches that different authors and researchers have taken when attempting to define inclusion. It will also discuss the inherent tensions and contradictions that emerge from this process.

As busy professionals, headteachers are likely to prioritize reading official documents and guidance from the DfE. Given that the DfE publish no other guidance on inclusion – either definition or its enactment - it is highly significant that they elected to publish a report, *Implementing inclusive education* by Schuelka (2018) on their own website which offers a discussion of key factors around inclusion and will automatically have made it highly visible to any headteachers searching for DfE guidance on inclusion.

Schuelka creates a list of essential features. He indicates that firm measures of inclusion and specific targets are required alongside a thorough evaluation of the political-social-cultural obstacles; any successful strategy must be carefully planned and evaluated. He also advises that the government must signpost inclusion as a top priority by systematically investing in precise and consistent school staff training and by reforming curriculum, education policy and management. Finally, it is recommended that synergy must be attained between IE and inclusive employment. However, Schuelka indicates that all of this is contingent on first providing a clear and precise definition of inclusion, something most writers agree has proved elusive.

Across the literature, many writers have attempted to refine a definition and the key discussions are reviewed next. Some, like Powell and colleagues (2016), have taken a practical definition to mean all children go to their geographically closest school and receive sufficient support to attain their personal goals but this is still imprecise and leaves practical questions unanswered. Like many abstract concepts, Inclusion means different things to different audiences and has been employed for so long in vague, non-committal ways that Corbett (2001) claims it has now lost its meaning. Corbett outlines how its generic employment across politics and education has robbed it of precise definition and left it vulnerable to accusations that it is simply a cost-cutting measure – hiding behind equality to remove additional resources. Slee (2008) agrees that since the term emerged from protest against systemic marginalization its employment by the establishment has sanitized it beyond recognition. Respectable political discourse with resistant stakeholders such as parents, special education and disability associations have tamed the term for mutual acceptance. Kozleski and colleagues (2007) examined the depth of commitment to '*Education for All*' through a comparative case study of schools in US, South Africa and Mexico and explored the impact of culture, participants, chronosystem and outcomes. They concluded that even if there are moves towards a general definition, since the debate is really about what teachers deliver, to whom and how, this will always be superficial as local contexts of history, politics, economics and culture will exert independent pressures. Perhaps this is why some writers (Ainscow et al., 2006) identify that government policy can

appear to deliberately sidestep a precise definition so requiring the readers to create their own, presumably local meaning. Due to historical exclusion of certain groups, Corbett (2001) identifies that the arguments around inclusion are preoccupied with bringing these 'others' into the mainstream of education; is it simply permitting physical attendance or embracing wider considerations of rights? The former ignores the presence of many marginalized groups already struggling in mainstream settings, limiting the debate to Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and makes it hard for schools to define pupils apart from how easily they conform. Such within-child deficit models will avoid engaging with cultural issues that continue to exclude CYP with learning and behavioural issues. Corbett (2001) feels the alternative is to embrace all pupils' right to be there and acknowledge, respect and value differences of *all* kinds. This aligns with the thoughts of Bailey (1998) when writing about inclusion in Australian schools, who placed acceptance and belonging as equally important as presence and engagement with the same learning. Graham and Slee (2008) consider the term *inclusion* is no longer fit for purpose since it implies reversing exclusion of marginalized groups from a fabricated centre. They agree with Ekins (2016) that being *included* involves being brought in to share the benefits of what society deems 'normal' and so maintains the preeminence of groups naturally aligning with this definition. Since Graham and Slee (2008) deny such a centre is anything other than the product of powerful elites' efforts to maintain the status quo, real inclusion would necessitate dismantling these power imbalances.

Other key arguments go back to the debate between what many writers call *integration* and *inclusion* (Barton, 1997; Lunt & Norwich, 1999; Corbett, 2001; Schuelka, 2018). *Integration*, or *assimilation*, focuses on physical co-education, whereby all children attend the same school, but its policies, practices, curriculum and measures are unaltered; the onus is on the students to conform to the more general expectations. Slee and Allan (2001) see this process as illegitimizing difference since focusing on additional resources to manage individual variation in needs fails to challenge the existing power structures and maintains the concept of 'normal' versus 'other' and government policy is steered towards within-child deficit models. *Inclusion*, or *accommodation*, is seen as a

continuous process (Booth, 1996; Schuelka, 2018) of revising, renewing and rebuilding educational systems, procedures, facilities and measures to remove all barriers to all pupils achieving their full potential. Some writers, such as Ekins (2016) accept that this definition, when seen as applying mainly to incorporating challenging SEND into unreformed schools, makes inclusion seem unobtainable and impractical. Ekins concludes that the prevailing medical-deficit model and in-school practicalities divert the argument onto placement and resources and away from the real issues of how to ensure equity of access and participation. She maintains that the only constant in society and schools is difference, and inclusion is contingent on an ideological acceptance that 'normal' does not exist.

In a detailed account, Ainscow and colleagues (2006) explore six different concepts of inclusion, exploring the ramifications of each:

1. *Focusing on SEND* - The existence of this concept reinforces 'normal' and 'different', with the ultimate conclusion that extra provision, and potentially special schools, need to exist to cater for the most 'different'.
2. *Challenge exclusion* - Inclusion and exclusion are opposite terms but the latter is used to describe a behavioural sanction which will have its own, bespoke context.
3. *Challenge exclusion vulnerability* - Beyond behaviour, some groups may be at risk of being denied full access for contextual reasons.
4. *Universal school* - Systems and procedures must be reformed to place appreciation of difference at their core or this merely replicates integration.
5. *Universal education* - Globally, some groups have proven harder to ensure school access than others. Therefore, local contexts can impact on inclusion priorities.
6. *Inclusive society values* - If society aims to be a participatory democracy underpinned by compassion, diversity, equity and community then this must be reflected in the values that drive schools.

Within their last category, the importance of the wider context for inclusion is made clear. Beyond sharing a school site, all children must participate to achieve their full potential not just as students, but as citizens in a democracy.

While this may seem a positive step in acquiring a definition, some writers have discussed the inherent tensions within this debate. For example, Messiou (2017) accepts Ainscow and colleagues' (2006) aspiration for all CYP but sees the opposition between medical and social ideologies remaining. He lists four dimensions that represent inclusion: human rights, SEN, defending against marginalization and transforming education. Messiou feels that variations in the extent of emphasis on each dimension are why definitions appear so varied, for example positing that some maintain there is still a need to recognize specific differences in order to support them effectively. Messiou argues that genuine inclusion should reject labels and categorization as dehumanizing and a source of stigma, and questions what is to be done with people who do not identify as any of the 'approved' categories; children's barriers can be considered as a function of their context. Additionally, in earlier work, Lunt and Norwich (1999) identify contradictions within definitions of inclusion that may undermine its application. For example, if it is established that all children have the right to be included at all times, is this always commensurate with their equal right to have individualized learning pathways at the same time? The former would appear to prevent schools from delivering any interventions outside the classroom at all, even if they were essential to enable access. Finally, some writers such as Florian (1998) explore the impact of the ideological connection between implementing inclusion, participation and democracy. While Sebba and Sachdev (1997) consider inclusion must also encapsulate an inherent right to choose *not* to be included. The unresolved tensions between these points of view are the source of the ongoing debates that preclude the creation of a workable definition for inclusion. Writers like Lunt and Norwich (1999) conclude that by prolonging inclusion's indeterminate qualities, such debates protect its ideals at the cost of rendering it almost inoperative.

International Agreements on Inclusion

In recent times, a number of successive international agreements, to which the UK is a signatory, have attempted to refine definitions of education to make them increasingly inclusive. Article 28 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1989) dictated that not only was *access* to education a universal right but so were equal opportunities for full development of each individual to their fullest extent. Shortly afterwards, The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994, p.6) unequivocally stated: *"schools should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions."* Taken together, these would indicate that all children must be provided equal access to the same schools at the same time. They do not particularly describe what must happen once they are there, leaving the door open to different methods of providing IE. However, further clarification was available in the opening preamble of UNESCO's *Incheon Declaration for Education 2030* (2015) that aimed to create a framework for action to create 'Education for All':

> *Inclusion and equity in and through education is the cornerstone of a transformative education agenda, and we therefore commit to addressing all forms of exclusion and marginalization, disparities and inequalities in access, participation and learning outcomes. No education target should be considered met unless met by all. We therefore commit to making the necessary changes in education policies and focusing our efforts on the most disadvantaged, especially those with disabilities, to ensure that no one is left behind.* (UNESCO, 2015, p.7)

It later goes on to confirm in its vision that:

> *Education is a fundamental human right and an enabling right. To fulfil this right, countries must ensure universal equal access to inclusive and equitable quality education and learning, which should be free and compulsory, leaving no one behind. Education shall aim at the full development of the human personality and promote mutual understanding, tolerance, friendship and peace. (UNESCO, 2015, p.28)*

This document seems to establish that inclusive education goes well beyond equal access to the same schools and requires equitable education – putting the onus on the *system* to evolve allowing all CYP to be taught alongside their peers. However, this aspiration does not appear to align with current UK legislation and the rights afforded to parents and carers when making decisions about CYP's inclusion. State-funded education does remain free at point of delivery for all CYP from 5 to 16 years but parents and carers retain the right to educate *away* from school altogether should they see fit (Education Act, 1996). Additionally, the Children and families Act (2014) allows parents and carers the right to nominate specific schools, including mainstream or special, for CYP with an Education Health Care Plan (EHCP). In both cases, family decisions apparently overrule the CYP's right to be included.

Warnock Report 1978

The *Report of the committee of enquiry into the education of handicapped children and young people,* also known as the Warnock Report (1978), is cited by most authors as being hugely influential on inclusion in the UK education system. This section will explore its context and key recommendations.

Among other things, the Education Act 1976 finally made Local Authorities (LA) responsible for providing state-funded education for *all* children, even those with '*disabilities*'. This was to be in mainstream settings unless *'impractical or incompatible'* or created *'unreasonable public expenditure'* when they could instead be placed in *'special schools appropriate to the category'* (Education Act, 1976, s. 10). As a prelude to this, the UK Education Secretary appointed a committee in 1974 that spent four years examining how this education should be managed.

The Warnock Report (1978) coined the term SEN to describe CYP who may need additional educational consideration and advocated applying additional funding to individuals through 'Statements of special educational need'. It suggested that *all* CYP were best educated with their peers *whenever possible* – but stopped short of promoting full inclusion together for *all* needs *all* of the time. It positively reinforced the ongoing role of

special schools by acknowledging that CYP with highly complex and severe needs would necessitate specialist placement. For those CYP with less complex needs it conceived three tiers of 'integration' within mainstream, matched to their profile. In order from least to most integrated they were: 1)being physically located on the same site; 2)accessing communal social times; 3)participating in the same learning experiences. It is such categorization of access that Ainscow and colleagues (2006) suggest provide a road map to move CYP into special schools and so *not* to include.

In later interviews (Morris, 2006), Warnock reflected on feeling that the separation into special schools actually served some CYP needs *better* than mainstream, especially for complex sensory and mental health needs, as they typically had fewer pupils. Warnock also criticized the original report for overlooking socio-economic deprivation's potential to impact on educational needs and taking insufficient account of the financial constraints in education.

UK Legislation and Guidance

This section will review the current and most relevant UK legislation, applicable professional standards, DfE guidance documents and Ofsted inspection frameworks that Headteachers will engage with in the course of running their schools and attempt to critically evaluate their impact on inclusion. Most UK headteachers have had long careers as teachers and they are still covered by guidance and standards for latter group so these are discussed where relevant too.

Since headteachers are '*custodians of the nation's schools*' (Gov.uk, 2020, p.1) there is a formal expectation that their organization must adhere to legislation and DfE expectations on what schools should provide both as employers and in the learning environment they maintain for the CYP on their school roll. These frameworks form the basis of how the overall school and individual professionals are judged. Therefore, headteachers are required to access and engage frequently with any statutory and guidance documents published by the DfE and these are likely to inform their actions. This section will consider the Teacher Standards (Gov.uk, 2021), SEND Code of Practice (DfE,

2015), Equality Act 2010 and the Ofsted Inspection Framework that came into force as this study commenced (Gov.uk, 2025a/b) as these are the most relevant to enaction of inclusion.

In the UK, all teachers are accountable, both for qualification and subsequent practice, to the Teacher Standards (Gov.uk, 2021). This two-part document outlines the expected elements of both teaching (Part One) and also personal and professional conduct (Part Two) expected of staff in state-funded schools. Without ever mentioning IE explicitly, the standards would appear to make inclusion central to modern teaching practice. It is interesting that the power invested in *individual teachers* in a classroom is acknowledged as they are made *personally* responsible for their own practice decisions and implicitly cannot defer to unethical school mantras or conventions. For example, individually teachers *must*:

- *Set high expectations which inspire, motivate and challenge pupils*
- *Promote good progress and outcomes by pupils*
- *Plan and teach well-structured lessons*
- *Adapt teaching to respond to the strengths and needs of all pupils* (Gov.uk, 2021, part 1)

School leaders are not superordinate to these standards and are only *equally* responsible for discharging them. In this way, Teacher Standards now work in similar ways to the Health Care Professional Standards by making IE a matter for individual professional's ethics. From an IE perspective, this makes their specific content pivotal.

With regards to the Teaching elements, expectations for IE are made extremely clear. Pupils' progress and outcomes are their teachers' direct responsibility. Teaching professionals are required to have knowledge of *every* pupil's existing attainment so that subsequent lesson targets can be effectively pitched. Lessons are effective when they '*set goals that stretch and challenge pupils of all backgrounds, abilities and dispositions*' (Gov.uk, 2021, s.1.1). A critical skill for teachers is adapting lessons or to '*differentiate appropriately*' so that individual pupils are '*taught effectively'* (Gov.uk, 2012, s1.5). This

requires sufficient knowledge of childhood development and wider barriers to learning alongside adaptive strategies to overcome them. It is made clear that these adaptations are to be applied to *all* pupils' needs – SEND, high ability and English as an Additional Language (EAL). Behaviour management including '*high expectations*' and '*clear rules'* is mentioned too, but the strategies employed must be '*appropriate to pupils'* needs in order *to involve and motivate them'* (Gov.uk, 2021, s1.7). In this way, behaviour management and IE are not *separate* and *parallel* concepts but woven together for mutual benefit (Gov.uk, 2021, s.1- 2, 5 and 7). Finally, teachers are also expected to be personally responsible for their own professional development (Gov.uk, 2021, s.4 and 7) – actively engaging with learning and feedback, which presumably includes the above standards. This would suggest that professional movement towards these standards, including IE, is both obligatory and monitored.

Part One goes on to require teachers inculcate an environment that is '*safe*', '*stimulating*' and '*rooted in mutual respect*' (Gov.uk, 2021, s1.1). They must also model '*positive attitudes, values and behaviour*' (Gov.uk, 2021, s1.1) which are only made fully clear in concert with Part Two. This clearly states professional conduct involves '*treating pupils with dignity, building relationships rooted in mutual respect*' and '*showing tolerance of and respect for the rights of others*' (Gov.uk, 2021, s2). Given the emphasis of the Equality Act (2010) and since IE *is* a right, then this makes all practicing teachers professionally responsible for pursuing it. Since teachers must also uphold '*democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect, and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs'* (Gov.uk, 2021, s2) then this potentially would seem to formalize teachers' commitment to facilitating full education participation to support democratic participation. Alongside operational obstacles within school that may bar this from becoming a reality, this offer is not yet universal as legislation still allows parents and carers to select schools other than mainstream for their children (Children and Families Act, 2014).

The SEND Code of Practice (DfE, 2015) is the current guidance for England concerning Part 3 of the Children and Families Act 2014. Far from embracing wider

definitions of inclusion, both of these maintain the status of the 'other' by continuing to make a firm distinction of difference between those CYP with SEND and those without. This is presumably justified for efficiency with limited public funds, but Slee and Allan (2001) feel this tussle to secure additional funding by meeting strict criteria actually reinforces marginalization. Ainscow and colleagues (2006) also suggest this categorization blocks diversity's contribution to creating adaptive and responsive schools and shows how fiscal policy returns society to conceptions of inclusion as physical placement over rights (Corbett, 2001). In its opening statement, the Code of Practice (DfE, 2015) sets out a mission to facilitate greater success for children with SEND by increasing their participation, raising outcomes via higher aspirations and a graduated response. Indeed, it overtly states its principles are to seek the views of the CYP and their family, ensure they participate fully in decisions about them and offer support sufficient to secure the best possible outcomes for the CYP. Among other things, these aim to ensure provision matches needs of CYP with SEND and has a '*focus on inclusive practice and removing barriers to learning*' (DfE, 2015, p.20). However, it also makes it clear that parents and carers of CYP awarded an EHCP retain the right to name particular education providers – which includes the decision to attend mainstream or specialist settings (Children and Families Act, 2014, s33 and 39). This is interesting because it seems to undermine the concepts in the Teacher Standards (Gov.uk, 2021) and the stated aims of the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994). These expect schools and teachers to cater for a wide spectrum of needs and curriculums be designed to ensure each member of society has the required support for full democratic participation, yet legislation allows it to be circumvented by parental choice. Ainscow and colleagues (2006) suggest maintaining 'parental choice' in the UK facilitates segregation through special school placement and removes the onus on mainstream providers to become genuinely inclusive. Powell and colleagues (2016) suggest this fundamentally undermines inclusion by maintaining the subtle message that there is, ultimately, a better fit for certain groups of CYP.

Current legislation uses age-related expectations to determine who has 'SEN' and who does not. Those who find learning significantly harder than *peers* or who cannot

access learning with provision for their *chronological age* may have SEN (Children and family Act, 2014, s20). Disability is defined for CYP with '*a physical or mental impairment which has a long-term and substantial adverse effect on their ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities*' (DfE, 2015, p.16). Long-term is taken to mean over a year in duration and substantial means not 'minor or trivial (DfE, 2015, p.16), although by *whose* definition is not clear. Focused as it is on labels and barriers, this all relates to concepts of *integration* and *assimilation* rather than IE; this group of people are 'different' and need the following provision to 'join in' with the 'centre'. Some authors have argued that this means that those with SEN are disempowered by the very tool used to identify them (Graham & Slee, 2008). This thinking links to the Equality Act 2010, which outlines a series of 'must' and 'must not' duties for schools and public bodies with regards to people defined as disabled. This reinforcement is perhaps best seen its requirement to promote good relations between 'disabled' and 'non-disabled' pupils; truly IE would just have 'pupils' who would all be equally valued and participate. The other main requirements are to not discriminate or harass, make 'reasonable adjustments' to procedures, practices and physical environs, anticipate disadvantage and make preparations to overcome it, create an accessibility plan and publish how they adhere to the legislation. These are all well-intentioned, practical considerations but assume that the schools and systems are *not already inclusive* and Barton (1997) would argue this suggests some CYP will have differences that exclude them from ready access and special provision will be needed to 'allow' them to take part. This subtly maintains two key concepts: there is still a 'centre' (Graham & Slee, 2008) and education does not require wholescale revolution as it mainly caters for this group (Ekins, 2016); and that within-child deficits of individuals present participation barriers (Slee & Allan, 2001). This focuses schools on making temporary adjustments for *identified individuals* rather than engaging in system revision (Schuelka, 2018). Far from being efficient, this attitude drives the demand for labels, categorization (Thomas & Vaughan, 2004) and individual funding and does nothing to build overall school capacity for the long term (Slee, 2008).

So, there appears to be a disconnect in the legislation between how the teaching profession is being asked to construct IE and the SEND guidance that dictates the support for the most needy groups of pupils in education. The former uses a wide definition requiring staff to perceive all students as individuals and adapt their practice for all students to participate across a curriculum modified so everyone maximizes their individual achievements. However, the latter still adopts a narrower model of integration, perceiving all CYP to fall either side of a notional threshold for additional funding which, if awarded, is provided to individual children to help them 'overcome' their barriers to be included with the 'rest'. The legacy rights of parents and carers to select schools could be seen to undermine the aspirations of IE within the teacher standards as it reinforces the conception that 'other' provision is available; if all schools were genuinely inclusive and curriculums and teaching practice catered to the needs of all children, then neither additional funding nor school selection would be necessary. Parents and carers could choose any school they want and the offer would be the same. The disconnect apparent across legislation and policy may reinforce the previously identified lack of consensus within the literature related to the definition and potentially undermines IE in schools. As *guardians of the public trust in schools* (Gov.uk, 2020) it is important to understand how headteachers make sense of these conflicting messages and define inclusion for themselves.

In accordance with the Education and Inspection Act (2006), all provision – education, training and care - for children under 18 in the UK are subject to inspections by Ofsted. In September 2025, Ofsted published its latest *Inspection Framework* (Gov.uk, 2025a) which came into force from November 2025. Its preamble makes it clear its mission is to '*improve life for all'* and puts CYP *'…who face barriers to their learning and/or well-being at the heart…'* (Gov.uk, 2025a). It overtly lists the areas that will be evaluated for *all* settings: safeguarding; inclusion; curriculum and learning; achievement; leadership and governance. These are extended to include others that are specific to each setting:

- Early Years and Foundation Stage - behaviour, attitudes and establishing routines; children's welfare and wellbeing.

- Schools - attendance and behaviour; personal development and wellbeing.
- Further Education - contribution to meeting skills; participation and development (Gov.uk, 2025a).

Although inclusion is prominently listed, there is no attempt at a definition. However, the separate evaluation for curriculum, attendance, personal development and participation – concepts that many authors have argued *also* represent inclusion – implies they *do not* form part of Ofsted's working definition.

Confirmation is provided in the *State-funded school inspection kit* (Gov.uk, 2025b) which explains that the evaluation of inclusion specifically focuses on provision for the following categories: socioeconomically disadvantaged (assessed through receipt of pupil premium); pupils with SEND (either SEN Support or an EHCP); care experienced children; children with 'other barriers' to learning and wellbeing. This is a narrower and more *specific* inclusion than the Incheon Declaration's (2015, p.7) *'humanistic vision….based on human rights and dignity; social justice; inclusion; protection; cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity; and shared responsibility and accountability…. addressing all forms of exclusion and marginalization*' where *'No education target should be considered met unless met by all'*. Ofsted (Gov.uk, 2025b) clarify that judgement will be formed on factors that '*contribute most strongly to inclusion*' and list these as: high expectations and high-quality teaching; early and accurate assessment of needs; understanding barriers (including community and school contexts); ongoing cycles of assess-plan-do-review to ensure provision meets need, utilising specialists when relevant, using pupil premium funding effectively to enhance achievement and collaborating with CYP and families to match views and aspirations. This strongly suggests Ofsted's version of inclusion is about tracking the school's provision for these groups pre-identified *by them* as having barriers, which overlooks the possibility that CYP's needs may fluctuate over time and barriers to inclusion may not be previously identified. The inspection framework places a high premium on how support influences children's *achievements* and does not mention the wider concepts such as belonging, participation (which is only mentioned at post-16 and not under inclusion), dignity and autonomy (Ekins, 2016; Schuelka, 2018). Such categorization

reinforces concepts criticized by Barton (1997) and Graham and Slee (2008) that *these* pupils are 'different' to a 'norm' and need 'extra help' to be 'allowed' to take part. Although Ofsted seek to take account of some contextual considerations, Ainscow and colleagues (2006) would suggest any such categories will create tiers of different need that can lead to non-mainstream placement and undermines the concept of *Education for All* (UNESCO, 1994). There is no suggestion that the *inclusion* category has any priority over the seven other areas for evaluation and it is not clear how the judgments will interact, for example if a school is preserving CYP's placements effectively and helping them belong but with minimal academic outcomes. This would seem to create tension when prioritizing management decisions as headteachers are equally accountable for good behaviour (DfE, 2024a) and achievement (Gov.uk, 2024a), the latter of which is the most publicly visible through published league tables.

However, the overt placement of inclusion in the new Ofsted framework and the recent white paper (Gov.uk, 2026a) is likely to reignite interest in the topic both within schools and across the LA and Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs).

Government White Paper of 2026

The government released *Every child achieving and thriving* (DfE, 2026a) in February 2026 to outline its vision for the reform of education and CYP services. It describes perceived flaws within the system and sets out a series of 'visions' backed up with measures and funding packages to address them. Central at all times is a commitment to IE, along with broadly what it is expected to look like:

> *We are committed to creating a more inclusive mainstream school system where more children can be educated in a local mainstream school, as part of their local community, with flexible, timely, and accessible support. That means considering the evolving needs of children and proactively working to remove barriers to engagement and attainment for every child.* (Gov.uk, 2026a, p.48).

The centrality of IE as its core principle is heavily reinforced throughout; the words '*inclusion*' and '*inclusive*' appearing over a hundred times across the 120 pages. School

leaders are warned they are now accountable for their IE through Ofsted's new framework (Gov.uk, 2026a, p.59). The visions fall into four categories:

1. *'…all children enjoy a childhood rich in opportunity'* (Gov.uk, 2026a, p. 17). This places services in orbit around CYP within their schools. Families will have increased access to them and it formalizes the responsibility of schools and other services to actively collaborate.
2. *'…schools provide children with a rich and broad education'* (Gov.uk, 2026a, p.23). The curriculum is to be re-designed so that *all* CYP leave with equal access to the same knowledge, skills and cultural capital. There is a renewed emphasis on achieving *equity* in the shape of maximising the number of all CYP who attain the expected standards in maths, science, reading, listening, speaking and writing. Schools are to be held accountable for the depth and breadth of their extracurricular offer.
3. *'Schools must be places where every child is included, where they are supported and challenged to achieve and thrive – regardless of their needs or background'* (Gov.uk, 2026a, p.39). This outlines schools' role as agents of social mobility and cites the UNCRC (UNICEF, 1989) as inspiration. It decries the historical connection between CYP backgrounds and their educational outcomes as fundamentally undermining inclusion and seeks to address this by making intervention start earlier and facilitate it responding to developing needs. It aims to evolve teachers' pedagogic practice into '*adaptive teaching*' so all CYP's potential can be reached by providing the correct blend of support and challenge matched to their unique needs and highlights the expectation that '*inclusive practice is a shared responsibility across all staff'* (Gov.uk, 2026a, p.52). Research proposing inclusion benefits *all* CYP academically and socially, backed up by data suggesting CYP in special schools underperform in English and maths GCSE builds the case of *'more children can be educated in a local mainstream school, as part of their local community, with flexible, timely, and accessible support*' (Gov.uk, 2026a, p.48). The plan is underpinned by the establishment of the *National Inclusion Standards* - a repository of strategies and resources to help identify and address CYP needs that can be used by families to hold schools to account for their offer, and

additional funding for LAs to increase school and family access to Educational Psychologists (EP) and Speech and Language Therapists (SALT). Three tiers of additional support beyond adaptive teaching are created, but each maximise access to mainstream. *Targeted* support is an individual plan created collaboratively between setting and family; *Targeted plus* involves external professionals and may involve additional support provision in the setting; *Specialist* will require an EHCP to meet complex needs and may be provisioned at a specialist placement. Schools must publicly account for the impact of their share of the £1.6 billion *Inclusive Mainstream Fund*.

EHCPs remain but with two important changes. Firstly, their provisions will be outlined by *'nationally defined, evidence-based packages of support…setting out the specific interventions, resources, and standards required to support them'* (Gov.uk, 2026a, p.57). Secondly, from 2030, CYP with EHCPs have their needs re-assessed when they leave primary, secondary or post-16 to determine if it can be reduced to *Targeted support*.

Special schools *are* retained for CYP with greatest needs but collaborate with other schools to share Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and facilitate CYP's access to part-time mainstream placements. But much of the additional funding is ring-fenced to create 'inclusion bases' in mainstream settings as tools to support incremental re-inclusion for CYP with their peers.

4. *'…children achieve most when they feel safe and connected to their school environment. They show that high expectations for academic excellence and deep pupil engagement go hand in hand'* (Gov.uk, 2026a, p.60). This vision promotes the relationship between school, pupils and families as the key defence against low attendance and disconnection from education. It outlines that by 2029 schools must evaluate and *act to improve* all CYP's school belonging and engagement and commits to providing a suitable framework to do this. There is also a firm statement that attendance is compulsory, and schools must collaborate with families to support CYP to remain engaged. CYP with extreme behaviours are to be supported to remain in

contact with mainstream through collaboration between schools, Alternative Provision (AP) and Special Schools on CPD and part-time placements. There is a statement that headteachers retain the power to permanently exclude (PEX) or suspend students where absolutely necessary but the latter can be hosted on-site if it is in the CYP's best interests.

The second part of the paper focuses on more practical elements of the agenda such as staff training, partnerships between services and utilising technology. It concludes with an ambitious plan to implement the necessary changes by 2030, indicating an alignment with the Incheon Declaration (UNESCO, 2015).

Linking Teacher Attitudes to Inclusion

This section will review theories that may link teacher attitudes and their behaviour and consider how researchers have attempted to measure such attitudes. It will then explore research around the interaction between teacher attitudes to inclusion and their enactment of it in professional practice.

The literature suggested that if successful IE *starts* with re-shaped school policies, practices and values (Slee, 2008; McGlynn & London, 2013; Ekins, 2016; Booth & Ainscow, 2017), then the focus shifts towards how best to implement these ideals; even good aspirations require practitioners to enact them (Ainscow et al., 2006; Bristol, 2015; Schuelka, 2018; Wächter et al., 2024). In the case of schools, teachers are the key workforce that interacts directly with the students and most researchers agree that it is *their* positivity towards the concept that limits how effectively it operates (Avramidis et al., 2000; Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; de Boer et al., 2011; Ekins, 2016; Lüke & Grosche, 2018; Yada et al., 2022). As a result, considerable effort has gone into trying to unpick teacher attitudes starting with defining what they mean. Eagly & Chaiken (1993) defined attitudes as a measure of positive or negative regard for the object of scrutiny and described them as comprising three elements: cognitive - their beliefs and understanding about the object; affective – feelings towards it; behavioural – how they *intend* to act. Other studies, such as Ajzen (2005), favour only the first two and consider behaviour to be their outcome. Still

other researchers (Dillon & Kumar, 1985) have argued these distinctions are artificial and misleading. Albarracín and colleagues (2005) consider all such models inaccurate as the three factors sit alongside attitudes and interact in a bi-directional and mutually influential way.

Measuring Teacher Attitudes to Inclusion

Because of the perceived importance of their role, considerable effort has gone into producing measures to gauge how teachers feel about IE. Some widely used measures include: Attitudes Toward Inclusion Scale (Larrivee & Cook, 1979), Opinions Relative to Mainstreaming (Larrivee & Cook, 1979), Teachers' Attitudes Scale on Inclusion (Green & Stoneman, 1989), Attitudes Towards Inclusion Education Scale (ATIES) (Wilczenski, 1992), Mainstream Attitudes Survey (Bender, Vail & Scott, 1995), My Thinking About Inclusion (Stoiber et al., 1998) and Prevailing Attitudes About Inclusion (Hammond & Lawrence, 2003). The majority suffer from three limitations. Firstly, they are based on self-report, which relies excessively on personal subjectivity. Secondly, they largely ignore the potential impact that established social norms may exert on the teachers' answers – teachers know that inclusion is a focus area and have a concept of what they publicly *should* think about it which may influence their answers. Thirdly, for convenience they often rely on conventional labels to describe specific contexts of impairment for teachers to comment on, avoiding the potential for each teacher to have a different construction of what those labels mean. This also reveals the scales in question are addressing integration as such categories should be irrelevant in full inclusion (Avrimidis & Norwich, 2002). Finally, given education and society's definition of what is under discussion has evolved from integration to inclusion, all the measures have a limited shelf-life as they need to be re-written to match these nuanced modifications.

More recently, to create a convenient tool for assessing teacher attitudes, Loreman and colleagues (2007) gathered data from 996 trainee teachers in Australia, Canada, Singapore and Hong Kong over 3 years using three established scales: Interaction with People with Disabilities (Forlin et al., 2001; Gething, 1991; 1994), Concerns About Inclusive

Education (Sharma & Desai, 2002) and ATIES (Wilczenski, 1992;1995). Using statistical analysis to combine these and remove redundant areas they created the Sentiments, Attitudes and Concern about Inclusive Education Scale (SACIE).

How Teacher Attitudes May Interact with Teacher Behaviour

Many researchers refer to two large-scale literature reviews of the various studies concerning teacher attitudes to inclusion: Avramidis and Norwich's (2002) extensive review of literature from 1984 to 2000 and de Boer and colleagues (2011) similar review covering 1998 to 2008. Given the era when the study was made, Avrimidis and Norwich (2002) reviewed studies of integration *and* inclusion, which means many of the studies were still considering categories of need and their relative assimilation into school settings. They report that two US-based studies (Coates, 1989; Semmel et al., 1991) indicated teachers preferred the withdrawal of SEN pupils for provision away from mainstream classrooms over full inclusion. Further studies showed split appraisal of inclusion between negative, by purely mainstream teachers (Vaughn et al., 1996), and positive, by current inclusive practitioners (Villa et al., 1996), and suggested teachers' attitudes in local contexts may become more positive proportionately with length of time practicing inclusion and commensurate skill development (LeRoy & Simpson, 1996; Sebastian & Mathot-Buckner, 1998; Avrimidis et al., 2000). To some extent this supports the conclusion that *exposure* to inclusion helps build capacity and teacher self-efficacy which in turn promotes positive attitudes. However, this analysis overlooks teachers' agency in their own careers; colleagues may join, leave and remain at schools depending on how aligned they are with its espoused vision and values meaning the teachers asked to teach inclusively who stay are potentially the ones most likely to agree with it.

de Boer and colleagues (2011) reviewed a large number of studies which had used many of the established scales. They divided the findings into the traditional three components underpinning attitude (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993): cognitive, affective and behavioural. When interpreting colleagues' results, they strictly applied their '*rule of thumb*' for clear overall statistical indications of associations to avoid over-interpreting minimal

positive associations from outliers. As a result, they concluded research indicated teachers' beliefs and knowledge about inclusion were overwhelmingly either *neutral* or *undecided* (de Bettencourt, 1999; Everington et al., 1999; Opdal et al., 2001; Pearson et al., 2003; Hammond & Lawrence, 2003; Alghazo & Naggar Gaad, 2004; Monsen & Fredericksen, 2004; Wilkins & Nietfeld, 2004; Kim et al., 2005; Rheams & Bain, 2005; Sari, 2007; Avrimidis & Kalyva, 2007; Kalyva, Goikovic & Tsakaris, 2007; Batsiou et al., 2008). This inconclusive outcome is perhaps inevitable given the fluid and unclear definition of inclusion over time and the tightrope professionals must walk balancing beliefs with self-efficacy and school expectations; unless society can articulate exactly what IE means, teachers will be forced to apply their own construction rendering blunt questionnaires of limited use. Where de Boer and colleagues (2011) encountered directional attitudes, these were usually negative and in specific areas: Parasuram's (2006) study found 300 teachers in India 'disagreed somewhat' with IE; Mushoriwa's (2001) 400 Zimbabwean teachers were strongly against including blind children; and Ghanizadeh and colleagues (2006) study in Iran showed 79 teachers were not in favour of including children with ADHD. In the UK, Sadler (2005) questioned staffs' knowledge about educating children with Speech and Language (SAL) needs and determined 88% were 'limited' or 'very limited'. Only Freire and César (2003), using a small sample of interviews in Portugal, found enthusiasm for including children with hearing needs. However, it is important to note that these studies cover a wide range of international contexts.

de Boer and colleagues (2011) found more balance in the affective component. Positive feelings of confidence in teaching diverse groups of children ranged from the broad (Everington et al., 1999) to specifically with ADHD (Bussing et al., 2002). Perhaps unsurprisingly, neutral attitudes were again prevalent (Glaubman & Lifshitz, 2001; Lifshitz et al., 2004) as were broad low confidence (Snyder, 1999) and specifically in teaching children with SAL needs (Sadler, 2005). Because they adopted the three-component model, de Boer and colleagues (2011) also reviewed the findings concerning teachers' behaviour intentions. Three studies (Cook et al., 2000; Cook, 2001; Cook et al., 2007) showed significant correlation between pupils labelled as having disabilities and being

categorized by their teachers as being a 'concern' or a target for 'removal'. However, Batsiou and colleagues (2008) concluded that of 179 teachers, behaviour intentions in this regard remained neutral.

Both Avrimidis and Norwich (2002) and de Boer and colleagues (2011) completed their reviews by discussing what variables research showed interact with teacher attitudes. A few (Thomas, 1985; Aksamit et al., 1987; Eichinger et al., 1991; Opdal et al., 2001; Alghazo & Naggar Gaad, 2004) suggested female teachers were more positive than male colleagues, although others find no such correlation (Berryman, 1989; Beh-Pajooh, 1992; Leyser et al., 1994; Parasuram, 2006).

Conflicting research explores if *social contact*, not professionally related, between pupils with diverse needs and teachers elevates the latter's positive attitudes. Some findings support this (Janney et al., 1995; Leyser et al., 1994) while others find either no interaction (Stephens & Braun, 1980; Center & Ward, 1987) or possibly detrimental effects (Forlin, 1995). There was considerably more evidence indicating an association between greater experience of teaching diverse groups and positivity about IE (Evrington et al., 1999; Opdal et al., 2001; Avrimidis & Kalyva, 2007; Kalyva et al., 2007; Batsiou et al., 2008). However, some emphasized that it is not just exposure but acquisition of broader, more varied skills through successfully engaging with inclusion that actually yields more positive attitudes (Leyser & Lessen, 1985; McDonald et al., 1987; Shimman, 1990) drawing connection to the role of self-efficacy in concepts like Ajzen's (2005) Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) and Expectancy-Value Theory (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). Interestingly, there may be an implicit association between many years teaching in *homogenous* settings and reduced acceptance of IE, as many studies (Harvey, 1985; Berryman, 1989; Center & Ward, 1987; Clough & Lindsay, 1991; Leyser, et al., 1994; Glaubman & Lifshitz, 2001; Alghazo & Naggar Gaad, 2004) indicated early-career teachers were *generally* more positive than colleagues with over eleven years' experience. However, it is important to note many studies find no association between length of career and attitudes (Avramidis et al., 2000; Leyser et al., 1989; Rogers, 1987; Stephens & Braun, 1980). The impact on attitudes after specific in-service training, revealed a general positive association to the increase in

knowledge and information (Wilkins & Nietfeld, 2004; Lifshitz et al., 2004; Kim et al., 2005; Ghanizadeh et al., 2006; Avramidis & Kalyva, 2007; Batsiou et al., 2008). It is possible to draw the conclusion that IE would be greatly enhanced if early-career teachers were offered opportunities to engage with a diverse range of students through their training period, are offered significant input and support on developing relevant pedagogical and classroom management skills and are then placed in settings where they are required to practice them.

As a legacy of integration, the interaction between categories and severities of within-child disabilities and teachers' attitudes to them are complicated by the multitude of designations and personal constructions of their meaning. However, there is considerable agreement across the research that teachers are more prepared to countenance integration (if not inclusion) of pupils with milder needs, especially in physical and sensory areas, and less accepting of moderate and severe needs particularly in behaviour, emotions and cognition (Clough & Lindsay, 1991; Ward et al., 1994; Forlin, 1995; Glaubman & Lifshitz, 2001). Later work by Cook (2001) agrees and finds teachers most likely to desire pupils with ADHD, specific learning difficulties and behaviour issues to be removed, being more accepting of 'obvious' needs such as cognitive, physical and sensory impairments. Alghazo & Naggar Gaad (2004) identify higher positivity towards inclusion of visual needs over hearing needs.

Forlin and colleagues (2010) used the SACIE (Loreman et al., 2007) and their own Likert-scored questionnaire to explore the attitudes of 286 trainee teachers in Mexico. Initially they gathered data on areas of training, sex, previous knowledge of inclusion legislation, prior experience and qualifications, and degree of exposure to and confidence supporting diverse groups. This revealed that the participants were overwhelmingly female, but were very balanced between none, some and reasonable experience working with and training about students with additional needs. However, over two-thirds had interacted with disabled groups to a notable extent. The SACIE Scale revealed that they were very positive about engaging with a range of student needs but slightly less so on the topic of inclusion in school. Their main concerns were their own capacity to provide sufficient

support and with the degree to which the 'rest of the class' would accept these students, much more than their own increased stress levels. The Teacher Efficacy for Inclusive Practices Scale (Sharma et al., 2012) revealed the student teachers had high self-esteem (SE) concerning their amount of inclusive teaching skills, feeling comfortable with varied approaches to explanations, assessments and student grouping. They were equally confident when liaising with educational professionals and the students' families. Interestingly, their SE was lowest when considering behaviour management, especially for physically aggressive students.

de Boer and colleagues (2012) developed a general tool to evaluate the attitudes towards inclusion for use with teachers, parents and carers and students. The self-report Likert questionnaire incorporated cognitive elements derived from My Thinking about Inclusion Scale (Stoiber et al., 1998), positive affective elements from Skills Questionnaire (Avramidis et al., 2000) and negative affective and behavioral elements from Multidimensional Attitudes Towards Inclusion Scale (Mahat, 2008). Interestingly, their findings indicated Likert scales were insufficiently nuanced for participants to answer effectively about broad questions of non-specific disability. Their survey required enhancing with detailed example vignettes providing specifics of gender and additional needs which gave the participants a real context to consider their answers. They concluded that existing surveys were deficient due to lacking this element.

These studies are important, as they indicate teachers' beliefs inform values, which influence attitudes which ultimately leads to their behaviour in school. As most writers agree, beliefs about IE will originate from a clear definition (Schuelka, 2018). So, who is creating the definition teachers use day to day? Generally, UK schools are led by headteachers who have been appointed after a successful teaching career, and it seems consistent to link their definition of inclusion to the one they held during their teaching career. However, the literature investigating these definitions is largely from *outside* the UK and there is a lack of up-to-date UK-based research. Since UK schools operate within a specific context influenced by national and local factors, including a resurgent interest in inclusion, research is overdue investigating Headteacher definitions of IE and how they

operationalize it in their schools. The limited usefulness of existing scales and questionnaires discussed above means that more exploratory work is required to understand the UK context for inclusion.

What Legislation Expects of UK School Leadership

This section considers the professional expectations on school leaders through the current legislation and school guidance documents.

The most recent Headteacher Standards (Gov.uk, 2020) suggests that social norms established by school leadership influence inclusive education; the preamble describes them as '*leading professionals'*, '*role models for the communities*' and '*custodians of the nation's schools'* (Gov.uk, 2020, p1). This document extends and expands on the Teacher Standards (Gov.uk, 2021), which it emphasizes headteachers must also adhere to. Exactly what is required from them is outlined in two sections: *ethics and professional conduct* and *standards*. The former draws heavily on the Seven Principles of Public Life (Gov.uk, 2024b), and outlines both compulsory *behaviour* and *attitudes*. Crucially, they must: *'show tolerance of and respect for the rights of others, recognizing differences and respecting cultural diversity within contemporary Britain'* and *'serve the best interests of the school's pupils'* (Gov.uk, 2020, s1). The Standards themselves overtly include school culture and additional and special educational needs. Headteachers are required to '*create a culture where pupils experience a positive and enriching school life*' (Gov.uk, 2020, s2) and '*promote positive and respectful relationships across the school community and a safe, orderly and inclusive environment*' (Gov.uk, 2020, s2). Taken together these core statements within a document that acts as a framework for both the training and performance management of headteachers would indicate they are required to welcome *all* diverse groups into *all* schools, respect their right to participate fully and hence achieve their full potential. This is completely commensurate with the edicts of the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994). Since headteachers create the school's agenda and culture (Gov.uk, 2020, s2), which informs day to day decisions and their emphasis, these will be indistinguishable to observers' perceptions of the *school's* attitudes.

Perhaps, then, it is the centrality of IE to their professional competency standards, rather than remoteness from classroom realities that means studies have found headteachers to be *more positive* towards it than their colleagues (Avrimidis & Norwich, 2002). Beyond individual performance management, schools are also subject to Ofsted inspections (Education and Inspections Act, 2006). These will create a judgement on the school provision based on quality of education, behaviour and attitudes, personal development and leadership and management (Gov.uk, 2023). Revisions to the previous Ofsted Inspection Handbook in 2019 required school leaders to redefine the local curriculum to suit the needs of their cohorts. This is evaluated in three ways: intent, implementation and impact. The *intent* is the degree to which the school's curriculum is matched to the identified needs and is designed to deliver the relevant skills and knowledge over time. The *implementation* is how well this material is actually delivered to the pupils so that they acquire the targeted skills and knowledge at the appropriate rate with contingency provided to repair misunderstandings. The *impact* returns to the stated objectives of the *intent* and gauges how successfully they were achieved. It is explicit that attaining National qualifications, such as GCSEs, will inform elements of the *intent* for many pupils. However, Ofsted judgments will also consider if the curriculum *'is ambitious and designed to give all learners, particularly the most disadvantaged and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) or high needs, the knowledge and cultural capital they need to succeed in life'* (Gov.uk, 2023, p.8) and expands this to mean *all pupils* access the curriculum, make progress and are equipped, potentially including National qualifications, to successfully transition to the next stage of education or work. Between the Headteacher standards and Ofsted Handbook, school leadership has been given an unequivocal steer to pursue a vague definition of inclusive education.

Potential for Impact of School Leadership

This section looks at studies that explore the potential for effective leadership to impact schools' enactment of inclusion.

Recent research disputes the potential for school leaders to influence their colleagues' appraisal of inclusion and manifest impact on such school ethos. Macfarlane and Woolfson (2013) applied Theory of planned behaviour (TPB) (Ajzen, 2005) which considers ultimate behaviour is partly guided by a person's evaluation of socially expected compliance in their study of teachers' attitudes to CYP with additional Social Emotional and Mental Health needs. They found limited impact of either school ethos, social norms or leadership on teachers' attitude towards IE. However, Lüke & Grosche's (2018) German studies involving 231 and 159 people from across an urban community and within education positioned observer's evaluation of an organization's overt attitude towards inclusion as being of *greater* significance than other variables such as age, sex and previous experience with diverse students.

In their discussion about leadership and diversity, Lumby and Morrison (2010) determine the former is contingent on a person's capacity to influence other people, and this is mediated by their acceptance of the leader's right to do so. In keeping with the definitions of inclusion that conceive it as an ongoing process (Lunt & Norwich, 1999; Schuelka, 2018), McGlynn and London (2013) conceive genuine leadership for inclusion as generating a perpetual force to shape community understandings of inclusion and encourage collaboration; diversity is to be seen not only as inevitable but also desirable. If leaders' own conception of inclusion does not match this, then they will lack sufficient commitment to pursue it effectively. After conducting semi-structured interviews in thirteen Australian primary schools, Graham and Spandagou (2011) felt that levels of IE reflected the headteachers' own diverse concepts of inclusion, the context of each school and the capabilities of the staff. They concluded that schools with more diverse contexts gravitated to wider definitions of inclusion, encompassing ethnic, socio-economic and cultural factors, rather than restricted to only SEND, which was found in schools with less diversity. They also identified that all the headteachers' definitions were more closely aligned to *integration* and cited poor behaviour and lack of specific funding as obstacles to meeting needs. These headteacher variables will inevitably influence the extent of the school's IE. Leader-generated momentum appears critical as McGlynn and London (2013)

consider it insufficient for school staff to merely agree with the inclusion concept, they must meaningfully apply it to every aspect of their practice. In a study of three mid-sized schools in USA, UK and Portugal, Kugelmass and Ainscow (2004) revealed that successful inclusive leaders adopted two key strategies. They continually modelled collaboration and accepted occasional dissent and conflict as necessary biproducts of developing improved team-teaching skills and sharing responsibility through a distributed leadership. However, they were also prepared to ruthlessly enforce critical inclusive policies when required. This resulted in staff either adopting the new practices or moving on and this stabilized the inclusive cultural norm. Rather than giving up on staff, some headteachers accept social change is challenging as it requires individuals change too. They employ techniques designed to give colleagues space to consider inclusion and help them to re-position themselves. Bristol (2015) explored the use of a community-supervision-reflective discursive model, *Teacher Talk*, by leaders for six months in four rural schools. This technique was almost the opposite of autocratic leadership and embraced discussion and collaboration across all sectors of the school community. The resultant interactions aired personal accounts of practice, successes, failures and the interaction between aspiration and reality. The conclusion was that this approach allowed challenge, equity of voice and merged personal and social change by inculcating shared ownership of the IE.

However, the literature suggests that maintaining such single-mindedness is not easy; Ainscow and colleagues' (2006) work for the Teaching and Learning Research Programme investigating twenty-five schools over three years concluded headteachers do not operate in a vacuum and are subject to many conflicting forces. They identify headteachers have the power to decide which underlying values to embrace, how a school discharges its business and controls the narrative of how they are justified to the community. On the surface, this would imply the omnipotent professional can act as they please and if suitably committed to inclusion could deliver real change. However, as discussed earlier, they are also subject to professional standards and Ofsted, national league tables, LA directives, local context, history and school culture. Ainscow and colleagues (2006) consider it possible for some school leaders to actually use these

external pressures to define both them and the school and so lose focus on ideological matters such as IE. This interaction between policy and conception was explored by Raffo and Gunter (2008). They identified two versions of inclusion. The *functionalist* considers a fully inclusive society to bring economic, social and aspirational benefits to all but ignores the fact that many groups do not achieve this. This deficit is usually associated with specific contexts, such as living in a disadvantaged area, or within-person variability, such as race or gender. This approach determines that education alone can bridge the gap with skills, knowledge and cultural capital, avoiding the link between deprivation and academic outcomes. The *socially critical* accepts that true equality is only achievable if policy dismantles the social, economic and power hierarchies that bar its path. Leo and Barton (2006) used mixed-methods to capture the experience of a single UK school for six years. They agreed with other research that the journey to IE was ongoing and challenging, requiring relentless, ethically aligned leadership to overcome the anti-inclusive forces exerted by the performance measures, data and the marketization of education.

It seems that pursuing an IE model requires firm commitment by the headteacher and according to Ajzen's TPB (2005) it is *beliefs* that inform *attitudes* and these inform *behaviour*. Using 237 people from Luxembourg, Krischler and colleagues (2019) researched if there are significant differences in the definition of inclusion between experienced teachers, trainee teachers and non-teaching public. They concluded that definitions to inclusion not only inform attitudes but are influenced by the level of a person's education work experience. Therefore, it is important to re-examine what definitions headteachers are applying when discharging their duty to develop IE in their schools.

Theories Positioning Inclusion in Schools

This section looks at one theory that could be used to frame how inclusion interacts with other aspects of the school systems and then reviews how one researcher successfully applied it to schools in Greece.

According to Ecological System's Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), children are at the centre of a pattern of interacting systems. This is usually depicted as a series of concentric

circles with the CYP at the centre. The circles closest to the CYP have the most direct and immediate influence with those further out becoming increasingly indirect. Immediately around the CYP is the *microsystem*, made up of home, school, faith groups and immediate locality. Where these factors interact with each other is the *mesosystem* including direct information exchanges and implicit social norms. Moving into indirect influences, the *exosystem* comprises local government, local media and school governance systems whose policies and frameworks define headteachers and other professionals' financial and performance indicators. Next the *macrosystem* holds the current views of society and where all systems interact. In his later work, Bronfenbrenner added the *chronosystem* to represent how time-related variables, such as war, economic crisis and pandemics, can also apply particular influence on all the other systems.

Rapti (2016) adopted Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) as the underlying theory when exploring the role of Greek school leaders in inclusion. Using mixed methods, Rapti conducted pilot interviews with eight headteachers, before creating a questionnaire with 83 respondents. In a final stage, thematic analysis was done on 17 semi-structured interviews. This identified that headteachers and teachers are separate factors within the child's microsystem and interaction between them both and family constitute the mesosystem. Rapti evaluated the participants' views on challenges and opportunities for inclusion at each system stage. At the macrosystem level, they identified tensions arising from legislation (enacted or not), poor planning, inflexible curricular, between-school competition, poor funding, high levels of bureaucracy, poor school autonomy and the vague definition of inclusion. At the exosystem, overt priority for pupils without SEND, low staff numbers and increased staff workload, prevailing community attitudes, poor collaboration with support services and overall organization were issues. Within the mesosystem, limited collaboration with and between staff, leadership and parents or carers were obstacles. Tensions at the microsystem level focused on insufficient training for leaders and teachers, poor recruitment and retention of teachers resulting in increased workload all round and unsympathetic attitudes of headteachers, teachers and parents and carers. Interestingly, Rapti (2016) re-casts the centre as *inclusion*, rather than

the *child*. Tensions at this point arise from the individual needs, the numbers of such children and the student attitudes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this literature review has developed four key strands around inclusion that would justify further qualitative research. Firstly, there is not a universally agreed definition of inclusion nor clarity concerning how IE should manifest in schools or what it should be aspiring to achieve. This is further complicated by claims that policymakers find an *undefined* concept of inclusion convenient to avoid accountability. Writers on inclusion have also proposed so many complex and competing ideas about rights at an individual level that these often sit in tension. Since unique contexts, practicalities and perspectives influence how stakeholders prioritize and emphasize these ideas, this makes definitions of inclusion local and contingent on personal experiences. This is important because if there is no understanding of what is meant by school inclusion or what its final outcomes should be, school leaders will find it very hard to create, enact or evaluate inclusive policies and practices. Since headteachers are professionals operating under 'live' conditions, they do not have the luxury of sidestepping these issues. They are accountable for decisions about inclusion on a daily basis and must establish *for themselves* a working understanding of inclusion, or local definition, that they are comfortable operating with and it is likely this will be shaped by their unique experiences and the contexts of their setting such as finances, staff capacity and diversity of need. It is important to explore this understanding of inclusion between individual school leaders as this is what is guiding their decisions and practices and shaping the manifestation of inclusion in English schools.

The second strand identified that UK schools are currently subject to a range of international agreements that identify inclusion for all CYP as a universal right, that inclusion and equitable education are constructed as a tool of social mobility and all CYP means *every* CYP accessing the same school as their peers, with the latest such agreement (UNESCO, 2015) making 2030 the completion date for its overt targets. What is unclear is the extent UK government policies are on track to meet these targets and

whether school leaders are directly aware of how they support or contravene the concepts, emphasis and expectations of the international agreements. Understanding these is important when evaluating how much these agreements have influenced the meaning attributed to inclusion by individual headteachers and the development of practice within English schools.

The third strand developed established that there are conflicting messages about inclusion within UK legislation and guidance. Despite the international expectation that all CYP should participate together, much UK legislation focuses on managing the placement of children by preserving parental rights to remove CYP from their peers for home education or specialist provision. There is emphasis on placing CYP at the heart of decisions made about them, but needs are still seen as 'within-child', with the level of support and additional funding being evaluated against deviations to age-related expectations and barriers to accessing provision in line with their peers. Person-specific resourcing preserves the concept that there is a notional 'centre' in schooling, prevents widespread reform to build capacity in the overall system and undermines the international concept that inclusive education is for every CYP at all times. This is reinforced by non-inclusive language categorizing people as 'disabled' or 'non-disabled' (Equality Act, 2010) and behaviour guidance that requires headteachers maintain discipline and order through consistent punitive sanctions (DfE, 2023b). Conversely, the teacher standards (Gov.uk, 2021) and headteacher standards (Gov.uk, 2020) appear informed by the ethics of the Incheon Agreement (UNESCO, 2015), charging practitioners to deliver inclusive education based on appreciation of diversity, full participation and belonging, understanding of individual needs with adaptation of teaching and behaviour strategies to ensure more equitable outcomes for all. Further confusion has emerged from the recent Government White Paper (Gov.uk, 2026a) that reiterates commitment to the 2030 targets, conceiving inclusion as a tool for social mobility and equitable outcomes based on participation, belonging and adaptive teaching, and openly promotes the benefits of inclusion within mainstream over specialist provision. However, it makes school leaders accountable for improving inclusion through the revised Ofsted inspection framework (Gov.uk, 2025a/b)

that specifically evaluates inclusion against the achievements of pre-identified *disadvantaged* CYP. This is much narrower than the international agreement's participatory vision for all or arguably the White Paper itself. It is not clear how school staff and leadership make sense of these apparently conflicting messages nor how they reconcile them with the wider ethical debates about full inclusion. This is important as although headteachers are legally obliged to follow applicable legislation to ensure consistency across English schools, if the guidance is vague or contradictory headteachers are required to apply their own interpretation of inclusion priorities and aspirations and it is this that will in fact be framing the inclusion experienced by CYP.

Finally, the literature review discussed the many attempts to use quantitative measures to assess teacher attitudes to inclusion and the outcomes they generate. It is clear that teachers hold a great many beliefs about the practicalities of inclusion and expressed diverse views on which groups of CYP and which types of needs were relatively easier or harder to include. Research into contextual factors concerning the teachers themselves were inconclusive with many results returning neutral or slightly negative appraisals. There is also suggestion that the lack of formal definition and changing terminology over time makes it hard for teachers to know *what* they are being asked to include and so it remains unclear how teacher beliefs and attitudes influence their classroom behaviours. This is important because teachers are responsible for managing their classes directly and these behaviours may exert a great influence on the type of inclusion experienced by CYP. It seems crucial to understand what meaning teachers make of inclusion to understand what they consider they are being asked to do in the current context and what they perceive the obstacles and opportunities to be. This could widen the debate about how best to support them to be inclusive but also shed light on how school leaders, who all were previously teachers, develop *their* understanding of inclusion.

When evaluating the potential for future research into these lines of enquiry, one consistent factor emerges: inclusion experienced by CYP in English schools results from policies and practices created by headteachers. Because so much cultural and legal uncertainty about inclusion remains, in order to operate their schools and maintain

professional duties headteachers are forced to construct their own, local understanding of inclusion. This will be a result of their personal journey as an educational professional and member of society and be influenced by the school's unique context and staff skillsets. The recent white paper makes it clear that inclusion remains an unfulfilled aspiration in England and there is considerable work to be done across the education sector to align with the internationally agreed targets by 2030. The failure of broad policy to resolve these to date would suggest a disconnect with school-level practicalities and a valuable focus for further research would be to work directly with a range of serving headteachers to socially construct an understanding of how they create their meaning of inclusion, to explore what they consider to be the tensions and barriers within their local communities and contexts and to question how these interact with cultural assumptions and norms when it is put it into practice. Apart from empowering these headteachers' voices, this may shed light on how they resolve practicalities in their contexts and serve their community's needs. Any emergent theories would inevitably be local and contextualized, and other headteachers and stakeholders may or may not recognize them. However, it may validate recognizable leadership dilemmas and create common terms of reference to form the basis of professional dialogue about inclusive practice. Because it represents how these participants operationalized unclear government policies and solved *real time* problems it may also offer an evidential and practice-based framework of pre-tested ideas that could be re-worked or re-scaled as needed.

The wider body of literature suggests that inclusion is not a fixed or universally understood phenomenon but a concept whose meaning is negotiated within particular social and cultural contexts. Therefore, while policy documents present inclusion as a national and transnational aspiration, the practical enactment of inclusion ultimately depends upon how school leaders interpret competing demands and translate them into local policies and practices. Therefore understanding inclusion requires a focus on both formal definitions and policy frameworks and, importantly, also on the subjective meanings constructed by those responsible for implementing them.

Chapter 2: Empirical Paper

Rationale for Research

In 2025, IE and inclusion again became education priorities. The *Education for all* agenda in the Incheon agreement (UNESCO, 2015) targets full and equitable inclusion by 2030. However, the UK government's recent white paper, *Every Child Achieving and Thriving* (Gov.uk, 2026a), makes it clear that the nation's education system is still not inclusive enough and established very ambitious changes to rectify this to meet the 2030 target. Inclusion is not a new concept and the many attempts to enact it over the decades have resulted in the current education system that has been recently identified as inadequate. The aspirations are clear, but they may be no more successful than what has gone before if the factors that have limited progress towards IE are not understood.

Since UK schools will be the main tool for delivering IE, current research aiming to support this initiative needs to explore closely the thoughts and practice of key personnel and decision makers at an individual school level to gain insight into how some serving school leaders construct for themselves their personal understanding of what inclusion means. It will also be useful to explore with them their understanding of how they are trying to make it work and their perception of any barriers to extending their provision to full and equitable education access.

This research aimed to explore the professional experience of secondary headteachers in two neighbouring counties in England to understand the factors that influence inclusion in their schools. A qualitative methodology facilitated deeper exploration of how they personally define inclusion and how they make it operational at a local level. The following sections starts by looking at why international agreements are sharpening the focus on IE in 2026 and the urgent need for this research to underpin success in the next steps. Given the complexity and ill-defined nature of inclusion, it then explores why research into how a small number of participants arrived at their definition may be of benefit. Next, the legal frameworks that make headteachers so pivotal in establishing IE are discussed and why they were made the focus of this research. This is

followed by discussion of the very complicated set of professional duties and pressures that may influence the way that headteachers interpret their inclusive duties – the elements that may be *limiting* the enaction of inclusion – and so highlighting why it was necessary to give priority to their voices when exploring their construction of inclusion and working practices. Theories that may explain how these practical considerations may influence their inclusive behaviour are considered. Finally, it shares how this research is needed to support professionals and families working together on the local inclusion agenda.

International Agreements' Influence on Schools

"…our concern here is to what extent the multiplicity of 'inclusions' identified in their accounts hinder the effort to realise the development of inclusive education across the whole system…" (Graham & Spandagou, 2011, p.233). Theoretically, by embracing the UNCRC (UNICEF, 1989) and The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) which outline CYP rights to universal education and equal opportunities *in the same schools,* the UK made its inclusion aspirations clear. Equally, the Incheon Declaration (2015) with its firm target of achieving *Education for All* by 2030 matches Ainscow and colleagues' (2006) assertion that inclusive schools must *change* to equitable provision for all CYP to access school together. However, 2030 is fast approaching and there is no current understanding of how these ambitions have been interpreted at a *school level*. This study used qualitative methods with a small number of UK secondary headteachers to learn if these international agreements align with their constructions of inclusion and what they consider the current *limits* of inclusion are. Given they are serving headteachers, it may provide insight into how close aspects of the UK is to manifesting the international aspirations for inclusion and what factors these headteachers identify as obstacles to meeting the targets.

The Definition of Inclusion is Unclear and Evolving

"We need to continually question and reflect upon inclusion as a troubling and complex concept…..and to return to this regularly to reflect on ways that this may have developed and changed over time…" (Ekins, 2016, p.54). Schuelka (2018) proposes that

understandings of IE need to be made explicit because different people may construct its meaning in different ways. Schulka's conclusion is if there are no definitions there can be no IE. However, the consensus amongst inclusion writers is the concept is vague and subject to so much localized interpretation that there *is no currently agreed definition* (Barton, 1997; Lunt & Norwich, 1999; Ainscow et al., 2006; Kozleski et al., 2007; Graham & Slee, 2008; Slee, 2008; Powell et al., 2016; Ekins, 2016). Government policy demands *inclusion* but is unclear on whether schools are facilitating *assimilation* (Barton, 1997; Lunt & Norwich, 1999) - physically placing CYP in the same schools with unmodified policies and curriculum, or *accommodation* (Booth, 1996; Schuelka, 2018) – wholesale revision of education to remove participation barriers. Clarity is further reduced with conceptual tensions such as including all children in the same provision at all times if they have an *equal* right to a bespoke curriculum (Lunt & Norwich,1999), *and* their democratic right to elect *not to be included* is protected (Sebba & Sachdev, 1997). To Corbett "*The term 'inclusive education' has become so used and abused that it has little meaning….*" (Corbett, 2001, p.10).

Writers like Nilholm and Göransson (2017) consider it essential to understand what meaning people make of inclusion before researching it with them and qualitative researchers consider that exploration of the construction of such meanings is essential for research interpreting what underlies peoples' actions (Silverman, 2004). As they are key agents in enacting *current* inclusive school policy, this study interviewed active headteachers to explore their concept of inclusion by looking for what processes lay behind their statements. The findings were analyzed to explore the meanings participants attached to inclusion and the processes through which these meanings informed their practice.

The absence of an agreed definition of inclusion does not necessarily represent a problem to be solved. From a constructivist perspective, inclusion may be understood as a concept whose meaning is socially produced and negotiated within particular cultural, political and professional contexts. Rather than seeking a universal definition of inclusion,

this study explores how headteachers construct understandings of inclusion through their experiences and how those understandings shape their actions within schools.

Headteachers are Required to Lead Inclusion

"To what extent the conceptual understanding of inclusion influences teachers' behaviour and how far a deeper understanding leads to more appropriate treatment of the diversity of pupils remains, however, a question yet to receive empirical investigation." (Kruse & Dedering, 2018, p.30). The rationale for focusing on Headteachers is because the Headteacher Standards (Gov.uk, 2020) identify them as lead professionals in UK schools with responsibility for shaping all aspects of ethos, curriculum and policy and make it very clear they are role models charged with welcoming pupils' diversity into school, helping them participate and develop fully. UK schools and headteachers are judged by Ofsted and in September 2025, their new inspection framework (Gov.uk, 2025a) overtly lists *inclusion* as one of seven areas of judgement applied to English secondary schools; heads must lead provision where *all pupils* access the curriculum, progress and transitioning to their next stage successfully. The inspection materials (Gov.uk, 2025b) are not clear about how judgments on inclusion interact with the other six areas of judgement, for example achievement, when it came into force from November 2026, but the government white paper (Gov.uk, 2026a) made inclusion a central priority. These frameworks are so new there is not yet any published research on how headteachers have interpreted this new evaluation nor on how it influences inclusion in their schools. But since Ofsted judgements are so crucial to headteachers' careers and hence the running of their schools, it seems inevitable that the new framework is already shaping their constructions of and approach to inclusion. This study interviewed participating headteachers as these documents were made public making it possible to gain an insight into how they interact with their existing interpretation of their duty towards inclusion, what steps they currently follow to achieve it, and allow them to reflect on how both may evolve under the latest guidance in one English county.

Enacting Inclusion is Highly Complex within UK Legislation and Guidance

"What <u>are</u> the links between leadership narratives and rationales adopted by school leaders and the visions of social inclusion promoted by school?" (Raffo & Gunter, 2008, p.411). There is little current research into the impact of a wide range of professional factors – including financial and Ofsted accountability – that potentially influence the way headteachers construct inclusion. As school leaders they face many practical challenges when *implementing* inclusion (Bell, 2017). Operationally, Headteachers had to contend with the financial crash of 2008 and the austerity policies pursued by successive UK governments since 2010 that led to falling school funding (Adams, 2019). The resulting 9% drop (Sibieta, 2021) forced school leaders to lower staff numbers (Gibbons, 2021; GMB, 2020), reducing resources to implement inclusive practice. Simultaneously, headteachers' responsibilities have grown in Mental Health (DfE, 2018), teaching and learning (Gov.uk, 2023) and attendance (DfE, 2024b) alongside ever-present school league tables (Gov.uk, 2024a). Writers consider CYP with additional needs are more challenging to support (Zdoupas & Laubenstein, 2023) and a marketized and competitive school system may be disinclined to discharge resources on them (McLaughlin & Rouse, 2002) which reduces inclusion (Allfie, 2023).

Headteachers must also resolve tension within UK policy. Teacher Standards (Gov.uk, 2021) make pupil outcomes their professional responsibility and behaviour management and in-lesson adjustments to overcome socio-cultural barriers must be applied to *individuals'* needs with overt links between IE and democracy. However, inclusion responsibility is sidestepped when CYP with an EHCP select special school over mainstream placement (Children and Families Act, 2014). The SEND Code of Practice (DfE, 2015) and Equality Act (2010) appear to follow an *integration* model, allocating additional resources and considerations *to* individuals based on within-child needs. Headteachers must reconcile messages that school is for the 'centre' and can therefore avoid wholesale revision, with the inclusive and internationally aligned professional standards.

Headteachers are also required to establish a positive ethos and maintain safe and orderly schools that promote learning and insulate pupils from violence, bullying, abuse and anxiety (DfE, 2024a), overtly linked to safeguarding duties (DfE, 2023a). Full behaviour

policies demonstrating inclusivity and supportiveness must be published on their website. The Equality Act (2010) requires reasonable adjustments for some pupils, including those with no pre-existing SEND. Together, these match the Headteacher Standards (Gov.uk, 2020) and steer leaders to cater for all pupils' needs and support their participation. However, Guidance on Suspension and Exclusions (DfE, 2023b) reasserts a behaviourist model by declaring 'no exclusion' policies to be unfit. It emphasizes headteachers must use fixed-term and permanent exclusions, managed moves and off-site provision.

Alongside these factors are the highly variable responses of parents and carers, the pupils in the school and community perception of inclusion and the staff. Any of these can be pro or anti inclusion and are subject to change dependent on context and recent events. Therefore, individual headteachers must balance a complex set of forces against their own definition of inclusion. Research suggests the latter may be derived from their experiences and training (Graham & Spandagou, 2011) and may influence their attitude towards it (Krischler et al., 2019; Schwab et al., 2024). However, to maintain their professional position, they will be forced to *operationalize* their conceptual understanding of inclusion – creating a personal 'best fit' model that allows them to balance these competing factors. This 'headteacher-specific working definition' of inclusion is what will manifest across individual English schools and shape the experience of individual CYP, which may be an evaluation of inclusion in 2026. This research worked with participating headteachers to understand *what* they actually do and *why* they do it to make inclusion work in their schools, *how* they make critical decisions about including individual CYP, what participants perceive as limiting inclusion and *how* they justify decisions around these constraints.

Evolving Local Authority Priorities Interact with Headteacher Priorities

In 2024, county 1's PEPs cited inclusion as *the* key priority for their LA following the Director of Education's launch of an inclusion framework for organizing the county's educational services going forwards. Aiming for a 'system wide inclusive approach', it embraces:

- practices – schools, settings, statutory processes.
- partnerships – leadership and transitions between settings.

- voices – CYP experience and outcomes.
- services – including Alternative Provision.
- people – harnessing technology to empower CYP.
- places – expanded appropriate capacity.

This tallies with County 1's historic investment in the principle: each county area has an Access and Inclusion Co-ordinator; significant investment since 2017 in a school-level intervention, Therapeutic Thinking, which scaffolds schools engaging with children's needs manifesting as behaviour and collaboration with Virtual School to develop Recovery Through Relationships to disseminate trauma-informed practice county-wide. This latest initiative may be driven by the increased focus on inclusion in the latest Ofsted framework (Gov.uk, 2025a) and aligns the county with the emphasis in the recent white paper (Gov.uk, 2026a), but it is very new and how it is being interpreted by individual headteachers is as yet untested. A key criticism of this approach has been that since there is no universally accepted definition of inclusion, the stakeholders supporting this initiative such as schools, LA and EPs will apply their own interpretation, which creates a barrier to effective collaboration. By revealing participating secondary headteachers' perspectives from this geographical area, this research supports this initiative by constructing their understanding of inclusion framed within the current educational reality as they experience it - what these headteachers are currently doing in their schools and why. Any emergent theory will be interpretive and localized to the participants, researcher and context of this study. It is not intended to provide a universal explanation of inclusion, but rather a theoretically informed account of how inclusion was understood and enacted by these headteachers within a particular educational context at a particular point in time. However, because it was co-constructed with serving headteachers it will offer viewers a practical and tested example framework of aspirations and practice which will be potentially relevant to others. It will also offer some insight into local obstacles that may need to be addressed more widely to move the IE agenda forward.

Because the study seeks to understand how inclusion is interpreted, negotiated and operationalized by headteachers, constructivist grounded theory provides an appropriate

methodological approach. Unlike approaches that aim primarily to describe experience, constructivist grounded theory enables the development of an interpretive explanation of the social processes through which participants construct meaning. The approach acknowledges that findings are co-constructed between researcher and participant and that any resulting theory is situated within the specific context within which the research occurred.

Summary

Therefore, there are three main justifications for this research. Firstly, there is a knowledge gap around how headteachers construct an understanding of inclusion. Authors agree this requires ongoing research due to its abstract nature and evolving nature. Secondly, there is a population gap. UK in general, and specifically County 1's, headteachers and schools are underrepresented in inclusion research. Finally, there is a practical knowledge gap. The latest Ofsted framework, which overtly assesses inclusion, is only a few months old and there is no research on how headteachers are operationalizing inclusion in 2026.

Axology

The choice of topic for this research was derived in part from professional interests that I have held throughout a long teaching career. I worked as a primary and middle school teacher for over twenty years, taking in five mainstream schools across two eastern counties. The practice of inclusion was always expected and overtly mentioned but never defined. Two arguments were often cited for inclusion, one of ethical rights for the CYP and one of financial efficiency for the system, which often seemed incompatible and led to a disconnect between training and the practical resources available.

My own definition of inclusion evolved over these years, influenced by initial teacher training, practical realities and the ethos of multiple headteachers and SENDCOs. Over the years, the relative emphasis placed on inclusion in relation to other factors ebbed and flowed partly owing to its poorly defined status within shifting educational priorities.

My move into senior leadership, first between 2014 and 2017 as a deputy head and then 2018 to 2021 as a headteacher of a large primary school, resulted in first-hand experience of balancing multiple pressures in an ever-changing educational landscape. However, many of those pressures – budgeting, behaviour, league tables, Ofsted grading, curriculum – *were* clearly defined and had well-established metrics used in dialogue at all levels of education. Despite maintaining its status as a CYP's right and therefore interacting with everything else in school, inclusion had neither clear definition nor well-established metrics which left it incongruously vulnerable to the *school leadership's* interpretation and priorities.

Research Aims and Questions

As previously discussed, there is no agreed definition of inclusion and no understanding of how headteachers construct this for themselves. There is also little research into how school leaders are integrating the latest guidance and inspection frameworks into operational decisions. Therefore, the proposed research questions were:

- How do secondary headteachers in England construct school inclusion?
- How do secondary headteachers in England make inclusion operational in their schools?

The aim of this study therefore was to co-construct with participating headteachers *their* conception of the meaning of inclusion and so create a theory interpreting what they believe they were aspiring to achieve in their role. This research then explored the extent to which these headteachers felt able to manifest this in their setting and what factors shape this, leading to a second theory interpreting their understanding of how they make inclusion work in their setting. As seen above, headteachers are uniquely positioned within society with regards to the enactment of school inclusion and this was why they were selected as the participant group. Such socially constructed theories have potential value because there are no current theories exploring the needs of this group as they discharge their duties in this area. Although any theories will be localized, by working directly with serving headteachers who are operating within the context of the counties of study and

whose perceptions have been 'tested in the field', it should ensure they have some credibility. It was hoped this would allow these theories to support local and national inclusion initiatives by enhancing the dialogue between LA and the leadership of schools and MATs. Because they are based on real-life examples they may support staff training and development in inclusion, and potentially outline how other school's leadership could address obstacles and effect positive change. Ultimately, they may also help school leaders provide rationale to stakeholders and outside viewers about their own decisions and policies. However, there is tension in this approach as its strengths - in-depth interaction with a few well-informed participants with experience of managing inclusion - also represent a source of potential limitations; the small field of participants will inevitably reduce not only the diversity of perspectives but also of range of practical contexts which critics would suggest undermines any generalizations that may be drawn for a wider audience. However, Yardley (2000) would suggest that qualitative research into evolving concepts such as inclusion is often better served by focusing on the perspectives of a few well-placed participants with deeper knowledge of the phenomenon.

Methodology and Methods

Ontology and Epistemology

Since the focus of this research was on exploring how individual headteachers construct inclusion and make sense of their professional duties within a complex web of interacting influences, this research adopted a type of relativist ontology. Braun and Clarke (2006) propose that relativism acknowledges that no single version of reality exists, just as no single definition of inclusion exists. Instead, individuals construct their own reality that is local to their time and context. To relativism, headteachers' actions result directly from their *unique* interpretation of ideas (Robson & McCartan, 2016). It was also important for me, as a former headteacher, and also the researcher, to acknowledge my own subjectivity in the process of this knowledge generation, in line with Charmaz's (2025) suggestion that a constructivist-relativist ontology concedes that the researcher inevitably interacts with

participants while gaining an understanding of their interpretations and any conclusions are therefore products of this process.

Willig (2013) defines epistemology as the concept of what it is possible to know, and this research employed social constructionism. Willig's (2013) social constructionism embraces that humans view their experiences through a lens provided by history, culture and, importantly, language. Since these are multiple and change over time, they result in many unique perceptions and understandings of the world, which tallies with the multitude of definitions of inclusion. Burr and Dick (2017) propose social constructionism must consider the productive power invested in linguistic terms, or discourses, that transcend description and shape human action and thought. Since the word inclusion impacts participation in education through policy and procedure it is such a discourse and its vague definition makes it especially prone to personal meanings, this study lent itself to social constructionism.

Methodology

This research seeks to explore two processes - *how* participating headteachers define and operationalize inclusion. As seen above, headteachers are a unique population with regards to inclusion in schools; they are required and empowered to enact it, are professionally judged against it but are not provided with definitions of what it means. Since they are left to form their own understanding and to find ways to manifest this into the inclusion experienced by CYP in their schools, each headteacher's version of inclusion will be unique, context dependent and there can be no single, objective reality. However, it is important to concede that through shared contexts, for example in terms of metrics and funding, these realities will also be influenced by social forces such as other stakeholders and government policies. Therefore, the methodology needed to acknowledge that understandings of inclusion are socially constructed rather than fixed or objectively knowable. A social constructionist approach was therefore adopted in order to *'study what people* [headteachers] *at a particular time* [2026] *and place* [England] *take as real, how they construct their views and actions, when different constructions arise, whose*

constructions become taken as definitive, and how that process ensues.' (Charmaz, 2025, p.341).

There are no current theories that adequately take account of the experiences of serving headteachers in this role nor do existing frameworks provide insight into how they develop understandings of inclusion or make decisions about its implementation in practice. This is further complicated by the ever-evolving political landscape around inclusion and the changing experiences of headteachers. Glaser and Strauss's (1967) Grounded Theory (GT) methodology is particularly suited to exploring undertheorized areas and is different to other qualitative research approaches because it overtly sets out to generate new, local theories inductively from participants' accounts rather than test pre-existing explanations (Willig, 2013). Since this research sought to create such theories, it was felt that employing GT was an appropriate approach. Additionally, Sutcliffe (2016), proposes that its reflexive, comparative, analytical approach to attempting to understand meaning derived from irregular and ill-defined and open data is particularly suitable for the work of EP, where researchers often seek to understand meaning within complex contexts.

Glaser and Strauss (1967) first explained the approach in 'The discovery of grounded theory'. They proposed GT as a methodology for allowing theories to be discovered *directly* from the data so they match the exact context they purport to explain. They suggest such a theory will 'fit' only if it is derived exclusively *from* and situated within the data and is not coerced to align with anything preconceived. In later work, Glaser (1978) expanded this concept to include 'refit' – keeping the theory grounded in the data by agilely modifying categories and theory through the constant process of comparing data with data and codes with codes, and 'emergent fit' – allowing existing categories and theoretical constructs that *subsequently* prove useful to 'earn' application. Secondly, a theory 'works' if it offers perspective on observed behaviour and explains it sufficiently to be useful for predictive purposes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). If these criteria as satisfied, such theories are more likely to be 'relevant' purely because they have avoided being influenced by existing concepts or even researcher biases by facilitating the exposure of the essential problem dimensions or processes (Glaser, 1978).

Glaser and Strauss continued to develop GT but in different ways. By maintaining a view that GT allows impartial scrutiny of the data and therefore an explanation of reality can be revealed, Glaser (1978) adopted a realist ontology within a positivist epistemology (Sutcliffe, 2016). Strauss and Corbin (1990) moved away from constant comparison to *allow* themes to emerge in favour of using GT to verify the applicability of categories.

In line with original GT (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), in this study data collection and analysis were conducted at the same time and constantly compared so that categories explaining the data could emerge and later be verified, expanded or discredited with precision questioning of future participants (Willig, 2013). However, the constructivist-relativist ontology and social constructionist epistemology acknowledge that the meaning of language associated with inclusion is socially constructed over time (Burr & Dick, 2017) and since my own professional background is also in school leadership this experience potentially influenced interactions during data collection and introduced unconscious bias during analysis (Dryden, 2013). Glaser (2003) dismisses such concerns, advocating that '*All is data'*. He discounts the social interaction between researcher and participant suggesting that the process of interviewing to be essentially passive and considers inadvertent bias to be: *"...a vital variable to weave into the constant comparative analysis."* (Glaser, 2003, p.170). This suggests that Glaser's overall ontological approach is that the data will yield objective information about a 'real' world that is waiting to be 'discovered' (Sutcliffe, 2016) and this did not align with my view that headteacher's create their own, unique reality; this study is based on an understanding of the nebulous nature of the term inclusion which has been acknowledged by many authors (Corbett, 2001; Slee, 2008). Such vagueness has been attributed to providing leeway for local education factors (Kozleski et al., 2007) as well as political flexibility (Ainscow et al., 2006) but mean that there is no objective reality to the definition of inclusion. Any such understanding will be local and contingent on the participants' experiences and any meaning I construct will be an interpretation I derive from my own context. I felt it was critical to acknowledge this as being unavoidable and so it made sense to employ *Constructivist* GT, which *'brings subjectivity into view and assumes that people, including researchers, construct the*

realities in which they participate' (Charmaz, 2025, p.339). This version of GT broadly follows the Glaser's (1978) coding processes but aims for the researcher to immerse themselves with multiple participants to gather insight into their experience and accepts the subsequent analysis of how any concepts relate will be socially derived from these interactions and be a product of the researcher's subjectivity.

In conclusion, the Constructivist GT was selected instead of other qualitative approaches to pursue the creation of two new theories interpreting how headteachers derive the meaning of inclusion and how they operate it in their schools but also to acknowledge how my own background and perspectives would inevitably shape any such interpretations.

Design

This study used the established processes of Charmaz's (2025) Constructivist GT. Semi-structured Interviews took place at participants' schools and were digitally recorded and transcribed. The priority was that these interviews allowed participants space to describe the meaning of inclusion, the freedom to share their experiences of managing it and explain how they justify their actions. Therefore, the data for the purposive sample could not be forced with pre-determined question schedules and were based around one broad, open-ended question (Appendix 13). The researcher offered only encouragement whilst listening to the replies. Further open-ended questions (How? What? When?) generated detail on topics mentioned only briefly. The researcher confirmed the participants' meaning of any terms or abbreviations used. Charmaz (2025) suggests a *constructivist* approach requires an emergent process using the following steps that will be discussed in more detail in a later section:

1) Initial coding
2) Focused coding
3) Theoretical sampling
4) Theoretical coding
5) Theory construction

After analysis of the initial codes had led to the application of focused codes, potential categories emerged. The researcher derived gaps in the data that needed further exploration and new participants were recruited for theoretical sampling, according to the original recruitment criteria. These interviews were arranged, conducted and analysed in the same way as the purposive sample.

Ethical Considerations. Ethical approval for this research was granted by UEA Ethics Committee (Appendix 1) in June 2025. An amendment was submitted and granted in September 2025 (Appendix 2) to widen the participant recruitment method. A further amendment was pursued in December 2026 to comply with the conditions of the original ethical approval; the questions derived from analyzing the purposive interviews and scheduled to be used in the theoretical sampling needed consideration by the panel. These questions were approved for use in February 2026 (Appendix 3).

This research was conducted at all times according to the requirements of the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2024), the British Psychological Society Code of ethics and conduct (2021) and Heath and Care Professions Council (HCPC) standards of proficiency: practitioner psychologist (2023).

Although inclusion is within the legal duties of a headteacher, enacting it is highly complex and challenging. Headteachers are a highly stressed workforce (Fazackerly, 2022), so the potential for participant distress when discussing the work of the headteacher was considered in the research design. I had to be alert to this risk (BERA, 2024) so provided contact details of employee and school leader support services on the debrief sheet provided to every participant after taking part should they be required (Appendix 16).

Participants were provided with information about the study aims and their involvement and retained the right to withdraw within a reasonable timeframe (BERA, 2024). After acquiring informed consent, data was collected at the headteachers' schools or online, based on their preference. All personal names (unless citing figures in the public domain such as politicians or authors) and identifiable information such as local historical places or acronyms were excised from transcripts and participants only referred to by code

(BERA, 2024). Participants were sent a PDF copy of their fully anonymized transcript for final approval which was the latest point at which they could withdraw.

Participants. Participants for both purposive and theoretical sampling were recruited according to the following criteria:

1) Minimum of two years as a secondary school headteacher – this allowed sufficient time in the role to experience some variety in managing diverse pupils' needs, the annual academic cycles, performance management, league tables and finance.
2) Minimum of one year as headteacher in COUNTY 1 or COUNTY 2 – this ensured the participants had some experience of the county-specific variables.
3) Able to give informed consent.

Recruitment. The initial purposive sampling stage aimed to recruit five participants from across County 1. A further participant was sought from County 2, a neighbouring county chosen to represent a greater cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity that had historical links with County 1.

The PEPs for County 1 and County 2 were approached (Appendix 4) and agreed to act as gatekeepers and sent my covering letter (Appendix 12) and participant information sheet (PIS) (Appendix 11) outlining the recruitment criteria so that participants could self-select and voluntarily take part. I later amended ethics to present my study to headship forums to enhance recruitment (Appendix 5).

Participant Demographics. Given there are just over thirty secondary schools within county 1, headteachers are prominent and highly visible figures within their respective communities. Details such as gender identification, preferred pronoun, length of service in a particular school, and subject specialism could render participants identifiable and make participation less appealing.

At the ethics application stage, the researcher decided to collect only *minimal* demographic data to ensure they satisfied the inclusion criteria and preserve participant

anonymity. Table 1 shows the information collected for the ten participants and recorded in the first two questions of their interviews.

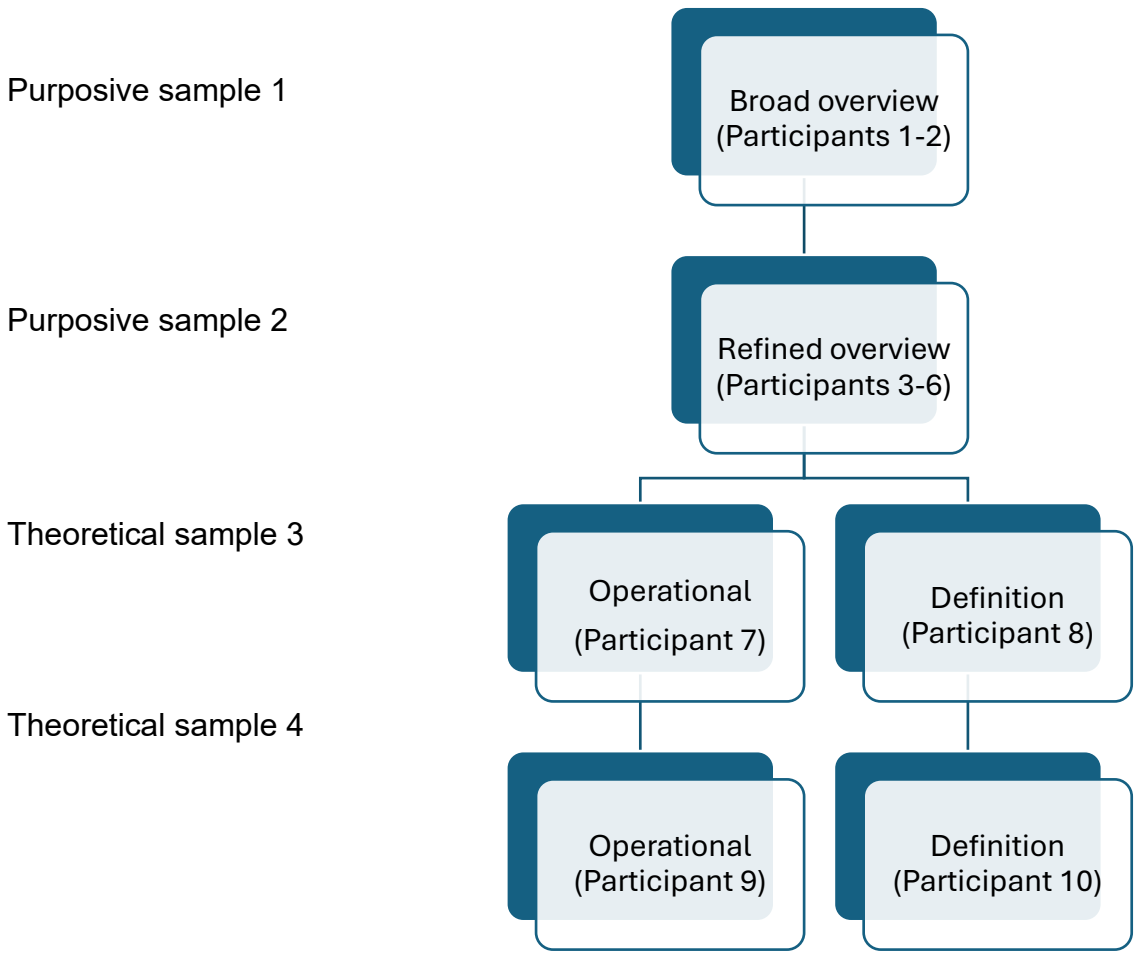
Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant code	Pseudonym	County of school	Headteacher service	Experience of headship outside county 1 or 2?
P1	Alf	1	10y+	No
P2	Ben	1	4y+	No
P3	Claire	1	10y+	No
P4	Derek	1	7y+	No
P5	Edward	1	2y+	No
P6	Frank	1	6y+	No
P7	Gina	1	6y+	No
P8	Howard	1	6y+	No
P9	Iris	1	9y+	No
P10	James	1	7y+	No

Figure 1

Phases of Sampling Interviews



Data Collection. All participants consented to individual, face-to-face and audio-recorded interviews at their schools. This was done in four distinct phases or *tiers* of interviewing shown in Figure 1.

Charmaz (2025) describes GT as 'iterative', 'comparative' and 'interactive'. In keeping with these tenets, each interview transcript – once approved for inclusion by the participant – was *initially coded* using a line-by-line approach immediately after completion. *Focused coding,* comparing *across* transcripts and initial codes, was done after *every* subsequent interview's initial coding to allow 'data to be compared with data' and so identify commonality of concepts as the basis for 'theoretical plausibility' (Charmaz, 2025).

Given the large number of theoretical codes emerging across the two research questions at the purposive sampling stage, it was decided to separate them when pursuing theoretical sampling. Two interviews were conducted for each research question, and the data compared between these.

Intensive Interviews. Rich and detailed qualitative data was gathered from initial participants through semi-structured intensive interviews, which Urquhart (2023) considers the main data source for GT. Once participants verified basic recruitment criteria, these were based on one open question (Appendix 13) with the participant talking more than the researcher. Charmaz (2025) considers these offer appropriate flexibility and rigour for research to explore perspectives, experience, language, meanings and actions of participants with knowledge of the research phenomenon. The unstructured nature of the interviews allowed the researcher to respond to the direction offered by the participants (Birks & Mills, 2023) and so co-construct their meanings. Table 2 shows the lengths of each interview and at which stage they were conducted.

Focus groups were discounted due to the participant population; headteachers are a small community of public figures charged with preserving the public image of their school and individual interviews preserved their anonymity and encouraged franker discussion of personal views and professional challenges. It was for the same reason that

Table 2

Overview of Interview Details

Tier	Sampling stage	Theme	Participant	Interview length
1	Purposive	Broad overview	P1	1:27:45
			P2	1:17:30
2		Refined overview	P3	49:11
			P4	47:07
			P5	49:05
3	Theoretical	Operational Definition	P6	47:22
			P7	56:53
			P8	59:24
4		Operational Definition	P9	42:13
			P10	46:54

recordings were discounted as part of the data set and deleted immediately upon transcription.

In keeping with GT, as the initial round of interviews proceeded and the researcher completed initial coding and comparisons, data collection and analysis co-occurred (Sutcliffe, 2016). Emerging codes and themes from P1 and P2 influenced how the researcher responded to participant initiatives in later interviews and where clarification was sought.

***Theoretical Sampling*.** Birks & Mills define *Theoretical sampling* as 'identifying and pursuing clues that arise during analysis…' (Burks & Mills, 2023, p.140). This research undertook this by recruiting and interviewing more participants to explore categories under consideration (Charmaz, 2025) from the purposive sample. As Urquhart (2023) acknowledges, practical realities of time and accessibility can limit the visits to the field which was especially true in this case; recruitment from a small pool of time-starved headteachers had proved challenging. I had to make a pragmatic decision to close data collection in a suitable timeframe for completion of the research. Therefore, since close analysis of the emerging categories from the purposive samples revealed *a lot* of correlation in the data across participants 1 to 6, pragmatically these were assumed to be

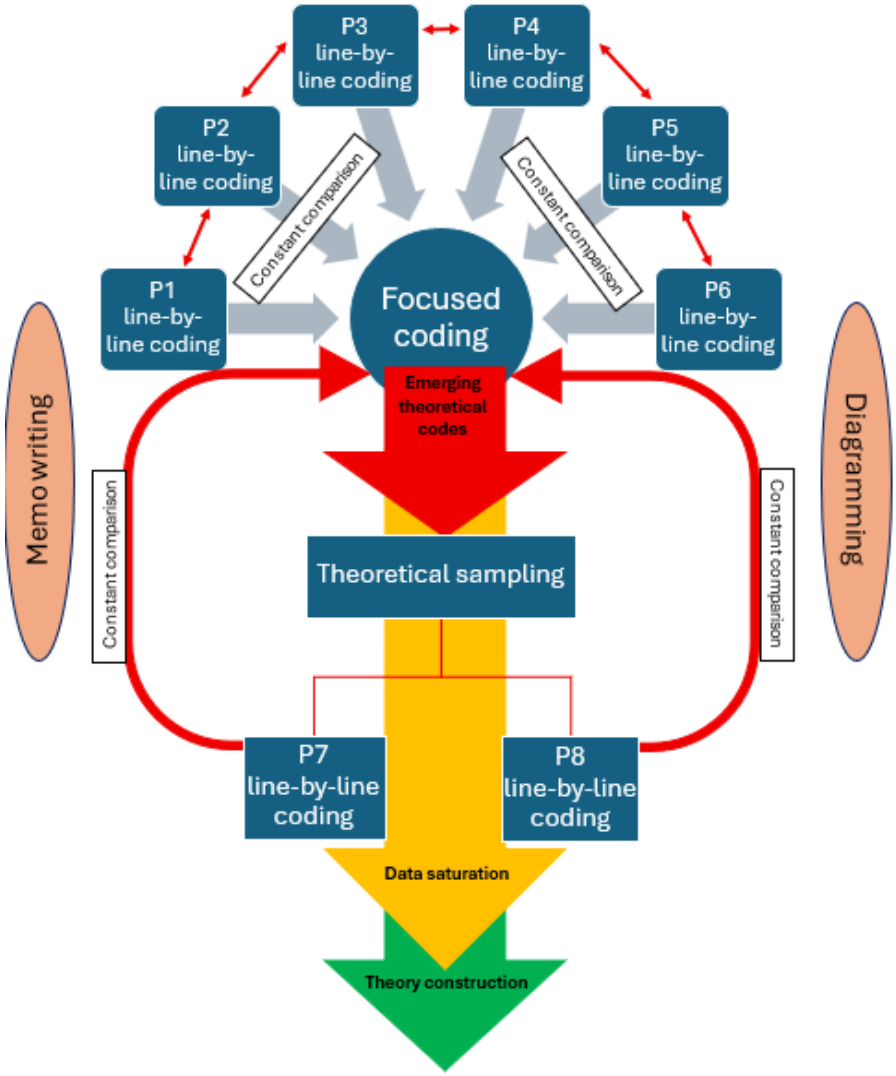
theoretically saturated. It was only those areas which were less clearly defined or were weaker in the data that needed further investigation to verify or deny them (Willig, 2013). To explore these categories eighteen specific questions - nine each addressing the two research questions - were drafted (Appendices 14-15) and submitted to UEA ethics for approval. Theoretical sampling was conducted in February 2026 by interviewing four more participants – two for each research question - who had been recruited previously to expand or verify categories and test the emerging theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Because each of these interviews were structured around questions that had been informed by detailed analysis of the purposive sample these reflected the degree of theoretical sensitivity (Urquhart, 2023) possible within the timeframe. Analysis and comparison were conducted between each interview to facilitate clarification and attain theoretical saturation.

***Data Analysis*.** This research used a bottom-up approach to data collection, analysis and theory production informed by constructivist GT (Charmaz, 2025). GT is different to many other qualitative research methodologies in that data collection and data analysis are concurrent and rigour is ensured through five processes. Figure 2 shows how theoretical saturation and constant comparison are maintained as analysis moves towards theory construction which is based on *theoretical sensitivity* (Glaser, 1978). At every stage, emerging analysis is recorded through memos and diagramming. These five principles are described before the actual GT process is outlined.

***Theoretical Saturation*.** Theoretical saturation is when the iterative and constant comparative analysis of data produces no new ideas, concepts or categories (Burks & Mills, 2023; Urquhart, 2023). As seen by its placement at the bottom of Figure 2, it is the notional end point that GT researchers strive for but practical realities may make it hard to achieve (Willig, 2013). After the purposive sample, this research found many ‘recurring interview statements’ (Charmaz, 2025) which enabled codes and categories to be considered ‘plausible’ to some extent. The emergent theoretical direction was analyzed for gaps and theoretical sampling was used to gather more data to achieve true theoretical saturation.

Figure 2

Grounded Theory Data Analysis Process



***Constant Comparison*.** Glaser and Strauss (1967) advocate that data, emergent codes and categories should be subject to constant comparison between each other, interviews, participants and times. This research used this approach so similarities that have underpinned codes or categories were deconstructed to explore potential exceptions and reveal subcodes (Willig, 2013). Figure 2 shows that continual scrutiny of data, codes and categories against each other robustly tested conceptual plausibility and ensured emerging theory was well-supported with evidence (Urquhart, 2023). Charmaz (2025)

considers all opinions to be of equal value, including those of the researcher, and these were simply noted as different perspectives that were compared to test assumptions.

***Theoretical Sensitivity*.** This research applied *Theoretical Sensitivity* at all stages which Willig (2013) feels is required to transcend description of raw data and genuinely analyze it for generating local theories explaining a phenomenon. Glaser (1978) explained that the rigour of the GT process – data collection, coding, category relating and theory construction – is preserved by the theory emerging *only* from the data. However, he acknowledges the crucial role played by the researcher in this, how they are a product of a background and this will provide a lens through which they understand the data and will inevitably shape their interpretation. Glaser proposes that *Theoretical Sensitivity* for GT is best served by a researcher who on one hand has avoided preconceived ideas, especially formal theories, and so remains fully open to anything *this* data set is revealing but is sufficiently well-versed in the field of study to be able to spot connections and understand the context. Charmaz (2025) agrees that some insider knowledge, such as I have in this study, can raise awareness of what may be happening in the data provided the researcher has sufficient reflexivity to acknowledge when this is happening and be prepared to abandon preconceptions that are not reflected in the data. As I interrogated the data, ideas *did* emerge requiring interpretation or further data collection that inevitably suggested theoretical direction but I crucially avoided framing these within existing theoretical frameworks and concepts (Urquhart, 2023). Charmaz (2025) sees synergy between coding and theoretical sensitivity as the key skill that allows researchers to explain 'what is happening' using concepts derived solely from the analytical codes.

***Memo-writing*.** In GT, it is critical to begin analysis as soon as data is collected. For this research, memos were written to record the researcher's ideas, questions and emergent categories as data was constantly compared (Charmaz, 2025). These followed Willig's (2013) format of a title and date (Appendix 8) alongside a comment on definition, label, perspective, relationship, emergent gaps in data or ideas (Charmaz, 2025) linked to specific data or even referencing existing theory (Urquhart, 2023). The purpose was to capture reflective thoughts, including any potential bias, and deconstruct the data *as it*

was analyzed alongside relevant examples (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) specifically to explore how the codes and categories related *as* they were being coded. Urquhart (2023) considers synchronicity between coding and drafting memos to be where the researcher begins to build the theory. My memos were freeform, being variable in length and format, and included diagrams which Birks and Mills (2023) consider help the researcher to explore data, spot gaps and enhance theoretical sensitivity.

Diagramming. Due to the researcher's preference for visual clarity, this research made frequent use of diagrams as a form of memo (Willig, 2013) when exploring the breadth and direction of categories and sub-categories as well as relationships between them (Charmaz, 2025). They also enabled links to be made between codes, categories and theoretical direction (Appendix 10). Burks and Mills (2023) suggest diagrams may also reveal gaps and weak points in the data which was the case in this research after the purposive sampling. The diagrams directly helped with the drafting of questions for the theoretical sample.

Process of Grounded Theory Construction. The three stages of coding outlined in the design can be seen in Figure 2, initial coding, focused coding and theoretical coding, and how they build towards theoretical saturation and theory construction. The next section will outline for each of these what was involved, why it was undertaken, what was done and how it led to the next stage.

Step 1 Initial or Open Coding. The first process in GT, as shown in the top part of Figure 2, is to interact directly with the participants' raw data by reading through it and noticing language that appears to reveal *anything* important – for example observations, reflections, emotions or actions – and labelling these 'chunks' of data in a way that effectively reflects their meaning (Urquhart, 2023). This can be done word-by-word, line-by-line or incident-by-incident (Charmaz, 2025) but it is central to the integrity of GT that at this stage the researcher is completely 'open' to what the data is revealing and is prepared to code in any directions suggested. Glaser (1978) strongly advocates that these codes must fit the data *as presented* and therefore emerge directly from it without being forced to

fit existing ideas – so codes cannot be preconceived. As the data is analyzed some codes may be re-used if they are relevant but the researcher must make sure the codes *accurately* describe the data and this may require the creation of a great many.

Glaser (1978) explains that the purpose of open coding is to break the 'rich' and 'messy' data into pieces that can then be analyzed for underlying concepts. By consciously being so open, Charmaz (2025) reflects that this allows theoretical direction and gaps in the data, and so prompts for further sampling, to emerge unforced and remain grounded in the data. The ultimate goal is to establish categories that completely address all the data as presented.

***Line-by-line Coding*.** The intensive interviews with the participants for this research generated *a lot* of rich data, replete with anecdotes and detailed accounts. Glaser (1978) is adamant that coding must be done directly by the researcher to ensure they are immersed in the data and enabling the drafting of memos as ideas occur to them. In this research each line of the transcripts was labelled with a number corresponding to a code on another sheet (Appendix 6). Line-by-line coding was adopted because most GT writers (Glaser, 1978; Urquhart, 2023; Charmaz, 2025) suggest it has several benefits. Firstly, while still deconstructing larger events, it helps ensure that researchers focus on the meaning participants are making of the *processes*. Glaser (1978) and Charmaz (2025) advocate labelling data by the actions - what is being *done*. They specifically outline using *gerunds* – verbs ending 'ing' – to construct a code reflecting what is happening and avoid description (Appendix 6). Although clumsy at times, Charmaz (2025) considers this important as it prevents researchers 'leaping' towards theories before analysis is completed and avoids coding for categories of *people*. The latter ignores the complexity of human responses and how they may change over time. Line-by-line coding means engaging directly with what participants are saying which may reveal implicit tension in their experiences. Finally, because of my own personal experience as a school leader or 'insider', it was important to reflect and record any biases that may have impacted analytical decisions even from this early stage (Birks & Mills, 2023). Line-by-line coding with gerunds ensured it reflected the

participants' viewpoint and made it less likely I would override the data with my own conceptions. The purposive sample continued until Theoretical Saturation was achieved.

As Urquhart (2023) explains, these initial codes must be gathered together into broader codes that begin to reflect the core categories and the emerging theoretical direction which leads to the next step.

***Step 2 Focused or Selective Coding*.** The second stage of analysis is called *focused* (Charmaz, 2025) or *selective* (Urquhart, 2023) coding and Figure 2 shows it follows directly from the constant comparison of line-by-line coding for the purposive sampling. Urquhart (2023) suggests that theoretical saturation is a good indication to start this stage, and that was what happened by the sixth participant in this research. Focused coding meant reviewing *all* the initial codes to test their validity and identify conceptual patterns across them. Charmaz (2025) suggests that the value of some codes becomes apparent as they appear more frequently and across multiple transcripts or explain or imply something of great significance. Focused Coding is the process of recognizing such importance in the data and labelling it to make analytical sense. Charmaz acknowledges researchers define these codes themselves and their experiences will influence such analysis, which she considers a strength of constructivist GT as it may reveal genuinely new insights - provided researchers remain reflexive about this process. I attempted to maintain this through frequent memo-writing and by comparing all focused codes against the data and one another.

Glaser (1978) proposes that selective coding allows the researcher to draw the emergent and wide-ranging data collected from initial coding back towards those that relate directly to a few (he suggests one) core variable to ensure any resultant theory is simple, or 'parsimonious' (Glaser, 1978, p.61). However, this can be hard to achieve given the large number of initial codes generated and Urquhart (2023) suggests grouping categories can be useful for developing theoretical direction. Charmaz (2025) is even more circumspect and proposes retaining multiple core variables produces greater insights and understanding through a 'diffuse' theory. For this research, the initial question was very

open and generated a lot of data. However, I found that much of the participants' answers coalesced quite naturally around 'meanings or aspirations of inclusion' and 'approaches or strategies to enact inclusion' which led naturally into my two research questions. I scrutinized all the initial codes and grouped and wove them together under new codes that more succinctly captured their meaning and formed the basis of potential directions for analysis (Urquhart, 2023). It was important not to lose detail though and Charmaz (2025) highlights the power of constantly comparing the initial codes both to each other and the original data to test their fitness for purpose. In this research, codes were compared across transcripts and emerging categories re-labelled by hand (Appendix 7). This step had two important outcomes that led to the next stage. Firstly, the focused codes supported organization and integration into conceptual categories (Burks & Mills, 2023; Willig, 2013), suggested theoretical direction and so provided an outline for my emerging analysis. Secondly, the focused codes revealed gaps in the data and informed decisions made when drafting questions to address these when theoretical sampling in the next round of interviews (see above). As described previously, the transcripts of these final four interviews were specifically used to explore undeveloped or thinly suggested dimensions of the core variable of 'meanings or aspirations of inclusion' (participants 8 and 10) and 'approaches or strategies to enact inclusion' (participants 7 and 9). These were all coded as the previous transcripts but constantly compared to the existing codes in these areas to test their adequacy and new focused codes did emerge. At the end of this process, I had two sets of focused codes for each core variable that I felt *accounted* for all the relevant data. However, Urquhart (2023) suggests that in order to develop my theories I needed to create an explanation of how these all *related*, which led to the next step.

***Step 3 Theoretical Coding*.** According to Glaser (1978), theoretical coding is the last step after focused coding which allows abstract codes to emerge that efficiently conceive the relationship *between* focused codes so *'They weave the fractured story back together again.'* (Glaser, 1978, p.72) and the researcher can begin to create a theory. Figure 2 shows it emerged directly from the theoretical saturation achieved after the theoretical sampling and focused coding. Glaser proposed a series of coding 'families' to frame this

step but qualified this as being only partial and that there were no specific rules to deter researchers from deriving their own. Given the 'local' nature of GT data, Birks and Mills (2023) consider theoretical coding a crucial step when explaining the narrative and communicating its explanation and later writers overtly suggest applying inflexible 'coding paradigms' (Willig, 2013). However, this runs the risk of forcing data into pre-determined labels and causes tension with Glaser and Strauss' (1967) original assertion that the researcher must *avoid* stifling emerging concepts.

In constructivist GT, Charmaz (2025) agrees that theoretical coding can integrate the focused codes and so facilitate the creation of *'an analytic story that has coherence'* (Charmaz, 2025, p.152). However, Charmaz also expresses concern that slavishly applying theoretical codes may straight-jacket the data and railroad it into the researchers' theory. Therefore, she stresses this step is not considered essential and it is equally possible to avoid applying *any* explicit theoretical coding and basing analysis solely on what participants shared and earlier substantive coding. Her advice is to allow theoretical codes to emerge *from* the data if relevant. Accordingly, I followed Charmaz's (2025) advice for this step and adopted her approach to be consistent with my relativist-constructivist ontology. Since the data represented co-constructed understanding created between the researcher and participants later analysis I avoided using preconceived notions. For this stage, I transcribed the focused codes into new groups based on my definition of them and my understanding of how they related (Appendix 9). These categories were described using phrases that offered some insight into what I perceived was actually happening, and so my theoretical codes were created by me but based solely on the data (Appendix 9).

Theory construction. In order to turn my collection of theoretical codes, with their internal relationships, into two clear and understandable theories, I used two strategies. Firstly, since I had written them throughout the three stages of coding as ideas occurred to me, I followed Glaser's (1978) approach to review all my existing memos (Appendix 8) and group them according to my own interpretation. This necessitated removing them from my memo books or re-writing onto slips of paper so they could be moved about. As Charmaz (2025) suggests, this allowed me to re-visit all the ideas that had occurred along the way -

definitions, processes, comparisons, empirical data – and helped reinforce or modify my earlier coding stages. At this time, I also followed Urquhart's (2023) advice to begin to consider links to existing theory.

For the actual theory construction, many GT theorists advocate that '*a diagram can indeed represent a theory'* (Urquhart, 2023, p.43). I decided to make use of *integrative diagrams* (Strauss, 1987) which literally meant drawing lots and lots of diagrams (appendix 10), each informed by what had gone before, where I tried to fit the categories together in ways that made sense according to relationships in my definitions of the theoretical codes, the participant data and my memos. This also allowed me to explore which categories were higher-level and which were subordinate. In this way, both theories represent my *interpretation* of what my participants chose to share with me based on my own perspectives and experiences (Charmaz, 2025).

Maintenance of Rigour. When compared to positivist approaches, qualitative research such as Constructivist GT, can be vulnerable to concerns about how rigour was maintained. However, Yardley (2000) questions this by proposing that some ontological and epistemological positions may render traditional definitions of rigour inappropriate. With regards to sample size, Yardley agrees with Charmaz (1990) that a small number of expert participants is commensurate with the deeper analysis aimed at with qualitative approaches and avoids overcomplicated and unwieldy findings. Yardley also suggests that adopting a relativist ontology and constructionist epistemology, as with this study, means accepting that any findings are simply one interpretation based on a particular time. Since inclusion is a particularly unstable concept participants' understanding of it is likely to continue to evolve over time. Since these positions embrace that there is no such thing as an objective truth, verification and replication of findings becomes questionable.

Alongside thoroughly engaging in the Constructivist GT method, I was guided to maintain rigour by principles proposed by Charmaz and Thornberg (2021). Specifically, this meant disclosing in my axology my prior background and reasons for interest in inclusion. It also meant ignoring Glaser's (1978) requirement not to engage with any literature at all

before collecting and analysing data but to adopt Charmaz (2025) and Urquhart's (2023) suggestion to tentatively and critically conduct a literature review at the start so as to begin to acquire theoretical sensitivity. I was aware that the quality of recruits was of paramount importance and invested time and effort recruiting ten serving headteachers from across County 1, representing as much diversity in terms of school context as I was able, and in line with constructivist GT (Charmaz, 2025), spent many hours hearing their journeys. Transcribing these interviews by hand meant I was fully immersed in their data and further increased my sensitivity. I have striven to be transparent in description of my method and subsequent findings, trying to openly show how any decisions I made about codes and categories are grounded only in the data. Although some codes and categories occurred to me quite easily, I always tried to maintain an open mind and my memos and diagrams, where I constantly compared data with data and codes with data, were where I questioned, refined and abandoned ideas as I applied my interpretation to any relationships. However, it is important to acknowledge that both HDIM and TMHOI are only my personal interpretation of what I saw in the data and are inevitably subject to my perspectives.

Findings

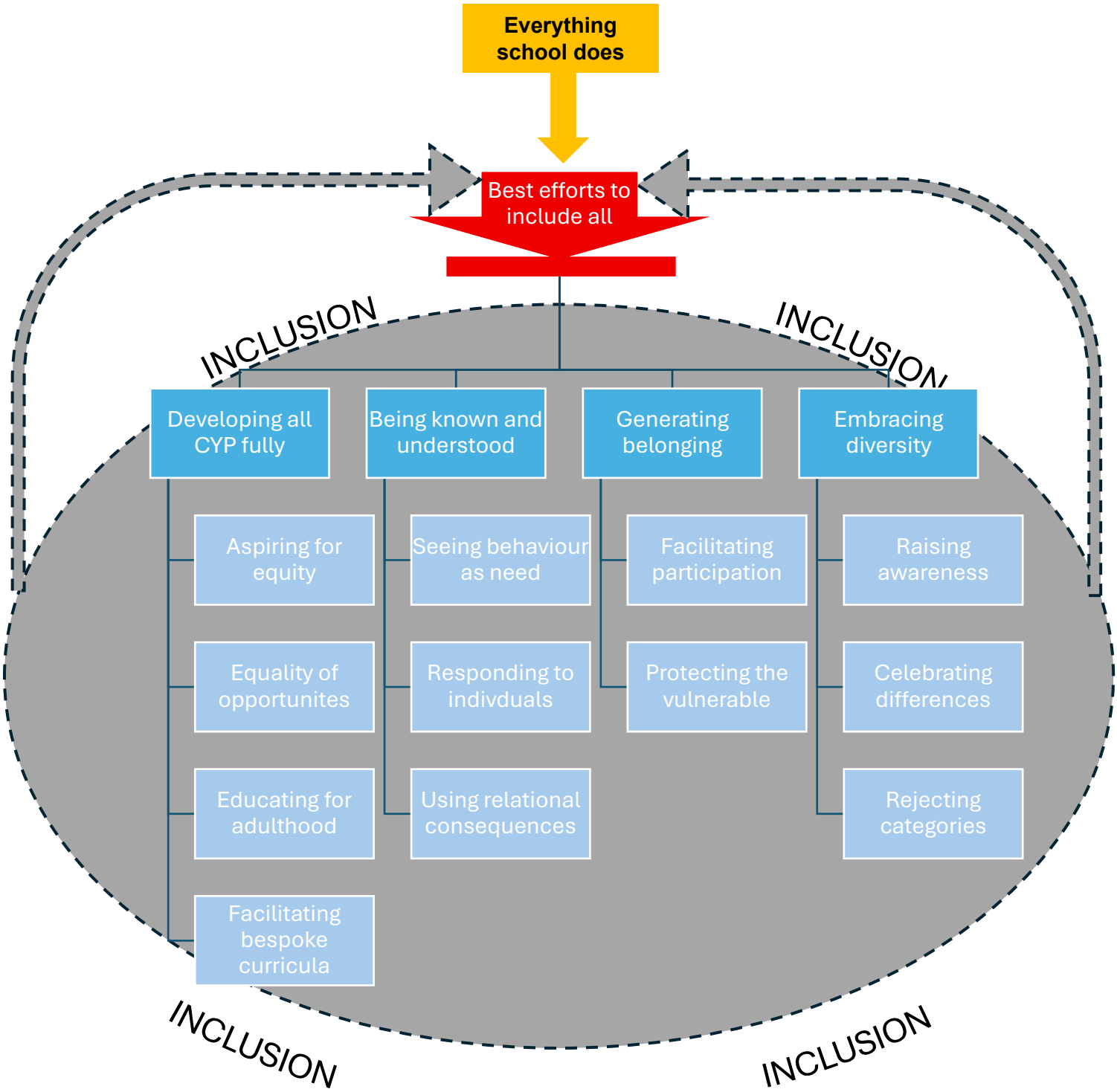
This section is in two parts, both consider the results of my analysis of the headteacher interviews. Part 1 focuses on headteachers' definition of inclusion (Figure 3) and Part 2 presents the GT that was generated about how headteachers' operationalize inclusion (Figure 5). The categories and sub-categories that capture them will be discussed in detail and illustrated using direct quotes from the participants' transcripts.

Research Question 1: How do Secondary Headteachers in England Construct School Inclusion?

Headteacher's Definition of Inclusion Model (HDIM) (Figure 3) is drawn directly from participants' data and represented as a flow-diagram to show the definition is constructed sequentially *from* the first high-level category reflecting participants' sentiment that inclusion is *Everything a School Does*. All other conceptual categories that generate inclusion are screened *through* the next high-level category – *Best Efforts to Include All*

Figure 3

Headteachers' Definition of Inclusion Model (HDIM)



which is underpinned by four main categories: *Developing All CYP Fully, Being Known and Understood, Generating Belonging* and *Embracing Diversity.* Each category comprises of sub-categories as seen in figure 3.

Figure 4 shows how *Best Efforts to Include All* gathers participants' construction that inclusion is ultimately about *Resisting PEX* along with factors they describe may hamper inclusion of individual CYP: *Criminal or Dangerous Behaviour* and *Disrupting Others' Learning*. *Conditional Trust* describes how participants felt a CYP's inclusive rights are dependent on their presentations being tolerable to the rest of the community and breaches inherently limit privileges extended to them.

The rest of the HDIM outlines the concepts participants used to describe inclusion and outlines what they are aiming to achieve. *Developing All CYP Fully* reflects participants' view that school is a vehicle of social justice that must actively reduce the impact of background on CYP outcomes through *Equality of Opportunities*. The ultimate goal of removing all barriers is contextualized within practical restrictions as *Aspiring for Equity.* Nevertheless, the long-term goal is to equip CYP for future success in sub-category *Educating for Adulthood* and *Facilitating Bespoke Curricula* shows participants commit to this by providing an education matched to CYP needs.

Being Known and Understood reflects participants' adoption of a therapeutic rather than behaviourist model for school management through sub-categories *Seeing Behaviour as Need, Responding to Individuals* and *Using Relational Consequences*. *Generating Belonging* describes the importance of making all CYP feel invested in by the school so they will reciprocate and behave and engage better. This is engendered through *Facilitating Participation* and is crucial as an antidote to radicalization and criminal grooming to *Protect the Vulnerable*. Equally central to inclusion was school overtly *Embracing Diversity* which participants seek to actively teach to students by first *Raising Awareness* and then *Celebrating Difference.* Finally, *Rejecting Categories* reflects how participants construct that difference between CYP is to be expected and therefore true inclusion accepts and

supports *all* CYP in their school community not just those whose contexts are known and acknowledged as disadvantaged.

Figure 3 shows that all categories in the HDIM are continually filtered through *Best Efforts to Include All*, whose sub-categories outline how headteachers decide what *cannot* be 'included'. The feedback arrows reveal the process is subject to continual review in light of a CYP's evolving presentations and headteachers return to *Best Efforts to Include All* to resolve dilemmas within their concept of inclusion.

Everything School Does. HDIM starts with a higher-order category describing participants' conception that by 2025 inclusion is no longer an additional consideration but the *central* factor that must be considered at all levels of school design and management.

Alf: ...*every element of our school improvement plan is based with [inclusion] as being the lens*.

James: *It is everything. Probably, it has to be considered in everything*.

Headteachers are responsible for all aspects of running their schools. Since the core business of a school is educating CYP and inclusion is directly concerned with who participates, it interacts with every one of these other areas. Participants indicated that the evolution of inclusion is ongoing and directly linked to raising overall standards.

Ben: ...*it's not one thing, it's everything that a school does. Because all of your decisions ultimately have an impact on inclusion*.

However, Ben suggested that the interaction is not bi-directional and inclusion is still *dependent* on leadership choices in other areas.

Iris: ...*everything has to fit around inclusion, because if those children are making progress, everybody else will be fine. You know, they're making progress, they're thriving, they're attending, they're behaving – we are meeting their needs and therefore everybody else, it will fit in. So, we always focus on inclusion as our starting point*.

Iris conceived school as catering for two groups of students – those being included and 'everybody else' which indicates that inclusion runs parallel to the management of the rest of the school. In this quote, she suggests it is pragmatic to make inclusion the key priority, because the presentations of the former disproportionately impact the latter.

Best Efforts to Include All. A key finding was that although participants understand they have a duty to design school systems that have the potential to include all CYP, there is frustration that this may ultimately be impossible:

Claire: *It is making every reasonable effort to include as many children as possible within a mainstream setting….being inclusive is trying your best…but it isn't always possible.*

Claire clearly saw inclusion as a moral imperative but one that is occasionally subject to failure, and such discrepancy threatened her self-concept. By applying a subjective evaluation of resource limits and describing them as 'reasonable', she permitted herself to admit defeat when she considered these are exhausted. This introduced the concept that inclusion is a *hypothetical* right ultimately limited by practical considerations. Claire qualified that CYP's disproportionate consumption of resources or impact on others influenced the calculation of what is 'reasonable':

Claire: …*there's an eternal balance when you're talking about inclusion – inclusion at what price?*

Claire suggested that inclusion will inevitably impact on the systems around them and a headteacher has an *equal responsibility* to consider any costs to the CYP who are being included with. Other participants agreed that it was critical to consider if there would be negative consequences to inclusion:

Edward: …*I think you have to always think of safety first, don't you? And, ultimately our safeguarding protocols and policies and our vigilant culture in that is number one.*

James: *In an ideal world it would be unconditional but in the pragmatic reality of working with lots of pupils in a particular age range where they are trying to find their own way and*

Figure 4

Sub-categories of Best Efforts to Include All



find their own identity, and grappling with those sorts of things, I think the considerations would be: number one safety and safeguarding of others.

Edward and James constructed their responsibilities as a list of priorities and that keeping all people at school free from harm is foremost. Since inclusion is made subordinate to other considerations, it is not a universal 'right'. Figure 4 shows the subcategories that describe the factors that participants perceive inclusion through.

Criminal or Dangerous Behaviour. Participants were clear that maintaining safety of the community was their *key* priority and defined what is unacceptable:

James: *Physical behaviours lead to physical injuries for staff. That's really difficult. So I think there has to be a line at some point there where any physical or aggressive behaviour prevents a student being in mainstream setting.*

James portrayed it as imperative to avoid injuries and clearly defined *any* such behaviour as not includable, reinforcing that inclusion *is* subordinate to safety. Similarly, other participants quickly identified unlawful acts that would defy inclusion:

Frank: *A really serious drugs thing could be that* [justify PEX]*, a serious premeditated physical attack could be that*.

Iris: ….*that is difficult because you can have harm, they could bring, you know, a weapon in*…

Frank and Iris framed the limits of inclusion around criminal acts that are likely to involve the youth justice system and potential prosecution. Since these are already identified by wider society as egregious, they can easily be constructed by headteachers as intolerable in school and absolve them from considering it an inclusion issue. Overt government guidance reinforces the message that some CYP actions sidestep inclusion and deferring to this helps participants resolve ethical dilemmas:

Derek: *There are four, I suppose categories, rough categories that the DfE – we follow those which are things around drugs, violence, extreme violence, around…some of it's bringing the school into disrepute anything like that…and yeah physical aggression towards a member of staff, for sure and racist incidents – we're very hard on those*.

Even though they are actively encouraged to discount inclusion for CYP committing these acts, James reflected that the ultimate decision to exclude or modify provision is still down to individual headteachers:

James: *If what they are doing puts at risk other young people or themselves at harm, that would be one time where, although the principles are still the same in terms of what we're trying to achieve, it may well be that they couldn't be in mainstream classroom*.

His conclusion is that although dangerous behaviour is an obstacle to inclusion *with others* it does not automatically activate permanent *exclusion* and other avenues may be sought within the school.

Conditional Trust. An important finding was that participants constructed inclusion as a transactional model, whereby privileges and participation are extended to CYP as the benefits of being part of their school community, and these are dependent on the CYP adhering to its social rules:

James: …*you're not an individual. You're part of a community, and the community has some expectations – fundamental, basic expectations that we try and nurture in everyone and help everybody understand and then do, which the vast majority of them do*.

James indicated that balancing the overall right of everyone to be safe at school means inclusion for an individual with peers is *not* an automatic right and manifests only when CYP show suitable *responsibility* to others. In fact, he suggested heads have an obligation to impose limits for the overall good of others:

James: *If they couldn't do it, as I said in the beginning, then we'd have to make provision for them, which might not include social times, being with others. You don't get just to come and do whatever you like and be with your peers all the time if you're harming or hurting your peers or abusing your peers or others.*

Claire went further and constructed inclusion as a privilege that is effectively *earned* by avoiding factors in the sub-categories: *Criminal or Dangerous Behaviour* and *Disrupting Others' Learning*:

Claire: …*they* [AP] *display behaviours that you wouldn't want, they earn it and then they do have social time. But maybe they don't. If, you know, they've had a bad morning like anybody, they'll lose their break. But actually the ones that are in there to begin with, we might not let them out at all. No, no, no. You need to earn trust because the problem is the kids in AP, part of the reason they end up in the AP part of the world is the trust is broken, isn't it? Because they just won't do anything they're told to.*

In this way, participating heads saw any breaches of 'trust' that may put others' safety or learning at risk as legitimate cause to *overrule* inclusion for individuals, which reinforced the concept that maintaining safety and order is *always* their highest priority. Derek

outlined that once CYP are in this category, he felt no hesitation in fundamentally restricting their status and rights within the school:

Derek: *The whole point is they can't manage themselves. But there might be opportunities. They'll do PE, for example. There might be touch points that they are given access to other students deliberately just to kind of help, so feel they're part of the community. But there's also, you know, they're not in the community because they can't manage themselves in the community.*

This withdrawal of community membership showed how participants perceived inclusion as something they can modify and reflects interaction with the sub-category of *Resisting Exclusion*; heads felt forced to tolerate the continued placement of CYP who they may previously have permanently excluded, and reconciled this by reducing such students' agency.

Disruption of Others' Learning. The sub-category *Conditional Trust* describes how headteachers defined inclusion as also being each CYP's responsibility *to* the overall community, and Gina and Iris suggested not disrupting lessons and barring the learning of others is central to this:

Gina: *...we want to run disruption free classrooms. So students will receive warnings.*

Iris: *...a Head has got to look at the whole community and the disruption that is causing the whole community.*

Such disruption cannot be tolerated because it interferes with the core business of a mainstream school, which as Edward illustrated, is teaching and learning and not inclusion at all costs:

Edward: *...the bread and butter of our school is obviously educating and therefore in the classroom and teaching is the first thing that we should be thinking about...you still have to have a behaviour policy that ultimately supports staff to be able to teach....*

In *Best Efforts to Include All*, participants defined inclusion as providing access to this education for as many CYP as possible. On this basis, James indicated that needs of the many outweigh the needs of the individual, and saw *excluding* an individual as *inclusive* if it protects the access of majority:

James: *Well, yes, socializing with peers if they weren't also then disproportionately or detrimentally having a negative, harmful impact on others. If they were doing that, then that wouldn't be inclusive.*

As a result, participants exercised little tolerance for such disruption and act quickly to maintain orderly classrooms:

Frank: *...if behaviour was disrupting the learning and that would be removing them to a class within the department.*

Resisting Permanent Exclusion. The interviews revealed that participants have considered for a long time that a fundamental aspect of their definition of inclusion was using all and any measures available to them to preserve the placement of a CYP at their school and avoid PEX, even if the measures separate them from mainstream peers:

Frank: *At this school here we haven't permanently excluded a child in over 10 years. I've never permanently excluded a child and we will do everything we can to not do that.*

Beyond a desire to avoid legal challenges and complex paperwork, participants reported that this focus is motivated by two moral imperatives. Firstly, the application of a more therapeutic approach underpinned by the understanding that behavioral presentations that are likely to lead to exclusion may result from unsatisfactory home lives and previous experiences. Therefore, Alf characterized exclusion of any sort undermines the capacity of school to offer an antidote to adverse childhood experiences and so fails in its duty of care:

Alf: *How's that inclusive if you're sending them out? And the kids you are sending out will tend to be the kids who are traumatized, who receive rejection through their life. So you're responding to kids who've been rejected with rejection.*

Secondly, Iris related that although PEX legally severs her links and responsibility towards a CYP, she has an ethical and moral obligation not to allow this to happen:

Iris: *I think sometimes you've got to make difficult decisions, but that's not a decision I would PEX because I don't know what's going to happen to that child afterwards. I still want to be in control of that. And I think that's very important in inclusion. You've still got to be in control, that you've still got to be an advocate for that child.*

Iris implied that while PEX may serve the interests of a school and headteacher by removing a challenging CYP from their care she feels it is an abdication of her responsibilities towards them. Only by maintaining their inclusion can she retain professional oversight of the CYP's provision and be involved in helping secure a better future for them, which is even more critical for CYP whose presentations are challenging.

Developing All CYP Fully. This category reflects participants' articulation of their concept of the outcomes of an inclusive education, namely to facilitate each CYP to reach their full potential, summed up by Edward as:

Edward: ...*it means are we supporting all young people to be the best version of themselves in every way at school.*

Participants felt inclusion represented a school's duty to support *every* pupil to fulfil their unique potential in line with their interests and not just academically. Inevitably this means *unequal* provision as pupils need different levels of support and in different areas:

Iris: ...*equity in what they were doing, moving forward and celebration of the fact that they'd found their 'thing'. And I think that's more of a 'I've found my thing' than what the 'thing; is.*

Iris' quote revealed that she considered the definition of success will naturally be different for each CYP, and inclusive schooling must actively help identify, pursue and publicly acknowledge these different routes equally. Alf overtly used psychological references to frame his ultimate objective of inclusive education:

Alf: *It's about a recognition at its heart that every student, whatever their abilities or frailties has come to us with an opportunity to be self-actualized, to actually reach that full potential of knowing themselves well, being a successful citizen, engaging in the community.*

Therefore, disparity of provision becomes completely acceptable because inclusive schooling focuses on the long-term goal of attaining the best outcomes for *individual* pupils.

Aspiring for Equity. Participants saw inclusion as aspiring to help *all* CYP leave school feeling ready to successfully move on to the next stage of their careers and lives. However, there was also a commitment to closing the gap between students so that those with disadvantages had similar outcomes and hence life chances as others, which Iris recounted as:

Iris: *Equity more than equality. So equity, so they all feel the same level…*

Ensuring equitable outcomes requires a commitment to allow significant modifications to provision, curriculum and experiences where needed to create a 'level playing field' by the time CYP leave school. This created tension with other areas of HDIM (see *Equality of Opportunities*) as equity is essentially *unequal,* but Ben was clear that an inclusive school must actively plan to provide resources and replace opportunities that some disadvantaged CYP may be missing:

Ben: …*we try and raise the opportunities for those students to create more of a level playing field.*

Alf depicted that for this to be impactful, school provision must be reviewed and updated continually to make sure these opportunities are relevant and actually address the needs of the cohort concerned:

Alf: *We challenged each faculty to come up with a week of activities that would celebrate their curriculum area, doing things that they [CYP] wouldn't be able to do otherwise.*

Nevertheless, James accepted that commitment to equity within the practical constraints of running a school may be insufficient to secure it for all CYP, leaving it more of a firm aspiration that informs decision making:

James: *We would love to achieve equity. I don't know that a complex school with complex needs, with the financial models that we have, we're able to achieve that. But we would certainly* want *to achieve that.*

Equality of Opportunities. Perhaps as an antidote to the potential difficulties when ensuring equitable outcomes, James was very firm about his non-negotiable view of inclusive schooling:

James: ...*it's about opportunity, access to everything, same opportunities for all.*

If equity is hard to guarantee, participants agreed that inclusion definitely meant all CYP must at least have the same access to engage with everything across their provision. Even if similar *outcomes* cannot be assured, this would mean nobody is left behind unnecessarily and their options are kept as wide as possible. However, since all CYP and their route to success are unique, Edward proposed that real equality allows CYP to select which opportunities suit them best:

Edward: ...*inclusion for me is about all young people having the opportunities, being able to access opportunities and ultimately walk away from whatever key stage it is with great outcomes that enable them to still very much make choices they can own.*

Iris expanded on this and saw establishing an ethos of equality at school as a moral duty as it inculcates an expectation within CYP that they *should* be able to access anything they want. If true equity cannot be achieved, then developing equal confidence in themselves to follow their dreams is another means of levelling the outcomes by the time CYP leave school:

Iris: ...*they have got as many doors open to them as any other child, that they feel confident, they're articulate, they feel they know what they'd like to do, they know what options are open to them. That's the equality bit - schools have got a really big job to make*

sure everybody feels equal when they leave secondary education…That's what our job is, to make sure in education, we're making sure there's equality.

Derek outlined that *Equality of Opportunity* required leaders commit to constant monitoring of not only participation of minority groups, but also the relevance of the offer to them, which overlaps with the sub-category *Facilitating Participation*. The implication is that schools must use this information to take remedial steps and make the offer more accessible *and* more desirable:

Derek: *Inclusion for me is around equality of opportunity…ensuring that young people in our community are reflected in our curriculum through to the fact that they have opportunities that are open to them.*

Participants were aware that equality and equity are not entirely commensurate with one another though and this creates particular tension when provision has been modified for individual CYP to engage with school in a different way, for example online or in an AP or nurture facility. Ben made it clear that inclusion requires special consideration be given to reverse any inadvertent obstacles by positively reinforcing equal access where necessary:

Ben: …*I don't want there to be a system here where we say we're inclusive, but we take students in and they do different provisions and they're not included.*

Educating for Adulthood. Closely related to *Developing All CYP Fully* and the previous sub-categories is how participants see inclusion's role in equipping CYP for the next stage of their life after they leave secondary school:

Ben: *And we're thinking about how we support their progression, post-16, post-18, into the workplace but also with their life skills.*

Many of the headteachers considered this represents inclusion because CYP develop at different rates and some become used to bespoke support at school that will inevitably change when they leave. To James, an inclusive school had an equal responsibility to help CYP accept that the wider world is not guaranteed to be as inclusive

as school, and they must accept that the prevailing model will be of them *integrating* with the systems they encounter:

James: ...*we're still giving you all of the scaffolding all the way up to the very moment that you leave. But an expectation, or certainly more of a balance around, we need <u>you</u> to be taking this on. So, giving them strategies to cope for themselves rather than putting things in place that are so structured that isn't necessarily going to help them later on*.

This sub-category reflects participants' concern that an overly protective school environment supplemented by significant adaptations and bespoke provision will not reflect CYP's post-16 life and its removal will be a barrier to their future success. Edward reported that inclusion meant supporting CYP to gain insight into their presentations and needs:

Edward: *We want to help you understand how you make choices or when you're feeling overwhelmed*.

The commitment towards *equity* means inclusive schools aiming to *Develop All CYP Fully* must aspire to bridge this gap by working with CYP on strategies to help them cope by themselves as young adults *outside* the protective environment of school.

Facilitating Bespoke Curricula. *Developing All People Fully* considers inclusion results in all CYP flourishing. Most participants agreed school must be prepared to adapt its provision to meet their divergent needs, especially if the CYP find it hard to engage with mainstream. This introduces a new sub-category – that inclusion demands schools be both flexible and responsive in their offer towards *individual CYP* and this may include focusing the curriculum on only the most relevant areas for them as Iris indicated:

Iris: ...*we have different pathways and actually some of the students that come back to see us and tell us how they're getting on you know, might be working at (LOCAL) farm, but actually feel incredibly lucky to be there because they're thriving – and its all about that word thriving – in their environment*.

Critically, this acknowledged that different support may be required to meet CYP with different needs and they may need a curriculum that matches their aptitudes and interests to help them succeed. Obviously, this undermines the concept that school offers a uniform provision but Edward and Frank were comfortable with this as it returns to the ideals of *Aspiring for Equity*:

Edward: *I think it goes back down to those core principles that we want everyone to be able to access education with as good ability as they can with the right support*.

Frank: *I think if you went through some systems where you were trying to make out that* everything *was exactly the same for* everyone*, no one would think that was a good idea*.

As CYP are all unique, so are the barriers they encounter but inclusion requires a school to find ways to overcome these to maintain their placement. Curriculum modifications or vocational placements could be supplemented with reduced or part-time timetables, nurture access, or alternative provision. However, participants' commitment to equality and equity moderated the extent to which they were prepared to deviate from a conventional school offer in two ways. Firstly, Ben revealed the importance he placed on not allowing bespoke provision to become *too* uncoupled from the wider school aspirations:

Ben: …*it's incumbent on heads of department to design their curriculum with the SEND team. So it's a modification of the curriculum. It's not something that the SEND team deliver and the heads of department have no input in*.

Secondly, Claire felt the essential ingredient that makes this sub-category part of inclusion is that any separation should be subject to review and be as brief as possible:

Claire: …*the aim is always to get them back into mainstream.…as they start improving we will put them back into mainstream*.

Being Known and Understood. An important finding in the analysis was the extent to which participants emphasized inclusion was founded on staff having a thorough knowledge of the CYP in their school, as exemplified by Frank:

Frank: …*our thing here is about being known, valued and supported*…

Edward added detail by indicating that inclusion requires systems to gather detailed understanding of each CYP so that their relative strengths, barriers and contexts are acknowledged and understood specifically so bespoke provision matched to meet these needs can be arranged:

Edward: *And what we mean by adaptive teaching is about firstly knowing the young people in front of you….and that, therefore, understanding what a barrier to learning might look like for that young person*…

Not only is such insight crucial to receiving appropriate academic support, but this knowledge also allows more attuned dialogue between CYP and staff, especially when things go wrong:

Iris: *And it's knowing those children…because inclusion is about* understanding *why they've done that*.

If staff actively apply knowledge of CYP's unique context it may help them to unpick what may underly challenging presentations or actions and lead to more therapeutic responses and form the basis of more trusting interactions that help with *Generating Belonging* (see category):

James: …*we would take a view of a positive regard for that young person and we would work with them, work through their problems that they have, start again the next day…or after the intervention or whatever we might need to do to try and get everything right and keep going with that young person*.

Seeing Behaviour as Need. Analysis of participant comments revealed significant influence of trauma-informed training. Most participants now agreed inclusion means recasting challenging behaviours by CYP as something that may be beyond their control and so *does not* reflect poor choice:

Alf: *Most of our* [poor] *actions are hardwired from when we're young, from early* [negative] *experiences*.

Participants felt that challenging, and even dangerous, behaviour may be a manifestation of underlying needs arising from a CYP's individual context and there is a high correlation between CYP living with some form of disadvantage and these presentations:

Frank: ...*the 5 or 6 students in this school who teachers would say are the most disruptive, the chances are that there would be a high – if I say top ten – they would put probably a high proportion out of that 10, probably 9 of those 10 would have SEN, probably 8 out of 10 would be pupil premium*.

Sub-categories *Aspiring for Equity* and *Facilitating Bespoke Curricula* reflect headteachers' understanding that inclusion means adapting their provision to the needs of individuals. As Ben indicated, for some CYP dysregulated behaviour is now re-constructed as an example of where school may not have adapted to their needs effectively, rather than poor behaviour:

Ben: ...*there have been times where I've reflected on a student's behaviour and thought, can we be crystal clear we haven't contributed to that*...

The implication is that this type of presentation must be handled relationally and not with sanctions. To James, inclusion placed an ongoing duty on the school to understand CYP's context and to plan how to address the unmet needs that lead to dysregulation:

James: ...*we know that there are many different reasons why, and barriers and factors that sometimes make it really hard for families at certain points, for whatever they might be going through, which is going to lead to dysregulation, whatever of our child's in terms of behaviour or whatever it might be. And at those points, you're going to need to adjust that balance. So you've got to adjust it in the context of working with that family, as you know where they are at that time*.

Responding to Individuals. Closely linked to *Seeing Behaviour as Need*, this sub-category describes how participants considered inclusion means school leaders being flexible in how they react to events or CYP presentations:

Claire: *We're not one of those schools where it's black and white. And if you do that, that happens. And if you do that…that's not me.*

Edward explained that this means using the individual knowledge they have gathered and their understanding of how such contexts may manifest as challenging behaviour to actively tailor the most therapeutic response:

Edward: *If you know the student and you know the family, but you know kind of what's triggered that student maybe in that situation or what's led to that situation or is this a pattern of behaviour or is it a one-off dysregulation in that moment or is this just a reaction to someone else – you make better informed decisions.*

This active engagement underpins CYP's confidence in their relationship with the staff (see *Generating Belonging)* because they feel less judged and more understood. Participants felt they must be prepared to overrule existing school policies if they judge the response would *not* be inappropriate given the CYP's underlying needs:

Iris: …*he just flipped and, of course, some schools that would be an instant suspension. But when we unpicked it all and he then was able to calmly talk about what happened then the consequence has been different.*

Although this apparent inconsistency could be confusing, Ben considered that inclusion places their response to individual needs as a *higher* priority than maintaining fixed policies:

Ben: …*we are mindful that sometimes our behaviour system needs to flex….The inherent flaw in behaviour* [systems] *is that it can't be consistent because you're dealing with completely different needs of students.*

Derek felt that accurate and up-to-date use of information gathered for Being *Known and Understood* (see category) meant *Responding to Individuals* could be used proactively to make inclusion compatible with consistent rules, provided CYP already had bespoke strategies and support that helped them adhere:

Derek: ...*we have the same expectations for all students, but just we'll adapt it. It might be that some students that find it difficult, if they have emotional needs, they might be withdrawn and work with a TA or in a workshop where we'll do a bit of work with them beforehand*.

He suggested that if CYP who have modifications still misbehave then they are treated as any other pupil. Edward echoed this but declared inclusive practice meant judging the CYP's presentation in the context of how *effectively* such support measures had been applied:

Edward: ...*that's why we ask staff to articulate what do they do in those moments. So, when you were going through the behaviour policy....did you do anything to support them? Did you do that sensory movement that they needed, that break they needed? Did you have that conversation in the classroom that we know they needed? Did you encourage them to use that time-out card to go and reset down in the space they need to reset? What did you do to support them?*

Using Relational Consequences. Inevitably, CYP will make mistakes, their presentations challenging and school leaders must consider what to do. Participants felt that crucial elements of inclusion such as *Generating Belonging* and *Being Known and Understood* (see categories) must not be undermined by their choice of response, and this led to another dimension of inclusion as suggested by Ben:

Ben: ...*there are times where I think that we can be more about the relationships than about the punishment*.

Claire considered that CYP were actually more responsive to being corrected by staff they trusted and valued, and who in turn trusted and valued them, than to the threat of punitive

sanctions, and that this was a good reason for investing in establishing strong relationships through inclusive measures:

Claire: *You've got to understand, yes there's lines but it's the relationship that'll get the kids to do as you want, not fear.*

If sufficient trust has been earned by the staff, then the existing relationship provides a framework to explore why the presentation was not appropriate and focus on repairing the situation. Frank felt inclusion is primarily about these relationships and therefore discipline is best handled by adults who have established a sufficiently positive rapport with the CYP - and this is unrelated to professional seniority:

Frank: *...if they've been removed to a class, they didn't go or were disruptive in that class, a member of SLT will pick them up and take them to their house office because the chances are the* [house officer] *would have the best relationship with them and they would be able to talk to them*.

Derek agreed that when things go wrong the focus must be on restoring good relations between adults and CYP as soon as possible:

Derek: *There is also built into the system before the kid returns a restorative meeting between the member of staff and the student to make sure that when they're reintegrated that the same situation doesn't occur again*.

For these to be inclusive, these systems accept the adults' potential culpability and equally focus on re-establishing the CYP's relationship with them as much as the other way around.

Generating Belonging. Another key finding was that participants considered establishing very strong bonds between CYP and school to be an inclusion priority and this required conscious investment. James summed up this objective:

James: *True inclusion would be that everyone has a sense of belonging. They feel that they belong to the school. They feel that they've got access to the opportunities. They feel*

they're listened to. So, even if you were in a period where you weren't in mainstream lessons, for example, and you were working somewhere else within the school, you should still feel that you belong to that, and that you're valued and seen, and heard and as far as possible understood…Just being physically present does not make an inclusive school.

'Belonging' initially implies ownership of the students by the school but James indicates it is more about maintaining open, trusted communication that reduces emotional distance between staff and pupils and this is maintained even when CYP are sanctioned or temporarily excluded. The investment of the school in the CYP and vice versa means the trust that both can be heard and understood by the other can survive periods of tension; it could be considered 'invested rapport'. Alf suggested it also seeks emotional capital with students by demonstrating school is actively interested in them:

Alf: *So why is agency important? Because if you have agency, you create belonging and you create ownership, you develop an opportunity to take pride in terms of what you are doing.*

This two-way communication allows staff to work with students to shape school in ways they *really* value and reveals that belonging aims to inculcate the sense that *students* own the school so make them more positive about investing in it, even during periods of challenge:

Iris: *Alternative Provision was on the outskirts of the school and we moved it to within the school here because of that very reason. They were still school students but they weren't getting any of the social time, going to the lunch queue, all of those things that give you a rite of passage to be like everybody else. And that was their voice that said, why have we been put in this building outside the school grounds?*

Iris proposed effective listening by adults to identify unexpected barriers to community membership meant belonging could be maintained even if CYP are *not* being included with their peers, which is important as participants agreed belonging must be prioritized irrespective of practical provision.

Facilitating Participation. As part of *Generating Belonging,* participants tried to reverse negative effects on CYP investment in school that arise through an *integration* approach, where CYP are partly or entirely segregated due to their needs, and this requires conscious effort to involve students *beyond* physical attendance on the same site. But Edward explained that inclusion is challenged by the potential of bespoke provisions to exclude CYP from their peers and must be carefully evaluated:

Edward: *I can have a young person potentially accessing 25 hours of provision week in, week out in a mainstream building but if they're not actually included and we've got such a heavily adapted curriculum and timetable, is that actually inclusion? I don't know.*

This sub-category explores how participants considered *inclusion* is more than reversing this distance, it requires schools to *actively* facilitate CYP's engagement to the whole range of activities in school, as Derek outlined:

Derek: ...*we are strategic in the opportunities they have available to them and we have a duty to check they are getting access to, for example, clubs, extracurricular opportunities in the proportions that appear in our community.*

In this way, an inclusive school can broaden CYP's horizons, facilitating experimentation in previously unconsidered groups and activities but has a duty to ensure uptake of its provision is representative and if necessary remove barriers to participation.

Protecting the Vulnerable. Participants discussed their concerns that some CYP are extremely vulnerable to negative feelings that can make it very hard for them to engage with school and get their needs met. Iris suggested a positive investment could alleviate this:

Iris: *So I meet with all the new families and I have one of the senior team in and we actually drill down to what the barriers might be. So obviously talk through all the positive things about the child or their interests they have or their skills or whatever. Right, now, tell me what are you worried about? What do you think your barriers will be? And then we'll build a programme around that before they get into mainstream.*

Iris reflected on the importance of personal connection with these vulnerable students to create a bespoke provision to build their sense of welcome and belonging with the school. This overtly maximizes their chances of attending school successfully which Alf advocates as protection against unlawful influences designed to radicalize or groom them for criminal exploitation:

Alf: *There's plenty of exploitation people there who are only too ready to provide the belonging for those children until they've got them and they've entrapped them. So we need to be providing belonging here.*

James clarified that when schools offer this sense of belonging it provides a working model of how it feels when relationships are enriching and positive. It is this that can help CYP to identify negative or detrimental situations and avoid being exploited in the future:

James: ...*what we're trying to do is prevent any young person going down that road towards that in what we tried to do. And you don't do that through exclusion, you do it through* inclusion *in terms of helping young people feel part of something. And so as adults they've got the tools to feel part of something and recognize when what they're doing might be the thing that is dividing or, cutting them off from being part of something*...

Embracing Diversity. Participants identified that school catchments reflect wider UK communities and aversion to this natural diversity is an unwelcome obstacle to cohesion. Accordingly, Derek summed up a central inclusive responsibility as he saw it:

Derek: *Modern Britain is a composition of multiple faiths, nationalities, backgrounds and we broaden. We have a responsibility to broaden horizons and also shape the community going forward. And hopefully over time people recognize that this is a welcoming and good representation of what modern Britain looks like.*

This makes it clear that Derek considered it part of IE to challenge bias and intolerance CYP may inherit from their contexts in order to actively change their attitudes. Since global diversity is inevitable, James explained that inclusion is a manifestation of schools' duty to

teach students how to be open-minded citizens in the modern world by establishing compassion for others and understanding the inherent value of differences:

James: ...*we as an individual, as a human being through education, should learn that we have to get on with lots of people we don't like, maybe, maybe not have anything in common with, maybe will never even meet. But can still have empathy, compassion, positive regard for them, kindness in our thinking...*

Therefore, a central concept of inclusion to the participants was the education of CYP to expect and appreciate diversity in the UK. Overtly modelling inclusion in mainstream schools actively changes pupils concept of diversity so equity is actively embraced as being fundamental to a just society:

Iris: ....*it is a school for everybody. And I don't care what anybody says, students who don't have those challenges really respect a school that puts those vulnerable students at the forefront. They have that, and when you're saying to students, you need to respect people, you need to, and they see adults doing it because they understand those children are not the same as them, and they need something different. And they see the respect adults give them. There's a sense of a different culture in the school and I think that's incredibly important.*

Raising Awareness. This sub-category of *Embracing Diversity* describes participants' view that inclusion must address the fact that many students lack personal experience of a wider community. James proposed that schools must openly acknowledge diversity and ask CYP to engage in a multitude of experiences in order to challenge intolerant thinking:

James: ...*looking at the world through different lenses and at least being broader in your horizons and not isolationist and not narrow in the way that you see everything and being open and willing to adapt and recognize that you might not always be right.*

In Frank's experience, the process of welcoming diverse students into mainstream and visibly adding provision to overcome their barriers may naturally increase exposure and understanding over time:

Frank: ...*where there's been a high proportion of students with physical disabilities, for example, and the other students become, I think the more they see that, the more tolerant they become of it*...

But Derek felt this must be reinforced by opportunities for students to hear a range of voices from across their community, which headteachers must actively facilitate:

Derek: ...*we've got an LGBTQ community and there's a club that they go to and they certainly have put on multiple events, fundraising activities, etc to promote that aspect of inclusion*...*we do ask them to advocate and to shine a light on what they're interested in*...

Celebrating Differences. Participants felt a key aspiration of inclusion is to transcend the mere *awareness* of differences to actually change student's perception so they genuinely value its enhancement of society as James suggested:

James: ...*they value difference, champion difference, are accepting of each other, of empathy and compassion for each other, values of equality, diversity*...*understand that we have our differences and what unites us is stronger*....

James clearly hoped that this investment builds advocates across the community who will defend diversity in the future as being conventional and expected. However, Iris thought school must go beyond creating safe spaces for sharing to actually promoting this positivity across CYP's differences:

Iris: ...*for them not to be embarrassed that they're different from their peers. You know, that sense of culture, of actually there's something different for everybody, and we're going to celebrate and share that*...

Of course, headteachers must ensure staff engage with CYP to have sufficient awareness of their differences, which overlaps with categories *Being Known and Understood* and

Generating Belonging. But Derek indicated that this information must inform the design of school provision *specifically* to create opportunities to embed the positivity of diversity:

Derek: …*we say to staff that when you have an offer in your curriculum, be that extracurricular or corporate, that you are aware of our demography and you are aware that you want to celebrate these things*.

Rejecting Categories. As seen on *Developing All CYP Fully*, participating headteachers had a clear sense that inclusion was about maximizing the outcomes for every CYP in their community. Alf described this aspiration:

Alf: *It* [inclusion] *is about self-actualization for* <u>each</u> *individual*.

He left no doubt that he saw inclusion to mean all of the students all of the time, not just those with pre-identified disadvantages according to the latest Ofsted criteria. Frank agreed and went further suggesting that inclusive measures really are for the benefit of the whole community:

Frank: …*is really about 'let's make the best possible environment for everyone' and* <u>*that*</u> *will be the best possible environment for SEN students and PP students*.

Participants were not yet clear on how the new Ofsted framework's focus on specific and pre-identified groups will be measured at this time but feel it cannot just be exam results. Iris was concerned that these categories are reductionist and applying them inflexibly may overlook children with significant but undisclosed disadvantages:

Iris: …*I'm not sure it's helpful to label children that are vulnerable as post social care and all the other labels that inspectors give them because actually it's any child with a barrier and that could be temporary*…

Participants did suggest that the categories could be ignored if inclusion is defined as a duty across the *whole* school to develop all pupils as individuals by meeting everyone's needs. If the focus is on everybody thriving, then this would prevent focusing on only those already identified as needing inclusion, and actually be more inclusive:

Edward: …*if you're actually talking about what does it mean to be an inclusive school, in some ways those categories of young people don't exist because you're just talking about schools who are meeting the need of children and every single child is thriving and therefore, we don't need to have those categorizations*.

Research Question 2: How do Secondary Headteachers in England Make Inclusion Operational in their Schools?

As with the HDIM, the Theoretical Model of Headteacher Operationalization of Inclusion (TMHOI) (see Figure 5) is represented as a flow-chart but with some key decision points. Headteachers report ever-broadening demands on mainstream education for multiple reasons not explored by this research. Given their finite resources, headteachers construct a toleration level for inclusion - high-level category *Defining Limits* – and run all subsequent decisions *through* this first. The broadening needs require that headteachers make their schools more adaptable to meet them and the mechanisms they use are described through the next four categories - *Researching Individual Needs, Creating a Family, Providing Relational Staff* and *Managing Outliers* - the nuances of which are explored through multiple sub-categories. For most CYP considered within *Defining Limits*, these provisions are considered sufficient to maintain inclusion. However, decision points reflect the constant review of CYP's *current* presentation and reflect how headteachers re-evaluate if provision must be modified. Category *Maintaining the Limit* reflects how headteachers reserve the right to end inclusion should a CYP ever exceed what they are prepared to include.

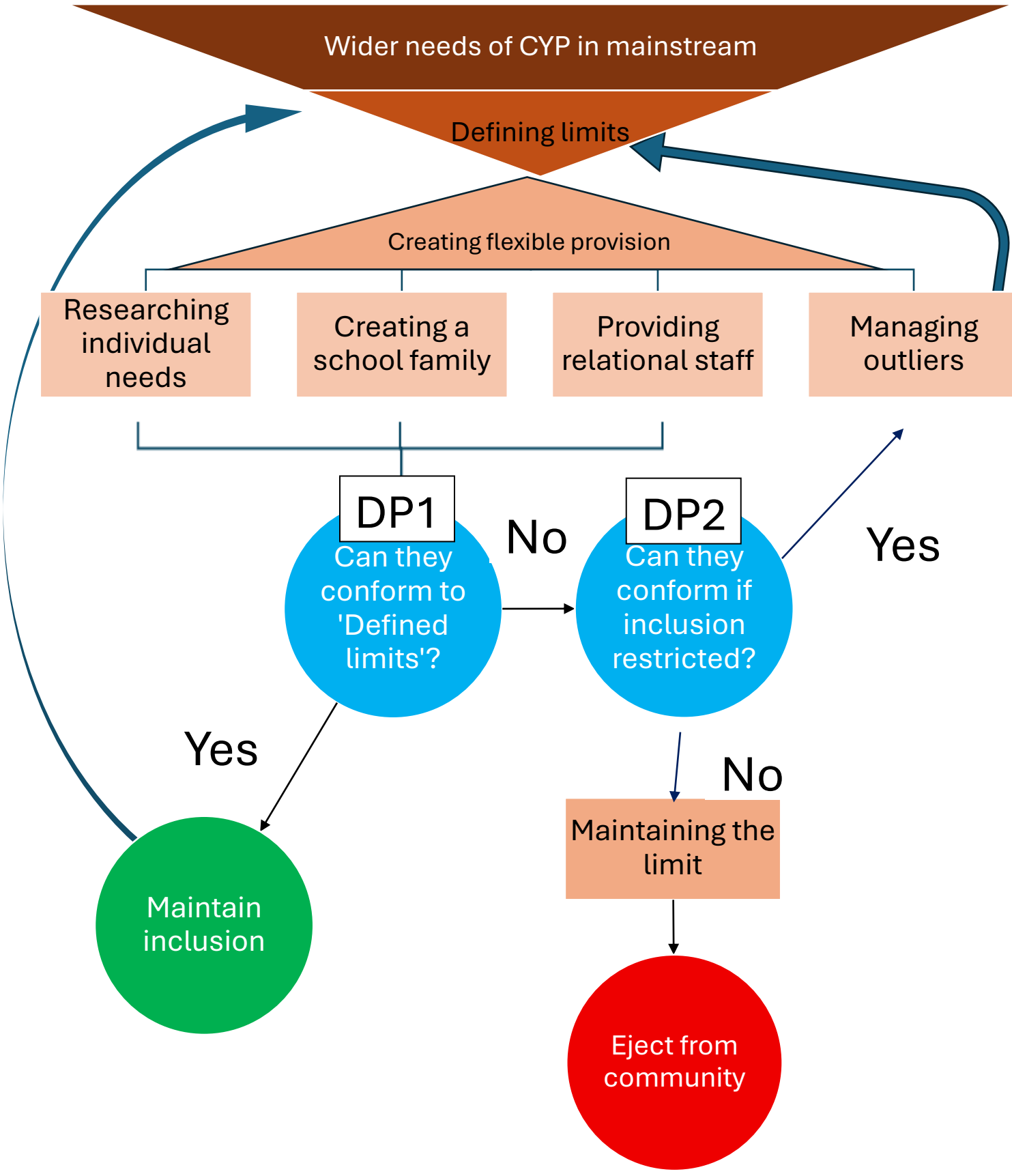
Wider Needs of CYP Entering Mainstream. When speaking about inclusion, participants considered that mainstream schools encounter greater diversity in their regular intake than ever before:

Edward: …*mainstream classrooms now look more inclusive and more different than they ever have done for lots of different reasons*.

Although this study did not explore the underlying reasons for this, participants had their own hypotheses. Gina wondered if contributory factors were the reduction in the level of

Figure 5

Theoretical Model of Headteacher Operationalization of Inclusion (TMHOI)



support services available away from schools and the capacity of area special schools over time, with the suggestion being that many of the most needy students went somewhere else:

Gina: …*earlier in my career, you would have people in working with them or there will be other places for them to go, or there'd be earlier interventions for them – they aren't. I'm not seeing that they're there and available*.

However, Alf was clear that headteachers must now embrace this 'new normal' as non-negotiable and an essential part of their duty to the CYP in their schools:

Alf: *We've got to deal with those kids we've got now. There's no point wishing it were different. There's no point talking about what they used to be like*.

Therefore, making inclusion operational for whatever students need to access their schools becomes a central priority.

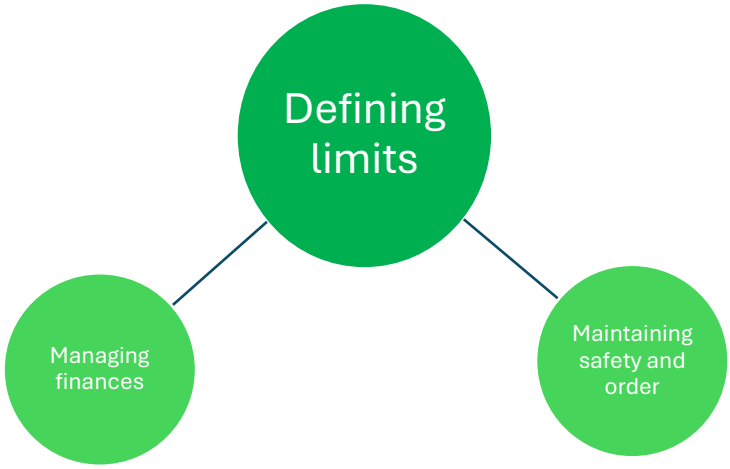
Defining Limits. Secondary headteachers are responsible for running and maintaining large, complex organizations and participants identified that they are required to balance considerations beyond the inclusion of individuals. Although incoming CYP are unique and will have an almost infinite variety of needs and contexts, the resources of mainstream school are not, and Gina felt clear that these cannot be exceeded by unconditional inclusion:

Gina: …*there's always been very clear non-negotiables…we'd never really want classes to be sort of disrupted, distracted and particularly as a science teacher, you know, there's always a health and safety concern for practical work. You can't have chaos because it's dangerous*.

Gina implied that inclusion is therefore subordinate to other considerations and is therefore *conditional* on satisfying other criteria to be enacted. Claire stated that where school is unable to resolve these satisfactorily such CYP *cannot* then be included in mainstream:

Figure 6

Sub-categories of Defining Limits



Claire: *...it is blatantly clear that even at that stage, some of those children just shouldn't be in mainstream. They do everything they can but they have to go elsewhere and it's either a PEX route because of behaviour or it is absolutely a learning need route....They need to be in a special school because we do not have the teaching skills and knowledge.*

Therefore, participants concluded that there is, ultimately, a limit to inclusion and these are described through the sub-categories of *Defining Limits* in Figure 6.

Managing Finances. The first limiting criteria on inclusion identified by participants is based around headteachers' responsibility to balance restricted finances:

Ben: *I'm always thinking in the back of my mind what's the opportunity cost of that? If I say yes to this, what am I going to have to say no to?*

With regards to inclusion, Edward described how it is about applying a simple equation: a school's biggest expenditure is on its staffing and staff are required to include. Therefore, greater inclusive needs will ultimately cost more money and since this is not unlimited, neither is inclusion:

Edward: …*you actually end up being not able to maximise it beyond a certain capacity…the limiting factor for inclusion is physical bodies. Because ultimately, young people need those trusted adults.*

Since they have a duty to the whole community and a finite budget, Claire proposed that headteachers must balance any desire to provide inclusive provision against provision for *all* the students and *all* the staff. This means they have to make hard decisions about what to spend the money on and that could *reduce* provision for individuals:

Claire: *My job is to think about 1600 of them, but you're absolutely right to ask the question because you're advocating for that one. So yes, ask the question and no, can I say yes to all sorts of therapy? No, because I haven't got the money for it.*

Austerity has lowered overall school funding and Derek explained headteachers have been forced to make efficiency savings whenever they provide additional adults for inclusion, which inevitably impacts how frequent or bespoke provision can be:

Derek: …*it used to be the case that you would employ a TA per number of EHCPs but that's not as cost effective as delivering targeted interventions when they need it in group-style activities. So we have to make do with what we've got.*

Participants all felt that LA delays in the statutory system mean that schools often face very long delays before EHCP funding becomes available. This is not backdated and puts schools wishing to be inclusive in a difficult position as maintaining CYP's inclusion could lead to them incurring significant and unfunded costs. Ben outlined that even when EHCP funding does become available, the legislation means that schools never see the full amount and any financial deficit must be absorbed by the overall budget:

Ben: …*you get…what about 5 ½ thousand is your age weighted pupil unit. But anyone with SEND, whatever top-up funding you get, you have to fund the first 6 ½ thousand of it.…so you're already, per SEND child, a thousand in deficit…*

Overall, participants felt that the aspirations of inclusion could be restricted by balancing the costs of appropriate support for individuals within existing financial models.

Maintaining Safety and Order. Ultimately, participants saw their schools' core business as the efficient discharge of education *and* maintaining the safety of the whole community and these are not subordinate to an *individual's* right to inclusion. Where a CYP's presentation is a threat to these concepts, schools question their ability to *be* included as explained by Gina:

Gina: *If there is poor behaviour, the students will need to know that is unacceptable…I don't feel it can be allowed to hugely negatively impact the other members of the class in terms of their learning….no one has the right to take your education away from you*.

In HDIM, the participants constructed 'inclusion' as including everyone in their community (see *Developing All CYP Fully*). However, operational tensions arise if inclusion of an individual threatens the core business of the school for the *majority,* and Claire outlined they cannot overrule the 'greater good':

Claire: …*there is a balance isn't there? Because if that one* [dysregulated pupil]*, for all of the stuff that's going on is trashing a lesson with another 28 kids in it…What about the inclusion of* [pupil]*? She's a good girl….Where's her bit of the love and attention?*

Claire suggested inclusion is a right for *everyone*, not only disadvantaged CYP and there is a moral duty to protect the *inclusive rights* of CYP who are conforming against those who cannot. Howard described how he makes his non-negotiable priorities of community safety and learning *before* adaptation for individuals visible to all stakeholders to pre-justify his responses to future CYP presentations:

Howard: …*why you have a behaviour policy and why its implemented in the way it is done to make sure that all students are first and foremost safe and all students have the ability to learn*.

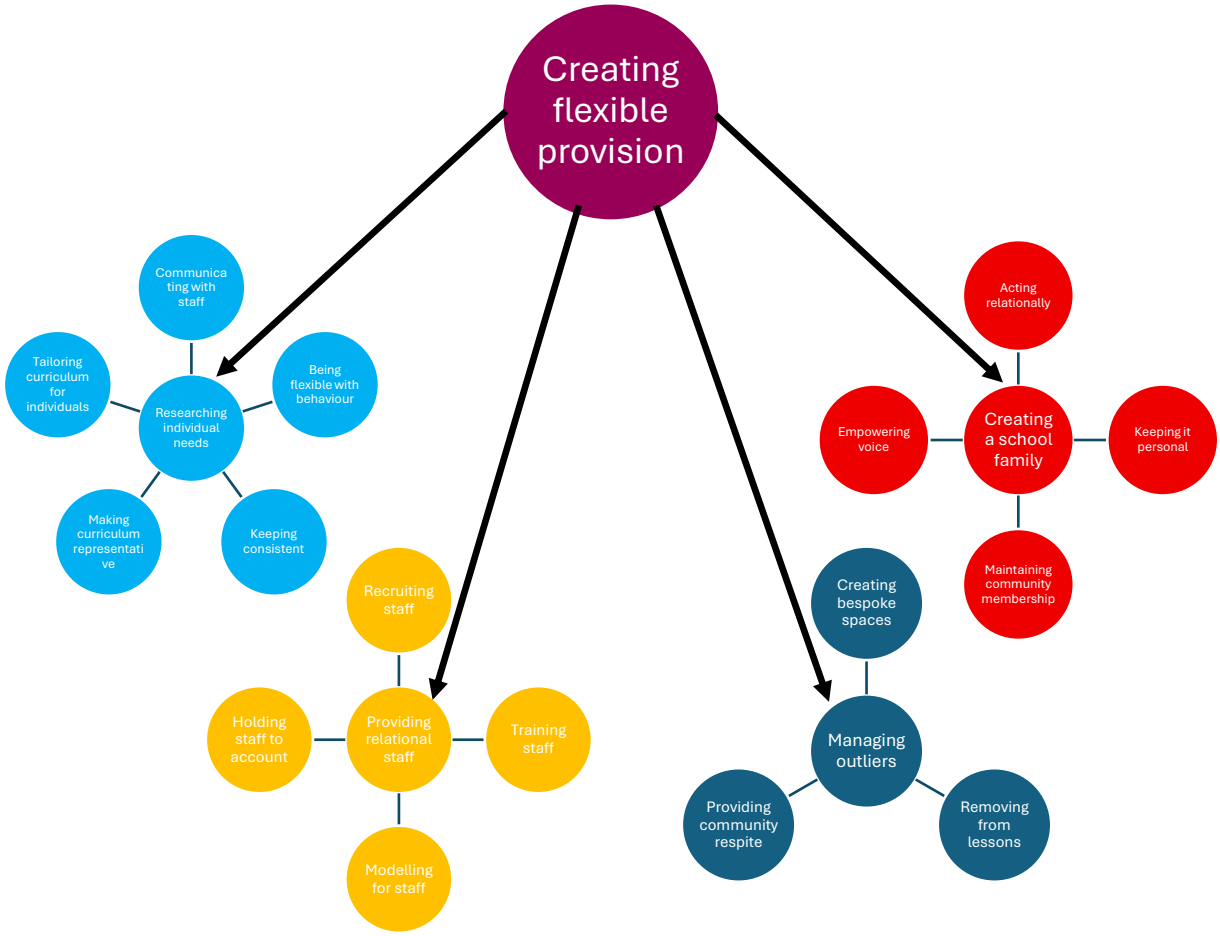
As these behaviour policies are published, it explicitly places maintaining safety and order of the school above inclusion. Ben illustrated that a headteacher's first duty is to prevent harm which requires they view inclusion through the lens of safety, evaluate risks to the community and be prepared to act decisively:

Ben: ...*with the* [permanent] *exclusions this year, one was because they presented a persistent* [physical] *threat to other children...I think when you get to a point where you've issued numerous suspensions and it doesn't improve...do I wait for them something* really *serious?*

Creating Flexible Provision. This category reflects participants' view that since schools' intake of CYP is constantly evolving and now covers a much wider range of needs, they must actively consider and revise their provision to accommodate them, as described by Edward:

Figure 7

The Four Categories Comprising Creating Flexible Provision with their Respective Sub-categories



Edward: ...*it is around adapting as a school to need within the school. So as our cohort changes, as our staff body changes, as our community changes or doesn't change, I think it's about responding to the need that kind of is presented to us day-to-day, week-to-week, year-on-year...*

Given that cohorts differ each year and CYP contexts are impossible to predict, the key tool is to design *flexibility* into the system so that it offers an adaptive response to whatever needs are encountered. It is described through four categories which feed into a fifth and each has multiple sub-categories as shown in Figure 7.

***Researching Individual Needs*.** Participants outlined that flexibility is only useful if staff have up-to-date insight into individual CYP's needs and the skill and attitude to apply it therapeutically to meet them:

Edward: ...*do the staff and teaching staff really know the young person in front of them? Do they have that information at their fingertips?...and then thinking about that young person in the context of the classroom*.

Gina explained this requires systems that are responsive to emergent needs and have processes to work *with students* to gather detailed knowledge about what may help both academically and pastorally:

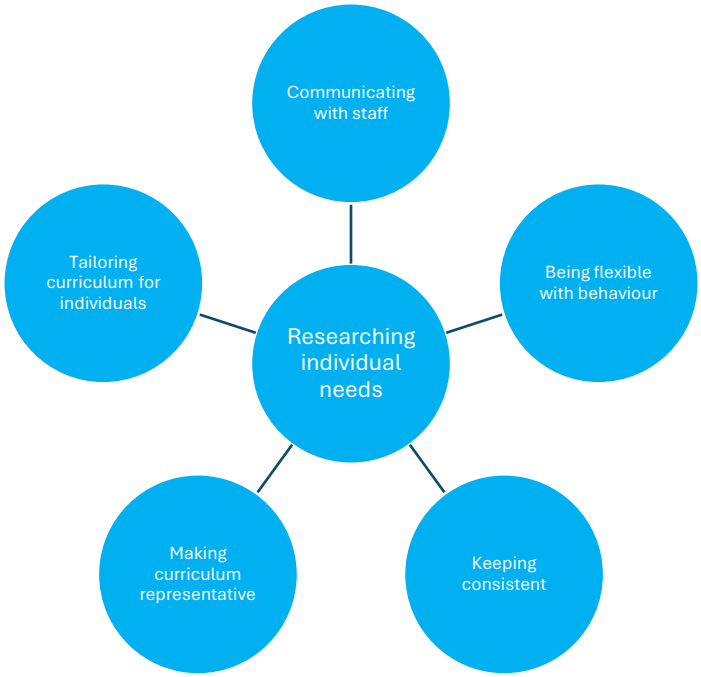
Gina: ...*if a student isn't learning well for a particular reason, now that may be their handwriting looks like a spider scrawling across it, it may be they are constantly distracted and aren't getting on with things, it may be they're struggling to start work. Then they* [teachers] *put a referral into the SEND team to investigate what it is and from that would come things like strategy sheets on how to support them with that*.

In order for CYP to trust this process, Frank proposed school culture must ensure there are open, two-way lines of communication between students and staff and the systems respond to information generated:

Frank: *I think knowing the students is the thing, isn't it?...So the students will go to* [student support] *and say I'm really struggling in science because my science teacher doesn't*

Figure 8

Sub-categories of Researching Individual Needs



understand that I can't do this or I can't work this way. And then [student support] *will go back to the teacher and say "Oh, I'm just letting you know I had so and so in the house office and what would be great is if you could try and make some of these, you know, an adaptation"....that's absolutely what we want.*

The processes of *Researching Individual Needs* is expressed through five sub-categories as shown in Figure 8.

Communicating with Staff. At secondary school, CYP work with many different adults and participants constructed a key sub-category was the need to share any information acquired about supportive adaptations effectively through regular meetings:

Frank: *...we give quite a lot of information as a senior team through briefings...so staff are aware of what's happening....a weekly staff briefing where I lead but there's also weekly house meetings...I think there's good communication around the staff about those minority of students that would need that bespoke privilege.*

Frank made it clear that these meetings must be sufficiently regular and detailed to ensure information is kept up to date in response to new or transitory situations. However, describing individuals with extra consideration as receiving 'privilege' implicitly preserves the concept that school caters for two groups – the 'centre' and 'others'. Derek suggested that these meetings can be used for CPD to improve staff practice:

Derek: …*we have a programme that goes out every Thursday morning where my SENDCO will take a case study of a particular student and then share tips with staff and how best to manage them*.

However, Gina reflected that her safeguarding role meant she was privy to information that could not always be shared and she had to find a way to balance her duty not to disclose specifics against supporting inclusion by asking staff to make accommodations:

Gina: …*there's a lot of things that we know that are not appropriate to share…..and it might be then speaking to the student and giving them a different option for that particular day….today do you want to come out and work somewhere separately…Just letting them* [staff] *know that you know that there are issues at the moment and this isn't necessarily how they would normally be*.

Being Flexible with Behaviour. In line with the HDIM category *Being Known and Understood,* participants applied trauma-informed practice *w*hen discussing behaviour management approaches within inclusion. Howard described how this means rejecting inflexible and predetermined sanctions:

Howard: …*zero tolerance for me isn't a fit for purpose policy when the needs of the students are so wide, great, diverse and all the other factors that come into play with that*.

Since their objective is to *understand* all their CYP, this means they can take individual contexts into account whenever presentations become challenging and so offer more therapeutic responses. However, Derek recounted that relational support or education may only be offered *after* the presented behaviour has been sanctioned through the policy:

Derek: *It happens because it's manifested itself in a reaction. A kid has said something racist or intolerant* [for example]*...our behaviour system will pick them up and we'll provide them support through that mechanism. It might be that they have to reflect on their views and we'll work with them on that to say "OK, do you understand why this is not right etc?"*

Frank outlined that personal insight meant behavioural deviations are constructed as communicating a potential need *at any time* and staff's responses must be continually modified to address these *at the right time* - and this may mean overruling conventional expectations:

Frank: *...I know* [she] *is very anxious about the mocks that are coming up next week and she was in the corridor. I popped her into the house office....she will talk to* [student support] *for a while and then* [student support] *will get her back into lessons....if it was someone else she would be <u>immediately</u> straight back to lessons but they will give that time to talk and make sure they're regulated and get back and it'll work. Or if it wasn't, they will keep them and let the teacher know...*

This relational approach does not ignore poor behaviour. It is seen to better address the underlying need and gives priority to repairing CYP's confidence which is hoped will make it more likely they will return to lessons successfully in the longer term. This effectively combines HDIM categories *Developing All CYP Fully* and *Being Known and Understood*. Alf considered inclusive schools must apply the same approach even for very serious matters when a CYP's context is particularly challenging, representing the HDIM sub-category *Protecting the Vulnerable*:

Alf: *...a young lady in Y9 who brought in 20 rolls of cannabis into school. She is from a very deprived background. At any of the local schools she'd have been permanently excluded on the day...It would have been seen as bringing drugs into school with an intent to supply, and that would have been it. We took a different approach. We didn't suspend her from school, we kept her in....we held her, we kept looking at that situation...she was terrified, she had been put under pressure by older girls...Our response?...Predictable, understanding, diagnostic, seeing behaviour as communication...*

Keeping Consistent. Many participating headteachers considered it important to keep things simple for their staff and students by maintaining a consistent behaviour policy, which is not commensurate with flexibility of the previous sub-category:

Gina: …*it's kept very simple, you know. Literally it is: they'll have a warning, they are removed from lesson. Because ultimately, putting layers and layers and layers in there – if that child is going to be disruptive, it just keeps them in there disrupting the lesson even longer.*

Ultimately, this reinforced that *Being Flexible with Behaviour* is subordinate to *Maintaining Safety and Order* and the focus reverted to removing potential obstacles to the learning of others (see *Removal from Lessons*). Some headteachers in this study resolved this tension by inserting mitigations and reminders within the policy to help CYP modify their behaviour *before* triggering a sanction:

Howard: …*a clear behaviour policy. A clear ladder that we don't go* [immediately] *to sanction state, say. We have clear reminders within our sanction policy that a student has the opportunity to make a correct choice and reinforcement with that. And if that doesn't work then the ladder can move up with a simple escalation…very carefully staged ladder of sanctions…*

Where individuals have identified needs, bespoke provisions can be added to help the CYP follow the behaviour policy, but Gina was clear that this privilege is limited to making *effective* use of these strategies and these CYP are still subject to the sanctions as written:

Gina: …*there are a few students who have mitigations…but if the teacher notices there's an issue, they suggest "do you need your time out?" and they say "no" and they blow up, then I'm afraid that the sanction will occur because it will go back to, you don't have the right to disrupt everyone's learning…*

This consistency is designed to simplify classroom management for the teachers at the point of lesson delivery and so preserve the orderly learning environment. The complexity

of whether to modify sanctions (see *Being Flexible with Behaviour*) – and inconsistency – is reintroduced by headteachers afterwards:

Edward: I mean, senior leaders spend a lot of time unpicking behaviour…

Making the Curriculum Representative. Participants considered their curriculum delivers the school's objectives, including inclusion, and require constant scrutiny to keep it fit for purpose:

Ben: *It all starts with curriculum…..The curriculum's got to be great. It's got to be constantly reviewed….why do you teach what we're hoping to teach?*

To match the concept of *Developing All CYP Fully* in the HDIM, the curriculum must reflect *all* students' individuality to build overall community understanding (see *Raising Awareness*) but also actively engage with positive impact of differences (see *Celebrating Diversity*):

Derek: *I think you have to be constantly aware that your curriculum intents will vary based on the contexts and your demography…always tweak it slightly. You have to because you have to use that as an opportunity to teach diversity.*

In keeping with HDIM category *Best Efforts to Include All*, Alf revealed that the curriculum delivery model must be adjusted to make it accessible to as many students as possible:

Alf: …*rather than teaching a lesson to neurotypical kids and then having other worksheets or activities for kids who are neurodiverse, you're teaching neuro-independently. You teach in a way that all can learn*.

Tailoring Curriculum for Individuals. Aligning with concepts in the HDIM category *Facilitating Bespoke Curricula*, participants illustrated the need to adapt the curriculum to reflect the needs and aptitudes of individuals. They considered recent DfE policy changes that encourage diversity of subject choices gives them the flexibility to do this:

Howard: …*not forcing a staple diet for every single child….the EBacc curriculum was not fit for purpose…you have to consider what is the best steps and best pathways for that young*

person and if that is spending more time and focusing to get a grade 3 in English and maths that may help them get on an FE course then you make those decisions in the best interests for that child. So we try to be flexible and if that is a slightly adjusted curriculum, you know, one or two less academic qualifications or GCSEs where they might do a slightly more vocational qualification to try to do it.

This suggested Howard invested in *Developing All CYP Fully* and *Embracing Diversity* by making sure *each* CYP gets the support they need to succeed in the areas *most relevant* to them. However, Edward saw this flexibility as creating space for additional support mainly in traditional core subjects, perhaps indicating the influence of conventional school metrics:

Edward: *...we also want to be able to adapt sometimes our curriculum model. So we know that certain, students in our Key Stage 3 have additional writing and English sessions because their literacy levels, when they arrive with us, are lower so they therefore have a little bit less of something else...*

Even with this consistency, reducing the overall breadth of subjects for a few creates tension with sub-categories *Equality of Opportunities* and *Aspiring for Equity*, which Ben resolved by emphasizing how such modifications help *Maintaining Safety and Order*:

Ben: *So it is a slight reduction in their curriculum offer but...when you can see improvements in attendance, in behaviour, when you can see the benefits of reduced disruption in other students' learning, those are really valuable...things that offset concern, alright for 5 or 6 students, their progress 8's not going to be progress 8, but that doesn't matter for the whole of the organization.*

Therefore, removing equity for a few individuals is acceptable if it supports improved outcomes for the wider community and their successes alone are used to justify the decision.

Creating a School Family. A central element most participants highlighted when discussing how they support inclusion through relational approaches is by recasting school as a surrogate family for each CYP, which Alf depicted:

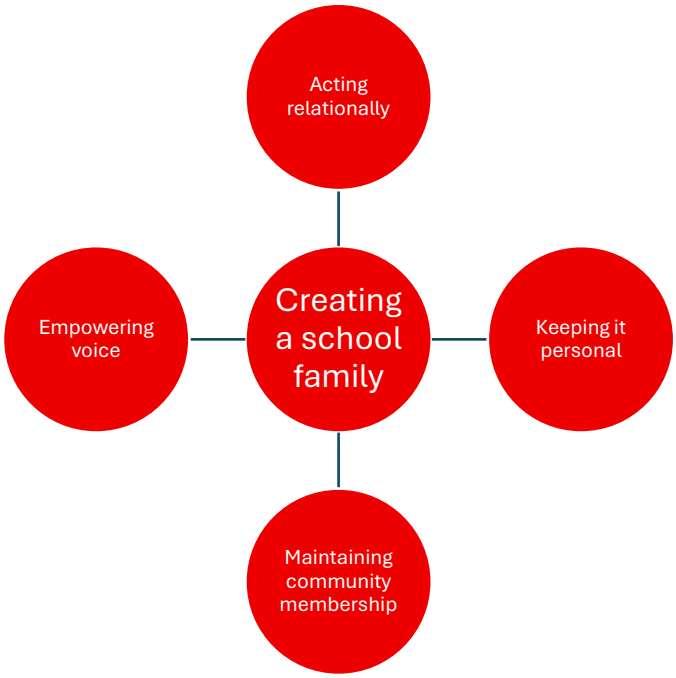
Alf: *All our forms are vertical so we have members of each year group in each form to create small families. So it's a family unit…kids are faced in: How do I relate to an older child? How do I relate to a younger child? How do I, you know, protect them? How do I work with them?*

Participants aimed to replicate the hallmarks of a family with smaller, more intimate and multi-age groups where CYP feel known and understood, and to have a team of attuned adults emotionally close enough to them to act *in lieu* of parents when required. Frank described how systems actively support this:

Frank: *They* [house offices] *are manned all the time during the day by a non-teaching student support assistant who many would see as like the 'mum' of the house…they are absolutely the first port of call for parents and students….I forgot my timetable, I forgot my lunch. Can you ring my mum to bring my PE kit in? That would be managed by the student support assistant in a very low-key kind of supportive…they're not really involved in any consequences or sanctions.*

Figure 9

Sub-categories of Creating a School Family



A critical element is earning CYP's trust by creating a safe space that replicates the non-judgmental support that parents and carers offer their children to help them repair things that have gone wrong. Figure 9 illustrates the sub-categories of Creating a School Family.

Acting Relationally. Participants described how inclusion involves accepting that many CYP have unsatisfactory previous experiences and challenging contexts, and need interactions that are positive and accept them so they can establish faith in the school:

Edward: ...*we recognize that a lot of young people who have additional needs or maybe are finding it harder to be included, therefore do need that kind of trusted adult more than anyone else...*

Participants considered the application of non-judgmental support complements staff's understanding of CYP and generates sufficient 'safety' that allows them to support dysregulated CYP. Alongside this, Frank explained how they seek to encourage close personal contact between home and school that facilitates exchange of important contextual information:

Frank: ...*if there's something happening at home...a family member's unwell or a pet has died or anything like that,* [student support] *will know about it immediately because the parents will ring in and tell them...it would be a very casual relationship...they would call them 'Ali' or 'Paula'...it's a very sort of peer-to-peer relationship and the children would be the same way....it's very much a safe place that they all know they can go to.*

It is this close working relationship between home and school that helped Howard resolve challenging behaviour in a therapeutic way and avoid imposing punitive sanctions, thus operationalizing HDIM category *Using Relational Consequences*:

Howard: *I've had a student who is struggling with school, has refused to go to lessons over the last day and a half. That at the moment has remained sanction free. Could have escalated to a suspension quite quickly because that student has persistently failed to follow instructions numerous times but we understand the needs and today I went as far as to say "let's get mum in to try to support and speak with the child and get back into lessons,*

which I believe happened this afternoon….the easier thing to do was sanction, the student's attendance is an issue already and almost you feel that they want the outcome of being sent home, which doesn't necessarily solve it. Was the behaviour policy followed to the letter of the law by me? No. However, context was applied to try to explain, reason and work with that student…

Howard and Frank's quotes revealed that they invest significantly in working with families to resolve issues therapeutically and strive to avoid punishments, even though this would be more efficient. Some participants considered these relationships are based on mutual trust and this requires staff to be honest with CYP and acknowledge their vulnerability and mistakes.

Keeping it Personal. The family environment that participants identified is to ensure all CYP have access to attuned support and so feel known and valued as individuals. Since many secondary schools have very large cohorts, participants explained that they need to increase the visibility of individuals and their specific contexts across the organization (see *Communicating with Staff*), which Gina suggested is both better to help them but also makes them more likely to conform to school expectations:

Gina: …*it's important that staff know the children and particularly those that maybe find it harder for whatever reason that is…from their backgrounds to what they're into, to how they might engage, what sorts of things work well for them…getting students to want to work for you means they're going to be a lot less likely to exhibit behaviours that are going to disrupt the lesson*.

Many participants applied organizational changes to redesign the whole school as a collection of smaller communities, and these are served by consistent adults. The combination of habitual recognition and reduced cohort size renders every member of the community, CYP and staff more visible and recognizable and helps develop deeper relationships, as Frank outlined:

Frank: …*we have a house system here at this school and so there's six houses and that's very much a school within a school structure….so it breaks it down to a smaller system…*

Ben indicated the creation of smaller 'family' units means that adult support is more manageable, more sustainable and more meaningful and this supports their inclusion:

Ben: ...*your initial contact with students doesn't work in a horizontal system. You've got one tutor with 30 odd kids and we're all the same age and you see them for 10-15 minutes. It's very difficult. It's stacked against you as a tutor to manage that. Whereas here, you've got 23-24 students maximum. You've got four 7s, three or four 8s. You know, when you're going through options, you can support your four 8 children really well...*

Maintaining Community Membership. Participants accepted that CYP derive belonging in different ways and inclusion in the formal part of the school with their peers may be insufficient. Edward respected how wider activities allow them to exercise choice and forge their own version of the community:

Edward: ...*that very bespoke work of extracurricular clubs at lunchtimes and social times that actually give students that sense of belonging...They meet the need by giving those young people somewhere where they feel like they really thrive and they're really successful and they enjoy.*

He considered inclusion was served by encouraging and supporting these opportunities and allowing CYP choice to engage. Participants were also aware that operational decisions they make to meet aspects of CYP needs could *inadvertently* exclude, and they address this by overtly trying to reinvest them in communal structures of the school:

Derek: ...*kids that are in like alternative curriculum, you need to make sure that they don't feel excluded from their peers. They need to feel part of the community...So some of our year 11s will come along to some of the assemblies...They might come along to some of the after school extracurricular subject support sessions... depending on how they've managed themselves over that week....There's going on trips, they wear school uniform. That's another way of feeling inclusive.*

Derek revealed that where CYP are separated through behavioural needs, he considered his inclusive duty was to respond to their *current* presentations and ensure they are 're-included' whenever possible to avoid them becoming completely disenfranchised.

Empowering Voice. Participants discussed how inclusion requires more than regularly gathering CYP's voices but also to communicate explicitly *how* these views have impacted their leadership decisions:

Edward: ...*we do regular student voice kind of surveys which capture kind of questions around teaching and learning and school access and extracurricular enrichment for all...We often do student voice panels...we certainly ask them do you feel you've got opportunities in this? How do you access that?...at the end of the year we often do a 'You said, we did'.*

Many participants agreed that the objective is to translate voice into genuine ownership of the learning environment, and this means being prepared to devolve key decisions directly to CYP:

Alf: *We've set up a fund where the kids can then make applications for projects that they come up with, the criteria which are all based upon relationships, about how they can actually support each other...So that's real ownership of their environment...*

Alf indicated that it was necessary to avoid accusations of tokenism by providing tangible resources that the CYP may access to shape their for provision themselves.

Providing Relational Staff. Every participant agreed that the main resource available to schools is the staff and they identified that a school's inclusive potential is based on their staff's ability to forge and maintain strong interpersonal relationships with CYP:

Claire: ...*generally there's a correlation, isn't there, between successful teachers and outcomes and good relationships.*

Participants accepted that this approach depends on staff's attitude towards working with children and take personal responsibility for shaping this through the school ethos. Specifically, participants need staff to *earn* the trust of individual CYP by making an effort to *understand* them and their unique needs and build this confidence through ongoing supportive dialogue:

Frank: ...*positive relationships between staff and students and I think that sense of the students know that the teachers know them and are aware of their needs*.

Participants identified staff in modern inclusive schools must have or be prepared to acquire a particular skillset and this can be arranged through the sub-categories in Figure 10.

Recruiting Relational Staff. All participants considered that informed recruitment of relational staff was a leadership priority, summarized by Ben:

Ben: *See that is one where I'm really controlling. I do all the recruitment....that always worries me about recruitment and who you bring into the team...*

Figure 10

Sub-categories of Providing Relational Staff



Participants seek to avoid wasting time on recruits who may resist working relationally and emphasize their expectations at the earliest opportunity by making inclusive school vision and values overt in adverts and discussing positive regard and adaptation during interviews. Edward explained how he verifies candidates' relational attitude beyond a formal interview by introducing them to 'real' students in his community:

Edward: ...*I purposely get them to interact with, maybe a young person who doesn't always fit...it might be popping into one of our behaviour spaces...and seeing how they interact with that student.*

This forensic approach aligns with other participants' suspicions about relying on formal interview techniques and scrutiny of qualifications to secure sufficiently relational staff:

Claire: *The staff that we recruit...I suppose what we do look for is that human bit....Some teachers and you go 'but you don't seem to like children. You might be the cleverest person in the world but you clearly don't like children much. You can teach the teaching bit, you can't teach them to like children.*

Claire proposed that inclusion cannot be undermined by appointing candidates who are not invested in relational approaches. Alf agreed and maintained that the more flexible provision demanded by modern inclusive schools have fundamentally changed the *priority* awarded to teachers' skills in favour of this relational approach; a candidate's positive *attitude* towards children is more desired than traditional academic values:

Alf: ...*we appoint the person who shares our values rather than who's the expert in the subject. We are teachers of children, not teachers of subjects...I want to hear about their motivation. I want to hear about their history. I want to hear about their ideals, their desires. Do they want to be part of a team? Do they want to collaborate? Do they see the importance of extracurricular work, not as an add on, but as an essential in terms of bringing the most out of people?*

Training Relational Staff. Participants accepted that their existing staff's attitude to a relational approach will vary considerably based on their own personal experiences:

Alf: *So we'll have teachers who find it much more difficult to accept that we should be relating to children and that's because they haven't been related to in that way.*

Cultural expectations about applying consistent behavioral expectations can lead to professional tensions with staff who either lack knowledge of individual contexts or why it is important to take this into account. Participants like Claire saw this as an opportunity for leadership to build this understanding:

Claire: ...*sometimes your staff get grumpy...because it's not all black and white...because they don't know all the reasons behind why a child is* [dysregulated]....*and sometimes it causes – conflict is too strong a word but it causes unrest that your classroom teachers might feel its double standards....And where the deputy is really good is he tries to go and have those conversations going "I understand what you're saying, but let me just contextualize..."*

Participants recognized these as informal opportunities to engender dialogue designed to inform staff about the approach required and why it is necessary. But many, like Edward, considered that the evolving nature of the needs amongst their intake of students as well as emerging research in educational and relational approaches make it important to maintain an ongoing programme of training:

Edward: *We have given little scripts around some tricky situations and de-escalating situations. We've done a lot of work about trauma-informed practice...some of the language you would use and the way you would have those kind of conversations with young people.*

Modelling for Staff.

Claire: ...*they learn as they go....it is just the norm here that SLT are out and visible...*

This sub-category is closely aligned with *Training staff* but reflects the additional importance participants placed on the observed actions of senior colleagues around the school to promote the necessary relational approaches. They were aware that observers infer the values of school leadership from their actions which puts them and their

leadership team under pressure to constantly and rigorously model the necessary relational culture:

Frank: ...*if you worked at this school for any length of time, that would be really clear in the sort of explicit and implicit messaging*.

Participants extended this by creating opportunities to highlight exemplar practice and approaches they consider to be the good examples of what they are trying to achieve across the staff. Howard suggested these opportunities are particularly important when developing the practice of the least experienced colleagues, especially Early Career Teachers (ECT), whose overall practice is still emerging:

Howard: ...*something's not quite right in how we're preparing people to enter the profession...Is inclusion at the top of the list of an ECT's training? Probably not. They're trying to get through everything they can do to, you know, learn what they need to do to become a competent teacher first and foremost*.

Howard outlined his perception of tension between the training of teachers and the new priorities of an inclusive school to have staff who are relational first and foremost. He reflected that established expectations of what a trainee must learn first do not place emphasis on the flexibility and adaptation for individuals that is required for inclusive teaching. Therefore, many participants accept that ECTs may well lack this understanding on recruitment and Edward evaluated schools have a responsibility to provide modelling and training opportunities to address this:

Edward: ...*the natural framework for ECTs is already built around their subject knowledge, it's built around their teaching of the subject. So the bit we can afford them is also time to explore and understand how to do the tricky bits of the teaching world, which is ultimately trying to meet the needs of young people, no one tells you about when you don't go into teaching that child who dysregulates because of X or this child who's got a significant barrier because this trauma's happened in their life*.

Holding Staff to Account. All participants agreed that headteachers have a critical role to guarantee the inclusive ethos of their staff and this means they must monitor the actual experience of students and compare what staff *say* they are doing with what is *actually* happening:

Frank: …*just have a look quietly* [at] *any SEN students and were they receiving any reasonable adjustments and then going back and looking at their assess, plan, do review paperwork and then seeing, OK, so…is there evidence of that target*….

Where the school's expectations are not met, Gina described how this must be addressed as quickly as possible with direct management:

Gina: …*at times it's about if something has gone wrong, reflecting on that. Whether it's a conversation with their line manager or something else*….*thinking about how could we have done that differently?*

Ultimately, all participants considered the relational approach that underpins the flexibility and adaptations required by IE is *non-negotiable* and Alf demonstrated how they will eject staff who are unwilling to adapt or maintain the expectations:

Alf: …*where they* [staff] *were so entrenched in their views, they felt it was appropriate to ridicule children, to shout at children. They've had to leave. They've had to go*….*and now we're left with largely a staff who are philosophically aligned to a much greater degree.*

The participants saw this as an integral part of school improvement that over time will lead to a more inclusive school culture.

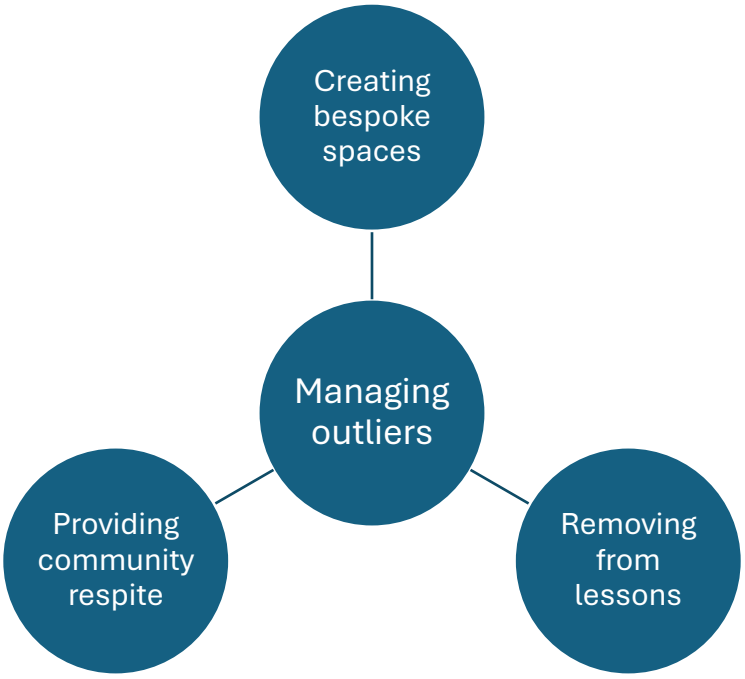
Managing Outliers.

Frank: …*when people talk about inclusion, that seems like what they're talking about is, what is your provision for making sure that students don't end up being taken out of mainstream school or permanently excluded from school.*

Participants described how they felt it is impossible to reconcile catering for the diverse needs of students in a large organization with *only* consistent expectations. Because they

Figure 11

Sub-categories of Managing Outliers



were committed to including as many CYP as possible (see *Best Efforts to Include All*) they needed to find ways to preserve the physical placement of students whose presentations stretch the capacity of mainstream school. The approaches they adopt are described in the sub-categories of *Managing Outliers* in Figure 11.

Creating Bespoke Spaces. As a key tool to help retain those CYP whose needs are most complex and are not deemed compatible with mainstream inclusion, participants created separate educational spaces to address particular needs but away from the mainstream provision:

Claire: *...we've got this sort of inclusion area where you've got a number of rooms...medical needs....children that maybe have come in in KS4 and they can't do all of their options...children that are reintegrating back in...another couple of rooms for your, I suppose your traditional AP children.*

Although these create a degree of separation, participants like Ben saw these bespoke areas as the only way to include some students who find it impossible to meet the expectations of mainstream due to significant learning or SEMH needs:

Ben: ...*we had a group of students who'd come through in Y7 who all had EHCPs but within that group...there were some who were 2 or 3 years chronologically behind their peers and would really value that kind of nurture group environment otherwise they'd just be swallowed up within a mainstream setting*....

Although this is more of an integration model where these CYP are physically placed at school but have their participation restricted, Alf described how he aims to ensure its quality by hosting them *within* the school site and using school staff:

Alf: *We have no external alternative provision at the school, everything is done internally. We run our own online school for kids with medical needs so that if they are off due to medical reasons, including anxiety, they will continue having lessons with their teachers that are live, that are safe, that are secure, to maintain that going. We've got a unit we set up for kids in year 11 who would otherwise be permanently excluded who are not permanently excluded, who are taught in the school.*

Participants did not see these spaces as detention areas to keep certain groups segregated from the school community but bespoke provision to address SEMH or learning needs *more effectively* to help CYP regulate and reduce their risk of PEX. This often means allowing students to deviate considerably from conventional school expectations by attending later and following a different curriculum.

Removing From Lessons. Many participants saw CYP forfeiting their right to be included in individual lessons if their presentations interfered with the learning of *other* students (see *Defining Limits*). Therefore, those like Gina empowered teachers to *exclude* them from a class as they deem necessary:

Gina: …*if they continue, they are removed from the classroom and they will come and they will work out of their lesson to allow the teacher and the rest of the students to get on with their learning*.

The priority is on minimising the disruption to *other* students' learning within *that lesson* so the focus is on efficient removal even if a dysregulated student refuses to leave:

Derek: …*if staff want the students to be removed, they'll create an alert and we have a team that will go and collect the kid in the classroom*…

Participants explained they provided facilities away from the original lesson and their peers for such situations, which allows staff to explore the underlying reasons for the dysregulation. This very short-term *exclusion* is constructed as essential for the smooth delivery of the curriculum to the majority of compliant students and is inclusive overall because, as Claire shared, the intention is always to return CYP at the next available opportunity:

Claire: …*reintegration is there* [GESTURES] *because they are part of the school…children are sent for a lesson and then they go back. That's one of the 'I can't teach you in here, you're off'. They will go back and there's obviously systems through that with heads of year and all the rest of it. There is a seclusion that the kids will go in for a day or something like that*…

However, she made it clear that she also made provision for longer periods of removal should that be needed.

Providing Community Respite. If a CYP's actions become threatening or dangerous towards others or are steering towards criminality, participants like Frank felt they must act protectively towards the rest of the community by removing the source of risk and be *seen to act* decisively in order to maintain public confidence in their position:

Frank:….*we still very much care about your child, we care about their education, but they can't be in our school after what was seen as such a public thing. We need to make it seem that the child is not now around and about and it's all just ok the next day…we would make*

sure that the students weren't seen for a long period of time, perhaps a term. But what we might do is send them to one of our neighbouring Trust schools…it's important that a clear message is sent out around those things.

Since inclusive schools seek to avoid *exclusion,* Frank indicated he would use supportive networks between local secondary schools to maintain the CYP's inclusion but at *another* school community for a fixed period. He, and other participants like Gina, had confidence that this is still a serious sanction but it is commensurate with their inclusive ethos as it is not PEX, and serves several purposes simultaneously:

Gina: …*we need to have the student out for the day…It may be something's gone wrong with a peer and so you want to support that young person but equally we need to show support to the person, the victim….maybe the perpetrator has certain needs as well or maybe it wasn't quite so clear cut…maybe there was an element of provocation or something like that. But equally they can't just come back as normal because what they did was really wrong. So it gives some breathing space and time for that person to reflect that like that isn't acceptable. The other person can also see a little bit like, Oh they're not around today. That's clearly been taken seriously. Rather than them just popping back the next day and it potentially blowing up and becoming a lot bigger problem.*

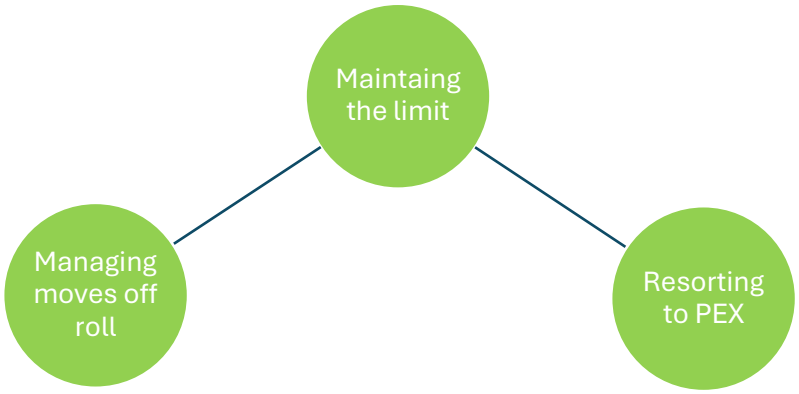
Gina and Frank constructed this as an *inclusive* sanction that maintains the education of all CYP and potentially allows a therapeutic analysis of what caused the behaviour. At the same time it confirms what is unacceptable behaviour and retains confidence in their authority and the safety of the school for the rest of the community. Because it still requires a CYP attend a school rather than stay at home, it also avoids inadvertently rewarding poor behaviour. Being only ever fixed-term, Howard focused on the CYP returning having used the experience to modify their attitude towards the original school:

Howard: ….[they*] kind of come back into here and have kind of realised that, yeah, I want to try and succeed here. I don't want to be permanently moved…*

Maintaining the Limit.

Figure 12

Sub-categories of Maintaining the Limit



Edward: *Sometimes though, it is blatantly obvious that a school cannot meet a child's needs, but unfortunately the system and structures at the moment when we have to go through quite a lot of steps that ultimately build that evidence – and that can be quite painful for a young person…*

When participants encountered CYP with extreme presentations they shared how they had to re-evaluate if *any* form of inclusion in the school was possible. If the actions were deemed highly unsafe, criminal or disruptive, they felt that had to employ approaches to remove them from school permanently, as seen by the two sub-categories of *Maintaining the limit* in Figure 12.

Managing Moves Off Roll. There are occasions when participants considered that a CYP's actions mean they can no longer be included in the community (see *Defining Limits*) and it is in the best interests of all parties if they are permanently removed:

Gina: *…the child has stupidly brought drugs into school or they have got involved in this massive fight or some horrendous online thing that's happened or stuff like that where you can't go back…you can't go back into school after everything that's happened. But another school, where they don't know it's happened…that's much more likely to be successful.*

Participants explained that COUNTY 1's secondary schools formed a Behaviour and Attendance Improvement Partnership (BAIP) which receives devolved funding from the LA to avoid permanent exclusions:

Derek: ...*when it gets to a point of a permanent exclusion, we would rather manage move a student...We have a managed move protocol that we set up here, so we'll...99% of the time we'll manage move a student if it's got to the point of a permanent exclusion...*

The concept of the BAIP is that CYP who need to leave a school for behavioural reasons can be relocated to another school within the same BAIP for a trial period. If that is successful, then the move becomes permanent. Participants like Howard constructed such managed moves as more inclusive than a PEX because they are easier to arrange within the BAIP and CYP will spend less time out of education:

Howard: ...*a managed move can be as quick as...right we need a week's notice to get it on the Fair Access Panel and the school can have* [them] *within a two-week period...*

There is also an onus on the excluding headteacher to invest sufficient resources to support the CYP in their new setting to increase the chances of a successful transition and preserve the partnership with the receiving school.

Resorting to PEX. Although the established culture in COUNTY 1 is to avoid PEX whenever possible, participants have not abandoned it unconditionally. Frank described how it is always retained as a strategy should he decide it is required:

Frank: ...*not that we would never permanently exclude but...that would be the last resort...there certainly have been times over the last year or so that I've had to consider permanent exclusion, but we'd always try not to.*

He is clear that PEX remains an ultimate sanction to preserve his authority and protect the integrity of the school community. Ben appraised this as commensurate with a commitment to inclusion, provided he had tried all other avenues of support:

Ben: ...*I've had to kind of permanently exclude two children this year. But then I am quite reassured at that point that I know there was nothing else I could have done. And there still has to be a point actually....they've got to understand, and the parents have got to understand, at some point...when we say no, that's enough*.

PEX is the manifestation of participants' evaluating that the actions of CYP already on their roll are no longer compliant with the non-negotiable elements of the sub-category *Maintaining Safety and Order*. Gina observed that if she risk assessed these actions as consistently unsafe to others, then her *inclusive* duty shifted from the individual student to protecting the safe inclusion of the rest of the school community:

Gina: *Within a mainstream setting there is* [a limit]....*I think of a student that we had to end things with a year or two ago. They were randomly very violent. I can't keep staff and students safe when I didn't know what would randomly set this person up and they nearly put a child in hospital twice....I can't risk that. I can't pay with people's lives*.

Discussion

Whilst inclusion features prominently as a key concept in international agreements (UNESCO, 1994; 2015), professional duties for school leaders (Gov.uk, 2020) and school inspection frameworks (Gov.uk, 2025b), it is also an evolving and unclear term that warrants further exploration. Given this, this research aimed to understand the working definition used by participating secondary headteachers and learn how they operate it within their schools.

A GT approach was applied to the participants' data to create theoretical models to explain how headteachers define (HDIM) and operationalize inclusion (TMHOI). The following sections will review the emergent theoretical models in detail and, where relevant, integrate them within existing research and theory to explain and contextualize the findings and show their contribution to the inclusion debates.

Summary of HDIM

The *Headteacher Definition of Inclusion Model* (HDIM - Figure 3) proposes the headteachers within this study have moved towards aspects of an *accommodation* (Booth, 1996) rather than *integration* (Lunt & Norwich, 1999) model of inclusion, recognizing that schools now service an increasingly diverse population and that meeting these differences has become the professional expectation. The higher-level category *Everything a School Does* constructs inclusion as synonymous with education for all and therefore interacting with every policy decision. However, the headteachers subordinated all subsequent concepts beneath the next high-level category – *Best Efforts to Include All*. This is constructed from four sub-categories: *Resisting PEX,* showing that participants focused on avoiding PEX which for them justified using approaches that limit a CYP's full inclusion because they were *more* inclusive than PEX; *Criminal or Dangerous Behaviour,* indicated participants felt CYP acting this way were deemed too threatening to the rest of the community to remain included; *Disrupting Others' Learning*, proposed participants interpreted they had a duty to prevent dysregulated CYP's actions halting or interfering with other students learning; and *Conditional Trust,* where participants described how CYP's full participation was a privilege earnt by demonstrating compliance with the other safety concerns. Participants used this filtering framework to outline their conceptual limits of inclusion and revealed that they refused to countenance unconditional inclusion, prioritizing their duty to protect the inclusive rights of the whole community *above* the rights of individuals where these were incompatible.

For those CYP whose needs were deemed manageable within school capacity, the model suggests that participants have pragmatically moved from an *assimilation* model where individual children are expected to conform with fixed expectations imposed by their organization with minimal modifications, because it was failing to address the increased needs participants were encountering. HDIM indicates participants may construct inclusion as a conceptual framework comprising four categories:

1) *Developing All CYP Fully* - realizing the full potential of every CYP to equip them for post-16 life by providing equal access to a range of experiences designed to minimize disadvantages resulting from different backgrounds and engender more equitable outcomes. Curriculum is modified to match CYP needs and aptitudes.
2) *Being Known and Understood* - re-creating schools as a community of unique individuals whose differences are acknowledged, understood and supported in bespoke ways. The trust built by making schools more interested in individual CYP and the application of relational consequences over punitive sanctions is used to renegotiate behaviour positively.
3) *Generating Belonging* – All CYP become agents in the community through a mutual process of investment underpinned by choice in their level of involvement. This is overtly to encourage CYP to value school and insulate them against criminal exploitation.
4) *Embracing Diversity* – school actively teaches CYP that diversity is to be expected and has positive benefits to their communities.

Together these categories form the conceptual framework drawn from participants' definitions of inclusion. In HDIM, these categories are grouped together beneath the higher-level categories and the feedback arrows indicate that the headteachers resolve any conceptual tensions by re-filtering their thinking through *Best Efforts to Include All*.

Theoretical Links to HDIM

At the centre of HDIM is tension caused by participants trying to hold two concepts of inclusion simultaneously. Firstly, that inclusion is central to education and is reflected in all planning decisions, as seen in *Everything a School Does*. In response to this, the four categories*: Developing All CYP Fully, Being Known and Understood, Generating Belonging* and *Embracing Diversity* construct school as a reflective and adaptive environment to *accommodate* all CYP rather than compelling them to *assimilate* with it. The clear commitment to providing equal opportunities and reducing barriers to facilitate more equitable outcomes for all would suggest that professional expectations, training and

government policies have influenced participants to embrace the intent of international declarations (UNICEF, 1989; UNESCO, 1994): *'To fulfil this right, countries must ensure universal equal access to inclusive and equitable quality education and learning, which should be free and compulsory, leaving no one behind.' (UNESCO, 2015, p.28)*. This makes it clear that inclusion is a CYP's *right*. None of the participants discussed how they interpreted the word *right*, but some talked about having a *responsibility* to include all CYP. This was constructed as a duty to be a vehicle of social justice that bridges disadvantages and insulates CYP against negative influences as seen in *Aspiring for Equity*, *Equality of Opportunities* and *Protecting the Vulnerable*, and this enables school to help everyone thrive and fully develop. Participants articulated that the way they conceived inclusion moved away from behaviorist models and that this required investment in understanding CYP's needs to help manage challenging presentations *without* punitive sanctions and so preserve the key element of *belonging*. The overall message was that it is morally right to keep CYP in school and participating fully for their development and safety. However, this concept of inclusion at all costs was not commensurate with participants' second constraint, that their practice is inherently restricted by the financial limits of their organization and the need to balance rights of an individual against the rights of the whole community. The development of the higher level category, *Best Efforts to Include All*, indicated that participants re-conceived their commitment to inclusion as only extending *as far as possible*.

Societal understanding of the word rights is reflected by a dictionary definition that confirms these should not be mutable or subject to revision by any agencies, including headteachers: *'**Right** – n. justification, fair claim, being entitled to privilege or immunity, thing one is entitled to (belongs to them by right, has no right to do it).'* (The Pocket Oxford Dictionary, 1984, p.644). Also, as seen in the literature, expectations are reinforced by both the teacher (Gov.uk, 2021) and headteacher (Gov.uk, 2020) professional standards, that make it clear that school leaders' commitment to including all CYP should now be central to their role. Participants described encountering two irreconcilable concepts, as seen in

Figure 13

Opposing Thoughts within Participants' Definition of Inclusion



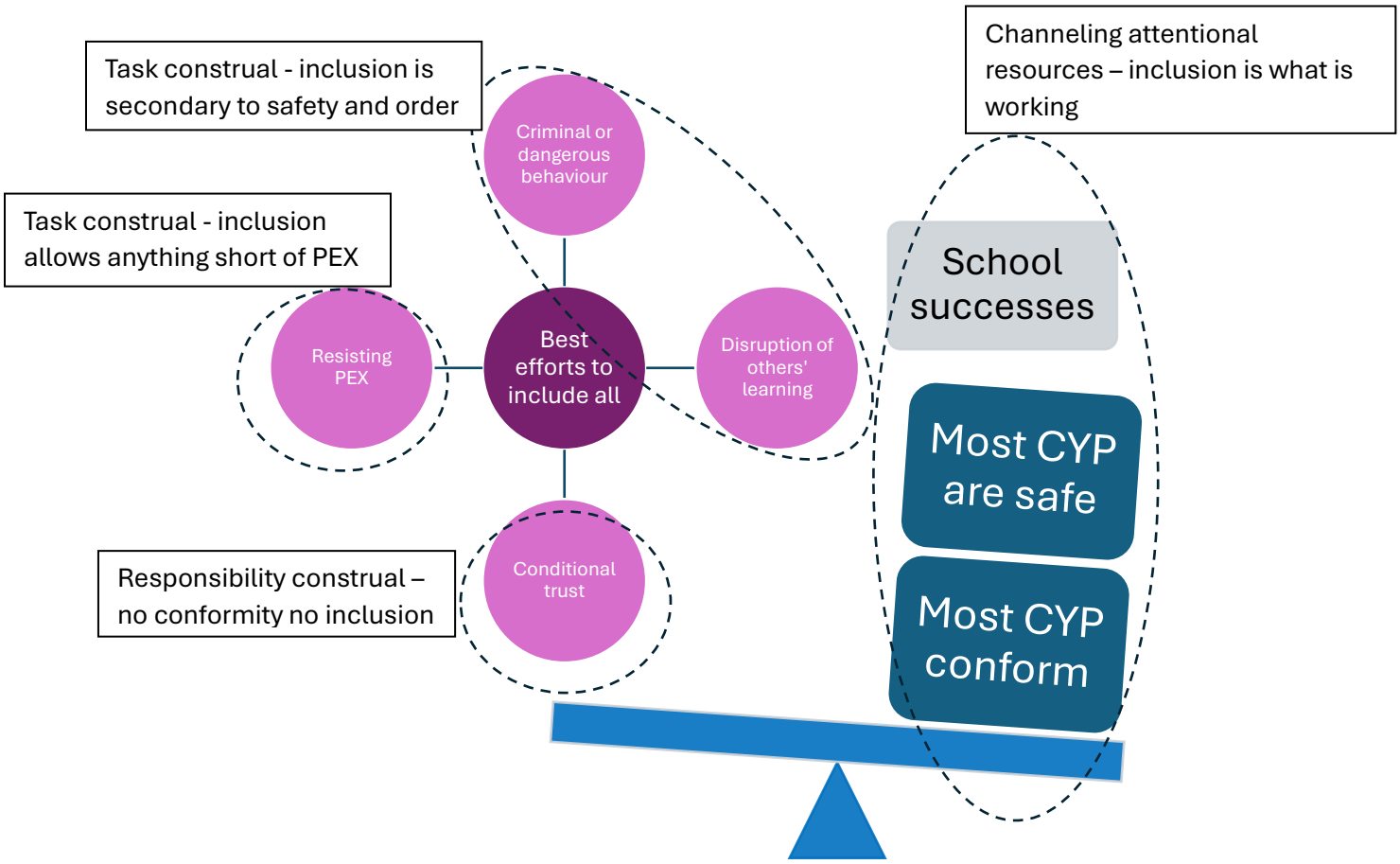
Figure 13, that inclusion is both a moral right, that must be maintained for all CYP at all times, against the practical limits and an equal moral duty to protect others. Existing theories may help explain how participants resolve this apparent contradiction. Rogers (1951) suggests psychological discomfort results from disparity between people's *self-concept* - cognitive constructs about what they expect from themselves - and the subconscious comparisons they make about themselves to other people and their *self-ideal*. Burkley and colleagues (2017) would suggest *to be inclusive* and to be *seen to be inclusive* could enter headteacher professional self-concept as an example of intrapersonal fusion of thoughts (eg. 'all CYP are equal and valued') and goals (eg.'I must include all CYP'). If this association is strong enough, it could result in a self-concept of 'I am an inclusive headteacher'. Leary and colleagues (2009) suggest this leaves participants vulnerable to self-threat if factors lead to negative comparisons, either against others or their ideal self-concept which will trigger self-protection (Sedikides, 2012).

HDIM suggests that may be what happens as participating headteachers are left to reconcile *how* to be inclusive in the context of managing a public service with only limited funding and expertise (Bell, 2017), which is made more complicated by explicit messages from central government about maintaining order in schools (DfE, 2024a), using exclusion (DfE, 2023b) and direct comparison via exam league tables (Gov.uk, 2024a). They are left with incompatible thoughts such as *'I must include all'* and *'I must offer equitable*

education' against *'I lack resources to meet all needs'* and *'I must protect the integrity of the school'*. The natural desire to resolve these to avoid psychological tension is compatible with *Cognitive Dissonance Theory* (Festinger, 1962). HDIM would suggest that participants have attempted this by deconstructing inclusion as a *right* and reconstructing it is as a *privilege* they can bestow should CYP be able to conform and their needs fit within the resources perceived to be available. If the dissonance is related to self-threat (Aronson, 1969), HDIM suggests participants may be filtering concepts of inclusion through *Best Efforts to Include All* to protect their self-concept as an inclusive practitioner by constructing some things as being beyond their control. Figure 14 shows the interaction of the HDIM with three self-protection processes that Sedikides (2012) identifies may be at work:

Figure 14

Self-protection Measures Interacting with Participants' Definition of Inclusion



- *Task construal* re-casts inclusion as secondary behind 'more important' considerations like protecting others and controlling illegal acts, and using 'anything but PEX'.
- *Responsibility construal* blames failure on others – the DfE funding model and CYP who cannot conform.
- *Channeling attentional resources* means headteachers draw attention to where their actions appear more inclusive, such as providing nurture rooms, but away from where it is less successful, such as isolating CYP in AP.

By allowing participants to reconstruct inclusion as a privilege rather than a right and making it subordinate to specific criteria, this filter re-introduces the idea that ultimately there are at least *two* groups of students – those school can include and those it might not – which preserves the notion of a 'centre' versus 'others' - which writers like Corbett (2001), Ekins (2016) and Slee and Allan (2001) would suggest means this definition does not represent true *inclusion*.

The HDIM proposes that participants conceived inclusion around four key concepts which can be implicitly linked to the professional expectations in the headteacher (Gov.uk, 2020) and teacher standards (Gov.uk, 2021). However, participants *explicitly* interwove these with their understanding of how inclusion supports ultimate expression of human success with trauma-informed practice (Department for levelling up, housing and communities, 2023; Fonagy et al., 1994; Bombèr, 2007; Bombèr, 2020; Bombèr et al., 2020). Each of HDIM's four categories are now discussed and linked with theory.

Developing All CYP Fully. When talking about inclusion, participants talked about the need to create an environment that allows all CYP to thrive and flourish to their greatest extent. In interview, Alf overtly named his ultimate goal of inclusion:

Alf: ...*Schools are vehicles for the expression and development of self-actualization....it's the top layer of Maslow's Hierarchy, and it's really becoming the best version of you that you can possibly be...*

Although none of the other participants used this terminology, returning to the definition in the original theory reveals their comments also aligned with the definition of self-actualization: *'It refers to the desire for self-fulfillment, namely, to the tendency for him to become actualized in what he is potentially.…to become everything that one is capable of becoming.'* (Maslow, 1943, p.382). At face value, helping all CYP develop to their fullest extent is entirely compatible with the aspirations of the Incheon Declaration (UNESCO, 2015), the headteacher (Gov.uk, 2020) *and* teacher standards (Gov.uk, 2021), and all participants agreed it is essential for CYP to satisfactorily move into adult life. However, Maslow's (1943) definition of *self-actualization* manifests differently for every individual, which may align with the Incheon Declaration for equity and equality but creates a complex problem for schools trying to manage their offer. Providing equity and equality for all CYP is not only an extremely ambitious aspiration given the finite resources headteachers have at their disposal, but they are also slightly divergent concepts, which makes it hard for headteachers to construct what they look like. Equality suggests all CYP have the same access to everything at the same time, whereas equity requires individual CYP have personalized support to help them reach the same outcome as peers. In HDIM, *Aspiring for Equity* is directly related to *Facilitating Bespoke Curricula* and *Responding to Individuals* but participants subsequently used it to inform categories in the TMHOI (Figure 5) – *Being Flexible with Behaviour, Tailoring Curriculum for Individuals* and *Creating Bespoke Spaces* – all of which are deliberate efforts *not* to be equal to support pupil's individual needs effectively. Genuine *equality* would seem incompatible with individual modifications as CYP taken out for individual support or into separate provision are being excluded from their peers. Exactly how inclusion should manifest equity is further complicated as there are outcomes that school conventionally *encourages* to be different such as exam results and job opportunities. Inclusion theorists Lunt and Norwich (1999) feel this debate is at the heart of arguments about inclusion and analysis revealed participants resolved it by returning to the high-level category *Best Efforts to Include All.* By downgrading inclusion from a 'right' to a 'possibility', they allow themselves to consider imperfect versions of inclusion to be successful. Sedikides (2012) self-protection would suggest they are using

Task construal to redesign inclusion to only mean facilitating equal access and C*hanneling attentional resources* to focus on occasions where this has been possible, such as gathering data on minority access to clubs and school trips.

Participants defined inclusion as equipping CYP to manage themselves beyond the protective environment of an adaptive school, which does relate to an overt duty: *'uphold ambitious educational standards which prepare pupils from all backgrounds for the next phase of education and life.' (Gov.uk, 2020, s2.1)*. *Educating for Adulthood* encapsulates the participants' portrayal of their interpretation of duties to support post-16 transition outcomes in Preparing for adulthood (2017), with particular focus on the movement into other settings:

- Employment - transition to new setting
- independent living - life skills, managing your time, being safe in your home
- community inclusion - belonging to different groups, building resilience, developing new friendships, managing your time, being safe on the streets
- health - mental health and wellbeing. (PfA, 2017)

Participants reported that alongside providing necessary adaptations, inclusion also has an *equal* duty to support CYP to *understand* their needs so they can advocate for themselves but also learn to succeed in environments that are less willing or able to adapt in adult life. This is interesting as participants accepted that schools are not reflective of the wider world and the ultimate goal of *inclusion* is to help CYP *integrate* into an unreformed society once they leave.

Being Known and Understood. Participants defined inclusion as understanding individual CYP's needs in order to support them effectively, which can be linked to a teacher standard:

> '*have a clear understanding of the needs of all pupils, including those with special educational needs; those of high ability; those with English as an additional*

> *language; those with disabilities; and be able to use and evaluate distinctive teaching approaches to engage and support them.'* (Gov.uk, 2021, s1.5).

The central concept of *Responding to Individuals* is to use information derived from trusted interpersonal communication between CYP, families and school staff to inform subsequent support and interaction but also any *reaction* to their future presentations.

The sub-category *Seeing Behaviour as Need* shows that participants constructed inclusion around trauma-informed research. They were aware that stress-influenced experiences in childhood affect neural development (Koss et al., 2015) and inappropriate nurture affects the working model of how CYP relate to others (Bowlby, 1969). Together, these may impair concentration, access to learning and social interactions (Rijk et al., 2008) and reduce trust in adults. These headteachers accepted that CYP's presentations are not always conscious choices and may reflect unmet needs a stance that is reflected in the work of writers such as Bombèr (2020) and so inclusion requires they reconsider how to react with non-punitive responses which can be further linked to the standards: *'manage classes effectively, using approaches which are appropriate to pupils' needs in order to involve and motivate them'* (Gov.uk, 2021, s1.7).

Using Relational Consequences showed participants' definition of inclusion moved from a behaviourist model to a relational one. In the former, CYP actions are seen as cognitive decisions; poor behaviour results from bad choices, good behaviour from good ones. The behaviourist model seeks to condition CYP actions by punishing what is unwanted and rewarding what is, and the assumption all CYP make these decisions consciously and from an equal starting point makes it ethical. HDIM reveals these headteachers' perception of unwanted behaviour had changed and so too had their choice of response. They focused on using trauma-informed approaches to co-regulate and re-establish trust (Bombèr et al., 2020). Some participants considered that poor behaviour is *maintained* by punishment through a combination of avoidance and reward, in much the same way as Emotionally Based School Avoidance can be maintained by avoidance of distress (Hodder, 2022). As Figure 15a shows, in *Using Relational Consequences*, poor

behaviour is constructed as potentially masking psychological discomfort or anxiety in school, from which CYP gain short term relief by behaving in ways they know will trigger the behaviour policy and removal. If they are sent home, this relief is reinforced with an inadvertent reward. The result is that next time they encounter distress or anxiety, they are very likely to misbehave to achieve the same result.

Some participating heads seek to 'break the behaviour cycle' by working with dysregulated CYP in school and helping them to understand the consequences of their actions by spending more time with the school staff, not less. Figure 15b demonstrates how this potentially removes the incentive for misbehaving and creates a more inclusive sanction that supports and does not undermine *belonging*.

Figure 15a

Behaviour Cycle Maintained

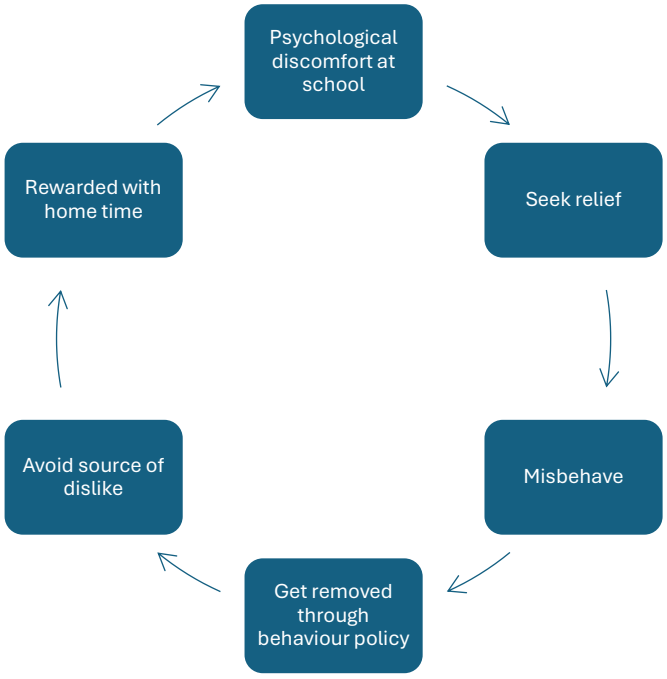
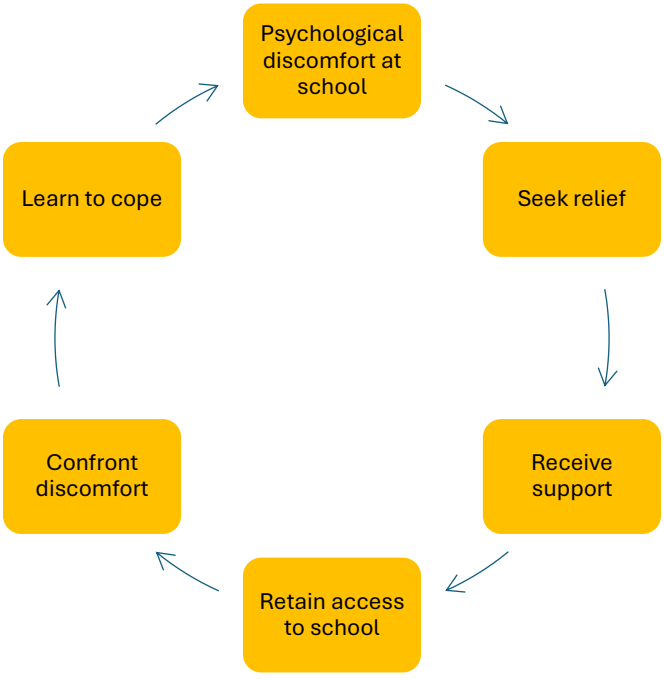


Figure 15b

Behaviour Cycle Broken

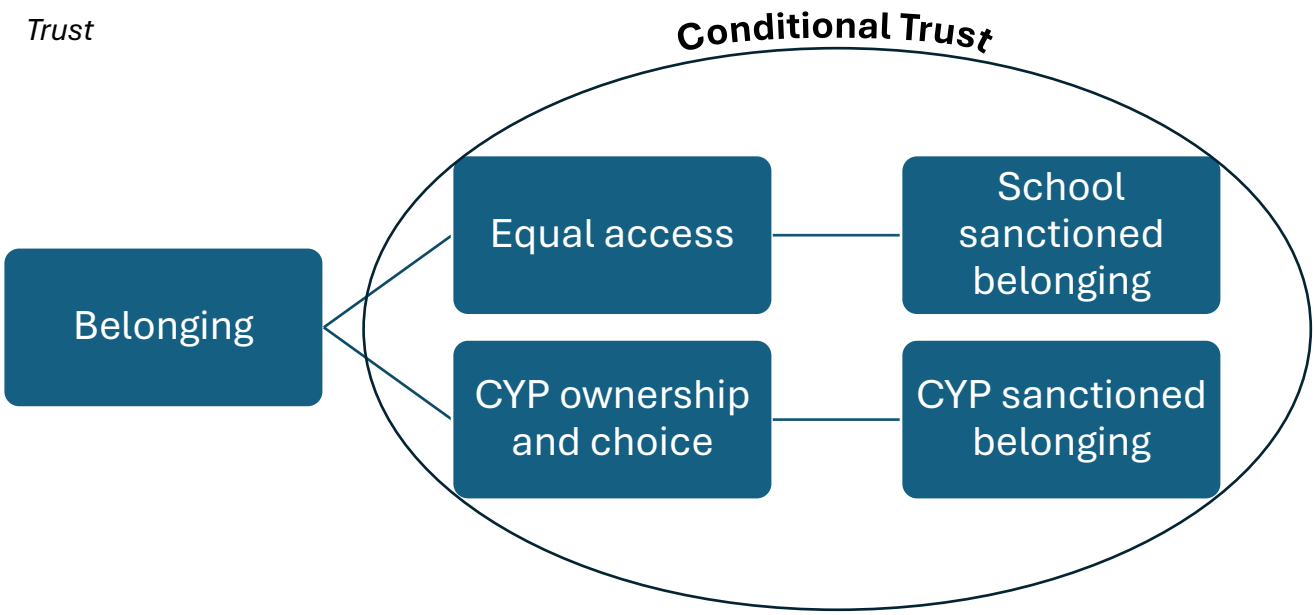


Generating Belonging. *'create a culture where pupils experience a positive and enriching school life.' (Gov.uk, 2020, s.2.1)*. These headteachers defined inclusion by the strength of the relationship they inculcate between each CYP and the school, and like Bailey (1998) they considered this to be a reflection of how much they *belong*. Many psychological theories cite belonging as a fundamental human need (Bowlby, 1969; 1973) and it has been defined as: *'…frequent, nonaversive interactions within an ongoing relational bond…the need to belong is a powerful, fundamental and extremely pervasive motivation.'* (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p.497). Participants accepted a lack of belonging would create obstacles to CYP development and so resolved to satisfy this need to allow CYP to flourish in other ways. This could be seen as an application of Maslow's (1943) theory that belonging must be established before the later tiers, and self-actualization, can be realized.

Participants constructed that belonging is mutually *earned* by both school and CYP through: *equal access, choice* and *ownership*. Firstly, many participants indicated a preference for inclusion that mirrors the aspiration of a participatory democracy as Ainscow and colleagues propose (2006) which means actively promoting *equal access* for all CYP to everything within the school provision and facilitating their *choices*. Secondly, participants developed CYP ownership of the school by acting on *their* initiatives. These headteachers aspired to promote the idea that school belongs *to the CYP* and so create a sense of agency in them. The benefits of this approach could be explained through related theories as an example of increasing CYP feelings of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) by increasing their *internal locus of control* (Rotter, 1966). However, Figure 16 shows there may be divergence in what stakeholders consider generates belonging. For example, some of the things that *participants* identify - wearing uniform and attending assemblies – may not reflect *CYP* priorities as much as access to peers and social time. Additionally, the category *Conditional Trust* revealed that many headteachers only extend this empowerment and full access to CYP who continually prove themselves able to conform with school expectations (see Figure 16) – significant breaches of safety and order result in these privileges being reduced or removed.

Figure 16

Interaction of Stakeholders Conceptions of What Constitutes Belonging with Conditional Trust



Protecting the Vulnerable. '[Exploitation] *may involve an exchange for something the victim needs or wants* …' (DfE, 2025, p.15). Headteacher safeguarding duties are very clearly defined for them in guidance (DfE, 2025a) which includes being vigilant for children at risk from grooming for sexual exploitation, criminal exploitation and radicalization to extreme perspectives. However, this is essentially a *reactive* task designed to create a culture of alertness to supply help for CYP already exposed to these risks. These participants defined inclusion as *preventing* CYP being vulnerable in the first place. This was based on the concept that belonging is an essential need that CYP *must* satisfy, which is aligned with the findings of Bowlby (1969) and Maslow (1943). These participants accepted that CYP will be compelled to seek belonging from other sources if it is not met by school and safe adults and makes it a moral imperative for them to do so.

Embracing Diversity. This section discusses how participants interpreted their understanding of the need to model an appreciation of difference which can be positioned as a response to their professional standards. It explores a process that may emerge through the sub-categories *Raising Awareness, Celebrating Differences* and *Rejecting*

Categories which may be explained as an application of Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977).

The headteacher standards require school leaders to: *'show tolerance of and respect for the rights of others, recognizing differences and respecting cultural diversity within contemporary Britain.' (Gov.uk, 2020, s.1)* and *'Uphold fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect, and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs' (Gov.uk, 2020, s.1)*. This means they must acknowledge that the profile of CYP in their communities is ever more diverse in terms of culture, ethnicity, languages, socio-economic status and many other contextual factors and they define inclusion as a school whose culture recognizes differences and perceives them as welcome and advantageous. Most participants constructed this as a teaching exercise captured through the sub-categories. Their process aligns with a *model-observation-imitate* process that could be explained through Social Learning Theory (SLT) (Bandura, 1977):

Embracing diversity is the wide modelling stage where leaders overtly demonstrate their expectation and acceptance of difference across the community through visible action, such as engaging with different communities and creating activities for minority groups, and implicit messages, such as showing diversity in publicity photographs and using inclusive wording in letters. This will be observed by pupils and staff and establishes social norms. *Raising awareness* creates opportunities through assemblies, awareness days, visitors and the curriculum to highlight diversity, forcing CYP to attend to an accurate representation of inclusion. Retention of the messages is promoted through frequent exposure which relies on leaders being visible and creating opportunities to continue modelling. In SLT, Bandura (1977) suggests CYP will encode the desired behaviour through associated images and verbal prompts but they will not imitate the desired behaviour unless they perceive its value. This could explain the priority participants gave to *Celebrating Differences* as a way to create motivation to imitate in two ways. Firstly, tapping into pupils' self-interest by actively promoting the positive influences diversity brings to the wider community and to pupils specifically. Secondly, by enhancing positive

evaluation of inclusive actions through overt praise. Informed by the imperative of the professional standards, participants conceived this version of inclusion to be non-negotiable and was therefore justified its own category, *Embracing Diversity*. Even though these sub-categories generally equate to Bandura's (1977) mediational stages, participants did not address *reproduction* perhaps reflecting an implicit assumption that CYP and staff in the community have capacity to adopt the model.

The final sub-category, *Rejecting Categories,* reflects that participants returned to the wider definition of inclusion similar to that suggested by Messiou (2017) – who argues that labels and categories are inherently non-inclusive as they create division through perception of 'in' and 'out' groups, and are too inflexible to explain the needs of CYP over time. These headteachers' inclusion sees CYP as unique individuals whose contexts evolve and may suddenly present unexpected needs. Therefore, *Embracing Diversity* is for everyone in the community as participants offered an overt critique of the new Ofsted framework's focus on measuring inclusion through the outcomes and participation for CYP from pre-identified groups perceived to be at disadvantage.

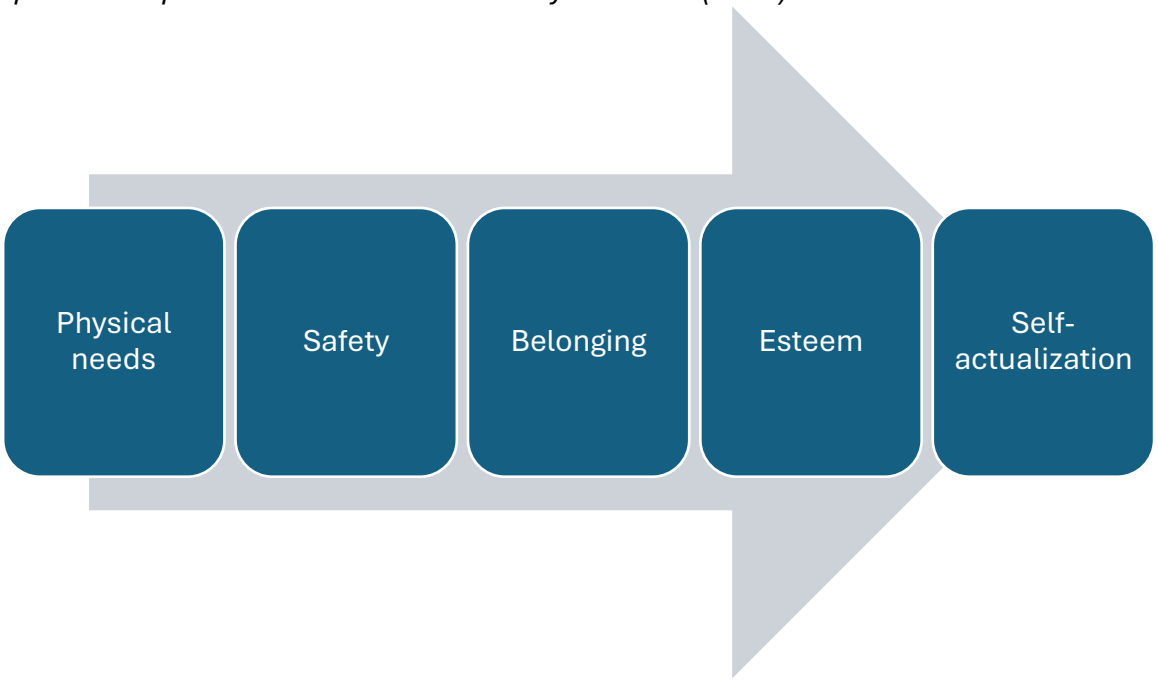
Table 3

HDIM Categories Mapped onto Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943)

HDIM category	Maslow's needs	Descriptors relevant to school inclusion
Developing all CYP fully	Self-actualization	Full expression of aptitudes and experience
Embracing diversity Being known and understood	Esteem	Self-respect, self-worth, confidence, feeling respected, recognition of achievements
Generating belonging	Belonging	Mutual affection: family, friends, community
Protecting the vulnerable	Safety	Safeguarding against abuse, radicalization, exploitation

Figure 17

Sequential Depiction of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943)



Concluding Thoughts

Although not directly named by all participants, Maslow's self-actualization (1943) aligns with how they define the *end purpose of inclusion* in school and Table 3 summarizes the application of the remaining categories in the HDIM. The original theory constructs human motivation deriving from the satisfaction of a sequence of needs (see Figure 17) in a predictable order, with self-actualization being the ultimate expression of success. Rather than the sequential satisfaction of needs in Maslow (1943), participants sought to address them concurrently which may reflect that these interviews were with secondary headteachers who work with CYP aged 11-16. Since participants constructed the ultimate goal of IE is to support CYP to reach their full potential, they may consider it more efficient to address missing steps through holistic measures at the same time. However, categories *Facilitating Bespoke Curricula* and *Responding to Individuals* revealed that these headteachers acknowledged some CYP manifest unmet needs that undermine inclusion unless they are met *first* and this requires special support be put in place.

Interestingly, none of the participants mentioned the foundational stage of meeting physical needs. Potentially, they assumed these are met for most CYP by a combination of supportive family life and a school building fit for purpose. For less fortunate CYP, these needs would be addressed through Free School Meals (DfE, 2025b), Pupil Premium (Gov.uk, 2026b) and the involvement of social care.

Summary of TMHOI

Theoretical Model of Headteacher Operationalization of Inclusion (TMHOI) (Figure 5) reveals the process by which participants operationalized inclusion. High-level category, *Wider Needs of CYP in Mainstream*, reflects their perception of the incongruity between finite school resources and cohorts with ever-expanding needs. This is resolved with a filtering category, *Defining Limits,* that frames *all* subsequent decisions about what needs can be accepted into the school community. It comprises two sub-categories: *Managing Finances, concerned* with balancing demands on funding for individuals against running the whole organization and *Maintaining Safety and Order,* which describes protecting the wider community's right to education free from interruption by extreme behaviour. Therefore, CYP's inclusion is only *conditional,* and any breaches of these limits may justify ejecting them from the community to a greater or lesser extent.

The majority of CYP pass this filter and the participants applied a conceptual category, *Creating Flexible Provision* to all planning decisions to make school responsive and adaptable to meet the varied needs, operationalized through four categories:

1) *Researching Individual Needs* – CYP information is gathered at an individual level, formally shared with staff and used to match their needs by refining their personal curriculum and school responses to dysregulation. The curriculum is frequently updated to reflect demographics and student learning profiles.
2) *Creating a School Family* – smaller structures within school elevate individuals' visibility. Relational and supportive approaches based on mutual positive regard and leadership acting on CYP initiatives develop investment in school and trust in adults which can be used to modify unwanted behaviour without sanctions.

3) *Providing Relational Staff* – forensic recruitment and ongoing CPD ensures staff have the required attitude and skills to act inclusively; headteachers dispense colleagues unable to comply.

From their entry into school or at any later stage, headteachers reserved the right to redefine inclusion for CYP whose presentations were deemed to require greater adaptation through a fourth category:

4) *Managing Outliers* - school provision is restructured for individual CYP: singular disruptive or threatening actions cause removal from lessons; diverse learning, SEMH, curriculum or attendance needs requiring significantly different approaches are accommodated away from the main school in separate settings or online; extreme or consistent misbehaviour that heads deem must be visibly sanctioned leads to temporary attendance at an alternative school.

Feedback arrows show headteachers continually reviewed CYP in these provisions and returned to *Defining Limits* to consider if, when and to what extent these CYP return to the wider school community. Decision Point 1 (DP1) reflects headteachers constant evaluation of their options given the latest presentations – and Decision Point 2 (DP2) is a decision to re-direct or return a CYP to *Managing Outliers*. Where this has been tried unsuccessfully or was deemed insufficient, headteachers moved to the final category, *Maintaining the Limit,* which includes all their options for permanently removing a CYP from their roll.

Theoretical Links for TMHOI

This study asked participants to share their perspectives on their definition of inclusion and their experiences of making it operational at the same time, which has led to natural synergy between the two models as one informs the other; the TMHOI can be interpreted as the practical realization of concepts they described in the HDIM as illustrated in Table 4, which shows these relationships. However, one area that needs further discussion is the process that may explain participants' approach described through the category *Providing Relational Staff*.

Table 4

TMHOI Categories Mapped onto HDIM Categories

TMHOI categories	HDIM category
Managing outliers; creating bespoke spaces	Best efforts to include all
Researching individual needs; communicating with staff; Creating a school family; Keeping it personal	Being known and understood; Protecting the vulnerable
Being flexible with behaviour; Acting relationally; Providing relational staff	Seeing behaviour as need; Responding to individuals; using relational consequences
Making curriculum representative	Embracing diversity
Tailoring curriculum	Facilitating bespoke curricula; Aspiring for equity
Maintaining community membership; Empowering voice	Generating belonging; Facilitating participation

Providing Relational Staff. Participants were unanimous in their opinion that inclusion is based on relationships between people and this made staff their school's greatest inclusive resource, as well as its biggest expenditure. They agreed that modern inclusive schooling requires all staff value the development of holistic and nurturing relationships with CYP and have the skills and patience to build them. The category *Providing Relational Staff* represents the participants' depiction of their commitment to secure this behaviour across their staff.

Participants explanation revealed they perceived staff fall into four groups: 1) existing staff who are already relational; 2) existing staff who are not yet relational but have potential to change; 3) existing staff who are not relational and refuse to act this way and 4) potential new recruits who represent a risk as their behaviour is unknown. The sub-categories capture how participants described management of this situation:

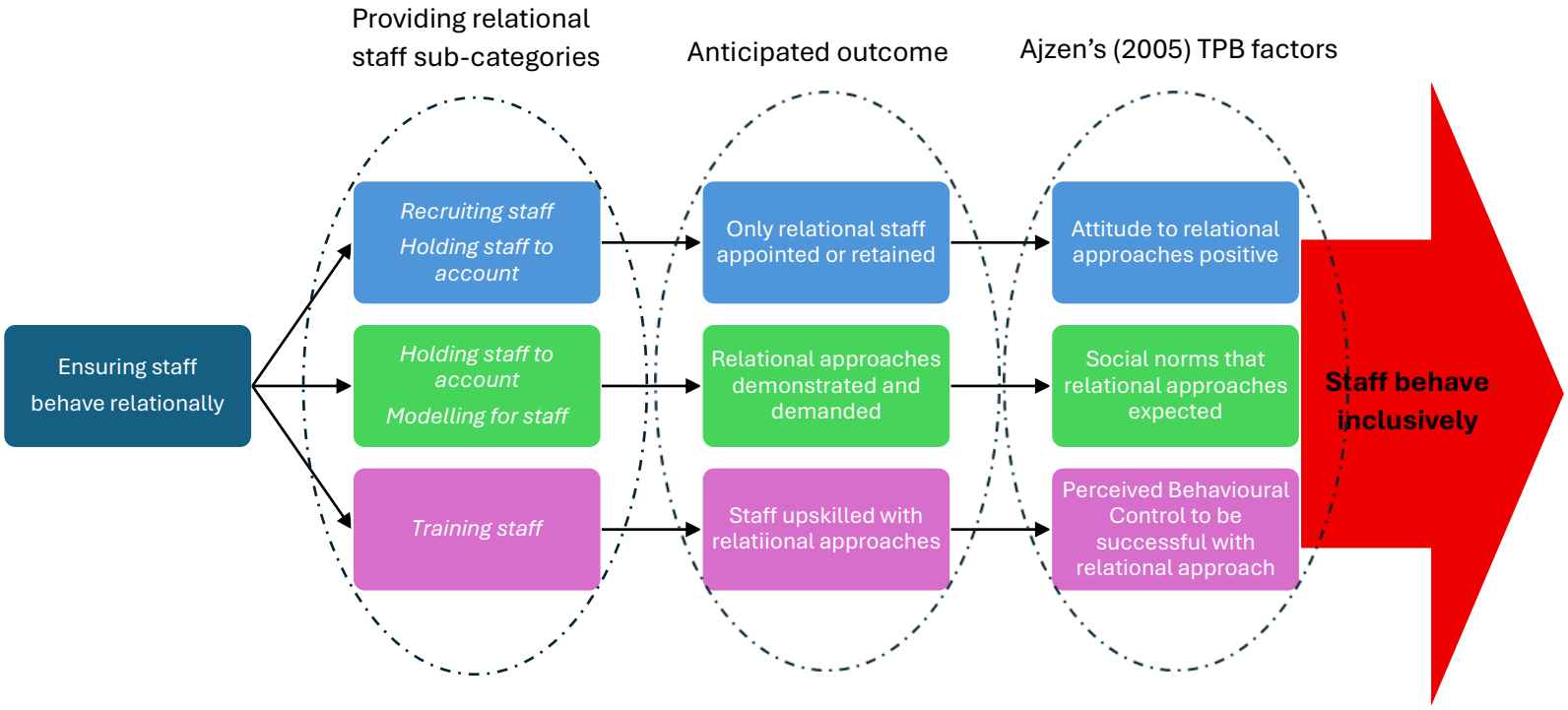
- *Recruiting Staff* focuses on making sure interview and recruitment processes make the school's inclusive vision clear from the outset to deter candidates with different opinions and modifies selection criteria to favour candidates with strong relational approaches. The objective is to make sure incoming staff are fully aligned with the school's inclusive vision when they start.
- *Training Staff* acknowledges that practices and research change over time and all staff benefit from direct input to support their own learning. This either strengthens the skills of existing staff or develops those new to the career. The objective is to make sure all staff feel confident they have the skills to act relationally.
- *Modelling for Staff* accepts the crucial role leaders have in creating an inclusive culture and establishing expectations across the whole organization through their actions. Priority is given to being *seen* to act relationally and creating opportunities for staff to observe and discuss relational practice with colleagues. The objective is to make sure all staff understand that acting relationally is non-negotiable, but support is available.
- *Holding Staff to Account* scrutinizes staff behaviour and challenges them where practice does not reflect school expectations and so reinforce the overall approach. The objective is to use direct management to maintain standards and, if necessary, remove staff unwilling to act relationally.

These sub-categories outline how participants described seeking to ensure their staff provision moved from the four types of staff mentioned above to one unit that cohesively adopts relational practice by only retaining or recruiting colleagues with a positive attitude towards relational approaches, making expectations explicit and enforcing them rigorously and providing training and mentoring in the skills to enact it.

One lens that could help explain what this approach is trying to achieve and why it may be considered successful is Ajzen's (2005) Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB). This theory conceives that an individual's attitude, motivation to act and ultimate behaviour arise from the degree of their personal positive or negative consideration of each element

Figure 18

How Sub-categories of Providing Relational Staff May Satisfy Factors Within Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 2005) to Generate Inclusive Behaviour in Staff



within three multiplicative relationships. Firstly, regard of a specific outcome and their belief the action will result in it. Secondly, 'normative beliefs' that observers desire the outcome too and how much the individual wishes to align with their norm. Finally, what Ajzen (2005) calls *perceived behavioural control* or the individual's perception of their realistic ability to get the job done. This is the result of believing crucial resources are at hand and their capacity to achieve the objective. Therefore, TPB concludes that teachers' behaviour is most likely to align with what they *personally agree with*, what they believe *others approve of* and what they consider they are *likely to succeed with*. Figure 18 shows how the sub-categories of *Providing relational staff* address all three of these factors.

TPB reveals a complicated interaction underpinning behaviours but Ajzen proposes that perceived behavioural control may be the limiting factor – if the means and opportunity

for success are perceived to be missing, teachers' own ethics, school ethos and social norms will be overruled. Therefore, this could explain why participants strongly identified the ongoing value of both *Training Staff* and *Modelling for Staff* so that teachers are sufficiently equipped with skills and resources to feel *capable* of delivering an inclusive education and so invest in making it a reality.

Resolving Ethical Tensions in TMHOI. However, TMHOI contains unresolved tension created by apparently contradictory processes in other sub-categories. *Being Flexible with Behaviour* results from importing trauma-informed approaches (Bombèr et al., 2020) and an understanding that CYP's presentations are dependent on context and prior experiences into behaviour management approaches. But most participants, like Claire, reported that they retained the idea that *some* presentations are still chosen by the CYP:

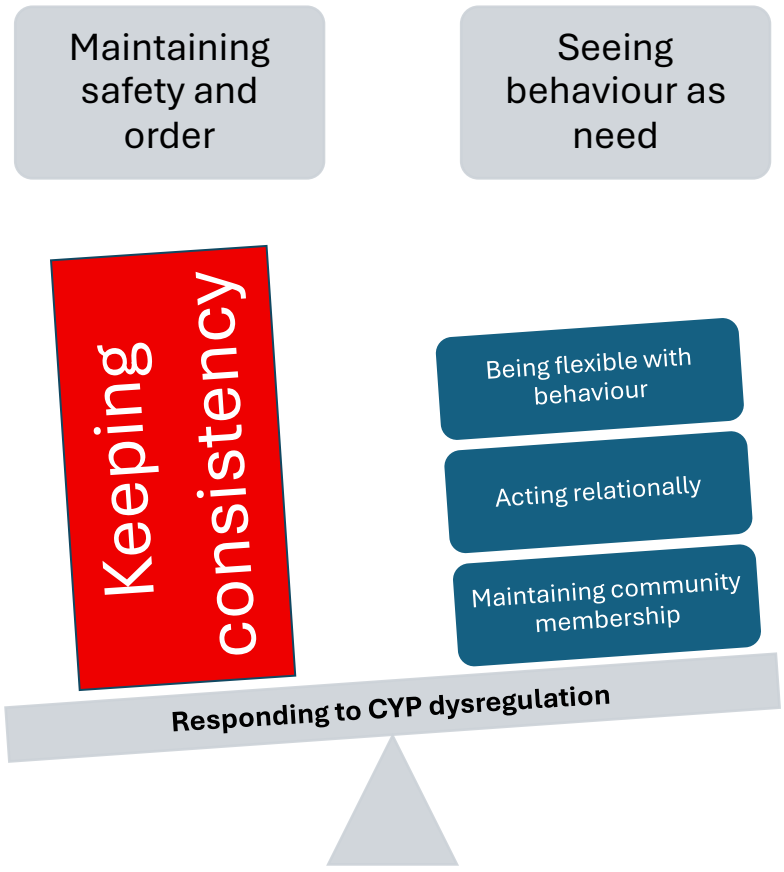
Claire: …*his behaviour is atrocious and quite a bit of that is choice that you, and everybody can see that that's choice*.

By dividing CYP's behaviour into two groups – conscious choices that warrant inflexible sanctions versus presentations that result from adverse experiences or neglect that require relational approaches – participants concluded that a multi-tiered response was required. This often took the form of *'strategy sheets'* containing approaches and resources to help individual CYP with *pre-identified needs* to manage classroom expectations. Participants considered these represent sufficient support for such CYP to conform, and provided staff made effective use of them, the CYP was then expected to follow the *clear and consistent rules for all*. From an inclusion perspective, this creates a problem since not all contextual factors *are* known to school and CYP experiences and context will inevitably change over time making it extremely hard to ensure the 'right' approach is adopted in each case. In fact, some participants wondered if there actually was any distinction between behaviour and need under any circumstances. Most of these headteachers realized this complexity made it impossible for their staff to determine if dysregulation resulted from bad choices or bad experience in the middle of a lesson and they felt pressure to find a pragmatic solution

that could be applied 'on the spot' to retain the integrity of the learning environment and protect their staff's position. They had particular concern that repeated observation of dysregulation by CYP with 'additional needs', if not managed effectively, could compromise overall discipline amongst 'other' CYP. Participants felt a strong obligation to preserve clear behaviour standards and control messages about what is acceptable in lessons for the majority of CYP and returned to concepts in category *Maintaining Safety and Order*. This could be attributed to the headteacher standards which make it absolutely clear they must *'ensure high standards of pupil behaviour and courteous conduct in accordance with the school's behaviour policy'* (Gov.uk, 2020, s1.4). This created tension with the therapeutic flexibility outlined within the HDIM concepts *Seeing Behavour as Need* and *Using Relational Consequences* as seen in Figure 19, that participants had to resolve.

Figure 19

Participants' Description of Tension when Balancing Therapeutic Responses with Duty to Maintain Safety and Order



The pressure to avoid what they considered a decline in order and to make it easier for staff to know how to react to dysregulation, led them to seek a level of 'consistency' across all CYP by imposing simple behaviour thresholds:

Derek: ...*I suppose the analogy is it's like a speed camera. It doesn't matter who's driving the car, it would just go off...*

Participants resolved this through the *s*ub-category *Keeping Consistent* which had the effect of positioning trauma-informed approaches (Bombèr, 2020) as a special consideration for particular CYP and *not* a universal approach for managing *all* CYP behaviour. This made it more likely that CYP whose presentations may in fact be related to *hidden contexts* will be sanctioned. Even if investigations subsequently revealed this and participants modified the school response, this *temporary* non-relational practice created further tension with categories of *Being Known and Understood* and *Generating Belonging* from the HDIM and potentially undermined their inclusive aspirations.

The interaction between these processes shows that in TMHOI these headteachers returned to *Defining Limits* to resolve operational tensions. In *Best Efforts to Include All* headteachers restructured the task of inclusion to create two groups of students – those that school *can* include and those it *cannot* – based on factors deemed beyond their control. In TMHOI, these headteachers acknowledged that they *must* compromise on the ultimate definition of full inclusion, even overruling their own aspirations for equity and equality (see HDIM), which they perceived as *being necessary to protect the rights of the rest of the community*. Bazerman and Tenbrunsel (2011) describe this type of ethical reasoning as *consequentialist* - evaluating morality of choices purely on outcomes – in this case ensuring school is safe and fit for the greatest number of students possible. In a pure sense, the international definitions of inclusion (UNESCO, 2015) require a *deontological* approach (Bazerman & Tenbrunsel, 2011), judging decisions by upholding the rights of every individual which heads, within this theoretical framing, are unable to do due to the multiple pressures of running a complex organization.

Decision Points 1 and 2. In the TMHOI model, the high-order category, *Defining Limits,* essentially creates three groups of CYP – those who can comply, those who cannot and those who *might* with some enhanced provision. Since full access to the school is only guaranteed for the first group, this renders it *inclusion by consent*. As discussed above, TMHOI operates with two key decision points as illustrated in figure 5. The core categories of *Researching Individual Needs*, *Creating a School Family* and *Providing Relational Staff* reflect the participants' design of making their schools more flexible and relational to allow CYP with slightly wider needs to comply with school expectations – which inadvertently maintains the supremacy of the 'centre' that writers like Ekins (2016) and Slee and Allen (2001) say inclusion must reject. In TMHOI, these headteachers defined limits to what they can reasonably be expected to include and essentially returned to an *integration* model (Barton, 1997; Lunt & Norwich, 1999; Corbett, 2001) where CYP are expected to assimilate into this slightly reformed provision. If an individual CYP's presentations begin to exceed those limits these headteachers experienced pressure from three community forces, which can be seen in Figure 20, to act *consequentially* (Bazerman & Tenbrunsel, 2011) and narrow their inclusive rights for the greater good.

Where the community perceived actions of a CYP posed threat to its members (staff or students) or learning, participating headteachers were under pressure to resolve this by ending the threat. This revealed a significant tension in their operationalization of inclusion as they had to find a way to balance the ethics of the HDIM while satisfying the community which again requires *consequentialist thinking* (Bazerman & Tenbrunsel, 2011). In the HDIM, participants defined inclusion as *Resisting Permanent Exclusion* and TMHOI decision points create a tiered response to 'unacceptable' presentations by incrementally *reducing* inclusion (see Figure 21) for an individual, which participants like Claire justified because they were seen as temporary:

Claire: ...*the aim is always to get them back into mainstream...as they start improving we will put them back...*

Figure 20

Constructed Views on the Pressures Headteachers Experience to Limit Inclusion

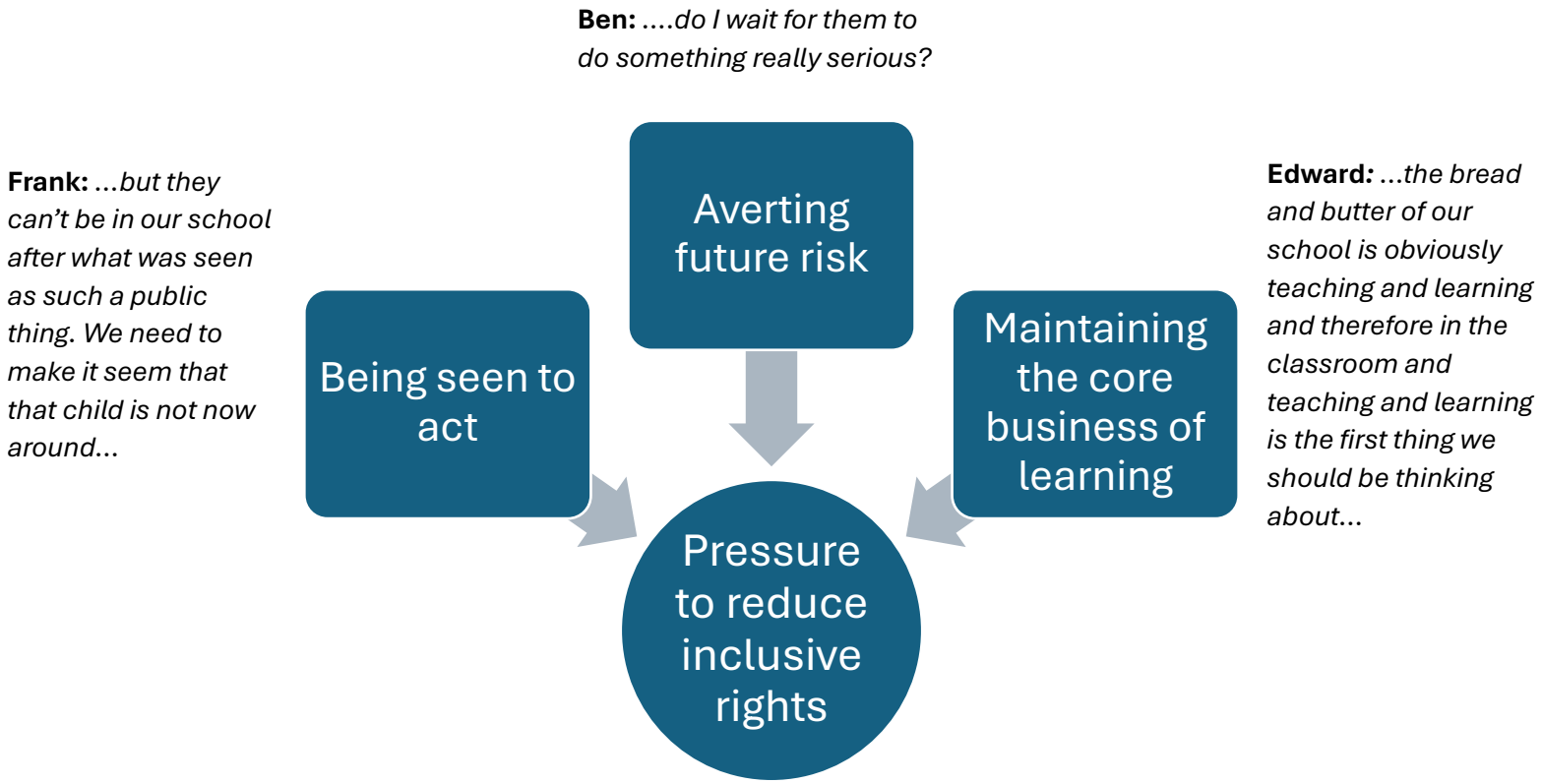
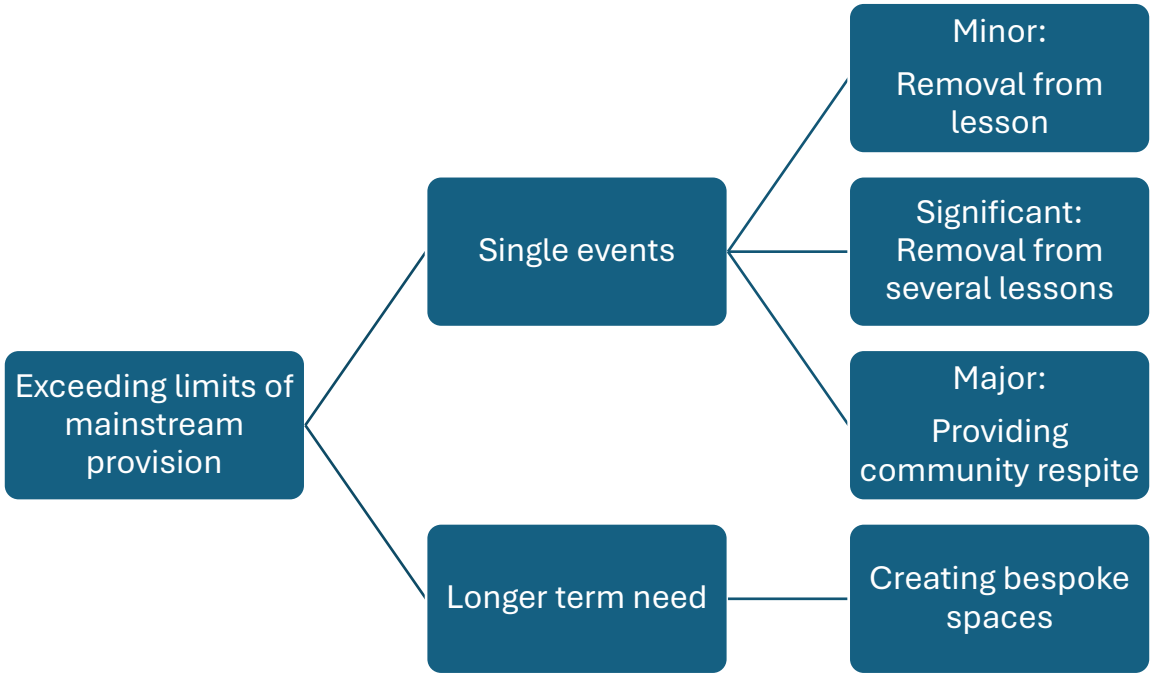


Figure 21

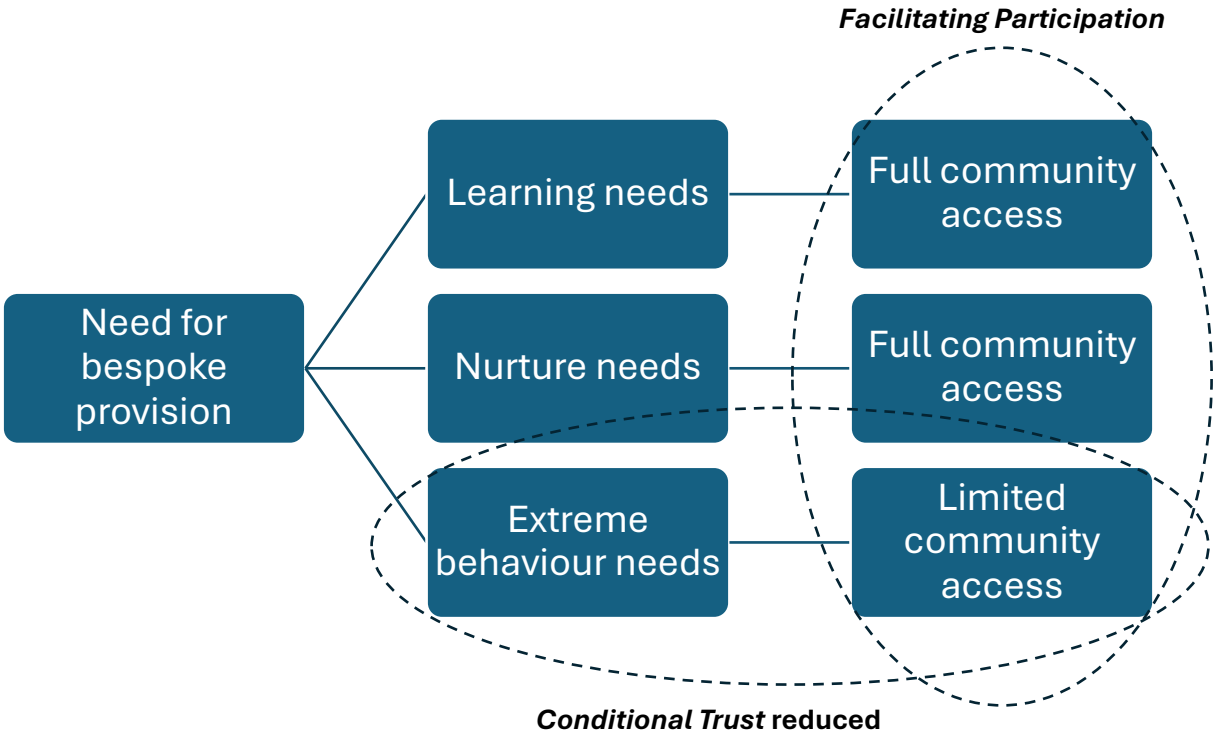
Application of Managing Outliers to Match Need



Of these three categories, participants felt justified in *Creating Bespoke Spaces* over the longer term if it prevented a CYP from failing. Many of them evaluated that certain CYP's needs, for example significant SEMH or developmental delay, were so different that they simply could not succeed in an unmodified mainstream setting and therefore this type of separation was actually *preserving* a degree of inclusion. However, in line with *Generating Belonging*, participants were keen to avoid inadvertent feelings of *exclusion* resulting from this. Their solution was to physically place these bespoke provisions visibly and centrally in the school and encourage the CYP to leave them when they felt able to re-engage with their peers. However, this access was based on *Conditional Trust* and the CYP continually demonstrating they do not represent a risk to *Maintaining Safety and Order*. Figure 22 shows how participants described the interaction between the extent they were *Facilitating Participation* depending on the reasons a CYP accessed bespoke provision. Since some of

Figure 22

Interaction of Conditional Trust and Facilitating Participation with Creating Bespoke Spaces



these provisions were not to service a learning or physical need but were overtly constructed to avoid PEX for CYP who are perceived to consistently present a threat to safety, participants' priority to protect the wider community resulted in these CYP having almost no community access, even at social times, as Derek indicated:

Derek: *No, no, no. They'll socialize with each other…the whole point is they can't manage themselves.*

These measures are all *exclusive*, but Derek's tone reflected the way many participants justified this as an unfortunate but unavoidable result of the CYP's *own* actions. These headteachers construed extreme measures that result in these CYP being entirely segregated were the only way to offer them *any* inclusion due to perception of serious threat to others. Maintaining their presence on school roll reflected how these headteachers operationalized *Best Efforts to Include All* in the HDIM by using absolutely any steps to *avoid PEX*. Returning to theory, this could be explained as another example of *Task construal* (Sedikides, 2012) whereby these participants reconceived inclusion for very challenging CYP as withholding permanent exclusion.

Maintaining the Limit shows participants were prepared to action their legal right to permanently exclude CYP from school (DfE, 2023b). County 1 tries to avoid this by creating a BAIP across its secondary schools and devolving funding directly to them so that such CYP can have *managed moves* between schools instead. Despite some concerns about specifics of funding and equality of commitment to the process across schools, participants saw this as a positive idea and perceived managed moves to be more inclusive than PEX for four reasons:

- CYP avoid PEX on their record.
- CYP start their new school much faster as it avoids significant delays through the PEX appeals process.
- Outgoing schools invest support as they want the move to work.
- Receiving schools invest support because they may need reciprocal support with another CYP in the future.

Although participants considered managed moves as different to a PEX, it is actually the same outcome – headteachers ejecting CYP from their community, and the extent to which it *feels* more inclusive to CYP was not part of this research. Returning to theories of *self-protection* (Sedikides, 2012) may explain participants' and LA's preference for labelling exclusion as managed moves:

- *Task Construal* – participants redefine inclusion as anything that avoids PEX.
- *Responsibility Construal* – participants construct that CYP create the conditions that make some level of their exclusion necessary through their own actions.
- *Channeling Attentional Resources* – participants focus on the outcome that the CYP continues to be included, just somewhere else.

In this way, participants are reconciling their need to exclude within an inclusive system, which Leary and colleagues (2009) would suggest *resolves their sense of self-threat*. Participants acknowledged a pressure to evaluate if CYP's presentations mean a managed moves has any chance of succeeding, as if it breaks down it can result in a PEX. They described they are most appropriate for CYP who historically demonstrate compliance with safety and behaviour expectations, and the sanction is considered due to a *single* incident of poor behaviour, such as a fight, or a poor choice, like bringing drugs onto school site. The logic expressed was that these CYP require a sanction to make the point about the seriousness of the mistake to them and the community, and since it was not a pattern of behaviour it was constructed as a 'mistake' and they would respond well to the chance to 'reboot' in a new setting. Participants agreed that for CYP with a longer history of non-compliance, where the presentations are consistent and established, then they may well export this pattern with them and the change of placement is less likely to work. Many participants portrayed these latter situations as requiring an immediate PEX. However, the LA pressure to *avoid* PEX meant participants felt some colleagues were obliged to attempt managed moves even if they considered them unlikely to succeed. Participants described how they sometimes received managed moves without full disclosure of the CYP history and patterns of behaviour, and this was causing breakdown of trust between schools.

When participants perceived other schools were misusing the system in this way, it eroded their own investment in making them work. These headteachers described concern at seeing the rate of successful managed moves across County 1 fall very sharply, which they attributed to four things. Firstly, receiving schools do not equally invest in making them work and they retain the sole right to decide to end them. Secondly, managed moves start with a trial period of a few weeks. If they break down within this period, the CYP returns to the original school, which inadvertently incentivizes receiving school not to persevere with challenging CYP and end the managed move quickly. Thirdly, LA metrics only record if a managed move was successful or not, there is no judgment of the length of time at the receiving school nor evaluation of the efforts they applied. From an efficiency point of view this also encourages them to be ended as soon as they can. Finally, participants were aware that informal and local co-operation between schools is being superseded by policies and priorities imposed through wider networks after changes to school governance:

Frank: ...*with the dawn of multi-academy trusts, which often span county lines, that kind of disintegrated a bit...permanent exclusion rates have really risen across (COUNTY 1) because National Trusts have their own ways of doing things and don't want to be bound by a kind of gentleman's agreement*....

Overall, this means that the rate of success has fallen markedly. Managed moves are based on County 1 headteachers agreeing there is an ethical imperative not to PEX and establishing a mutual trust that they will support each other to welcome CYP into their school as required. Although it is a form of exclusion, it is more inclusive because it permanently and quickly re-starts a CYP's education. However, if the factors above continue to erode headteacher confidence in the BAIP, they will resort to using PEX.

Concluding Thoughts on TMHOI

Ethically, participants used *Maintaining the Limits* to resolve a tension created by a desire to be inclusive for all and their conception that they must sometimes eject CYP from the community. Shorter-term measures run the risk of undermining CYP's sense of

belonging, ignoring underlying needs and deny them equal access to the curriculum and peers. Permanent options, such as managed move or PEX, may actually set a CYP to fail. Bazerman and Tenbrunsel (2011) suggest two systemic processes that may help to explain how headteachers may be separated from such ethical debate. Firstly, *ethical fading* can result if structures in and around school, such as MATs, governance and DfE, cause headteachers to reframe decisions as solely 'operational' rather than 'ethical'. Secondly, *bounded ethicality* (Chugh and Kern, 2016), resulting from limits to headteachers' cognitive, information and time resources, could leave them simply unaware of ethical dimensions. Since they contradict inclusive aspirations of HDIM and international definitions (UNESCO, 2015), applying any of the non-inclusive measures in the TMHOI may provoke a *consequentialist* vs *deontological* ethical debate – do we have the right to take away a CYP's right to inclusion to protect the wider community from them? The TMHOI flow chart that constantly re-evaluates CYP presentations through *Defining Limits* would suggest that headteachers ultimately follow the former and conclude that the rights of the many always outweigh the rights of an individual.

Overall Conclusion

At the end of the literature review, it was established that there were three justifications for further research: a knowledge gap concerning how school leaders create a meaning of inclusion and how they consider they make it work; a population gap of serving headteachers; and a practical knowledge gap of how these meanings interact with the very latest professional guidelines and government priorities. This is important because headteachers are uniquely placed in English education in 2026; they have a duty and responsibility to enact inclusion in their schools and considerable power to realize it. However, the lack of any universal clarity about inclusion and confusing guidance leaves it up to them to make sense of what it means and how to do it. Headteachers operate under the 'live' conditions of running a school on a daily basis. They are required to make active decisions about inclusion – with real outcomes for CYP – every day and are not afforded the luxury of debate and thought experiments enjoyed by academics, politicians and social commentators. Given the authority invested in headteachers, the version of inclusion

experienced by CYP in their schools will result from their decisions which makes it particularly important to hear their voices in this area.

This research has attempted to populate these gaps by working directly with head teachers to co-construct their understanding of how they define and operationalize inclusion resulting in local theories providing insight into both - the HDIM and TMHOI. As outlined in the rationale, recruiting participants who are experienced and currently serving headteachers has provided a degree of *credibility* to these emergent theories and because they all work within County 1, this also adds contextual *relevance* of the theories to other local school leaders. Given the ten recruits represent almost a third of the secondary heads in County 1, this also suggests their insight may be *representative to a degree*. Although describing my interpretation of the relationship between categories, which is the central feature of any theory (Urquhart, 2023) both HDIM and TMHOI are composed of many categories reflecting the complexity of inclusion. This means they lack the 'parsimony' that Glaser (1978) espouses. However, Charmaz (2025) suggests that what 'diffuse' theories lack in clarity they make up for in broader scope and extended insight.

With regards to the contribution of HDIM and TMHOI, their diagram form means both are still sufficiently simple to be shared easily. Other school leaders within County 1 and beyond may or may not recognize what they describe but due to the credibility outlined above, they may help frame conversations about what is currently going on in these participants' schools. HDIM provides my interpretation of how these participants constructed a meaning of inclusion and hence describes what they consider they are trying to achieve. This may prove useful because the latest Ofsted framework (Gov.uk, 2025a/b) sets out to measure inclusion without properly establishing its meaning or objectives, which writers such as Schuelka (2018) consider undermines any progress and could prove a major challenge for inexperienced school leaders. HDIM may prove a useful tool for provoking debates amongst these school leaders about their decisions. Similarly, the TMHOI reveals these participants' perception of current obstacles and provides a bank of 'road tested' strategies they have developed to overcome them. Taken together, HDIM and TMHOI could be used to support school leaders in other schools with suggestions for CPD

and even form the basis of rationale for their decisions with stakeholders. Irrespective of viewers' level of recognition, the power of this sample and contextual relevance may at least lead to the creation of socially constructed common terms of reference and enable frank discussions about perceived barriers to inclusion which could inform decisions at LA and MAT level about appropriate areas for resourcing and support.

However, these models are inherently limited by the scale and specificity of their context. It is important to accept that these theories do not provide a 'definition of inclusion' – the HDIM is only my interpretation of what these participants shared with me, at the time of their interview. It is highly likely that their perspectives have already started to evolve again and will continue to do so in the future. It is such a complicated concept, with many competing dimensions, that no theory could ever capture this sufficiently to be truly acceptable to all stakeholders. Secondly, one of the strengths – the County 1 contextual relevance - is also an inherent weakness when sharing with viewers in other areas; the conclusions are contingent on the conditions experienced by these participants.

Central to both HDIM and TMHOI are the way that these headteachers use a concept of *limits* – what they define as can be reasonably provided - to help them resolve tensions when balancing the complex demands of inclusion. Since all decisions must first satisfy the higher-level categories of *Best Efforts to Include All* (HDIM) and *Defining Limits* (TMHOI) it reveals their perception that inclusion is not always possible for all pupils all of the time, perhaps aligning with Ainscow and colleagues (2006) observation that many headteachers subordinate such ideology behind external pressures, such as Ofsted judgements. The core debate surrounding both theories is do they represent inclusion (Booth, 1996) or merely another form of integration (Barton, 1997; Lunt & Norwich, 1999; Corbett, 2001). The suggestion of the HDIM is that while these headteachers acknowledge a deep ethical understanding of a need to fully include all CYP – it is *only* where the actions of the CYP and resources of the school 'allow it'. The decision points of the TMHOI reveal the application of staged reduction of a CYP's inclusive rights constructed as being imposed *in response* to the CYP's inability to conform to the school, which is *integration*. In these theories, non-inclusion may potentially be re-cast as the 'fault' of the CYP and hence

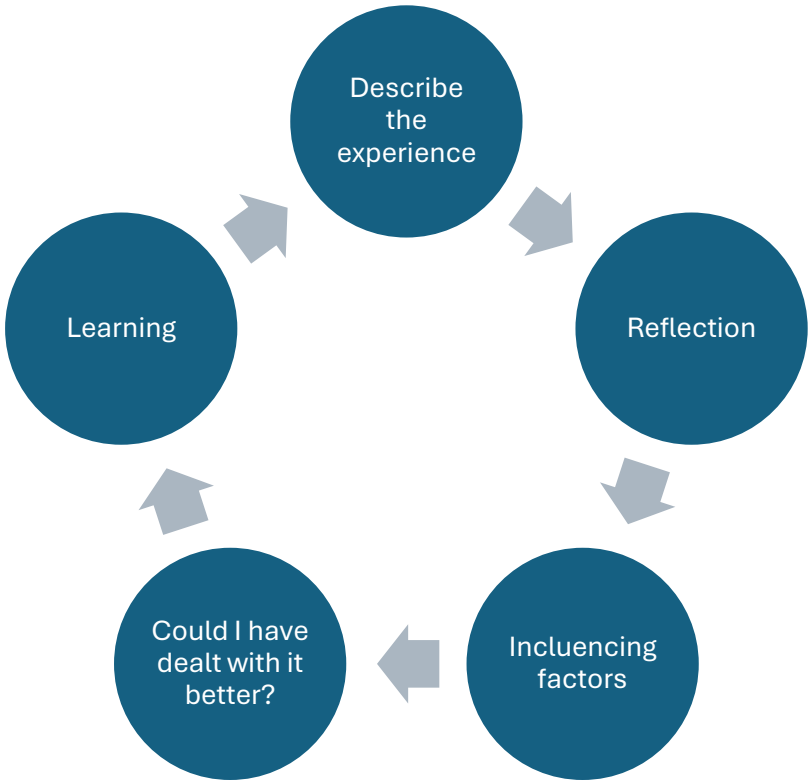
be used to justify exclusion. It will be interesting to see if these theories evolve with the implementation of more commitment to inclusion in the recent government white paper (Gov.uk, 2026a).

Chapter 3 Reflective Account of Study

EP professional guidance documents make reflective evaluation of decisions and consideration of other approaches central to practice (HCPC, 2023; BPS, 2017). Additionally, to protect the public and integrity of the EP research, the BPS Code of human research ethics (2021b) requires practitioners engaged in research to be self-reflective and open to public debate to ensure there is an appropriate balance between consequences of methods and potential value of findings for the common good. This chapter uses Johns Model for Structured Reflection (Johns, 2017) (see Figure 23) to consider why the topic was selected and how it was shaped through my research journey. I will reflect on my relationship with the data collection and analysis process and my learning is considered using Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb & Kolb, 2009). Implications for practice and limitations of the study, along with ideas for future research are also discussed.

Figure 23

Johns Model of Structured Reflection



Describe the Experience

At the planning stage, I wanted to understand the processes around how headteachers manifest inclusion and drafted three research questions:

- How do UK secondary headteachers define inclusion?
- What key experiences inform this definition?
- What operational factors influence how UK secondary headteachers manifest inclusion?

Faculty feedback suggested this was too many but I was motivated to evaluate the context of decisions I made in school management and wanted to understand how headteachers made their definition *work,* so ambitiously retained two research questions. It was suggested that I needed to double my initial estimate of six participants.

There is an ongoing debate in GT about whether to engage with literature before (Charmaz, 2025) or after (Glaser, 1978) data collection and analysis. The university requirement to do the literature review first rendered this irrelevant to me but it did have an impact; my reading not only threw up clear areas that would justify further research but also cemented my ontological and epistemological positions. Although it became obvious that current headteachers' definition of inclusion was unknown it was also such a complex, contested, conflicted and unwieldy concept that it would be impossible to 'uncover' or construct a single definition that would be acceptable to all audiences. Since there could be no objective 'truth' about the meaning of inclusion, with each person creating their own, I felt it remained inconsistent with realist ontologies and kept to a relativist positioning. Secondly, by adopting a social constructionist epistemology I accepted that headteachers construct their reality via their actions and, crucially, *interactions*. This changed the fundamental aspiration of my research away from trying to 'solve' universal 'problems' of inclusion, to those more suited to qualitative research – working deeply with a few participants, facilitating their voice to gain insight into how and why they construct inclusion the way they do *here and now*. Inevitably, this would make any subsequent theories more local and contingent, but this position became more relevant

over time. The Ofsted school inspection framework that I initially reviewed (Gov.uk, 2023) was superseded by another (Gov.uk, 2025a) *as I was doing the research*. Towards the end of my analysis the long-anticipated government white paper on inclusion (Gov.uk, 2026a) was also published. These directly changed the school inclusion landscape, and it was impossible to predict how these could or would influence anybody's understanding of inclusion and showed the inherent fluidity of the system. GT writers generally accept that *'phenomena in the social world are shifting all the time, and that large, generalized abstractions in the form of formal theory may or may not hold true'* (Urquhart, 2023, p.40). This instability suggested to me that I would have found it hard to defend my findings if I had adopted a positivist ontology.

The PEPs for County 1 and County 2 agreed to act as gatekeepers (Appendix 4) and emailed their respective secondary headteachers. P1 and P2 responded immediately, reflecting personal interest in this topic, and arranged interviews in June 2025. They suggested headteacher forums could facilitate further recruitment. No recruitment June to July 2025 led me to ask the gatekeepers to re-send the invitation, which was delayed by the school summer holiday. Concerned by a lack of response, I sought supervision and amended ethics to approach previous participants and the gatekeepers to access headteacher forums. Introduction to co-chairs of a forum (Appendix 5) led to them participating and invitation to present in November 2025. In anticipation, my covering letter and PIS were forwarded to delegates. County 1 gatekeeper introduced me to another forum chair who also forwarded the covering letter and PIS to their heads. This second phase of recruitment yielded P3-P10 and revealed how important personal contacts are when reaching out to participants in senior professional roles.

Gathering data through intensive interviews enabled participants to speak at length about their relevant experience (Charmaz, 2025). For the purposive stage, I needed a broad understanding, so used only one key question. However, I was keen to gather as much detail as possible and made notes as they spoke so I could seek elaboration or clarification. The participants responded well and spoke at great length – which made the

transcription process arduous. My commitment to provide drafts for approval within five working days put me under additional pressure.

Creating the transcripts from the audio myself immersed me in the data and provided me an overview that helped to spot relationships (Urquhart, 2023). However, using 'gerunds' for both initial and focused coding (Charmaz, 2025) felt unnatural and forced. I had to constantly remind myself to focus on the processes and resist the urge to describe. From the second interview, I made constant comparisons and wrote memos outlining ideas and concepts. I have a good memory and memo writing felt unnecessary at first, but maintaining it allowed me to compare observations made weeks apart and to maintain the constant comparison that underpins GT. As a visual learner, I made increased use of diagrams to explore connecting categories and describe theoretical direction (Appendix 10).

The writing process was slow to start because of the huge amount of data I had collected; I was overwhelmed by the number of categories across the two research questions. Diagramming led to a breakthrough when I realized that all categories in *definition* were influenced by the *same* process. I made a comparison to *operationalization* and found the same pattern. This insight led to higher level categories *Best Efforts to Include All* and *Defining Limits* that framed the rest of the models.

Reflection

As a teacher, I found inclusion in mainstream to be a complicated concept due to conflicting messages about educational priorities and professional pressures exerted via inspections and league tables. Professional dialogue revealed two key arguments: 1)morally preserving all CYP's right to be included with their peers and 2) saving money in the education system. The first argument aligned with my personal and professional views on equity and equality, but I never understood how inclusion could *reduce* costs at a school level; to be done properly I felt it necessitated changes to teaching and significant *investment*. Over twenty years in primary schools, I considered government policy explicitly contradicted my understanding of inclusion by focusing on financial efficiency, reducing

the adults available to build relations and make adaptations, and ever-tightening progress and outcome measures in KS2 SAT performance tables, which influenced Ofsted judgements. I concluded the DfE's promotion of inclusion disguised financial efficiency *behind* a moral argument. Over time, I lost faith that modern state education was inclusive and moved to EP where I perceived my values were more aligned.

As a TEP, reading how school leaders navigate this led me to reflect on my own understanding of inclusion. I had prided myself on being an inclusive teacher and subsequently school leader, but had never formally defined inclusion – what was I actually aspiring to achieve? Critiquing school policies for another project through the lens of inclusion reminded me that *I* had justified operational decisions, for example to maintain safety, that an objective observer may interpret as non-inclusive. I realized my own ethical position on inclusion may have been compromised through external pressures. As a former headteacher, I know they are responsible for all decisions made in schools and if IE is to move forward for the benefit of CYP this interaction must be understood.

After interviewing participants, I feel more positive about the future for IE in mainstream schools. Participating headteachers had different views on specifics such as how far IE could be extended and when certain provisions need to be modified, but they were aligned with the central concepts outlined in the HDIM and a commitment to bring the best out of every CYP. The TMHOI reflects factors that shape the way the participants enact inclusion. Although I recognized many of them – a need to defend decisions *not* to exclude CYP, justifying costly inclusion measures against a falling budget, keeping people physically safe, balancing when a head must be *seen* to act - the emphasis was different, which may reflect a secondary setting compared to my primary background. These participants *want* to be inclusive as far as possible and constructive use of the TMHOI to design provision and train staff can widen the field of who can be included and delay the use of the two decision points to the benefit of CYP.

Perhaps unexpectedly, many participants spoke openly about how much they valued speaking to me. Reflecting on why returned me to my experiences; headteachers

can feel isolated. They have highly varied and ongoing responsibilities including single point of contact for police and other services, budgetary control and business manager, data manager, health and safety, public relations and so on. Although they have colleagues, ultimately they set the school's agenda and ethos (Gov.uk, 2020). Their positivity made me wonder if I had unintentionally provided a form of supervision that they previously lacked (Kennedy & Laverick, 2019). Regular supervision is a requirement of *clinical* practice (HCPC, 2023), and research has indicated providing similar psychological space to headteachers may allow them distance from day-to-day pressures to reflect more compassionately on decisions concerning CYP (Heriot-Maitland & Taylor, 2024). Why was I able to achieve this? In my recruitment letter, I made my background as a former headteacher clear, which would have indicated I had prior experience of how school inclusion works and the pressures headteachers face. Unluer (2012) would suggest this makes me an *insider* – researching a demographic to which I belong. Cohn and colleagues (2020) propose this may give me greater credibility due to perception I understood what it was like – and I think this inculcated a level of empathy and trust between me and the participants.

At the end of our interview, several participants thanked me and said it was good to have an opportunity to reflect together on their decision making and to re-connect with what inclusion actually meant to them. Others expressed their hopes for how my research may be used in future as they feel headteachers' voices are not listened to sufficiently. One participant even said that County 1 did not *understand* inclusion, and it was important the LA would listen to my conclusions!

Ultimately, a key reflection is on the suitability and adequacy of my approach to satisfying the research questions and its aims. My original interest in this research was when I became aware that *I* had constructed an understanding of inclusion that differed, to a greater or lesser extent, to that of other people. Therefore, it made sense to adopt a constructivist-relativist ontology, which denies any objective truth and placed me as co-constructor with the participants of any understandings and allowed me to acknowledge that resulting theories would be highly contingent on my interpretation. Since the aim was

to provide new theories about how *these* participants understand inclusion and make it work in their school, it was effectively exploring how they create their own 'inclusion reality' through their actions and how these are influenced by the actions of others, which is social construction. I conclude that there was good overall alignment between my ontology, epistemology, aims and methodology. However, on reflection I may have worded my research questions too broadly, suggesting that in some way my research could reveal 'truth' about headteachers in English secondary schools in general, which it could not do.

Influencing Factors

It is incumbent on GT researchers to be aware of their own perspectives and present how these have influenced findings (Urquhart, 2023). After a long career in primary schools, I had a lot of practical experience with regards to managing inclusion in a mainstream school; I taught mixed ability classes servicing wide needs; I managed staff and community encountering the same; I invested in an inclusive school ethos. To Charmaz (2025), my prior experiences are a potential source of strength in GT as it potentially renders me more sensitive to what is happening behind the data. But the integrity of GT research requires continuous reflexivity to ensure theory emerges only from the data and is not driven by inherent biases. On reflection, my biases arise from two main areas. Firstly, having spent most of my career in the *primary* sector, I had a preconception that *secondary* schools are less inclusive. In my previous schools there was always tension around Year 6 transition, despite the best efforts of staff on both sides. Family and CYP's anxiety are provoked by a social narrative that secondary school is more fixated on routines, less tolerant of difference and swifter to sanction. The change from one class teacher to many subject teachers seems less personal and promotes the idea that CYP become faceless in an inflexible system. I was aware that even though I approached the interviews openly, I was particularly alert to comments about sanctions, movement to AP and particularly CYP being deprived of social access to their peers. I had to acknowledge my bias to engage with how inclusive the participants actually were.

Secondly, as a former *headteacher,* I experienced the demands of the job personally and had preconceptions about its complexities. I found inclusion frequently occupied my thoughts, especially when balancing the rights of an individual against maintaining the safety of others. Throughout the interviews, coding and analysis, I was automatically sympathetic to the *challenges* participants described and was prone to overlook the *opportunities* of inclusion. Also, I was headteacher at a school with an educated and vocal community who publicly scrutinized my every decision. This made me very sensitive to the *social pressures* I had felt to protect members of staff and CYP through exclusive measures and to ensure all CYP were treated *exactly the same*, which created tension with my therapeutic approach and commitment to equity. Because I was expecting this, I found I was actively looking for descriptions of similar experiences. Again, becoming alert to this led me to realize these were much less significant to my participants. Finally, as a practicing teacher and headteacher, my focus had always been on pragmatically running a class or school and making inclusion *work*. I was never offered a definition of inclusion, and this bias was evident in my early analysis. I found the definition harder to quantify and essentially less relevant to the practical side and subconsciously concentrated on operationalization. This revelation led me to start my entire analysis again from scratch and facilitated the HDIM.

Recent experiences also influenced me. On a TEP placement at a secondary school, I discovered they used 'inclusion' to describe internal *exclusion* where CYP were separated from their peers for a day or longer. It seemed any measures short of external or permanent exclusion were constructed as preserving inclusion. This was completely at odds with my own conception and led me to consider what factors generated this usage and how secondary colleagues now viewed inclusion. This re-ignited my interest in the topic when drafting ideas for my Small Scale Research Project. For this, I originally planned a Thematic Analysis (TA) of headteachers' views of inclusion but realized this was more suitable for a thesis and conducted a content analysis of County 1's secondary schools' behaviour policies instead. This revealed the complicated relationship between inclusion as a concept of rights (UNCRC, 1989; UNESCO, 1994; 2015) and various DfE guidance

documents (Gov.uk, 2023; 2024a; DfE, 2015; 2018; 2023a; 2023b; 2024a; 2024b). This study is an attempt to explore this interaction.

As a TEP having to complete my thesis alongside the professional and academic demands of the course, I wanted a study that was impactful and manageable. A key consideration was data collection, and I was fearful of struggling to recruit within the timeframe. Having conducted research with CYP before I know they are a protected group and opted for a professional group to make recruitment easier. As a former headteacher, I felt comfortable discussing running a school and hoped I would have credibility with prospective recruits.

Could I Have Done Better?

Due to familiarity, I originally thought to use TA to explore the interviews. Given the small numbers of potential participants, TA would have been good for comparing and contrasting headteachers' views (Willig, 2013). Braun and Clarke (2006) also suggest deep analysis *directly from the data* could enable insight into what is actually going on. However, during UEA input, I shared my ideas concerning pressures on headteachers with a colleague. They challenged my selection of TA and proposed I could create a new theory to describe what was happening, which GT is conceived to do (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978; Charmaz, 2025; Urquhart, 2023). Reflecting on this point, I concluded that I was interested in a set of *processes – how headteachers define inclusion* and *how they make it work* – and further reading revealed GT was a good fit as Charmaz (2025) proposes that constructing GT around *actions* could lead to theory. Additionally, Glaser and Strauss (1967) indicate GT's strength lies in not having to rely on existing theories which I was cautious about due to the undefined nature of inclusion and lack of research in modern school contexts. Had I continued with TA, the study may have been more manageable for me and would have led to insights into headteacher thought processes and the challenges they face with IE. However, it was less likely to have enabled me to explore the actual processes involved and hence create the HDIM and TMHOI. Biró and Csíkos (2025) would suggest this learning reflects The Four-Stage Model of Competence: I was *consciously*

competent with TA having used it before to get results, so it was less threatening and became my default. However, through my dialogue I became *consciously incompetent* with GT – I accepted it was the better fit but understood I knew almost nothing about it. A large element of this research journey was aspiring for *conscious competence* with GT.

Reflecting on my application of GT and re-reading my reflective research diary, I was aware that I had many reservations about my skills throughout the process. As seen in the methods section, the three fundamental steps – initial coding, focused coding and theoretical coding – are sequential and do follow logically on from one another (see Figure 2). However, I was troubled by anxieties at every stage. In the initial coding I was concerned about avoiding being descriptive, having too many codes, insufficiently comparing them and when I might reasonably judge theoretical saturation had been reached. This was not helped by the recruitment gap that forced a delay of several months between coding participant 2 and interviewing participants 3 to 6. For the focused codes, I felt under pressure to 'get them right' as I needed to understand gaps and thin lines of enquiry to draft suitable questions for theoretical sampling which had to pass ethical approval *before* I could proceed. In December, this anxiety led me to discard all my original focused codes and start again from scratch when I became concerned that I had addressed operationalization in more detail than definition. Although this was time consuming, it was a powerful source of ideas and memos for later on and also revealed insecurities about the validity of my own interpretations – what if my codes were wrong? Ultimately, my ontology helped resolve this as *'a constructivist approach places priority on the studied phenomenon and sees both data and analysis as created from shared experiences and relationships with participants'* (Charmaz, 2025, p.238). Charmaz's reassurance that my interpretations, if acknowledged as such, were valid helped me to proceed. I used this confidence to overcome concerns around theoretical coding. I researched Glaser's (1978) coding families and spent some time considering if I could employ 'dimensions' for definition and 'strategies' for operationalization but was also alerted to his (and others') suggestion to make my own up. In the end, I concluded that as I was doing constructivist GT, I did not want to apply any frameworks to my data and so created my own theoretical

codes directly from my interpretation of relationships in the data. On reflection, I took comfort that *'by referencing such a well-known method that uses systematic procedures, the researcher can demonstrate rigour'* (Urquhart, 2023, p.84) and being supported by the regular meetings with my research supervisor, who was experienced in GT, where I justified my coding definitions and outlined emergent relationships.

Having one research question for definition would have streamlined the study - reducing number of participants, halving my findings and making the study easier to complete in the timeframe of the TEP course. However, there is no doubt that using constant comparison throughout data analysis across both research questions led to greater insights; the TMHOI *explains* how headteachers make inclusion work on a daily basis and reveals how conceptual arguments in the HDIM are tested and resolved.

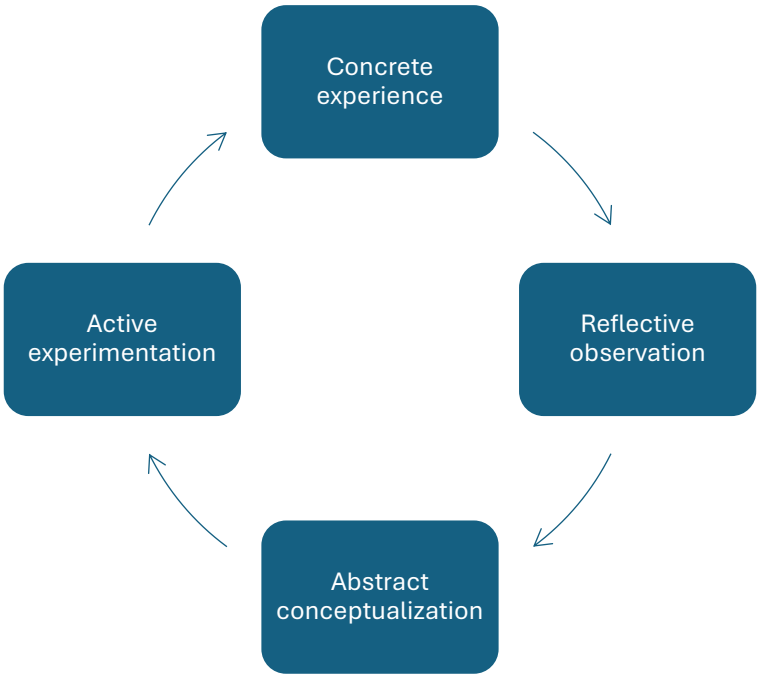
At the planning stage, I considered focus groups to facilitate discussion between headteachers. This could have revealed shared terminology and given insight into conventions and social norms of the profession and suited social constructionism. It may also have made it easier to identify categories as the colleagues would have been discussing similar elements at the same time. However, as a former headteacher, I was acutely aware that the current climate can feel competitive (Gov.uk, 2024a) and the role includes public relations. I was concerned that face-to-face focus groups would put headteachers under pressure to 'sell' their school and so feel less able to speak openly. Individual interviews preserved anonymity and freed headteachers to speak honestly and in detail about their challenges.

Finally, County 1 is a rural area with a historically homogenous population. Recruiting from County 2 would introduce colleagues with experience of a different LA servicing a more urban and diverse area with different priorities. The HDIM and TMHOI would be less local and more easily generalized but it could have made identifying categories more challenging.

Learning

Figure 24

The Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb & Kolb, 2009)



I will explore my own learning by relating my experience of the GT process to the Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) (Kolb & Kolb, 2009) which is depicted as the cycle in figure 24. ELT describes learning as '*grasping and transforming experience*' (Kolb & Kolb, 2009, p.298) which is done by repeating the four processes above. I will discuss how I encountered these below:

Concrete Experience

This research was based on my own experiences in education. Teaching in and managing what I hoped was an inclusive school meant I formed a concept of inclusion and gave me insight into practical realities. This was supplemented by TEP placements with the LA and in secondary schools. The research process meant trying a lot of new things for concrete experiences. Intensive interviewing using a single question allowed me to actively engage with headteachers and co-construct their meanings. I tested out the core interview skills of building rapport, active listening and seeking clarification. The transcription

process immersed me in data and line-by-line coding taught me to break it down into specific *actions* to help me understand what was going on.

Reflective Observation

Discussions around my experiences, such as the rise in nurture provisions, AP and the use of inclusion to describe sanctions led me to reflect on my own enaction of inclusion. I was unsure what I was now seeing in schools constituted IE but reflected that I had made equally pragmatic decisions under constraints I encountered as a head.

The constant comparison, memo-writing and diagramming between data and between interviews led me to determine the most significant or frequent codes and to reject those that were purely descriptive. I learnt to ask myself 'what is actually going on?'

Abstract Conceptualization

This study began with me considering the socially constructed nature of language. What was inclusion supposed to mean? Was it acquiring a *new* meaning? What factors made this happen? I wondered if my application of inclusion had been too pragmatic and overshadowed by operational decisions. I wondered if I had occasionally lost sight of inclusion under pressure, is this also shaping other people's practice?

The constant comparison of small chunks of data with other data to test, refine and re-test emerging categories reduces them to abstract concepts. Divorcing them from the original context allowed me to consider them solely as a process – what is being done? Referring back to language used by the participants provided insight into what actions depended on other actions and what factors framed the process.

Active Experimentation

The iterative and inductive nature of GT required me to constantly prepare for the next stage of data collection, data analysis or reflection. Every interview was followed by transcription and initial coding, and constant comparison to previous interviews. These

thoughts were captured in memos and diagrams and informed later interviews, which formed new concrete experiences.

Summary of Learning

This study has been both challenging and rewarding. My hope is that these models facilitate the voice of secondary headteachers – who clearly have a strong ethical and professional commitment to inclusion – with other stakeholders and help address the obstacles and move the IE agenda towards the aspirations of the Incheon Agreement (UNESCO, 2015). These models create frameworks and common terms of reference that support the essential collaboration between all parties.

I have learnt that constructivist GT is a powerful tool for harnessing lived experiences to understand processes derived from breaking raw data into constituent actions which are then rigorously compared and contrasted across data sources to identify patterns. This is recombined into theoretical direction. It requires commitment to rigour and academic discipline to ensure it is derived *solely* from the data (Glaser, 1978), even if this deviates from the researcher's preconceptions. However, the joy of GT is creation of something new and useful that has been facilitated by a researcher's passion and interest, even if the sample size makes it local and contingent.

Limitations

A core limitation of this research is the small number of participants, which is partly imposed by its design; there are just over thirty state-funded secondary schools in County 1 and another fifteen in County 2 making a total of less than fifty headteachers. A major disappointment was the absence of participants from County 2, which had been selected not only for its close geographical and historical links with County 1 but also for its *significantly* greater diversity in ethnicity, languages and cultures. In the end, the researcher's professional placement in County 1 meant this research was known to the key gatekeepers, the PEPs, which elevated its relevance and maintained momentum in recruitment. The lack of similar contacts within County 2 greatly restricted recruitment. The timing of the school summer holiday delayed data collection for several months and

when recruitment was resumed using contacts to access headship forums, this resulted in County 1 participants only. As this study was conducted in a relatively short time as part of the EP training programme, the researcher had to pragmatically accept that County 2 headteachers were unavailable on this occasion. The eventual recruitment of ten headteachers represented a respectable return but they all represent schools servicing a largely rural and homogenous population.

A second limitation is the criteria for headship recruitment itself. It was decided early on that recruitment could be a factor and since headteacher retention is a national cause of concern, exclusion criteria around length of service was deliberately kept to a minimum. It was considered important to have two years' experience overall with at least one year within County 1 or 2. What was unanticipated was the impact of minimal staff migration into and out of County 1 which resulted in a sample size where *none* of the recruits had headship experience anywhere else. Added to the small sample size, this makes the emergent theories particularly local and contingent on conditions within County 1.

The recruitment process was particularly reliant on heads who, on receipt of an invitation to take part via email or following a presentation at a heads' conference, were willing to give up their precious time to talk about inclusion, which makes it likely the topic was already of interest to them. Although research suggests heads are generally more *positive* to inclusion than other members of staff (Avrimidis & Norwich 2002), the self-selection required by the ethics application meant the study has no overall perspective on *how* positively the heads viewed inclusion before interview. Therefore, the theories could be based on participants who were already highly aligned with inclusion.

Finally, data collection for this research commenced in June 2025 and completed February 2026 which meant it straddled the launch of the new Ofsted inspection framework (Gov.uk, 2025b). As seen in the literature review, this document places an increased emphasis on inclusion - despite not offering a clear definition - and focuses on evaluating inclusion of specific categories of CYP. Given its newness none of the schools

had yet been inspected under this new framework and this left headteachers with many questions. It seems inevitable that these inspections will exert influence on what heads prioritize when making inclusion operational over time and, therefore, this research is limited by not representing this evolution.

Implications for Practice

This study has created two brand new theories: Headteachers Definition of Inclusion Model (HDIM) and Theoretical Model of Headteacher Operationalization of Inclusion (TMHOI). Because they are based on my interpretations of data from a small sample size of headteachers who all work within one English county, it must be acknowledged that they are extremely local and contingent on the context of these participants. The theories are open to criticisms of being highly 'situated' by being intrinsically placed, and therefore only related to, this very specific context and time (Brown et al., 1989). They could be described as explaining how *these* headteachers act under *these* conditions. This is consistent with my ontological perspective, that since there is no objective 'truth' about how headteachers construct the meaning of inclusion and how they operate it. However, they do provide a degree of insight from experienced and current practitioners which others may engage with and consider in their own learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991). They also create conceptual frameworks that may be used *alongside* Schuelka's (2018) agenda for inclusive education:

1. Agreeing a definition of inclusion;
2. Creating targets, measures and outcomes;
3. Understanding existing obstacles created by structures and cultures in education;
4. Creating a clear implementation plan with review cycle;
5. Disseminating appropriate training for staff;
6. Government investment in reforms to policy, curriculum and transition to adulthood.

Since a relativist ontology would preclude the creation of universally true understandings of any of these, there is no expectation that the HDIM or TMHOI has satisfied any of these steps. However, for *this* group of participants HDIM has created *their* definition that

satisfies step 1 and underpins step 2 *for their context*. The TMHOI addresses step 3 by explaining what is actually being done and why by them in their secondary schools. In conjunction, both models facilitate step 2 and enable their organizations to move to steps 4-6. By working directly with these headteachers, who are the key stakeholders in fashioning secondary school cultures (Gov.uk, 2020), this study has created a working definition of inclusion (HDIM) using their own language, which should make it instantly recognizable to them. The TMHOI explores how these headteachers make decisions when enacting their definition. In other words, it is hoped these models capture simply what they are doing and why. Even though this is 'situated', this could prove enormously beneficial to other headteachers and school professionals as they grapple with inclusion. Lave and Wenger (1991) discuss how exposure to 'situated' knowledge through 'communities of practice' with experienced colleagues benefits apprentices as it *'offers exemplars (which are grounds and motivation for learning activity), including masters, finished products, and more advanced apprentices in the process of becoming full practitioners.'* (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p.96). At very least, HDIM and TMHOI may provide a convenient way of sharing these participants' expertise with others. The implications for other stakeholders across steps 4 to 6 are explored below.

Teacher Training

The four categories of the HDIM – *Developing All CYP Fully, Being Known and Understood, Generating Belonging* and *Embracing Diversity* clearly outline the values and attitudes participants required of modern secondary staff, and effectively describes inclusive school ethos. The TMHOI shows participating headteachers prioritize interpersonal skills, a desire to be relational and willingness to be flexible in terms of teaching strategies and behavioural approaches. All of this is commensurate with the teacher standards (Gov.uk, 2021) and is aligned with their identification that inclusion is the *central* issue of running a school. However, they find that Early Career Teachers (ECT) often enter the profession lacking this understanding and schools must offer considerable support to develop these skills.

Headteachers identify two factors at the heart of this. Firstly, training and recruitment has historically placed greater priority on academic qualifications of candidates. This is implicitly maintained by the requirement in ECT provisions that school provide an *academic* mentor (Gov.uk, 2024c). Secondly, decades of teacher shortages have caused a trend to truncate training routes, leaving candidates short of practical experience. Given the immense diversity mainstream schools serve, it must be questioned if this is leaving ECTs unaware of the realities of modern classrooms before they start and contributing to drop-out rates within the first year of over 10% (NFER, 2026).

It seems essential that teacher training reverses this trend and places inclusion as the central skill to be acquired. Research has shown that greater exposure to different needs and scaffolded development of relevant skills increases teachers' positivity to inclusion (LeRoy & Simpson, 1996; Sebastian & Mathot-Buckner, 1998; Avrimidis et al., 2000). Therefore, it must become essential that trainee teachers work in *multiple* settings and have broad experience of CYP with divergent needs, observe and be closely mentored by experienced staff on how to deliver skills and knowledge but also managing engagement and behaviour. Headteachers report that ECTs feel courses are already too pressurized and they have too much to learn. One solution would be to expand teacher training in length to 2-3 years full time equivalent *before* qualification to enable breadth of experiences and time to internalize relevant training followed by an enhanced probation period of 3 years post qualification overseen by a mentor focusing on relational techniques.

HDIM provides a clear set of values that can be used to inform recruitment and attitudes that must be consistently evidenced before qualification.

LA and BAIP

Schuelka (2018) proposes that IE can only result if the obstacles are understood which the HDIM and TMHOI reveal. Participating headteachers balance the impact of individual actions against the rights of the wider community and articulate a need to reserve their capacity to exclude CYP from school if necessary. If reserving such consequences is non-negotiable, the TMHOI suggests it may be included in an IE

framework if the inclusive aspects of managed moves are restored and enhanced. Inclusion is a CYP's right (UNESCO, 2015) but if this definition is based around a *wider community* responsibility of being included in *the local education system*, then supported movement between schools *could* maintain inclusion. This requires all schools to work closely together though. However, county 1's hitherto successful strategy to reduce PEX in favour of managed moves is being undermined by the partial collapse of the BAIP.

Because the BAIP is designed to meet the needs of CYP in a locality, it will be formed between schools that are geographically close. The advent of MATs has meant schools are no longer run within the same LA (or even the same MAT) and competing narratives makes it hard to align schools to maintain inclusion. National legislation must *require* MATs facilitate co-operation between local schools. This could be reinforced in four ways: a)additional funding to be conditional on formalizing such agreements, b)official school data category reporting percentage of received managed moves that become permanent, c)making all managed moves a minimum of 6 weeks to avoid early termination and d)removing PEX as a legal option.

LA and Ofsted Agenda

If the DfE intends to match inclusion in UK schools to the definition that it is all CYP's right to equitable inclusion (UNESCO, 2015), they must accept it is an ongoing process (Booth, 1996) and respond to Schuelka's (2018) points *in order*. In interviews headteachers expressed concern Ofsted was applying a narrow interpretation of inclusion as a core measure in its new inspection framework (Gov.uk, 2025b) without a clear definition – in other words imposing measures and outcomes prematurely. County 1's ambitious 'inclusion for all' initiative - which seeks to improve practices, partnerships, voices, services, people and places – cannot move forwards until they establish with stakeholders what the obstacles are.

The HDIM and TMHOI could be used by both LA and Ofsted to create frameworks to initiate and evaluate the progress of inclusion in secondary schools. Firstly, the HDIM categories and sub-categories creates a scaffold of concepts revealing headteachers'

aspirational definition of inclusion is based on full inclusion. In time these can be used to form the basis of mutually understood targets and outcomes. Crucially, the HDIM also reveals that it is headteachers' perception of practical constraints and competing demands that leads them to pragmatically re-construct inclusion as making school fit for *as many CYP as possible*. TMHOI helps understand that balancing the competing pressures forces headteachers to apply *consequentialist* thinking in their decision making and limits inclusion. Before creating assessment protocols that simply track participation and academic success for CYP with identified needs, the LA and Ofsted must work with headteachers to address these constraints; they will only be able to apply d*eontological* thinking that prioritizes the right of individuals to be included if education is re-*purposed* to maintain full inclusion and the measures reinforce this.

Headteachers and Schools

Both models reveal that participating headteachers place inclusion as the central issue for their school. The HDIM provides a framework that can be used to articulate this with all stakeholders – staff, families, CYP, governance, community – and as a reference guide when writing policy and making strategic decisions. For example, *Facilitating Participation*, could be used to justify why students are overtly involved in the re-writing policies they interact with on a daily basis – behaviour, uniform, teaching and learning, homework. Using the HDIM to publicly explain how the purpose of secondary schools *must* be re-designed to maintain full inclusion for all CYP in accordance with international agreement (UNESCO, 2015) could relieve some of the community pressures headteachers feel. For example, if PEX was publicly removed as an option and relational consequences became the norm, headteachers' responses to dysregulation would need no further justification other than preserving a legal entitlement.

Educational Psychologists

The models in this study create frameworks that can be used by EPs supporting IE across four of their five key roles (Scottish Executive, 2002) - research, training, intervention and consultation:

Managing Outliers in the TMHOI shows participants preserve overall inclusion at school by modifying provision for some CYP away from their peers. With their understanding of school systems, trauma-informed practice and gathering voice, EPs are ideally placed to conduct research with CYP to explore their experiences of modified provision and exclusive sanctions. If their continued use is to be justified within a right of inclusion, then the inclusive credentials of bespoke provision such as AP or nurture rooms and the preference for respite or managed moves over PEX must be evaluated in light of how they affect CYP's sense of belonging, participation and personal efficacy. This information can be used to supplement such approaches to mitigate non-inclusive dimensions or cease them altogether.

Schuelka (2018) demands extensive training be maintained for all school staff and EPs should deliver the psychological elements. The values inherent in the HDIM and practical approaches of the TMHOI provide a relevant curriculum: it must be considered integral to all teacher training courses and as part of ongoing CPD for experienced staff to have formal instruction in relation-based and trauma informed theories such as attachment (Bowlby, 1969; Crittenden, 2008), polyvagal theory (Porges, 2011), attachment focused therapy (Hughes, 2007), neurosequential theory (Perry, 2009) and childhood resilience (Fonagy et al., 1994).

Supplementing this training, EPs can maintain support for schools and staff by building their capacity to respond relationally over time. Firstly, since inclusion can be a demanding and stressful process, staff should be offered individual supervision with EPs to contextualize their experiences, explore concerns, celebrate successes and apply theory. Secondly, EPs could model application of group problem-solving processes, such as solution circles (Grahamslaw & Henson, 2015; Brown & Henderson, 2012). Thirdly, EPs could train staff in and supervise delivery of psychoeducation approaches such as 'Cool Connections' (Seiler, 2008) or 'Think good, feel good' (Stallard, 2019) designed to build self-esteem and well-being by helping CYP understand what underlies anxieties and negative thinking. Finally, modelling person-centred approaches such as PATH (Pearpoint et al., 1993) to more effectively gather CYP voice and connect them with their aspirations.

Where schools seek support to maintain CYP inclusion, the HDIM and TMHOI create a common language that EPs can employ with schools during consultation. When exploring the complex interaction between CYP presentations and existing school responses, the HDIM creates a socially constructed set of aspirations to frame the conversation around. The categories and sub-categories relate inclusive outcomes to successfully addressing the sequential needs outlined in Maslow (1943) which will support communication of the most therapeutic application of support.

Future Research

Since HDIM and TMHOI are new theories that are local and contingent on conditions and contextual factors within County 1 they suggest several lines for future research. Firstly, the very localized nature of the participants makes it important to conduct similar interviews in other counties in this region and beyond for comparative purposes. It would be particularly important to evaluate if these theories reflect the definition and approaches adopted in more urbanized areas or those with greater diversity in their demographics. Secondly, these theories are contingent on their timing – it is impossible to predict if the new Ofsted framework will shape them moving forwards. An excellent follow up research would be to revisit all the participating heads in a few years after some of them have been inspected to gauge if anything has changed.

There are several avenues for complementary research suggested by the findings. In the first two interviews, data was collected about how the heads felt their opinions about inclusion had been shaped by their background and early professional experiences. Since this was not part of the research questions, it was discontinued but it would be interesting to research this process, perhaps in concert with interviewing current class teachers who lack senior leadership experience to evaluate how definitions may change over a professional career. Additionally, it was alleged in a sub-category *Providing Relational Staff* that ECTs enter the profession having focused largely on the academic aspects of the job and lack relational expertise headteachers consider requisite for inclusion. Since inclusion is so important this seems a remarkable oversight in 2026. It seems important to interview

ECTs and colleagues from teacher training to understand the constraints and social dynamics that maintain this.

All the participants discussed how their schools are now expected to cater for a wider spectrum of needs than previously. Although many of them hypothesized about why this may be the case, exploring the details was beyond the scope of this research and it was taken as a simple statement. However, as an important driver in the practices of inclusion and demands on resources, the processes that are causing it need to be explored.

Finally, this research has focused on school leadership as key agents of *applying* inclusion. Their definition was seen to guide their attitude and behaviour and ultimately how they make it work in their schools. However, all of these decisions will have an impact on the members of the school community. It is important to evaluate how the most divisive policies and procedures are received by them. For example, research with CYP who have been partly distanced by being moved into AP or nurture facilities, or those temporarily removed altogether from the community through respite at a local school could shed light on their experiences; to what extent do they feel their inclusion was maintained? What strategies did the school employ to keep them feeling part of the school community? What was the impact on how they perceived their role in school?

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Appendices

Appendix 1

UEA Ethics Approval

EM

Ethics Monitor<no-reply@ethicsreview.uea.ac.uk>

To: David Lawrence (EDU - Postgraduate Researcher)

Tue 5/6/2025 11:14 AM

University of East Anglia

Study title: Using grounded theory to understand how Secondary School Headteachers from one English County in the UK define and operationalize inclusion.

Application ID: ETH2425-1546

Dear David,

Your application was considered on 6th May 2025 by the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee).

The decision is: **approved**.

You are therefore able to start your project subject to any other necessary approvals being given.

This approval will expire on **30th June 2026**.

Please note that your project is granted ethics approval only for the length of time identified above. Any extension to a project must obtain ethics approval by the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee) before continuing.

It is a requirement of this ethics approval that you should report any adverse events which occur during your project to the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee) as soon as possible. An adverse event is one which was not anticipated in the research design, and which could potentially cause risk or harm to the participants or the researcher, or which reveals potential risks in the treatment under evaluation. For research involving animals, it may be the unintended death of an animal after trapping or carrying out a procedure.

Any amendments to your submitted project in terms of design, sample, data collection, focus etc. should be notified to the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee) in advance to ensure ethical compliance. If the amendments are substantial a new application may be required.

Approval by the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee) should not be taken as evidence that your study is compliant with the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018. If you need guidance on how to make your study UK GDPR compliant, please contact the UEA Data Protection Officer (dataprotection@uea.ac.uk).

I would like to wish you every success with your project.

On behalf of the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee)

Yours sincerely,

Dawn Corby

Ethics ETH2425-1546 : Mr David Lawrence

Appendix 2

UEA Ethics Amendment for Recruitment

EM

Ethics Monitor<no-reply@ethicsreview.uea.ac.uk>

To: David Lawrence (EDU - Postgraduate Researcher)

Thu 9/11/2025 4:49 PM

University of East Anglia

Study title: Using grounded theory to understand how Secondary School Headteachers from one English County in the UK define and operationalize inclusion.

Application ID: ETH2526-0136 (significant amendments)

Dear David,

Your application was considered on 11th September 2025 by the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee).

The decision is: **approved**.

You are therefore able to start your project subject to any other necessary approvals being given.

This approval will expire on **30th June 2026**.

Please note that your project is granted ethics approval only for the length of time identified above. Any extension to a project must obtain ethics approval by the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee) before continuing.

It is a requirement of this ethics approval that you should report any adverse events which occur during your project to the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee) as soon as possible. An adverse event is one which was not anticipated in the research design, and which could potentially cause risk or harm to the participants or the researcher, or which reveals potential risks in the treatment under evaluation. For research involving animals, it may be the unintended death of an animal after trapping or carrying out a procedure.

Any amendments to your submitted project in terms of design, sample, data collection, focus etc. should be notified to the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee) in advance to ensure ethical compliance. If the amendments are substantial a new application may be required.

Approval by the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee) should not be taken as evidence that your study is compliant with the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018. If you need guidance on how to make your study UK GDPR compliant, please contact the UEA Data Protection Officer (dataprotection@uea.ac.uk).

I would like to wish you every success with your project.

On behalf of the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee)

Yours sincerely,

Dawn Corby

Ethics ETH2526-0136 (Significant amendments): Mr David Lawrence

Appendix 3

UEA Ethics Approval for Theoretical Sampling Questions

EM

Ethics Monitor<no-reply@ethicsreview.uea.ac.uk>

To: David Lawrence (EDU - Postgraduate Researcher)

Tue 2/10/2026 8:32 AM

University of East Anglia

Study title: Using grounded theory to understand how Secondary School Headteachers from one English County in the UK define and operationalize inclusion.

Application ID: ETH2526-1175 (significant amendments)

Dear David,

Your application was considered on 10th February 2026 by the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee).

The decision is: **approved**.

You are therefore able to start your project subject to any other necessary approvals being given.

This approval will expire on **30th June 2026**.

Please note that your project is granted ethics approval only for the length of time identified above. Any extension to a project must obtain ethics approval by the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee) before continuing.

It is a requirement of this ethics approval that you should report any adverse events which occur during your project to the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee) as soon as possible. An adverse event is one which was not anticipated in the research design, and which could potentially cause risk or harm to the participants or the researcher, or which reveals potential risks in the treatment under evaluation. For research involving animals, it may be the unintended death of an animal after trapping or carrying out a procedure.

Any amendments to your submitted project in terms of design, sample, data collection, focus etc. should be notified to the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee) in advance to ensure ethical compliance. If the amendments are substantial a new application may be required.

Approval by the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee) should not be taken as evidence that your study is compliant with the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018. If you need guidance on how to make your study UK GDPR compliant, please contact the UEA Data Protection Officer (dataprotection@uea.ac.uk).

I would like to wish you every success with your project.

On behalf of the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee)

Yours sincerely,

Melanie Aplin

Ethics ETH2526-1175 (Significant amendments): Mr David Lawrence

Appendix 4

Request for Gatekeeper Approval

David Lawrence
Trainee Educational Psychologist

19th May 2025

School of Education & Lifelong Learning

University of East Anglia
Norwich Research Park
Norwich NR4 7TJ
United Kingdom

Email: David.lawrence@uea.ac.uk
Web: www.uea.ac.uk

Gatekeeper recruitment letter

Dear [redacted],

My name is David Lawrence, and I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist from University of East Anglia on placement with [redacted].

For my final thesis, I am conducting research into how secondary school headteachers define inclusion and how it interacts with running a mainstream school.

For my study, I need participation of headteachers to take part in anonymous interviews where they have an opportunity to share their unique perspectives. I am writing to ask if you would be prepared to act as gatekeeper for my participant recruitment.

As a gatekeeper, I would ask you to send the recruitment letter and participant information sheet to all head teachers in the County. I will be selecting participants according to the following criteria:

- Minimum of two years as a secondary school headteacher.
- Minimum of one year as headteacher in [redacted] or [redacted].

Ideally, participants would be from schools across [redacted].

I will send you a recruitment letter, participant information sheet and consent form so that you can forward them to the selected candidates.

All participants are anonymous, voluntary and can withdraw on request.

If you agree, then please send me an email saying you agree to act as my gatekeeper to David.lawrence@uea.ac.uk.

Many thanks for your time and I sincerely hope that you can take part!

David Lawrence

David.lawrence@uea.ac.uk

Appendix 5

Request for Presentation at Headteacher Forums

Dear Mrs [redacted] and Mr [redacted],

My name is David Lawrence, and I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist on placement with [redacted]. In my former life I was a primary school head teacher, and I remain very interested in the experiences of being a school leader.

For my doctoral research, I am looking into secondary headteachers' experiences of inclusion in their schools. I am particularly interested in how they define inclusion but also how they go about operationalizing it in their settings. Essentially, I would like to interview serving headteachers in [redacted] and ask them a few questions. The interviews will be rendered anonymous and could be finished within an hour.

So far, I have not had many participants agree to take part and I wondered if presenting my project in person would help colleagues see what I was trying to achieve and how limited the commitment is. I understand from colleagues that you co-chair a group of local headteachers and I wondered if it would be possible for me to briefly attend your next gathering to present my research in the hope of recruiting participants.

Please be assured that this request in now way affects your existing relationship with [redacted] SEND Services.

I look forward to hearing from you. If either of you would be interested in helping me, I can easily send you the letter and participant information sheet with more details.

Many thanks for your time,

Dave

David Lawrence
Trainee Educational Psychologist

Appendix 6

Line-by-line Coding Example

TEP: 10 years. Fantastic. Right, so the, the big question is, thank you for your time today, erm...is could you please tell me what the word inclusion means to you and everything that's involved in leading an inclusive mainstream school? I'll listen and make some notes and I'll not interrupt until you're finished. Erm...please take as much time as if you're necessary and tell me all the details you remember in your opinion connected to leading an inclusive school. It's a big question.

P3: It is, it's an enormous question. OK, what does inclusion mean to me? Erm...It is.... it is making every reasonable effort to include as many children as *possible* within a mainstream setting. And I think I've probably changed that definition over the last few years because I think earlier on I would have been, I suppose, more basic of it's just including everybody. But over the last few years because of...I suppose everything else that's going on and the children...that are finding themselves in a mainstream setting...it's, being inclusive is trying your *best* and making everybody every reasonable effort to include them, but that isn't always possible. So I think in the past I would have said it's, it's about keeping everybody and making sure everybody's got a provision. But I think increasingly there are children in a mainstream setting for whom we, we can make every reasonable effort, but it just doesn't work for them.

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DL: Yep.

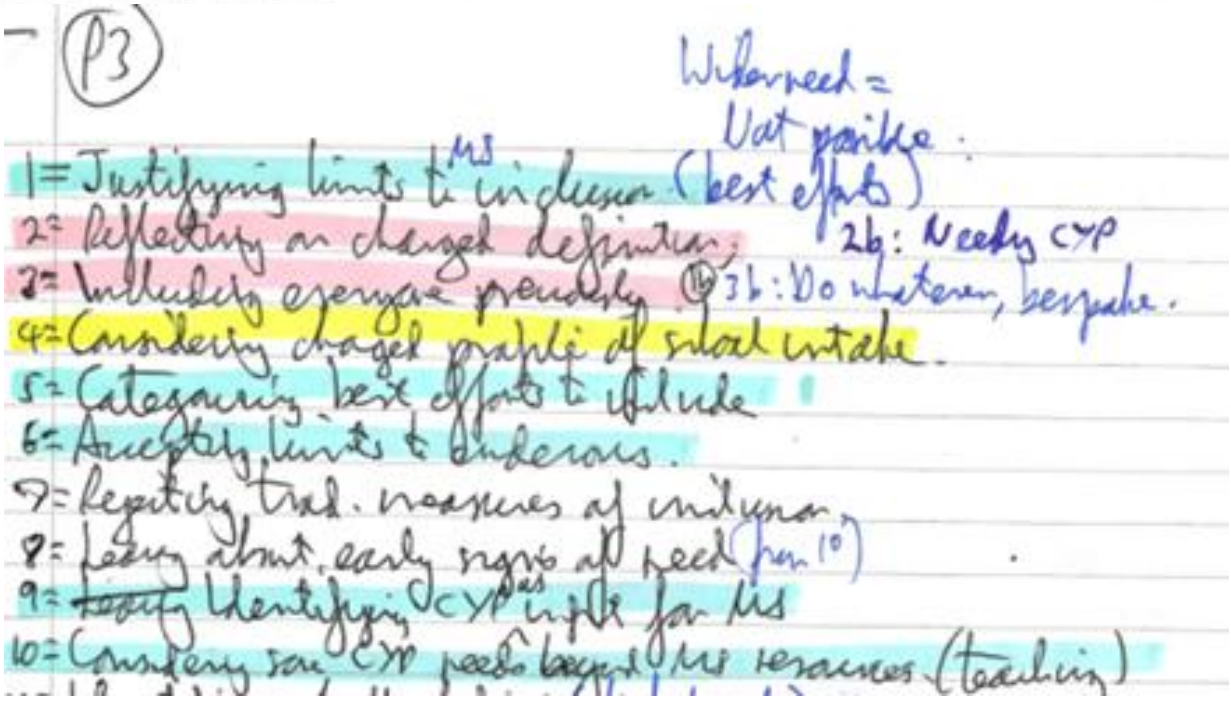
P3: So I think our approach is very inclusive and we say yes. Is it always successful? No...

6

TEP: Yep.

P3: It's not. And I think measuring successive inclusion on outcomes and what I mean by outcomes is probably whether they stay here, their attendance, their academic outcome. All of that is, is not...relevant. And I think we...obviously are now an all through school....

7
7



Appendix 7

Focused Coding Example

TEP: 10 years. Fantastic. Right, so the, the big question is, thank you for your time today, erm...is could you please tell me what the word inclusion means to you and everything that's involved in leading an inclusive mainstream school? I'll listen and make some notes and I'll not interrupt until you're finished. Erm...please take as much time as if you're necessary and tell me all the details you remember in your opinion connected to leading an inclusive school. It's a big question.

P3: It is, it's an enormous question. OK, what does inclusion mean to me? Erm...It is.... it is making every reasonable effort to include as many children as *possible* within a mainstream setting. And I think I've probably changed that definition over the last few years because I think earlier on I would have been, I suppose, more basic of it's just including everybody. But over the last few years because of...I suppose everything else that's going on and the children...that are finding themselves in a mainstream setting...it's, being inclusive is trying your *best* and making everybody every reasonable effort to include them, but that isn't always possible. So I think in the past I would have said it's, it's about keeping everybody and making sure everybody's got a provision. But I think increasingly there are children in a mainstream setting for whom we, we can make every reasonable effort, but it just doesn't work for them.

DL: Yep.

P3: So I think our approach is very inclusive and we say yes. Is it always successful? No...

TEP: Yep.

P3: It's not. And I think measuring successive inclusion on outcomes and what I mean by outcomes is probably whether they stay here, their attendance, their academic outcome. All of that is, is not...relevant. And I think we...obviously are now an all through school....

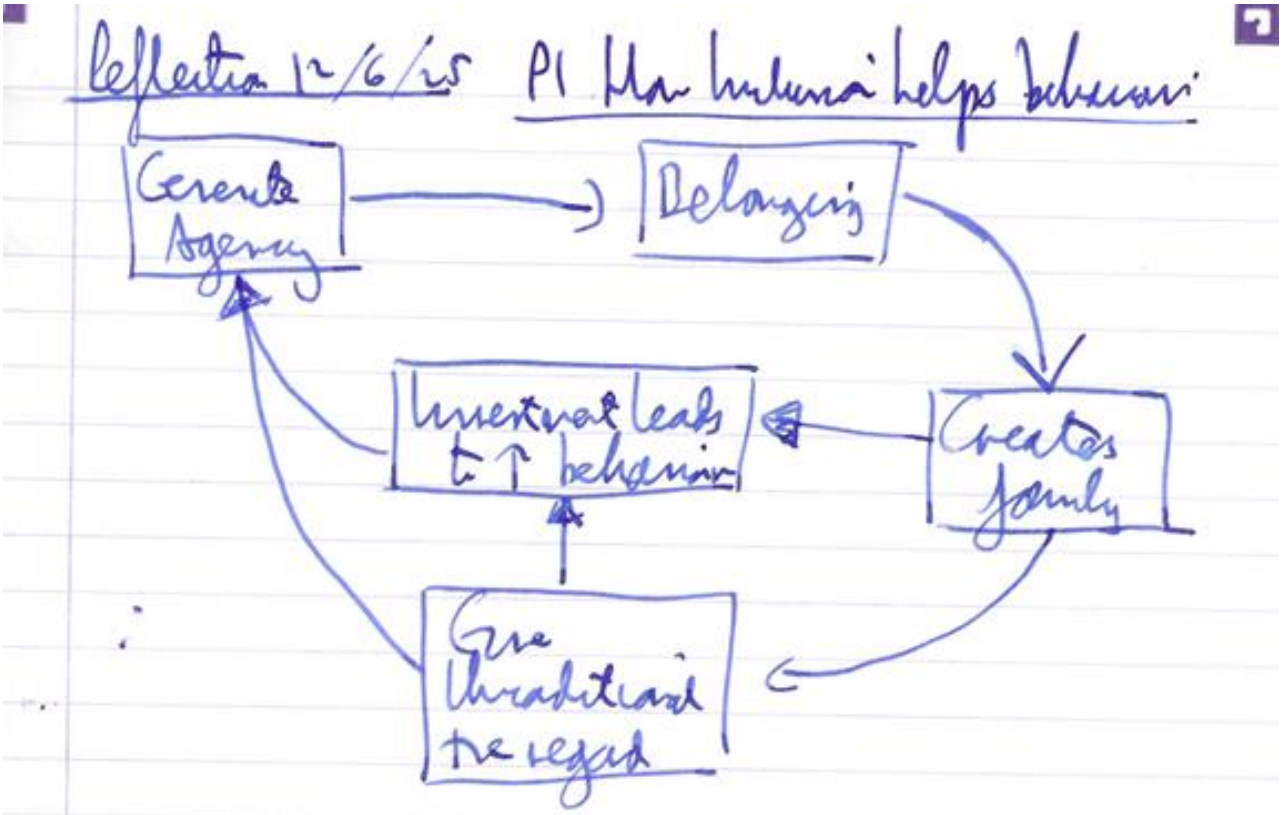
P3 F

1a = Best efforts
1b = Individual adapt.

1c = Accepting limits
2 = Repeating trad methods
3 = Upskilling staff
4 = Using CYP to adapt
5 = Funding deficit - CCC delays
6 = Recruiting relational staff
7 = Widening needs (↓SS)
8 = ~~Being misled~~ Lacking honesty
9 = Recognising variable needs (CiC.) = f

Appendix 8

Researcher Memo Examples



Reflection 20/6/25 Relating P1 to P2 ideas...

3 Terms to consider for Theoretical stage?

1: Country is examplatory: where do they see the school? That is for everyone. Second is to satisfy measures.

2: Staff: What do they need to be equipped with to make leads visit? What are training shortfalls?

3: How should we record: What needs to change or how have do they need to be to create them as measures?

21/2 Why exclude?. (P2)

P2. makes unclear distinction between inclusion and PEX.

It is clear they see the need to separate CYP who are:

a) present as sig. MD
b) disrupt learning
c) commit serious misdemeanors (drugs)
d) present threat.

In the case of d) LA sees no issue with PEX but in all these cases the CYP must be placed away from MS for "their own good".

25/2 P2 - duels off decisions vs P1 ethics?

P1 also talks frequently about pride. Pride in reading program, pride in multiple program, pride in giving CYP's pupils jobs.

He also talks about ignoring Ofsted but also reveals he has inside knowledge (as an inspector) that helps him target "ethical leadership". (Irony?)

He then mentions being brave to withstand them. However he also quotes trad metrics freq. He suggests that poor academic returns for a few can be tolerated if overall for whole one ↑.

Is he suggesting pupils with additional needs are "sacrificed" when included? Is it bad possible for both?

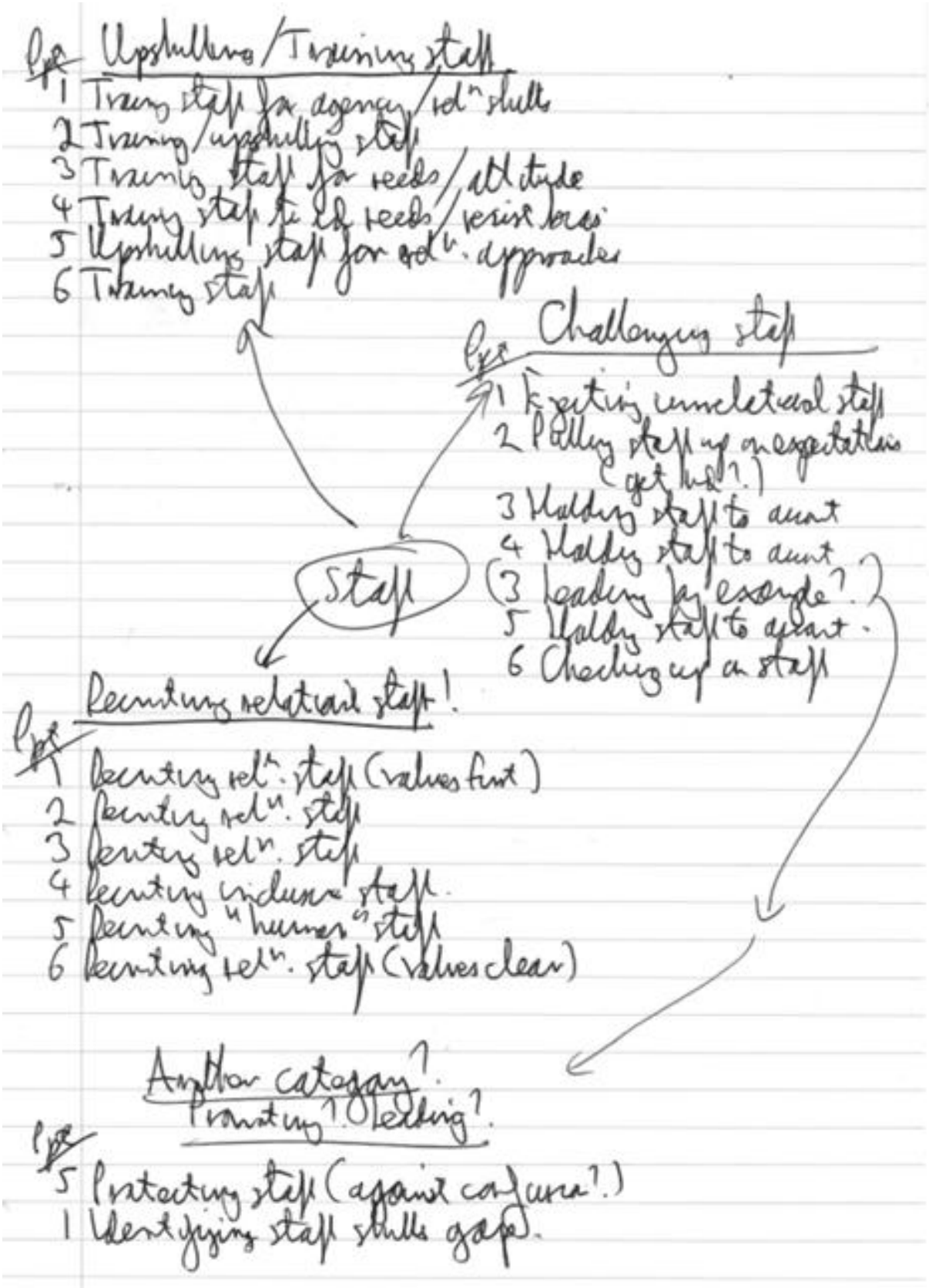
P2 Also makes freq. reference to them being included in the school but this is really integration: CYP with needs are assimilated into the school and "allowed" certain access as long as they conform within their provision.

Big difference between P1 + P2

P1 sees CYP presence in class, with peers as "right" for them + obligation (Christian? Moral? self-determination? Anti-crime?) for him.

Appendix 9

Theoretical Coding Examples



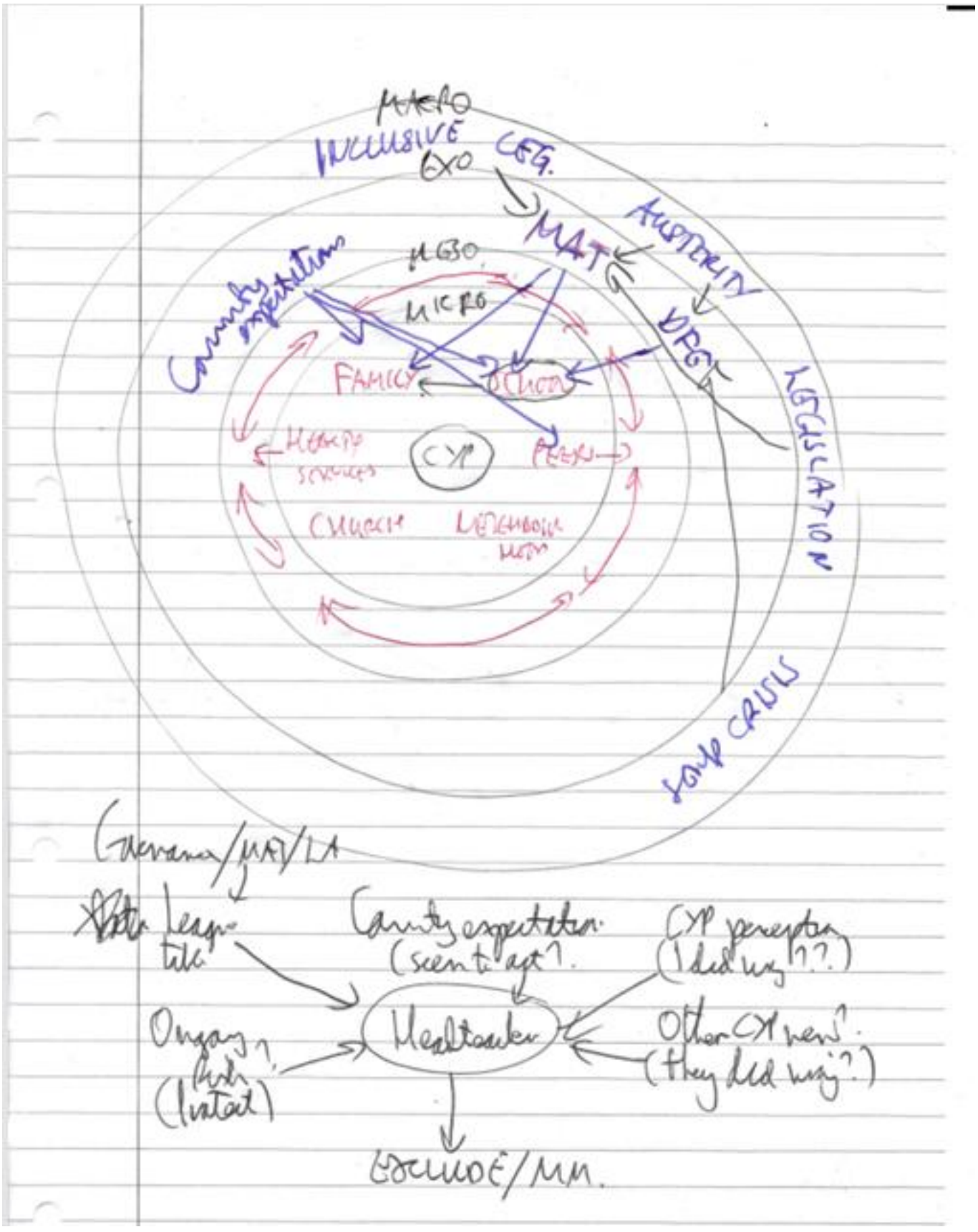
Creating additional provision (alternative? / bespoke?)

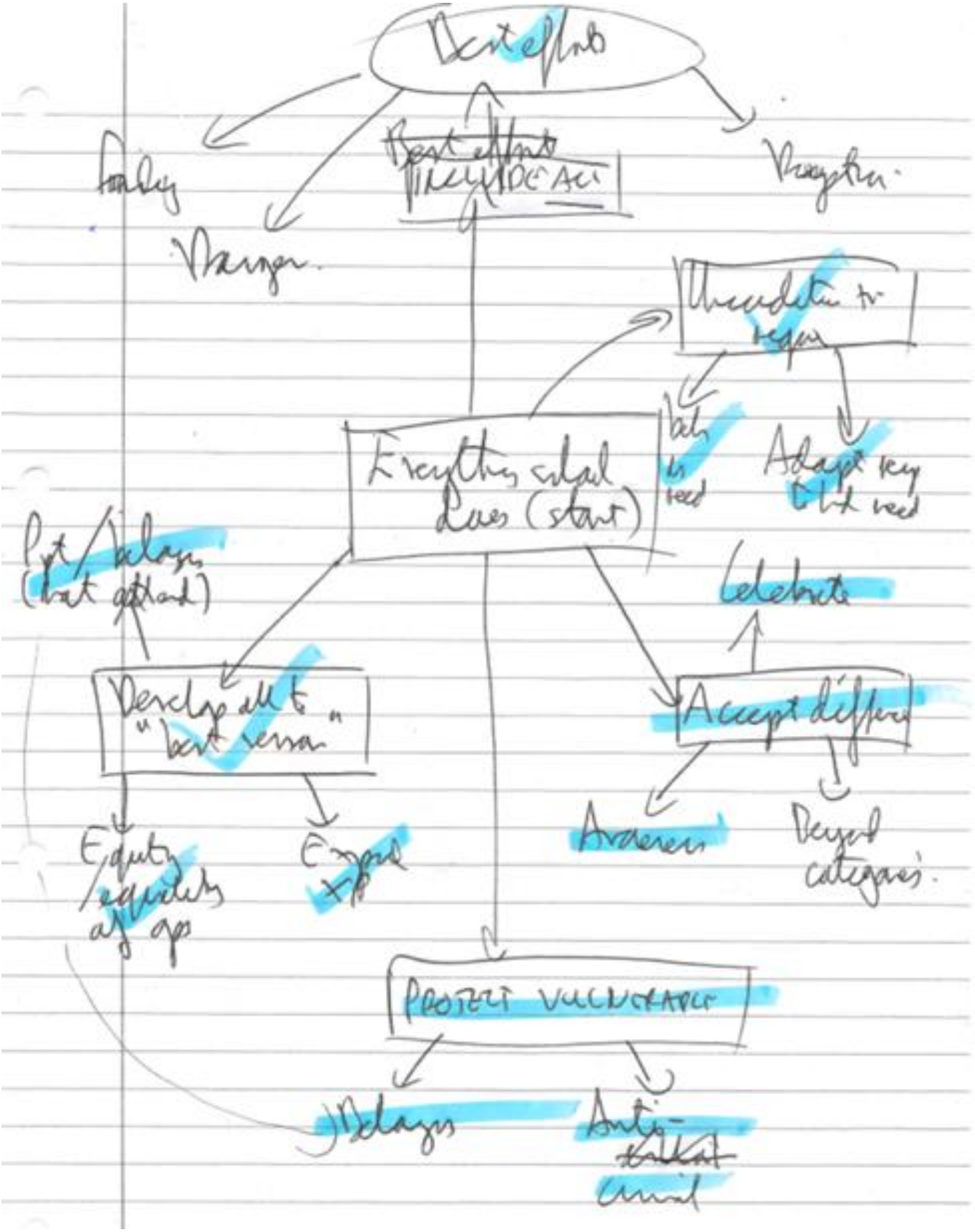
Ppt

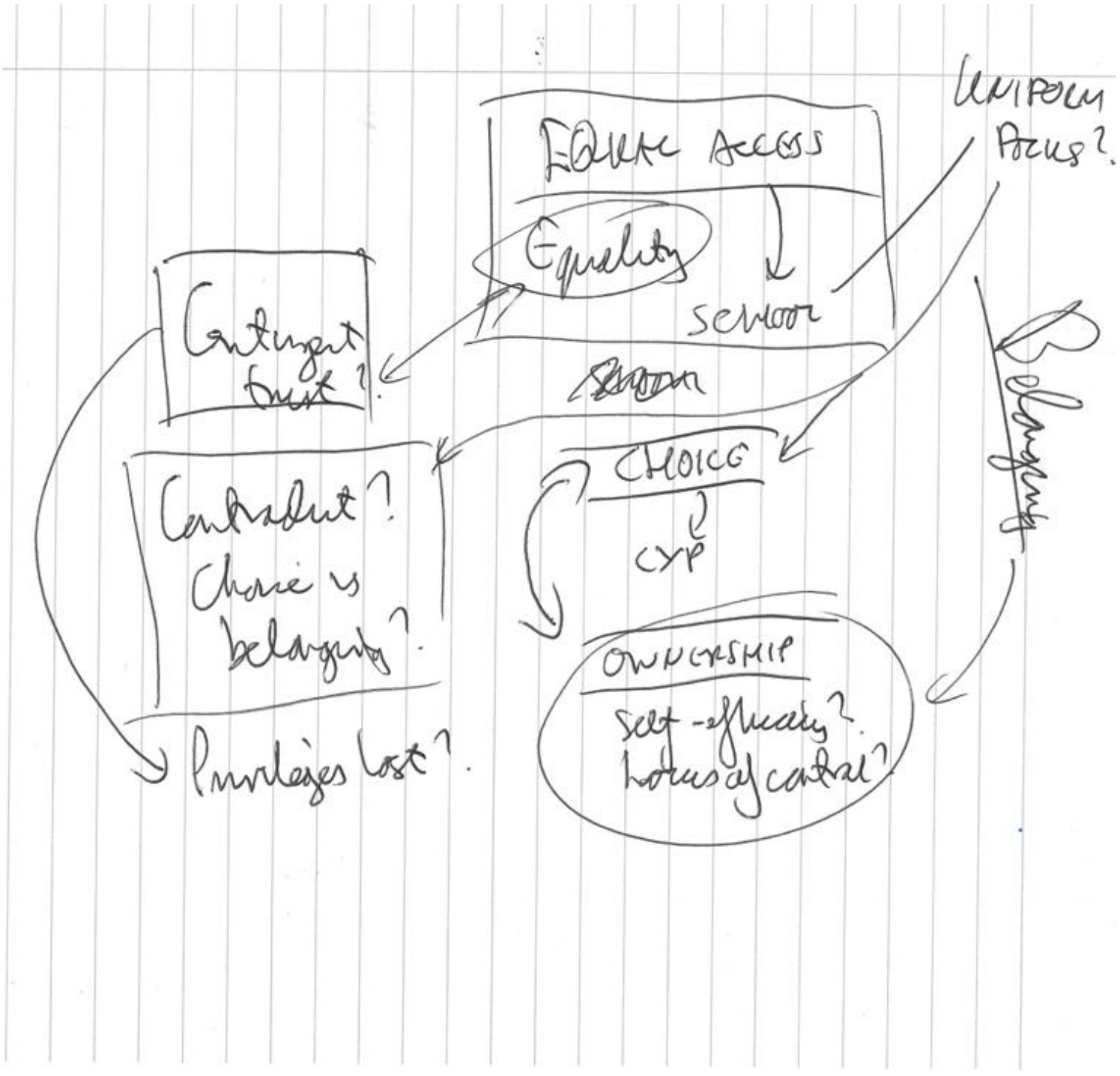
1 Creating separate spaces to manage needs / avoid FOX
2 Using bespoke provision / spaces for SEMD / SCMH / AP (also from MS)
3 Having bespoke spaces for managing range of need.
4 Creating bespoke spaces for extreme behaviour
5 Having vulnerable SEMD in safe environment
6 Meeting extreme needs in-house but away from MS
9 Offering additional nurture spaces

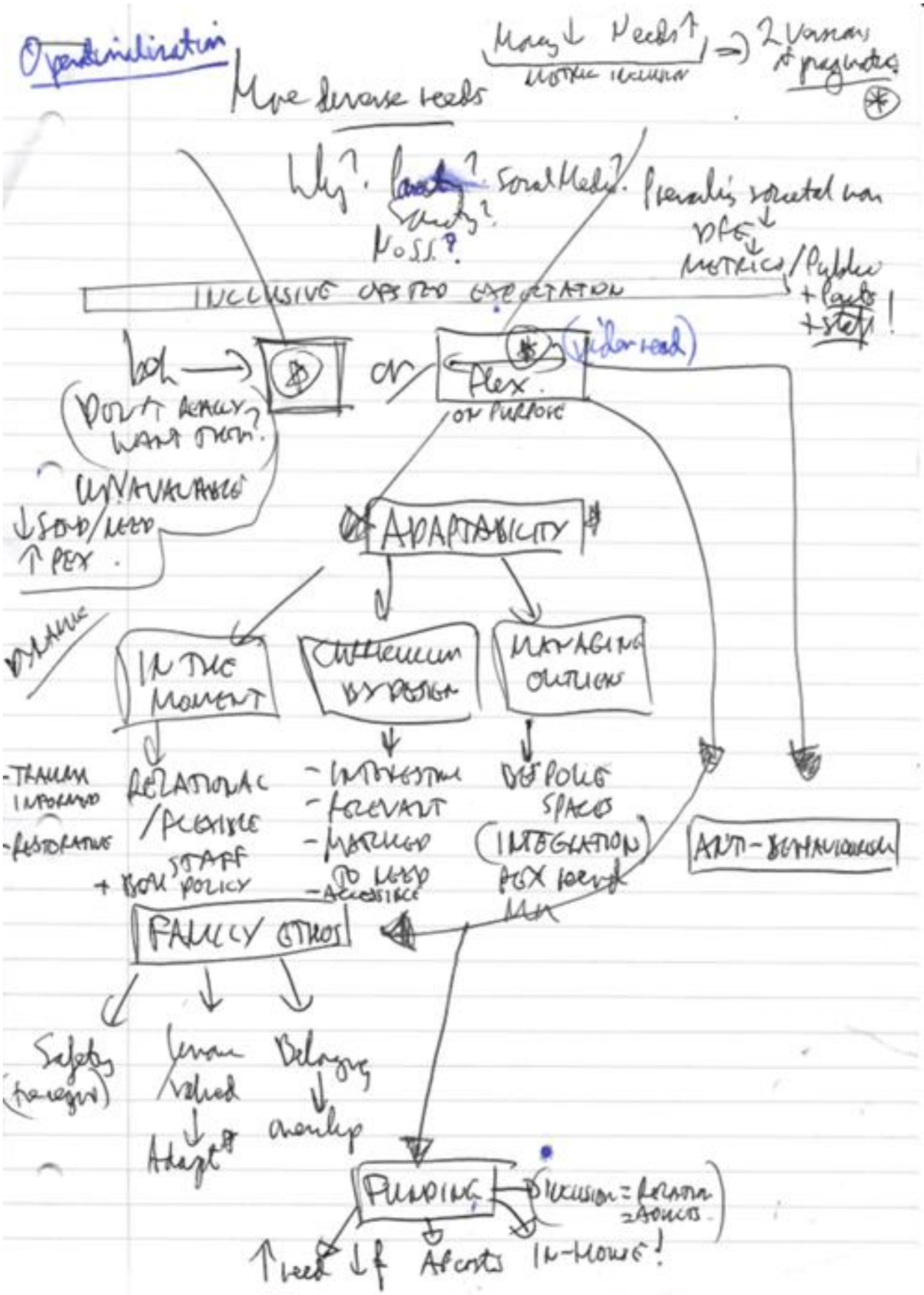
Appendix 10

Diagramming Examples




Beste/Ook
Beste offerte
Vergelijken
Vergelijken
Verander tv regels
Alles is veel
Alles veel
Alles is veel (start)
Put/delays (beste offerte)
Vergelijk offerte "beste versie"
Accept different
Accepteren
Beyond categories
Equity/equality of ops
Expand
PROJECT VULNERABLE
Delays
Anti-


Equal Access
Equality
School
Uniform Rules?
Belonging
Contingent task?
Contribute? Choice vs belonging?
Choice
CYP
Ownership
Self-efficacy? Locus of control?
Privileges lost?


Operationalization
More diverse needs
Many ↓ Needs ↑
Why? Social Media?
Parents separated now
DFE
METRICS / Publish
+ Parents
+ Staff!
INCLUSIVE OPTED EXPECTATION
both
OR
Flex.
(videoread)
ON PURPOSE
DON'T REALLY WANT THEM.
UNAVAILABLE
↓ SEND/NEED
↑ PEX.
ADAPTABILITY
DYNAMIC
IN THE MOMENT
CURRICULUM BY DESIGN
MANAGING OUTLIERS
- TRAUMA INFORMED
- RESTORATIVE
RELATIONAL / FLEXIBLE
+ BOM STAFF POLICY
- INTERESTING
- RELEVANT
- MATCHED TO NEED
- ACCESSIBLE
DEPOLICE SPACES
(INTEGRATION)
PEX here
ANTI-BEHAVIOURISM
FALLACY ETHOS
Safety (hierarchy)
Seen valued
Adapt
Belonging
overlap
PLANNING
DISCUSSION = RELATION = ADVICE
↑ Need ↓ If
Adapts
IN-HOUSE!

Appendix 11

Participant Information and Consent Forms

Mr David Lawrence
Trainee Educational Psychologist

20th May 2025

Faculty of Social Sciences
School of Education and Lifelong Learning

University of East Anglia
Norwich Research Park
Norwich NR4 7TJ
United Kingdom

Email: david.lawrence@uea.ac.uk
Web: www.uea.ac.uk

How do Secondary Headteachers define and operationalize inclusion in their schools?

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

(1) What is this study about?
You are invited to take part in a research study about how headteachers define school inclusion themselves and how they practically make it work whilst balancing all the other competing factors and complexities of running a modern school. You have been invited to participate in this study because of your role as a headteacher. As the lead professionals in the UK's schools, with overall responsibility for their ethos, policies and procedures, it is important to hear about this context and how school leaders balance the concept of inclusion along with the many other factors that they have to consider. This Participant Information Sheet tells you about the research study. Knowing what is involved will help you decide if you want to take part in the study. Please read this sheet carefully and ask questions about anything that you don't understand or want to know more about.

Participation in this research study is voluntary. By giving consent to take part in this study you are telling us that you:

- ✓ Understand what you have read.
- ✓ Agree to take part in the research study as outlined below.
- ✓ Agree to the use of your personal information as described.
- ✓ You have received a copy of this Participant Information Sheet to keep.

(2) Who is running the study?
The study is being carried out by the following researcher(s): Mr David Lawrence who is conducting this study as the basis for the Educational Psychology Doctorate at the University of East Anglia. This will take place under the supervision of Dr Andrea Honess (a.honess@uea.ac.uk).

There are no obvious conflicts of interests in this research, but I must disclose that I was previously a headteacher of a primary school and so have some experience of this context.
There are no financial benefits from taking part.

(3) What will the study involve for me?
If you agree to participate, then it only requires you to take part in **one** interview that can be hosted in-person at your school or online via Microsoft Teams according to your preference. The interviews are likely to take 45-60 minutes and be between May and December 2025.

I am recruiting particpants to take part in **one** of the two different phases of interviewing:

Phase 1: Apart from confirming their length of service as a headteacher, participants will be asked one open question asking them to describe what inclusion means to them and all the things involved in leading an inclusive mainstream school. The researcher may ask for clarification of terms and ideas that emerge.

Phase 2: Participants taking part in later interviews will have questions shaped by themes and ideas from phase 1 so they may touch on how, when or why certain factors influence inclusion as they do.

There is no other personal information accessed.

For face to face interviews an audio recording will be taken. For Teams interviews an audio and video recording will be taken. Both types of recording will be deleted once a fully anonymous transcription has been made.

You will be sent a copy of your anonymous transcript and then have five working days to withdraw from the study should you wish.

(4) How much of my time will the study take?
It is anticipated that an interview will probably take in the region of 45-60 minutes. Each participant will only need to take part in **one** such interview. Once the anonymous transcript has been submitted, you will need to spend time reading it to make sure you consent for it to remain n the study. It is anticpated that under usual circumstances this would take a maximum of 20 minutes.

(5) Do I have to be in the study? Can I withdraw from the study once I have started?
Being in this study is completely voluntary and you do not have to take part.
Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia, [redacted] and [redacted] SEND or Educational Psychology services now or in the future.

If you decide to take part in the study, you can withdraw your consent at any point before the interview. After the interview, the transcript will be fully anonymised and sent to you for approval. You will have a further five days to withdraw at this point. You can do this by contacting me by email or telephone stating that you wish to withdraw from the study.

(6) What are the consequences if I withdraw from the study?
You are free to stop the interview at any time. Unless you say that you want us to keep them, any recordings will be erased and the information you have provided will not be included in the study results. You may also refuse to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer during the interview. If you decide at a later time to withdraw from the study your information will be removed from our records and will not be included in any results, up to the point we have analysed and published the results.

(7) Are there any risks or costs associated with being in the study?
Aside from giving up your time, we do not expect that there will be any risks or costs associated with taking part in this study. However, we are sensitive that this is a challenging topic and exploring the demands you face may be discomforting. As part of the debrief, participants will be provided with contact for professional support services. Additionally, there is the possibility that participants could be identified through the views and experiences they share. To mitigate against this, interview transcripts will have all identifiable information removed including names, location, dates, landmarks and local features. Participants will receive a full copy of the final anonymous transcript for approval and have up to five days from receipt to withdraw from the study completely.

(8) Are there any benefits associated with being in the study?
This research will allow you to vocalize and explore your own professional journey in the complicated and often confusing arena of inclusion. Given the resurgent interest in inclusion across education, it is hoped that an anonymous interview will allow you a safe space to articulate and reflect on your unique perspectives and experiences.
As National government and Local Authorities look to pursue inclusive education for financial and moral benefits, it is important that all stakeholders work towards a shared understanding of the term inclusion. As a key stakeholder, expressing your understanding of inclusion along with the professional practical considerations you face is fundamental to make this dialogue effective.

(9) What will happen to information provided by me and data collected during the study?
All recordings of the interviews will be transcribed into written form as soon as practically possible. As part of this process, the participant is rendered anonymous using a pseudonym and any identifiable information for you, the school, locality or other people will be modified to be unrecognizable. The researcher will then explore the themes in the interview and look for patterns from other interviews. These will be used to steer the questions posed in later interviews as the researcher attempts to create a theory describing the experiences of headteachers enacting inclusion.

Your personal data and information will only be used as outlined in this Participant Information Sheet, unless you consent otherwise. Data management will follow the Data Protection Act 2018 (DPA 2018) and UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR), and the University of East Anglia's Research Data Management Policy.

The information you provide will be stored securely and your identity will be kept strictly confidential, except as required by law. Study findings will be used for the purposes of my dissertation and may also be used for other scholarly and educational purposes such as research publications and in teaching. Although every effort will be made to protect your identity, there is a minimal risk that you might be identifiable due to the nature of the study and/or results if you decide to participate.

The audio or audio-visual recordings of interviews will be temporarily stored on secure UEA OneDrive account until transcription is completed at which point they will be permanently deleted. The anonymous transcripts will be stored on the UEA OneDrive account and extracts will appear in the final dissertation.

Since the study findings may also be used for other purposes such as publications, the anonymous transcripts will be kept in the UEA repository for at least 10 years beyond the last date they were used. nThe deposited data will not include your name or any directly identifiable information about you, but there is a risk that you might be identifiable due to the nature of the study and/or results.

(10) What if I would like further information about the study?
When you have read this information, Mr David Lawrence (david.lawrence@uea.ac.uk) will be available to discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have.

(11) Will I be told the results of the study?
You have a right to receive feedback about the overall results of this study.
You can tell us that you wish to receive feedback by ticking the box on the consent form.
This feedback will be in the form of a one page summary of research findings.
This feedback will be made available at the end of the study in late summer 2026.

(12) What if I have a complaint or any concerns about the study?

If there is a problem please let me know. You can contact me via the University of East Anglia at the following address:

Mr David Lawrence
School of Education and Lifelong Learning
University of East Anglia
NORWICH NR4 7TJ
david.lawrence@uea.ac.uk

If you would like to speak to someone else, you can contact my supervisor: Dr Andrea Honess (a.honess@uea.ac.uk)

If you are concerned about the way this study is being conducted or you wish to make a complaint to someone independent from the study, please contact the Head of School of Education and Lifelong Learning: Professor Yann Lebeau (y.lebeau@uea.ac.uk).

(13) How do I know that this study has been approved to take place?
To protect your safety, rights, wellbeing and dignity, all research in the University of East Anglia is reviewed by a Research Ethics Body. This research was approved by the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee).

(14) What is the general data protection information I need to be informed about?
According to data protection legislation, we are required to inform you that the legal basis for processing your data as listed in Article 6(1) of the UK GDPR is because this allows us to process personal data when it is necessary to perform our public tasks as a University.

In addition to the specific information provided above about why your personal data is required and how it will be used, there is also some general information which needs to be provided for you:

- The data controller is the University of East Anglia.
- For further information, you can contact the University's Data Protection Officer at dataprotection@uea.ac.uk
- You can also find out more about your data protection rights at the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO).
- If you are unhappy with how your personal data has been used, please contact the University's Data Protection Officer at dataprotection@uea.ac.uk in the first instance.

(15) OK, I want to take part – what do I do next?
You need to fill in one copy of the consent form and return it to me via email. Please keep the letter, information sheet and the second copy of the consent form for your information.

(16) Further information
This information was last updated on 24 April 2025.

If there are changes to the information provided, you will be notified by email as soon as the changes become apparent.

This information sheet is for you to keep

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (First Copy to Researcher)

I, ... [PRINT NAME], **am** willing to participate in this research study.

In giving my consent I state that:

- I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.
- I have read the Participant Information Sheet, which I may keep, for my records, and have been able to discuss my involvement in the study with the researchers if I wished to do so.
- The researchers have answered any questions that I had about the study and I am happy with the answers.
- I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary and I do not have to take part. My decision whether to be in the study will not affect my relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia (or [redacted] and [redacted] SEND or Educational Psychology services) now or in the future.
- I understand that I may stop the interview at any time if I do not wish to continue, and that unless I indicate otherwise any recordings will then be erased and the information provided will not be included in the study results. I also understand that I may refuse to answer any questions I don't wish to answer.
- I understand that the results of this study will be used in the way described in the information sheet.
- I understand that personal information about me that is collected over the course of this project will be stored securely and will only be used for purposes that I have agreed to. I understand that information about me will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.

I consent to:

Audio-recording	YES	☐	NO	☐
Video-recording	YES	☐	NO	☐
Reviewing transcripts	YES	☐	NO	☐
Researcher will conduct an interview and then create an anonymous transcription.	YES	☐	NO	☐
Would you like to receive feedback about the overall results of this study?	YES	☐	NO	☐

If you answered **YES**, please indicate your preferred form of feedback and address:

☐ Postal: _____

_____

☐ Email: _____

.....
Signature

.....
PRINT name

.....
Date

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (Second Copy to Participant)

I, ... [PRINT NAME], **am** willing to participate in this research study.

In giving my consent I state that:

- I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.
- I have read the Participant Information Sheet, which I may keep, for my records, and have been able to discuss my involvement in the study with the researchers if I wished to do so.
- The researchers have answered any questions that I had about the study and I am happy with the answers.
- I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary and I do not have to take part. My decision whether to be in the study will not affect my relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia (or [redacted] and [redacted] SEND or Educational Psychology services) now or in the future.
- I understand that I may stop the interview at any time if I do not wish to continue, and that unless I indicate otherwise any recordings will then be erased and the information provided will not be included in the study results. I also understand that I may refuse to answer any questions I don't wish to answer.
- I understand that the results of this study will be used in the way described in the information sheet.
- I understand that personal information about me that is collected over the course of this project will be stored securely and will only be used for purposes that I have agreed to. I understand that information about me will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.

I consent to:

Audio-recording	YES	☐	NO	☐
Video-recording	YES	☐	NO	☐
Reviewing transcripts	YES	☐	NO	☐
Researcher will conduct an interview and then create an anonymous transcription.	YES	☐	NO	☐
Would you like to receive feedback about the overall results of this study?	YES	☐	NO	☐

If you answered **YES**, please indicate your preferred form of feedback and address:

☐ Postal: _____

_____

☐ Email: _____

.....
Signature

.....
PRINT name

.....
Date

Appendix 12

Participant Recruitment Covering Letter

David Lawrence
Trainee Educational Psychologist

20th May 2025

School of Education & Lifelong Learning

University of East Anglia
Norwich Research Park
Norwich NR4 7TJ
United Kingdom

Email: David.lawrence@uea.ac.uk
Web: www.uea.ac.uk

Headteacher recruitment letter

Dear Headteacher,

My name is David Lawrence, and I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist from University of East Anglia on placement with [redacted].

I am conducting research into how secondary school headteachers define inclusion and how it interacts with running a mainstream school.

I need to interview headteachers to explore their unique perspectives. I am looking to recruit participants according to the following criteria:

- Minimum of two years as a secondary school headteacher.
- Minimum of one year as headteacher in [redacted] or [redacted].

I am writing to ask for your consent to take part.

Please see the attached Participant Information Sheet for more information about this study, including how long we keep your data and how we keep your data secure.

If you are interested in taking part, please sign and return the attached consent form to me via email at David.lawrence@uea.ac.uk. I will then arrange with you to do the **interview at a time of your convenience**. These can be conducted face to face or online using Microsoft Teams.

To help me create an accurate transcript, both types of interview will be recorded on Teams. Since your participation will be anonymous, all personal or identifiable details of any kind will be removed during the transcription process and then the recording will be deleted. I will send you a copy of the fully anonymous transcript for your approval.

Participation is voluntary and you do not need to take part if you do not wish. You can withdraw at any time before the interview and withdraw your transcript within five days of receiving it. If you decide you would like to withdraw any of your data, you may email me at David.lawrence@uea.ac.uk.

Many thanks for your time and I sincerely hope that you can take part!

David Lawrence

David.lawrence@uea.ac.uk

Appendix 13

Purposive Sample Semi-structured Interview Schedule

Purposive sample: initial demographic and open questions

All participants will be asked the following questions:

"Please can you confirm how long you have been in role as a headteacher?"

"Please can you confirm how long you have been in this role within [redacted] *or* [redacted]*?"*

"Could you please tell me what the word inclusion means to you and everything that is involved in leading an inclusive mainstream school? I will listen and make some notes, and I will not interrupt you until you have finished. Please take as much time as you feel necessary and tell me all the details you remember that, in your opinion, are connected to leading an inclusive school."

The researcher will offer only encouragement whilst listening to the reply. Further open-ended questions (How? What? When?) may generate detail on topics mentioned only briefly. The researcher will also confirm the participants' meaning of any terms or abbreviations used.

Indicative variables governing decisions about inclusion

Eg. How/when/why does _____ impact/influence/interact?

- Headteacher personal ethos or background
- School context, including Ofsted grading or imminence
- School reputation and ethos
- Finances
- Staff levels, training, attitudes
- Union militancy
- DfE policies and priorities
- MAT policies and priorities
- Exam Performance tables
- Nature of perceived 'differences' to be included
- Student attitudes or wellbeing
- Parent/carer/community attitudes
- Local, recent and contextual events (eg. violence, drug use, weapons)

Appendix 14

Theoretical Sample Interview Schedule: Definition

Theoretical sampling questions: Definition
1) What are the overall objectives for each CYP after an inclusive mainstream education?
2) Which key areas of mainstream school planning and provision must consider inclusion?
3) If inclusion with their peers and in the curriculum is a CYP's right, is it unconditional and would anything define its limits in a mainstream school?
4) What is the balance between a school adapting to CYP and CYP adapting to school?
5) In what ways does school inclusion align or not align with current UK social and cultural expectations, including concepts of endeavour, reward, crime and punishment, and school's role in maintaining these with CYP?
6) Given the diversity of CYP's needs, contexts and previous experiences, is inclusion about equality of access to provision or aiming for equity of outcomes and experience?
7) What contextual, social, economic or cultural vulnerabilities is inclusion attempting to rectify to improve outcomes for all CYP?
8) What distinguishes inclusion from physical attendance on a school site with or without high levels of adaptation?
9) How important in school and for later life is it to educate CYP on how to manage their individual differences rather than expect adaptations?

Appendix 15

Theoretical Sample Interview Schedule: Operationalization

Theoretical sampling questions: Operationalization
1) What factors may be resulting in mainstream schools supporting a wider range of needs than previously?
2) What factors influence headteachers' decisions to pursue a behaviourist and sanctioning model (eg. zero tolerance) or a relational and therapeutic model?
3) What must be considered when designing and delivering an inclusive curriculum to CYP with widely divergent needs and can it ever be accessible to all in the same way and at the same time?
4) Headteachers have described a need to train and upskill staff to be flexible for needs and to develop relational skills. What wider social and cultural expectations or gaps in modern teacher training lead recruits to have focused on other areas previously?
5) How do you balance having consistent school rules and clear expectations for all against being flexible and therapeutic for individual needs?
6) How do you help staff to diagnose in the moment if a CYP's actions represent underlying need or poor choices and so how to respond effectively?
7) Are Managed Moves more inclusive that Permanent Exclusion and why is their rate of failure increasing?
8) In what ways do partnerships between schools, either regionally or across Multi-Academy Trusts, support or hinder inclusion?
9) When can relational practice such as explanation of consequences, increased personal attention and investment in experiences improve behaviour without accompanying sanctions?

Appendix 16

Participant Debrief Sheet

David Lawrence
Trainee Educational Psychologist

11th June 2025

School of Education & Lifelong Learning

University of East Anglia
Norwich Research Park
Norwich NR4 7TJ
United Kingdom

Email: David.lawrence@uea.ac.uk
Web: www.uea.ac.uk

How do Secondary Headteachers define and operationalize inclusion in their schools?

PARTICIPANT DEBRIEF SHEET

Thank you for participating in this study. We hope that it has been of interest to you. Your time and efforts are much appreciated.

As you know, the purpose of the study to gain insight into how secondary school headteachers define inclusion and how they make it work considering all the other factors that must be considered when running a mainstream school. To help me gather data, you kindly agreed to take part in an interview with me to explore your own views and perspectives.

Now that I have gathered your data, I will begin to analyse it by looking for key ideas and themes from what you have shared. As I gather more data from other participants, I will be able to look for commonalities, agreements or disagreements which will help me to identify lines on enquiry. As I continue to interview participants, eventually I hope to build a theory explaining the experience of managing inclusion in secondary schools. Once I have anonymised it, I will send you a copy of the interview transcript for your approval and there is an option for you to indicate if you would like to receive a summary of the findings of research by contacting me.

If you have any questions regarding this study or if you have any worries or concerns about the research, please contact the researcher: David Lawrence (david.lawrence@uea.ac.uk) or supervisor: Dr Andrea Honess (a.honess@uea.ac.uk). You can also contact the Head of School of Education and Lifelong Learning: Yann Lebeau (y.lebeau@uea.ac.uk) about this research.

We understand that the topic covered in this research is challenging and potentially distressing. We are open to any feedback you have about how this has been handled to inform subsequent data collection. If you have been upset by any aspect of the study, then you may wish to consider contacting the service below for support:

- Emotional and practical support for teachers and education staff – Qualified Education Support Councillors available on **08000 562 561**
- Employee Assistance Programmes.pdf

Thank you again for your participation.

David Lawrence