



Belonging in School



Part 2: A Practical Guide to Inclusive Policy Planning



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Part 2: A Practical Guide to Inclusive Policy Planning

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With thanks to Sian Lewis, and the participants who shared their insights and feedback as part of the Diverse Trajectories to Good Developmental Outcomes Workshop (2022) and the Delivering Inclusive Education Workshop (2023)

<https://inclusion.mrc-cbu.cam.ac.uk/>

Who is this resource for?

Belonging in School is written for all education professionals working in schools, not only senior leaders or classroom teachers. *All* staff members play important roles in creating and maintaining inclusive environments.

This resource offers planning strategies and policy suggestions to make schools more inclusive for pupils with neurodevelopmental differences, and for everyone. Acting on these ideas to create positive change needs local knowledge of schools and their communities—in other words, you!

The resource will likely be most relevant for mainstream primary schools in the UK's school systems, but its planning strategies could be adapted and implemented in almost any educational setting.

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Contributors

This resource includes contributions from the participants in the Diverse Trajectories to Good Developmental Outcomes Workshop (University of Cambridge, December 2022), the participants in the Delivering Inclusive Education Workshop (ITAKOM conference, Edinburgh, March 2023), and Dr Sian Lewis. See Section 5 'About the Belonging in School project' for details.

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About the Belonging in School Resource

Part 2: Planning Guidance Document

The **Belonging in School** resource focuses on developing policies for educational inclusion in mainstream schools, for learners with neurodevelopmental differences. These learners *may be* labelled as having Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND; England and Northern Ireland), Additional Support Needs (ASN; Scotland), or Additional Learning Needs (ALN; Wales). While the resource and its planning tools can be applied across any level of education, it will be most relevant to primary schools.

In this **Planning Guidance Document** we explain a five-stage **Action Cycle** in detail, as a “generic” planning tool that schools could use to support existing or new inclusion planning goals. We then provide detailed information on each of the **Four Planning Approaches**, including step-by-step guidance on how you could apply each approach using the steps of the action cycle. A final section offers guidance on **collecting data and evaluating your inclusion-related changes**.

Part 1 of Belonging in School (available as a separate document) is an **Overview Report** giving brief background on inclusion issues, describing characteristics of inclusive policy, and introducing the Action Cycle and Four Planning Approaches. The Report includes the full text of the 12 Suggested Changes, which are not repeated here. Get Part 1 here: <https://inclusion.mrc-cbu.cam.ac.uk/>

Developing this content

The content in the **Belonging in School** resource builds on contributions from over 100 experienced stakeholders from schools, third-sector organisations, and academia. Over 80 people participated in the *Diverse Trajectories to Good Developmental Outcomes Workshop* (December 2022) where school inclusion was a major topic, as part of the [Global Conference on the Science of Human Flourishing](#). More stakeholders gave feedback as part of the *Delivering Inclusive Education Workshop* at the [It Takes All Kinds of Minds \(ITAKOM\) neurodiversity conference](#) (March 2023). A final stage in summer 2023 revised and extended the earlier content for policymakers into this planning-focused resource for schools and educators. *Read more in section 5, ‘About the Belonging in School project’.*



1. Policy development as a cycle

This section walks through a “generic” action cycle and explains the purpose of each step and its key tasks. Section 2 of this document gives step-by-step guidance related to each of our four proposed approaches to policy planning. We recommend using the generic action cycle guidance in this section together with Section 2.

1.1 Introducing the action cycle

Action cycles are employed across many fields and settings, with variable terms but the same big ideas of assessment, planning, implementation, and evaluation. Most critically, *they represent a repeating cycle over time*, not a single process with a definite endpoint. Becoming a more inclusive school is a living and changing process, which makes the ongoing action cycle an appropriate fit. The goal is not to overhaul policies in practices in one go, but to plan, test, and build on changes. While pursuing a full planning cycle is a time investment, it is “spending to save” on time and resources later.

Figure 1 shows our version of the action cycle, followed by an explanation of key terms and details on each of the five steps.

Engaging with an action cycle to develop policy is useful tool in itself, supports a proactive, systems-level approach to inclusion.

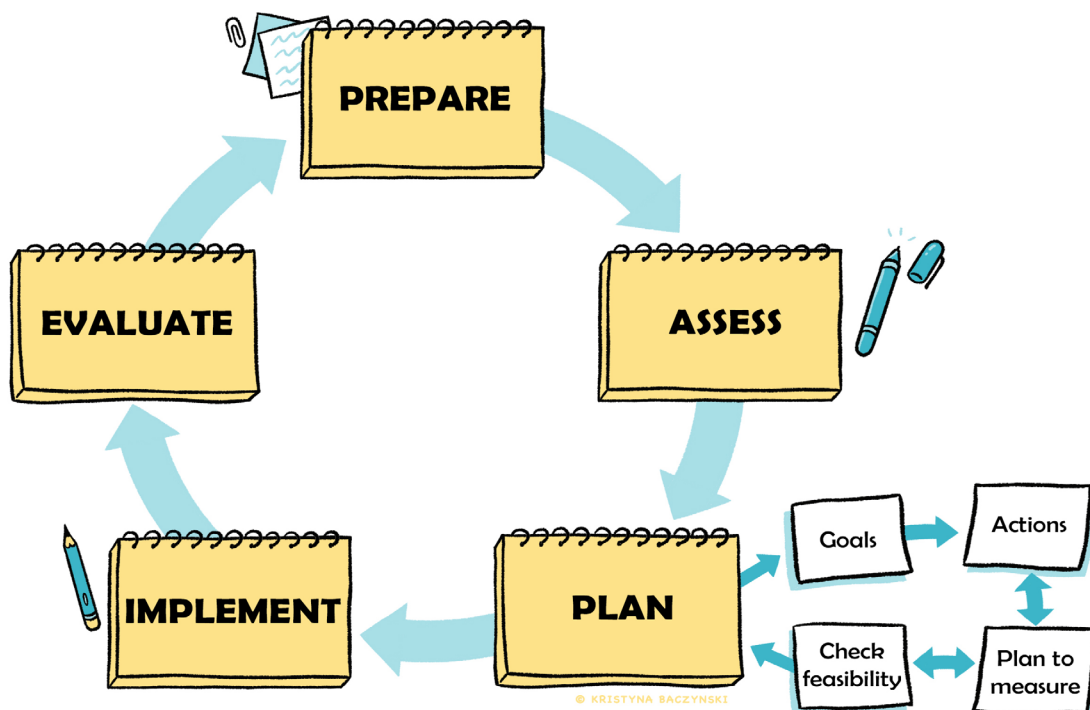


Figure 1. A five-step action cycle for inclusive policy development. Planning includes a sub-cycle, and may take some iteration to develop a feasible plan before going on.



1.2 Key ideas in the cycle: Vision, goals, and actions

The action cycle (especially the planning sub-steps) talks about identifying a **vision**, identifying **goals**, and choosing **actions**. Why three different terms and what do they mean? The cycle is easier to understand if you understand how we use these terms, first.

Each term is at a different level of detail, moving from “the big picture” down to specific, measurable actions that implement changes in policy, practice, or environments (Figure 2).

**Vision: Where are we trying to go?
What would our inclusive school be like?**

This is the biggest picture: what do you *mean* by inclusion? What would good or successful inclusion be like? Your school might engage with a structured inclusion planning process because you already *have* a strong vision for inclusion, and want to work towards it.



*Vision: Where do we want to go?
Goals: What should we change?
Actions: How should we change it?*



The Four Planning Approaches (Section 2) present different visions for inclusive schools. For example, the first approach in Section 2.1 focuses on pupils’ sense of belonging, and (in brief) says that an inclusive school is one where pupils feel like they belong there.

Goals: Your school has a vision, but how will you get there? **Setting goals** is about identifying possible target areas for change, and deciding which goals to pursue *now*, in this action cycle. As an example, a school might have identified staff training as a priority for change (i.e. **goal**), to progress toward their **vision** of a neurodiversity-affirmative school (see Section 2.4).

Actions: We have a goal, so what do we need to do to achieve it? **Actions** are things people will *do* to meet a goal (i.e. create change). Actions needs to be specific, measurable, and *feasible* for the people affected. For example, the school with a **goal** to improve staff knowledge might agree an **action** to send two staff members to a neurodiversity training course so they can cascade this knowledge back to the rest of the school, and a second **action** for as many staff as possible to attend the local training session.

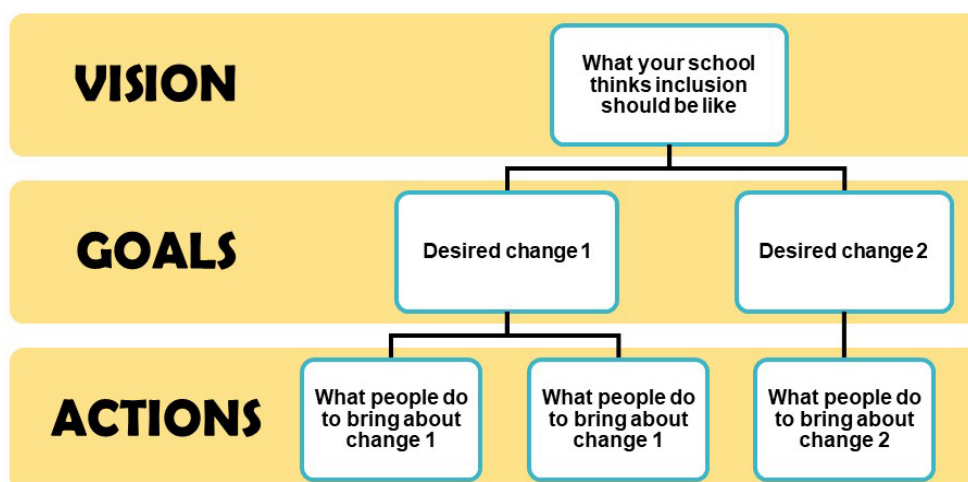


Figure 2 The relationship between a vision for inclusion, goals, and actions



1.3 The action cycle step-by-step

This section presents a “generic” action cycle that could be used for planning any kind of change related to inclusion. You do not need to use one of the four approaches if they don’t fit your school. Each step has a **purpose** and a series of **key questions** for schools to address during that step. For example, in Step 2 schools should be able to answer “How do we **define** and understand inclusion now?” before moving on.

Step 1: Prepare the planning process

Purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is a “project management” step about deciding the scope and practicalities of running your current action cycle, such as the projected timeline and who will be involved. • In your second and later cycles, you will also be feeding in information from the previous cycle, and deciding which practical decisions to keep or change.
Key questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is our focus in this cycle? Are we concerned with a single area of school policy? Everything? • What level of policy are we looking at? School, classroom, other? • What time and resources can we commit to this planning process? Is there a deadline? • Who will be involved in planning (or not involved) and why? • How will the process work, in general? Timeline, location/modes of communication, information-sharing...

Step 2: Assess your current situation and resources

Purpose	This step zooms in to the foci and level of policy you identified in step 1, and gathers information about the current situation. Even if you think this information is already known, it is important for everyone in the planning process to start with a shared understanding.
Key questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do we define and understand inclusion now, in our setting? • What is the current situation re: inclusion, in relation to our foci? • What are our assets, barriers, resources, relationships, and needs that may impact inclusion? This could include aspects outside the school, in the wider community. • Are there constraints that mean we cannot currently change certain things in relation to our target area, and take them off the table?
Top tips	If you are working on a new area for your school’s policies, you may need to gather new information from pupils, parents, or others. You need to understand the problem before attempting solutions! For example, you may need to find out which sensory aspects of the school pose barriers for pupils, before trying to address these.



Step 3: PLAN goals, actions, and measurement

Purpose	Now you have gathered information about current circumstances and resources, it's time to develop a plan for change.
Sub-cycle	This step has multiple interrelated components, and is best understood as a "sub-cycle". You may need to move back and forth between the sub-cycle steps to develop a plan that meets all your requirements.

3A. Identify vision and goals

Purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This step is about setting out the vision for inclusion that you are trying to achieve, and starting to break it down into individual goals. If this action cycle focuses on a narrow policy area or is at classroom level, you might have a big vision for your school/policies in general, and then an intermediate goal you are working on now. For example, your big vision might focus on pupil belonging, with a current action cycle remit about peer relations, and a specific goal to reduce bullying.
Key questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What is our vision for inclusion? What do we think "good" or "successful" inclusion should look like? (This may be specific to the area your cycle focuses on). Goals: Which practices or circumstances will we try to change in this cycle, in order to progress towards our vision of inclusion? <i>Why</i> do we think changing those things will be helpful or effective?
Top tips	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Remember to set SMART goals! (Specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and time-bound)

3B. Plan actions toward your goals

Purpose	This sub-step is about determining <i>how</i> you will meet your goals, given your starting point, resources and constraints (Step 2).
Key questions	<p>For each goal we've identified...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What specific action(s) or changes will we make, in order to meet the goal? Who would be responsible for the action(s) and why? What information, support, resources will the responsible people need, in order to take that action? <p>Across all the goals...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are the dependencies between actions and goals? What needs to be first?



3C. Plan toward measurement

Purpose	Waiting until you've implemented your plan may be too late to gather the information you need to determine if there have been changes in your school. Plan now to make sure your sub-goals are measurable, and that you'll have the time and resources to do this.
Key questions	<p>For each goal we've identified...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How could we measure our progress toward it? (i.e. how would we know if we met that goal?) • Who would need to collect that information, and when? • What would we do with the information once we have it? (e.g. analysing, summarising, or reporting it) • How long would it take to do these things?
Top tips	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you cannot come up with a practical way to measure one of your goals, the plan needs an adjustment. Your goal may be too big or general—or maybe it's not the right goal, right now. • While your goal will be positive changes, make sure your plan for measurement can also find out about negative effects and experiences, if they occur. Knowing that information is really important. • See Section 3 for our detailed guidance about measurement.

3D. Feasibility check

Purpose	Sub-steps B and C encourage you to focus on one goal at a time. This sub-step puts them back together. Is your whole plan feasible in terms of resources and time?
Key questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As a package, are our planned actions and measurements feasible for key individuals and the school? • Does our plan make full use of our school's relationships and resources, including external ones? (i.e. can anyone else help?) • How do we think people will feel about this plan? How much support or opposition is there likely to be? Who and why?
Top tips	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't worry if you need to go back from this step to an earlier one to revise your plans, or cut down the scale. Now is the best time to make changes—before you firmly commit your resources. • Especially if your planned changes are big ones, this could be a good point to seek feedback from the people who will be affected.



Step 4: IMPLEMENT your planning and begin measuring

Purpose In this step, you will begin to implement the plans you made in step 3, keeping in mind dependencies between actions—and also that implementation will be a process.

- Key questions**
- **Check:** Who should we communicate with about upcoming changes and why they will be happening? When and how? E.g. families
 - **Check:** Do we need to start collecting information before making changes, in order to measure our progress? *Or, to be continuously collecting information?*
 - If implementing some changes isn't working or turns out not to be feasible, is it OK to stop? Who can decide?

Step 5: EVALUATE and reflect on your changes

Purpose This step is about answering the big questions “what happened, what was it like for people, and did our changes make a difference?”. You may be collecting final measurements, if not already completed, or doing summary and analysis of information you have been collecting. Use your information to help answer the key questions.

- Key questions**
- **What happened:** Which planned actions did/did not happen in practice? Did they *evolve* in practice? Why?
 - How do people feel about what happened?
 - **Meeting goals:** Based on the information we have, did we progress toward our sub-goals, and our big-picture goal? Do we think these were the *right* goals?
 - Was our plan **feasible** in actuality? Why or why not? What does that mean for next time?
 - Do benefits or positive effects appear **proportionate** for the time and resources expended?
 - **Check:** Who should be informed of our results? How and when?

And closing the cycle back to step 1...

Purpose After Step 5, it's time to close the circle and return to Step 1—otherwise it won't be a planning *cycle*!

- Key questions**
- What did we **learn** during this cycle?
 - Which policy and practice changes from this cycle do we plan to **keep, discard, or revise** in a new cycle?
 - Regarding inclusion policy development, when should we embark on a new **planning cycle**, and where should it focus?

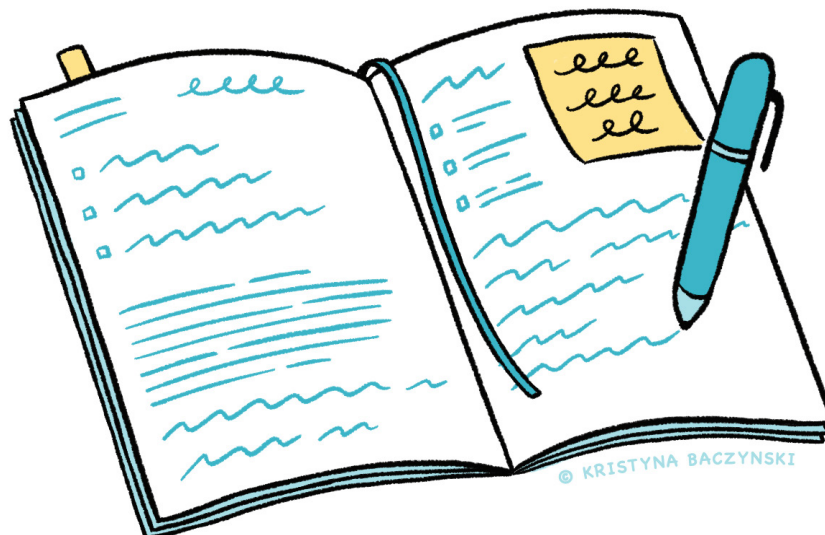


Additional planning tools and guidance from the Educational Endowment Foundation (EEF)

As an alternative to our action cycle that also addresses process of implementing changes in school practice, the EEF published a 2019 report on “Putting Evidence to Work – A School’s Guide to Implementation” (Sharples, Albers, Fraser & Kime)

In addition to the freely downloadable report, there are supplementary guidance documents and tools focusing on individual areas, such as using professional development as one of your strategies to effect change.

In general, the EEF website can be a valuable and accessible resource for checking on current evidence for different practices and tools.





2. Four approaches to inclusive policy development

Each approach to planning inclusive policy encapsulates different values and set different goals. They are different angles on inclusion, and **pose different questions** for your school to address at each stage of the action cycle. The approaches can be used alone, or combined—meaning you would look at multiple, complementary goals and questions at each stage of the cycle.

The four approaches are:

1. Committing to “inclusion-as-belonging”
2. Participatory policy design
3. Inclusion by design
4. Committing to be a neurodiversity-affirmative school

The Belonging in School resource gives guidance on a process, not a step-by-step recipe for creating a certain results. Two schools could choose the same approach—but have practices that look very different at the end of their planning cycle, because their resources and their community’s priorities are quite different.

Each of the approaches in this section is presented in the same format, with an introduction to the approach, and then step-by-step information about how you might complete an action cycle using that approach.

We recommend using the approach-specific guidance together with the generic action cycle guidance. All the generic questions are still important at each step.



2.1 Committing to “inclusion-as-belonging”





Introduction

Committing to “inclusion-as-belonging” as the vision for your policy development means working toward greater inclusivity in your environment and practice by focusing on understanding and facilitating your pupils’ sense of belonging at school.

Whether or not pupils *feel* like they belong and are part of their school community is an essential component of inclusion. Do pupils feel like they are part of the shared life of their class and school, or out on the margins? In this view, a learner could be present and taking part at school, but would not be fully “included” if they personally *felt* left out, disrespected, “separate” or unwelcome—regardless of the school’s values and policies. Children with different needs and from different backgrounds (or across ages and genders) may not agree on what makes them feel included or excluded, and why. Understanding their diverse views is one reason that we encourage **participatory strategies** for developing policies (see Approach 2, section 2.2).

What is belonging?

Belonging might best be understood as a ‘cluster’ of concepts, as exact terms and ideas vary across authors and fields where this concept has been studied. In the context of school belonging, these may include the presence of positive relationships with teachers and/or classmates, care and support, connectedness, safety at school, respect, or feeling valued. Inclusion-as-belonging is fundamentally related to all school policy and practice because it is about pupils’ total experience of education, not “inclusion policy” alone.

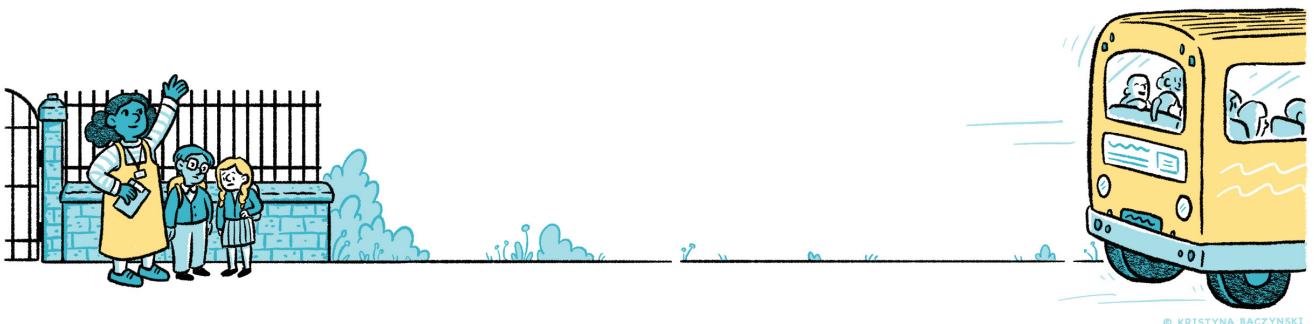
In the December 2022 Diverse Trajectories workshop, belonging and related concepts resurfaced repeatedly across different parts of the programme, and there is broad support for the usefulness and centrality of this idea in thinking about inclusion. The concept of “belongingness” connects to a larger research literature on *school belongingness*, how and why it affects pupils, and how schools can actively support belonging (e.g. see Roffey, Boyle, & Allen, 2019 for a very short introduction). This body of research uses a variety of terms¹, but focuses closely on the ideas put forth by Goodenow and Grady of belonging as “*the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included and supported by others in the school social environment*” (1993). A related definition by Libbey more explicitly includes some of the interpersonal aspects referenced in discussions of inclusion and belonging, saying it is present when pupils “*feel close to, a part of, and happy at school; feel that teachers care about students and treat them fairly; get along with teachers and other students, and feel safe at school*” (2007, p52).

¹E.g. school belongingness, school membership, school connectedness. Terms vary partly because this issue has been studied and reported across disciplines.



Seeking to facilitate pupils' belonging is beneficial and meaningful in itself, but research suggests it can also support other goals and positive outcomes, like participation and attainment. A wide range of studies have shown relationships between pupils' levels of school belonging (and its related terms and constructs) to other factors and outcomes (see Allen, Kern, Vella-Brodrick, Hattie, & Waters, 2018 for a meta-review) including academic achievement (Sirin, & Rogers-Sirin, 2004), motivation (e.g. Goodenow & Grady, 1993), happiness (O'Rourke & Cooper, 2010). It may negatively relate to symptoms of mental ill health, absenteeism, and risky behaviours (see a review in Slaten, Rose, Bonifay & Ferguson, 2019)². Multiple studies suggest that measures of school belonging have an important predictive value for later wellbeing, For example, a recent study in England found that school belonging measure scores were an important predictor of primary children's wellbeing and emotional health (Castro-Kemp, Palikara, Gaona, Eirinaki, & Furlong, 2020).³

The existing research on school belonging provides a **toolbox of strategies** for creating more inclusive school environments: ones where children feel like a part of their school, are accepted, respected, supported, feel safe, and have positive relationships. It highlights factors that are related to pupils' school belonging. Moreover, it suggests that whether pupils feel they belong at school is not something that "follows on" from presence and participation, but may be an extremely important factor in whether they are willing and able to engage with school in the first place.



²While this literature has focused mainly on older children and adolescents, work with primary school children supports the pattern of results, and there are measures of school belonging specifically for this age group.

³Across these studies of school belonging, it's important to keep in mind that the picture of **causality** is as yet unclear, and may vary across different factors or groups of pupils. As Allen and colleagues point out, while teams may say that belonging influences a particular outcomes (or vice versa) "*the study designs do not allow causality to be determined. For instance, a student's level of academic motivation may both stem from feeling a sense of belonging and also influence the extent to which the student belongs*" in their setting (2020, p6).



As the other belonging literature has illustrated, we *can* intervene to promote belonging, and belonging is positively related to a range of other outcomes, including academic and wellbeing outcomes. Committing to a focus on belonging does not mean abandoning inclusion goals your school may already have. Rather, it is about considering them in a different framework. This framework is fundamentally about contexts and systems—not individuals in isolation. It also asks us to go beyond thinking about “inclusion policy” as isolated. Inclusive values apply everywhere, and across everything the school does.

Valuing belonging in all schools

Regardless of whether you choose this planning strategy or not, we strongly encourage schools to adopt a definition of educational inclusion that focuses on, or at minimum includes, pupils’ sense of belonging in their school, and use this to guide your decision-making (see also Suggested Change 1, Part 1 Overview Report).

Emphasising the importance and centrality of belonging is an important opportunity for **senior leaders** to model positive attitudes and lead by example, potentially paving the way for later action on belonging. What can you do to show that pupils’ belonging is an important part of inclusion (and school in general) to you? How can you show that you are listening to pupils and families about what makes them feel like they do (or don’t) belong?

“Inclusion-as-belonging” is both a statement of *values* around educational inclusion, and a desired *outcome* (or **vision for inclusion**, in the terms of our action cycle) that can be facilitated by **actions** in the school community. All three things are important and interrelated: values, actions, and outcomes.



whether pupils feel they belong at school is not something that “follows on” from presence and participation, but may be an extremely important factor in whether they are willing and able to engage with school in the first place.



Concepts of inclusion-as-belonging help to shift focus beyond individuals, and towards systems, interactions, and school culture. Thus, when we focus our inclusive policy development on belonging, it makes sense to ask questions not only about whether *individuals* feel like they belong, but what conditions, values, interactions, and activities appear to be facilitating or hindering that, for whom, and why.



An action cycle using an “inclusion as belonging” approach will need to grapple with as many of these questions as possible (next section).

Action cycle guidance for this approach

Please use these tables with the generic action cycle guidance, in Part 1. This table focuses on questions and actions in that are specific to *this approach*.

Step 1: PREPARE the planning process

In addition to generic guidance...

This strategy is about committing up front to belonging as a value and vision for inclusion, and then using this commitment drive the other parts of the action cycle. Is the vision of inclusion-as-belonging likely to have sufficient support from key school stakeholders and the wider community, such that it makes sense to go forward?

Step 2: ASSESS out your current situation and resources

In addition to generic guidance...

Key questions

- Are any of your current school policies concerned with belonging or related concepts? In what way?
- In this cycle, will you focus on pupil belonging across the school, or focus on specific groups of pupils, and their specific barriers to belonging?

You will need detailed information in order to proceed to the planning step. DO take the time to ask your school community—don't assume.

- What does belonging mean to pupils, members of school community?
- What circumstances, events, make pupils feel like they *do* or *do not* belong in the school community? What range of 'answers' are present across groups of pupils?



Step 3: PLAN goals, actions, and measurement

3A Goals

This approach's vision for inclusion:

Pupils are included if they feel like they belong. School communities use policies and actions to facilitate or increase pupils' sense of belonging. These will be different across schools, because how people understand 'belonging' will differ too.

In addition to generic guidance...

Use information you collected in Step 2 to identify goals. You are likely to have goals related to **promoting** circumstances or actions that are important to your pupils' sense of belonging (e.g. opportunity to share interests) and to **reducing** other interactions, circumstances (e.g. bullying).

Don't forget to consider... whether actions to promote belonging for certain pupils may have unintended, negative effects on others.

3B Actions

Follow generic guidance

3C Plan to measure

In addition to generic guidance...

The essential questions your measurement needs to answer are "Were our actions successful at making some pupils feel greater belonging? Who and why?"

It will be critical to collect qualitative information directly from pupils. What do *they* think and feel? Asking staff or parents/carers about effects can also be useful and informative, but is no substitute for hearing from pupils themselves.

Check: are you planning to measure/collect feedback in a way that would also capture *negative* effects and experiences, if there are any?

3D Feasibility check

Follow generic guidance

Step 4: IMPLEMENT your planning and begin measuring

Follow generic guidance

Step 5: EVALUATE, and reflect on your changes

In addition to generic guidance...

Key questions to answer through your collected information and team reflection

- Were our actions successful at making some pupils feel greater belonging? Who and why?
- Were there *negative* effects on anyone's belonging? Who and why?

If we have both positive and negative effects on different groups of people, how can we decide a way forwards?



Existing measures of school belonging

Due to the amount of research in this area, there are multiple standardised questionnaires and surveys to measure school belonging for different age groups (terminology may vary). These tools might help gauge levels of belonging now or trends across your population of learners, but won't be the right tool for finding out about school-specific questions, like *which* policies or people might be contributing to pupils feeling included/excluded. Castro-Kemp and colleagues (2020) give a good description of several measures and show example items (in-text). *This paper is open-access.*

Primary school measures

- Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale-Primary (PSSM-P; Wagle et al., 2018). This paper is open-access. Find the scale items in the **supplementary material**, which is a [separate download](#) to the main paper.
- Me and My School Questionnaire (Deighton et al., 2013). A downloadable measure, terms of use and scoring information are available free via the [Child Outcomes Research Consortium \(CORC\) website](#).

Secondary school measures

- Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale (PSSM; Goodenough, 1993), currently [available for download here](#).

While there are many more measures reported in the academic literature, they aren't necessarily available for purchase or download.



2.2 Participatory policy





Introduction

The core idea of participatory policy design is that members of the wider school community take part in developing and evaluating school policies—not school leaders/staff members alone. Pupils, families, and staff all have valuable knowledge, skills and experience that can facilitate inclusion.

Policies developed through participation can increase inclusion by literally including more people as planners and decision-makers, but also because the developed policies have incorporated a wider range of needs, goals, and values along the way.

Participatory policy design is not a new idea, and goes by many names. The terminology differs across contexts and fields⁴, but the idea of shared input and decision-making remains the same. This approach differs from the other approaches in *Belonging in School* primarily in terms of *who* is involved in the planning cycle, who has the decision-making power, and what the practicalities will look like for organising and running your policy planning process.

There is no one, singular “participatory design method” that can be cut-and-pasted across questions and contexts, but rather an underlying theory and a family of techniques. This guidance includes many reflective and planning questions about who, what, when, where, and why—and those many decisions *are* characteristic of participatory design approaches, whether you are looking at metropolitan planning or mental health services or math skills apps.

Participatory design (and co-design, and co-production, other related terms and practices) are an extremely complex area, with many diverse examples and decades of research literature. Trying to give “an introduction” is a project for a whole book!

Writing this section was about deciding what to leave *out*, as well as what to include. For *Belonging in School*, we have tried to focus on ideas about what participation *is* and what it has to do with inclusion. We also look at levels and types of participation that might currently be most feasible for schools. There is extensive guidance out there for schools who want to go further—see the end of this section for some pointers.

⁴ Depending on which UK nation you are in and your role, you may frequently hear about **co-production**, which for example appears in England’s SEND code of practice (DfE, 2015).



What's the point of participation?

There are both practical and ethical (or values-based) arguments for developing inclusive policies through participatory processes. The practical argument is that participatory design of *anything* will better fit its users/community members and have greater buy-in than if it is unilaterally designed by “experts” alone. Both adults and children are more likely to support and use something that meets their needs, and something where they have an element of ownership. Users bring important insight and understanding of a specific situation or problem, which is equally as helpful and important as the information contributed by an expert or authority figure. In the case of schools, both pupils and staff may have deep situational knowledge—but pupils bring their expertise and view of *being pupils and being children*. Their experiences will always be different to those of adults, even their teachers. A participatory policy design process represents an opportunity for mutual learning.

There is also the ethical argument that people have a right to be involved in decision-making around the services, tools, and spaces they must use—in this case, educational provision, tools, and spaces. This argument is traceable back to the roots of participatory design in Scandinavian industrial contexts (1960s-1970s), where there was a drive to democratise and to include stakeholders in workplace decision-making⁵. In the UK, there is also a *legal* obligation to children in terms of educational decision-making. Article 12 in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) specifies that a child “who is capable of forming his or her own views” has “the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child” (Article 12.2). Lundy clarifies that,

“There may be a misperception that the right to express a view is somehow dependent on ‘the age and maturity of the child’. This phrase, which can obviously limit the application of the right, only applies to the second part of Article 12(1) (the obligation to give views due weight). Children’s right to express their views is not dependent upon their capacity to express a mature view; it is dependent only on their ability to form a view, mature or not” (2007, p935).

The long literature on participatory design with children, including young children and those with limited verbal language or literacy, attests to a wide range of ways in which children can express views, and decision-makers can use them. Even if this obligation may not be a deciding factor your choice to include children in policymaking or not, the legal right *is there*, and all professionals should keep it in mind when weighing up the importance of hearing and acting on children’s views.



⁵ E.g. see discussion in Bjerknes and Bratteteig (1995).



Linking participation and inclusion

There are two main arguments for how designing policies through community participation can increase a school's inclusiveness:

1. Inclusion by participation: Pupils, families, and others are *literally* included in shaping their school environment. Marginalised or less-engaged individuals/groups might even be specifically invited to participate for this reason. This involvement with decision-making can be a strong signal that people are valued and belong (see Approach 1), or may also be a signal that the school acknowledges there is work to do on inclusion. They're taking steps to *become* a place where people belong. Being part of decision-making increased a sense of ownership and buy-in over what's happening at school.

2. Shifting what policies are made and why: A participatory policy development process will include a wider range of views, ideas, and experiences throughout, than when policy is created by school leaders alone (or even by a single person!). It may result in different foci for your action planning, different goals, different actions, different assessments of what's working. **When the community participates, you find new solutions—and problems you might not have known you had!** Over time, your school policies are likely to be meeting more needs and promoting belonging because the *process* of making those policies will include more voices and experiences.

We talk about “shifting policies” rather than “shifting inclusion policies” because **all** policies can impact how inclusive and accessible your school space and your practices are (see a discussion of this in *Belonging in School Part 1, section 3.1*).

If you are interested in incorporating more participation into your policymaking, we encourage you to try it in **any** area of policy, not only “inclusion policy” or policies you think are most likely to affect neurodivergent pupils.

Both of these routes only work to improve inclusion if schools (as institutions) and individual leaders are truly committed to hearing their communities and acting on that input, even if they are not yet in a position to share or re-distribute decision-making power. Not all community input will be actionable, not least because of straitened resources. However, transparency and “showing the work” can be very important in communicating why decision-makers act on some inputs and not others.



Levels of participation

The literature in this area generally acknowledges that there are **different levels of community participation in decision-making**, with Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation (1969) as a particularly well-known model that you will see referenced if you read further about this topic⁶. What do "levels" of participation actually mean, however, and what makes them different from one another?

What do "levels" mean in this context?

Discussion of participation "levels" begins with the assumption that **someone or some group of people in the community has decision-making power now, and there are other people who are affected by these decisions, but not currently part of making them**. For example, decision-makers might be the managers of a business, city planners, or senior leadership of a school. In many respects, the *point* of these roles is to make decisions! There are also other relevant types of power that affect participation and decision-making, like who is perceived as having knowledge or being an expert, levels of privilege/disadvantage in society generally, or who is perceived as *capable* of knowing and deciding at all (an issue that particularly will affect children/young people, and disabled people). Even outside the circle of decision-makers, sub-groups/groups of the community will likely have unequal amounts of privilege and power.

As noted in the introductory section, a core idea of participatory policy design and its relatives is that people who will be affected by decisions should be part of making those decisions—whether they are workers in a company, residents of a city, or pupils in a school. **Talking about "levels" of participation is a way to describe planning and decision-making processes based on whether, and how much, the community is involved in those processes, and whether and how much power is redistributed away from traditional decision-makers.**



⁶ Try this short summary from the Open University:

<https://www.open.edu/openlearn/mod/oucontent/view.php?id=21024§ion=4.1>



Three example levels of participatory policy development

To help illustrate what types of participation are possible and how they differ from one another, we propose three example levels of participation. We include a comparison example with little or no community participation. These examples were created for Belonging in School, so may not match up neatly to other participation models. They vary in terms of how many people are participating and what that looks like, and the extent to which community members have responsibility for making decisions and administering the action cycle.

- A. Staff-led⁷ policy development:** One person or a small group of staff members have full responsibility for all aspects of developing and evaluating school policies, and may or may not consult with others or seek feedback along the way. *This level effectively has no community participation, or very little if there is a consultation at some point.*
- B. Staff-led policy development based on community consultation and feedback:**
- Staff members manage the action cycle administration and have decision-making responsibility.
 - Throughout the action cycle, staff members use inputs from community consultations to guide their decision-making as far as possible (i.e. identify the priorities for change, specific goals and actions), and also gather feedback and experiences at multiple points.
 - A major planning priority is to design the consultation and feedback elements so as to make *these* as accessible as possible, and to reach key people/groups within the school. They may consult different people at different times and through different modalities/activities.
- C. Mixed “policy team” of school staff and community members:**
- Staff members manage the action administration overall.
 - There are one or more “policy teams” made up of staff and school community members (e.g. pupils, parents/carers, non-teaching school staff). The same team(s) work together over time, across stages of the action cycle.
 - Teams may generate ideas that are then taken forward in more detail by staff (e.g. writing actual policy guidance based on policy team’s discussion).
 - In principle, the policy team should guide decision-making as far as possible but they are advisory, rather than making binding decisions. Staff ultimately hold decision-making power.

An alternate version of level C might be to have an **adult policy team** and a **child policy team** doing complementary work. This can give you more flexibility about logistics, and meeting access needs to make contributions manageable and meaningful. The child policy team may have dedicated responsibilities, like leading on speaking to other children in Step 2 and Step 4/5 of the action cycle. This creates an additional layer of decisions about *who* has what responsibilities and why, and if children are being credited with capability to form and express views (as per Article 12), and these views are being given “due weight” in the planning process.

⁷We use the generic term “staff” here because we know schools may vary in terms of who has primary responsibility for policies *now*, and around inclusion issues or in general. Also, inclusion-focused role titles vary across the UK nations.



Next steps to greater participation beyond example C would be...

- Combine the policy team with consultation activity at some points, to “check” the smaller team’s planning with the larger community. Does it have wider support? Is it seen as acceptable?
- For the action cycle planning process to be **administered** by the policy team to a greater degree, especially with respect to agenda-setting. They would become involved in steps where they have not yet been involved—for example, in analysing inputs and feedback, and work on actually drafting policy documentation and reporting.
- To begin **sharing, delegating and re-distributing decision-making power** away from staff members only, out to a policy team or the wider community. For example, a policy team may have *binding* decision-making power, and share responsibility for drafting actual policy documents, communication around policy changes, and/or reporting.
- Increase decision-maker transparency and accountability back to the community.

Like the Four Planning Approaches, these three participation examples may be more or less appropriate or feasible in specific settings. One isn’t inherently better or worse than another: it’s what seems better *for your school, now*. “More participation” or shared responsibility isn’t necessarily a better option if you think people in your school will find it overwhelming! “More participation” also may not be necessary or productive for addressing every issue, especially if time and resources are very tight, or you are addressing a pre-defined problem (e.g. see some discussion of this in Roper, Grey, & Cadogan, 2018). Most importantly, “more participation” may not be a pre-requisite for achieving positive changes. As we say elsewhere in *Belonging in School*, **progress matters**. Expanding your school community’s participation in creating school policies can really make a positive difference in terms of meeting needs, but also belongingness and other parts of the school experience. It is truly OK to begin modestly, and build on that foundation in the future.



Action cycle guidance

Generic guidance for participatory processes

This approach begins with “Step 0”, to make a high-level decision about what level of participation is likely to be realistic for your school, in this cycle. This is to cut down on planning complexity and save time. If in doubt over how much participation is likely to be feasible or acceptable in your school now, choose the less ambitious option, and work on making it as positive and successful as you can.

Step 0: Reality check

Purpose: Decide what level or type of participation is likely to be realistic for your school in this cycle, to narrow your planning options. *For example, does example A, B, or C sound most realistic? Or doing even more?*

Key questions:

- Do we think it is realistic to involve pupils, families, and/or our wider staff team *at all*? If yes to at least one of these groups...
- What level of participation do we think would be realistic and why? Are there specific types of participation or activities we think are not realistic?
- What are our prior experiences (successful or unsuccessful) of involving school community members in making or evaluating policies? What can we learn from these precedents? Can we use them to rule out any options now?

Step 1: PLAN the planning process

Purpose: As in the generic guidance, this is a “project management” step about deciding the scope and practicalities of running your current action cycle. Who will be involved, and how will it work? If you have decided to work with a **policy team**, you will need to define their role (like a mini job description) and recruit them in this step.

Key questions for recruiting a policy team:

- Will there be just one team, or multiple teams? If multiple, what are their roles?
- How big should the team be, and does everyone need to be there all the time? *We recommend teams smaller than 10.*
- Will the team(s) have children, adults, or both?
- Will people be able to volunteer themselves, or will you strategically invite people with particular experiences, or membership of certain groups in the community?
- How do practicalities feed into this decision making? E.g. where and when to meet, online or in person... Those decisions may rule some people in or out. *See the end of this section, on logistical planning.*
- How can team members get to know each other, and get ready to work together?

Remember that you can't represent everyone in your school community without teams becoming huge! What choices will help serve your community best, now?

Depending on your plans, the **policy team** (including community members) may be part of project management decisions about how the rest of the action cycle will run.



After Step 1 (planning the planning process), the action cycle does not necessarily ask different questions than in the generic guidance (Section 1.3), but may involve different *people* carrying out the tasks, contributing information, or making decisions.

For each step, consider *who* should be involved based on the model of participation you have chosen, or if the step provides a point where you should be consulting or seeking wider feedback before going on.

Step 2: MAP out your current situation and resources

In addition to generic guidance...

Even if you have a **policy team** that includes community members, you *still* need to do this step. Part of this step may also involve information-sharing with community team members so they can be informed decision-makers (e.g. judging if something is feasible with respect to school resources), and understand how other decision-makers like school governors or the local authority might fit into the planning picture.

Step 3: PLAN goals, actions, and measurement

3A Goals

This approach's vision for inclusion:

School leadership actively and meaningfully involves the wider school community in reviewing, developing, and evaluating school policies, and may share decision-making power with the community.

School policies change to become more inclusive over time, because a wider range of people are involved in making them. Where possible, community members are directly included in the school as knowers and decision-makers.

3B Actions

Follow generic guidance

3C Plan to measure

Follow generic guidance

3D Feasibility check

Follow generic guidance



Step 4: IMPLEMENT your planning and begin measuring

Follow generic guidance

Step 5: EVALUATE, and reflect on your changes

In addition to generic guidance...

Evaluating your participatory process: Make sure to also collect information about your participatory process itself. What has it been like for different people/groups to participate? Gathering information about practical and accessibility issues is important, but also about the experience. Who did/did not feel valued and respected, or that they could speak freely?

After Step 5...

In addition to generic guidance...

Key reflective questions

- How manageable/unmanageable was the level and type of participation in this cycle? For whom and why?
- How did it work to share decision-making power (or to not share this power)?
- Would the people involved this time be willing to participate in the next cycle, or would they recommend the role to others?
- What level and type of participation would be realistic in the future?



Worked examples: bringing together participation levels with the action cycle

The following hypothetical examples try to illustrate how the same planning focus might look across the action cycle for participation levels B and C. These examples have a cycle focus of **improving the sensory environment of the school**, and goals around reducing visual busyness in hallway areas—but they arrive there in different ways. In reality, the two processes would be more likely to arrive at *different* solutions, but making them the same enables easier comparison.

Participation example B: Staff-led policy development based on community consultation and feedback

Step 1	Based on ongoing feedback/communication channels with pupils and parents, staff policymakers identify sensory aspects of school building as an important accessibility/inclusion issue, and decide to use it as their action cycle focus .
Step 2	Staff policymakers run a consultation with pupils and staff around sensory experiences of the school and different spaces, to identify possible targets for change and desired improvements (within current resource and time constraints). They map other information relevant to sensory issues.
Step 3	Based on consultation, staff policymakers set goals to reduce visual busyness and clutter in hallways, and identify specific actions around reducing large, bright hallway displays and how pupil belongings/other items are stored outside classrooms. They seek feasibility feedback from teaching staff and adjust plans. Staff policymakers plan what measurement information to collect.
Step 4	Staff policymakers write the new guidance for the school based on the policy team discussions, set implementation timeline. Policy team directly helps produce and promote communications about the new “Calm Hallway” policies.
Step 5	Staff policymakers seek feedback from staff and pupils on their experience of the changes ⁸ , and recommend keeping the changes based on their analysis of the answers. <i>After step 5, they might return to the consultation results in Step 2 and choose another goal to work on in the next cycle.</i>

⁸Qualitative data collection, see advice in Section 3.2



Participation example C: Mixed “policy team” of school staff and community members

Step 0	School leadership decides to support a trial of participatory policy development, managed by two main staff policymakers. They will organise the process and take overall responsibility. Here, school leadership <i>has not</i> determined a specific policy focus.
Step 1	<p>Staff policymakers plan for a policy team with an advisory role: how it would operate, who it would involve, timescale, etc. They choose to invite specific staff, children, and parents/carers instead of asking for volunteers, in order to include a range of experiences. They assemble a policy team of 9 people: 3 staff members (including 1 who is openly neurodivergent), 1 occupational therapist, 2 parents, and 3 older pupils proposed by teachers as likely to engage, but not be overwhelmed by participating in the discussions with adults.</p> <p>In early agenda-setting discussions, team narrows to sensory aspects of school as a priority focus right now.</p>
Step 2	Drawing on own experiences and additional knowledge from staff policymakers (e.g. of planning constraints, legal obligations etc.), policy team builds up a map of information and resources around sensory issues in the school.
Step 3	<p>With support from staff policymakers to narrow their focus, policy team identifies specific goals and actions around reducing visual busyness and noise in hallways.</p> <p>Head teacher vetoes noise-related goals because all proposed actions would cost too much, or are perceived as unlikely to be supported by wider school. Only the goals around reducing visual busyness will go ahead. Based on team input, staff policymakers plan what measurement information is feasible to collect.</p>
Step 4	Staff policymakers write the new guidance for the school based on the policy team discussions, set implementation timeline. Policy team directly helps produce and promote communications about the new “Calm Hallway” policies.
Step 5	<p>Staff policymakers have main responsibility for measurement, and share information back to the policy team, who discusses impact of their changes on various parts of school community. Team divided on whether changes have been successful, future changes. Staff policymakers make a final report to school leadership.</p> <p><i>After step 5, they might continue their work on another goal, or add/change members, or disband, depending on the team’s experience.</i></p>



Even more guidance

Logistical planning is critical

In this approach, it is truly worth investing time in decision-making around how the planning process will run, and defining the roles and responsibilities of the people involved. This is not a step before getting to the “real work” of policy planning—it is the real work, and may be the hardest part! **Planning questions like, “where shall our policy team meet, for how long, and how often, and should we get biscuits?” aren’t just procedural, but can be integral to the success of your process.** Decisions like these can shape who is *able* to take part in your process around other commitments, and also who *wants* to take part, and what it is like for them. Does this policy thing sound scary, or manageable? Does this sound like a trustworthy process that may result in change?

Don’t assume that school buildings are a default acceptable (or positive) meeting place, or that meeting online will be accessible to all. What about a local library, park, village hall? Do a little digging about your options and how these might dis/advantage certain community members. Keep in mind you *don’t* need to include people all at the same time or in the same ways.

If you are doing consultations, it’s equally important to get the most out of these activities by planning them very carefully, to maximise accessibility and honesty. Again, you need to carefully consider who you will consult, and how—and why!





Big questions to ask when planning consultations

- What is the purpose of this consultation? How will we communicate about that purpose?
 - For example, to scope our current issues and concerns and help decide a planning focus?
 - To decide between options?
 - To feed back on a plan or an experience?
- What actions have we taken to make the consultation accessible to specific groups/specific needs? This could be accessibility in terms of timing and location, but also... demands for English language comprehension, amount of reading/writing, whether there are multiple response modalities, time given to respond...
- Do we think all people will be able to contribute honestly, and be critical if they need to be? What can we do to help ensure this?
- What will we do with the information we collect?

The importance of open questions

Especially if you are running an agenda-setting consultation or want to understand people's experiences about something, **ask an open question if you can**. Consider the following two example questions for pupils:

“What is something that makes school difficult for you?”

“Which of these makes school most difficult for you? X, Y or Z?”

These are questions that will produce very different answers. If you suspect factors X Y and Z are important, asking the first (open) question may turn up *completely different* answers than you expected. That can be part of the beauty and surprise of participatory design processes!

Our guidance on qualitative data collection (section 3.1) may be useful in planning consultations. These may use recognised methods like questionnaires, focus groups, surveys, or interviews—but don't forget the possibility for arts-based methods and more!



Managing expectations around participatory activities⁹

If you are running a participatory process, no matter who else is involved or their level of involvement, it's important to manage people's expectations about the activities they're engaged in. What is the purpose of what's happening now, and will it result in change?

Common expectation 1: “This meeting/activity is about X” (actually it was about Y...)

We strongly encourage you to communicate the planned purpose of *every activity, every time, even if you are with the same team*. If nothing else, this makes sure the *organisers* are on the same page about the purpose! Some common purposes might be...

- Building relationships and getting to know one another
- Identifying priorities
- Generating or sharing ideas or experiences
- Reviewing or feeding back on existing content or ideas
- Making decisions
- Producing a specific output

If you need to do more than one of these on the same day/session, help people stay on track by **splitting the functions up and labelling them** (e.g. on a meeting agenda, labelling sections of an online survey). For all these types of activities, explicitly state their purpose in **every** meeting or activity session, especially if different people may be joining in. Signal clearly when transitions are happening, and whether there is capacity for people to give more input later, if they feel like the first task isn't finished. Feeling like there is unfinished business is common, and making preparations for later input can be an important step in making your processes more accessible for those who need more time to process the information or make a response.

The main risk of not clearly communicating objectives is that you *will not meet the immediate objectives*—and may jeopardise longer-term ones. For example, if team activities so far have focused on sharing ideas and experiences but today you need to make decisions, running out of time because people are still proposing new ideas may leave the organisers 1) making unilateral decisions in order to keep moving, or 2) changing the schedule to have the group make the decision. Neither is ideal!

Common expectation 2: This activity will result in a concrete list of decisions, actions, or priorities

If you are new to participatory activities (or to types of qualitative data collection like running interviews or focus groups), it would be easy to think that “something is wrong” or “people didn't get it” when your activity produces a rich and messy stew of contradictory ideas and opinions and has made zero decisions. Actually, this is the *most* common outcome!

⁹“Activity” could be anything here—a focus group, an online consultation study, an arts-based activity, asking people to respond to a plan...



A more realistic expectation: You are very unlikely to get fully-formed, actionable contributions out of most participatory activities, without further processing the inputs.

By processing, we mean some kind of analysis. It may be simple, like...

- Counting (or estimating) what views and topics came up most or least
- Chunking similar contributions
- Splitting up big contributions that have covered many issues
- Looking at very specific or personal examples and contributions for underlying ideas or themes.
- Filtering out “off-topic” content...but holding on to it. The most important actions or priorities or views, according to your community, may be things you haven’t thought to ask about at all—“off-topic” *doesn’t* mean irrelevant!
- Setting aside ideas that are clearly outside your current scope or stated constraints (for example, things that are the purview of the local authority or government, and outside your school’s control).

This can feel awkward and like you are not “using” what people have contributed, but it is an essential step in making use of those contributions. Depending on how you are running your process, a policy team may be doing the processing, not a staff member alone. See *section 3.2 on qualitative data analysis for more ideas and resources*.

Make sure you leave time to process as you go. Do it as soon as you can! For example, after consultation focus group 1, do some review or processing. Let’s say they proposed an idea that the group was very excited by, and seems within your scope, budget, etc. You might want to take the idea to your second consultation focus group to ask what they think.

Common expectation 3: The idea I shared/the plan we made will become reality

There are several levels of expectation management here. The simplest one is to make sure people (especially, but not only, children and young people) are aware that *even if they share an idea with you, it does not mean this idea will become reality!* Many other stakeholders may share ideas as part of the current policy planning process, and these people may not agree on what’s important or what to do about it. It won’t be possible to use all the ideas. There will be more discussion to decide what to do next.

Especially for a policy team, you may need to manage expectations in more detail about the possibility of proposed changes or decisions being vetoed or amended by 1) the staff members managing the process, or 2) people higher up the food chain. *Is this a possibility? What are some reasons that may happen? Don’t let this be a nasty surprise—be honest about who has decision-making power.*

Searching for more guidance: terms and topics

As noted in Section 3 about evaluation, it can be *least* overwhelming to start with books, especially books for university students, rather than braving the entirety of the conflicting advice on the internet. If you do want to look for books (or dive into Google), remember the diversity of possible terms in this area:

- Participatory research
- Participatory design
- Co-design
- Co-production
- Co-produced [policy] *or other term*



Many guidance resources and projects focus on health and services.

Don't assume something won't be useful to you, because it isn't directly about education!

You are very unlikely to find someone who has solved the exact problem your school faces: this is a place to look for methods and advice that may be *transferrable* to your setting.

Books and papers about **children's interaction design** and **designing technologies with children** can be some of the best sources for examples of including children in design processes, including young or non-speaking children. These range from working with child design teams on long-term projects, to shorter one-off sessions developing ideas or eliciting feedback on options or prototypes.

Example resources and projects

The following is a very short list of additional sources and examples that may serve as a jumping-off point to understand the diversity of participatory work happening now, and seek more information.

- **Co-production collective research library:** A range of readings, tools, and examples around co-produced services and research. The primary focus is not on education, so do click around to find tools and examples that may be relevant for your setting:
<https://resources.coproductioncollective.co.uk/>
- **Co-production: Putting principles into practice in mental health contexts.** This guide from Australia is about mental health, but provides lots of helpful questions and examples that might be able to guide your planning. It does focus mainly on co-production, a level of participation that is more complex and with greater power sharing than the "level C" example detailed in this guide.
https://healthsciences.unimelb.edu.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0007/3392215/Coproduction_putting-principles-into-practice.pdf
- **Whitley researchers project (Berkshire):** They describe themselves as "a partnership between Whitley Community Development Association, local residents and the University of Reading. The programme involves local residents in conducting their own research, voicing their own needs and devising solutions to local issues." One project, "Aspiration in Whitley" is education-focused (2018). <https://research.reading.ac.uk/community-based-research/whitley-researchers-voice-in-research/>
- **UW KidsTeam Anatomy Guidebook:** Free e-book detailing the practicalities of a long-running kids technology design team based in a public library, with some further intro to participatory design. *NB: this resource may still be in progress; not all sections are complete.*
<https://www.kidsteam.ischool.uw.edu/ebook>
- **RECENT PAPER: Involving children, teachers and parents/carers in dialogues around child well-being in schools.** Free. Reports a knowledge exchange programme that involved primary school children, teachers and parents/carers in dialogues around school well-being, focusing on use of creative methods. Focuses on explaining their methods, and lessons learned.
<https://uclpress.scienceopen.com/hosted-document?doi=10.14324/RFA.07.1.12>
- **RECENT PAPER: Using Stakeholder Involvement, Expert Knowledge and Naturalistic Implementation to Co-Design a Complex Intervention to Support Children's Inclusion and Participation in Schools: The CIRCLE Framework.** Free. This paper focused specifically on inclusion issues and UK schools, and reports using a series of stakeholder workshops to design an intervention.
<https://www.mdpi.com/2227-9067/8/3/217>



Spotlight on participatory budgeting

Participatory budgeting initiatives include the wider community in deciding how budgets should be spent. Participatory budgeting has been tried in many settings, including UK schools. This could be an option for your school, or the available guidance and projects could form practical examples for including pupils, families, and others in decision-making. For example, *how* did they run sessions and meetings? What are some options for collecting input, or groups approaching decision-making?

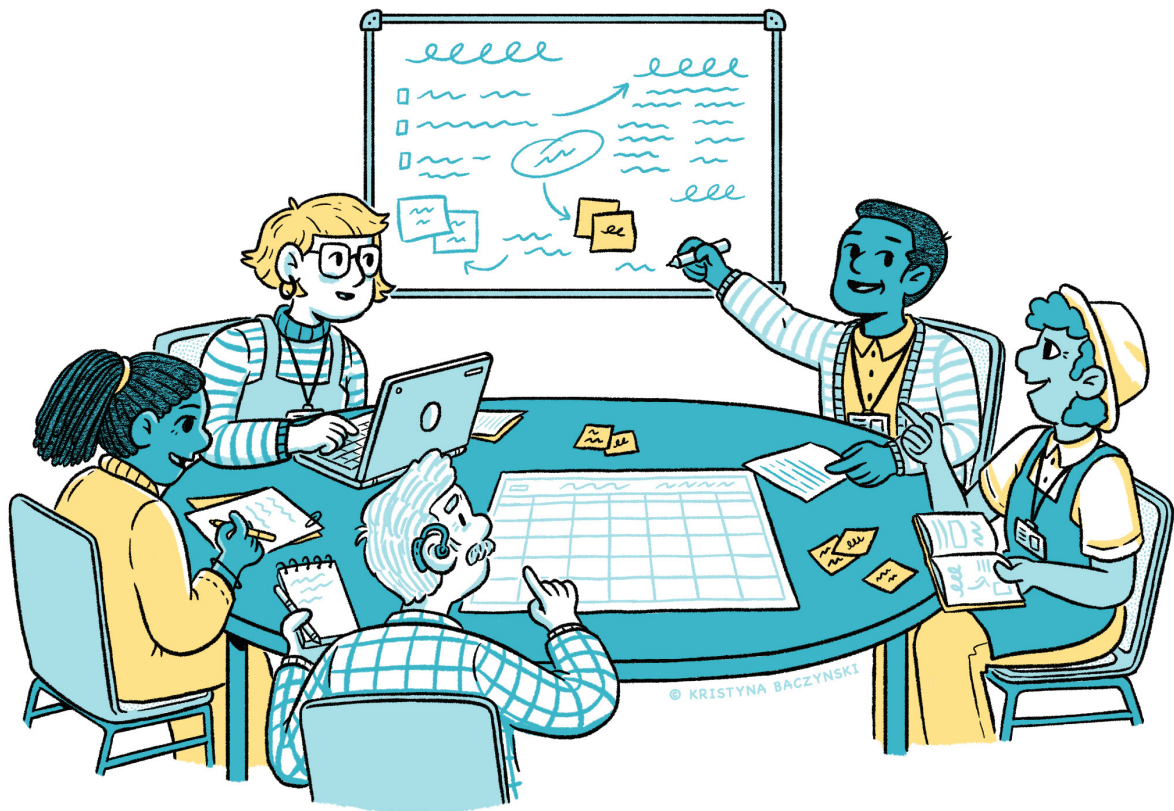
Get started with these guidance sources:

- Participatory budgeting Scotland: <https://pbscotland.scot/pb-in-schools>
- Participatory policymaking toolkit: https://www.democracybeyondelections.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/PPM_Toolkit_FINAL.pdf
- Council of Europe toolkit: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/participatory-democracy/-/-school-participatory-budgeting-new-council-of-europe-toolkit-available>

Or, check out the **Cost of the School Day Project** with Midlothian schools: https://www.midlothian.gov.uk/info/200284/your_community/449/participatory_budgeting/3



2.3 Inclusion by design





Introduction

We have included limited background about this approach because there is a large amount of pre-existing educator guidance available online, such as via CAST (2018a) <https://udlguidelines.cast.org/> and the government of Aotearoa New Zealand (n.d.) <https://inclusive.tki.org.nz/guides/universal-design-for-learning/>

We encourage you to consult these sources, and search more widely for examples of inclusion by design in schools.

This planning approach is about changing how your school approaches policy development, to focus on system-level inclusion planning and changing the environment to be more accessible to everyone “as standard”, rather than changing learners.

A central idea of inclusion by design is to examine “usual” school environments and practices, and seek to make these more universally accessible to everyone. Flexibility, agency and offering choice are major ingredients, as well as providing multiple ways for pupils to engage, express themselves, and show what they know. This is a **system-level approach**, looking at the level of the classroom, school, or even larger systems.

A very useful framework in this area is **Universal Design for Learning (UDL)**. CAST, a learning sciences organisation, has developed [comprehensive guidance and resources about this framework](#). They explain,

*“UDL is a framework to guide the design of learning environments that are accessible and challenging for all.... **UDL aims to change the design of the environment rather than to change the learner.** When environments are intentionally designed to reduce barriers, all learners can engage in rigorous, meaningful learning” (CAST 2018b, “What’s the goal of UDL?”)*

This framework focuses on **multiple means of representation, action and expression, and engagement**, for example by:

- Presenting information and content in different ways;
- Offering choices to all learners;
- Providing different modes of classroom engagement that align with students’ interests and challenge them appropriately.

The online CAST resources provide extensive resources to explain these principles, and planning tools to help educators to reflect on and implement these strategies.



This type of system-level, “change the environment” intervention contrasts clearly with common inclusion planning approaches. Where it is apparent that a learner’s needs aren’t being met at school, the prevalent strategy has been planning and implementing **adaptations, accommodations and supports at the level of the individual**. Even if left implicit, there is a sense that we are changing or adding to “regular” education to meet that learner’s needs. On the one hand, this makes intuitive sense—assessing individual learners’ needs and putting supports in place accordingly sounds like the best way to help them.

On the other hand, this strategy becomes rapidly unsustainable when each classroom is likely to have *multiple* pupils and needs beyond what is provided through “education as usual”. Neurodivergent pupils are those with other types of support needs are not rare—they are a substantial group of mainstream pupils, and growing. Staff can only do so much at once, especially when they are under-resourced.

Making class- or school-level changes to improve the inclusivity of environments and practice is an investment in planning, but with potential for longer-term savings on resources and time as more needs are met by what the school *usually does*, rather than by special arrangement. It’s about “spending to save”. There is also huge potential for benefit to *all learners*, not only those with neurodevelopmental differences or who currently receive support with some parts of their learning. In addition to potentially better supporting pupils *without* documented differences, there are valuable opportunities to work on pupils’ understanding of their own learning and needs, their metacognition, and self-advocacy skills.

Providing support *options* is an important distinction here: **this approach is not about rolling out intensive or highly specialised programmes to all students indiscriminately, but about making more tools and ways of doing things readily *available*, along with the flexibility and agency for students to choose.** There will always be learners who *do* need specialised, expert support such as speech and language therapy. Inclusion by design does not *in any way* deny that pupils should be able to access these supports. However, there is a large realm of less-specialised support that might currently be offered as “adjustments” or “accommodations”—but could be offered to all, with a little planning.

Some support options can be extremely simple and low- or no-cost, even when rolled out to everyone. For example, always turning on closed captioning/subtitles as a default when showing videos, or putting the schedule for the lesson or day up at the front of the room for everyone to see, instead of only giving it to pupils who have this as an agreed support. The information is just *there* for anyone who needs to refer to it—without having to ask, or be singled out by requesting or using it. Offering this information “as standard” is unlikely to negatively impact the pupils who do *not* need it. They may simply ignore it! There may be other types of physical resources your classroom already has, like mini-whiteboards or headphones, that could be relocated where everyone is freely able to access them *if and when they think they need them*.



Flexibility and agency are two more important features of inclusion by design. In being able to flexibly interact with their environments and make choices, pupils gain confidence and exercise their decision-making skills. As a result, they build their sense of agency, which has been shown to positively impact learning, emotional regulation abilities, and engagement in problem-solving behaviours (e.g. Taub et al., 2020). Flexibility and agency are beneficial for all children, regardless of whether or not they have neurodevelopmental differences. Inclusion by design sets out to create school environments in which *all* pupils can participate and thrive, make meaningful choices about how to engage, and build valuable skills.

Finally, it's important to be realistic about what this approach can achieve. Every classroom has such a diversity of needs and experiences that **it is extremely unlikely to find the “perfect” system to meet all needs all the time**—even just for this school year. Indeed, the “best” set of universal principles can shift as different children enter and age out of school. There are also bound to be conflicting needs—like pupils who need movement to focus, and those who are distracted by it. This is simply part of the process, and should not discourage you from pursuing inclusion by design as a viable approach to pursuing inclusive policies at your school. Designing for inclusion and accessibility “as standard” can help ensure the flexibility of supports (and attitudes) are present to meet a large proportion of needs, much of the time.

Real examples of inclusion by design

School level: Flexible seating in a London mainstream primary

Seating plans and “good sitting” are major classroom concerns, but conventional chairs and desks do not suit all children for a range of reasons, including neurodevelopmental differences that may mean they need movement or high sensory input in order to regulate and focus. Occupational therapists may already recommend alternative seating for some children, and there is research on the benefits of targeted seating interventions for individual neurodivergent children. In a pilot project led by a teacher-researcher, her school trialled and evaluated **flexible seating choices as a whole-school inclusive adaptation available to all pupils** (Al-Jayoosi, 2022). Their study asked, what if seating alternatives were available to everyone? Could more learners benefit? Crucially, the school was able to link this trial to their school improvement plan, which facilitated planning and staff involvement.

The school made a range of seating options available with “minimal rules”: the seats should be accessible and visible to all pupils for them to choose and use, and have minimal direction or rules about use. In addition to “regular” classroom chairs, the many initial options included wobble cushions and stools, floor desks, standing desks, floor rockers, ball chairs, and rocking classroom chairs. The school purchased a percentage of seating for pupils to try over a period of time, and then more following extensive pupil surveys and feedback. Children explained their preferences and decision-making in terms of comfort of different options, the extent to which these facilitated additional movement, and how well the option supported their concentration in lessons. Some pupils clearly found a favourite option, and others were more flexible in trying and using different seating types. By the end of the trial, the school was able to offer 50% flexible seating options in each classroom.



Overall, staff reacted very favourably to the seating trial, and reported it did not require any difficult adjustments to their teaching, and did not create challenges for managing pupil behaviour. In fact, they believed that pupils' behaviour, comfort, mood, and collaboration *improved* with the introduction of flexible seating choices.

Lead researcher Heba al-Jayoosi reflected that this school and its staff strongly prioritises inclusion and serves a community with high levels of need. There is already substantial flexibility built into their day, and how pupils and staff already sat, moved, and used classroom spaces before the seating trial. It's possible that in another school, there might be different barriers or facilitators to offering this type of option as standard.

[View a free online talk about this project on Youtube.](#)

National level: Adopting UDL in Aotearoa New Zealand

In recent years, Aotearoa New Zealand's Ministry of Education has introduced new policies and guidance to shape more inclusive primary and secondary schools. Some of these changes, such as the inclusion of digital technologies in teaching and learning and the move away from single classrooms to flexible learning environments, have helped introduce educators to UDL. This in turn has promoted curriculum accessibility and helped foster environments that minimise barriers to learning.

The emphasis on inclusive education is paying off: compared with other OECD countries, they have higher than average early childhood enrolment and secondary school completion (New Zealand Government, 2020). The country's success in implementing UDL principles, while maintaining a commitment to high educational achievement, shows that inclusion policies can help all students do their best at school, contribute to their school environment and feel included.

UDL in Aotearoa New Zealand is also a clear example of how and why successful inclusion strategies are inherently *local*. UDL is a methodology originally from the USA, which was further developed within Aotearoa New Zealand to fit their own values, needs, and communities (Butler, 2019). The "solution" they have developed is a unique solution that may not directly work elsewhere—and a strong vote for why other nations or school systems should also work on 'localising' their strategies.





Action cycle guidance for this approach

Please use these tables with the generic action cycle guidance, in Part 1. This table focuses on questions and actions in that are specific to *this approach*.

Steps 1 and 2 may be combined to some extent in this approach. It may be difficult to plan the action cycle *and* focus on system-level decisions without first reviewing the timing and scope of your current inclusion planning.

Step 1: PREPARE the planning process AND Step 2: ASSESS your current situation and resources

In addition to generic guidance...

Key questions

- How (and when) do we approach inclusion planning now? To what extent do we address needs “reactively” on for individuals, versus planning for accessibility, support, and inclusion at a system level?
- Are there areas where we think system-level planning is successfully happening now? Where, and what’s helping it succeed?
- Are there areas where we think we do a good job now, in providing support options or choices to all?
- How do we think and talk about support needs in our school now?

Identify initial targets for change and use them to help identify a **focus** for the current cycle. For example...

- Are there issues in the school environment previously raised by pupils, families that might be good targets for change?
- Are there areas where many pupils already have similar exceptions or adjustments?
- Are there areas where we already offer choice/flexibility to some pupils: could we expand?

Begin planning how you could communicate about this approach to school community members. What is the purpose of making system-level changes? Are there likely objections? What, and from whom? (For example, concerns that these changes will somehow disrupt or disadvantage certain pupils?)



Step 3: PLAN goals, actions, and measurement

3A Goals

This approach's vision for inclusion:

Schools improve their inclusivity by changing “education as usual” to make teaching and environments more universally accessible to all pupils, and to build in the flexibility to adapt to individual needs on the ground. In their planning, schools move away from reactive accommodations for individuals, toward proactive, system-level “inclusion by design”.

In addition to generic guidance...

Use any **targets for change** from Step 1-2 to help identify specific goals. It's better to be focused, and not try to change everything at once!

The process of **implementing this approach might begin with a consideration of individual children's needs**. After that, you may choose to **generalise** individual supports in a way that may be helpful to a range of pupils across the classroom. Sometimes, considering how to accommodate everyone's needs at the same time can be very difficult, which is why it's useful to start small. For example, one of your pupils might already be benefitting from using a fidget toy to help them concentrate. One way of generalising this is to keep a box of fidget toys for anyone to use, should they need to.

Remember that changing staff and pupil **knowledge and attitudes** around support needs and differences generally can also be important systemic changes, that can strongly influence the school experiences of neurodivergent children.

3B Actions

In addition to generic guidance...

Check: Are there preliminary actions that might help your planned changes to be successful? For example, if you will be making supports or choices newly available to everyone, how will you explain this? Do pupils have the vocabulary to talk about their own needs?



Step 3: PLAN goals, actions, and measurement - cont.

3C Plan to measure *In addition to generic guidance...*

For changes that offer pupils choices or make supports newly available to all, keep in mind that consistent or long-term use of those options isn't necessarily the right (or only) measure. Part of the point of choice and availability may be to *normalise* the presence of supports and people doing things differently. It can be a 'win' if many people try a new option and only a few use it long term—but in the process the option becomes unremarkable and boring because it's *not* a special exception (e.g. taking movement breaks).

It's also good to remember that inclusive policy changes might help different pupils for different reasons. For example, a movement break during the school day might help a hyperactive child release excess energy, but it might also help a child experiencing sleep issues regain energy and focus. When planning to measure, consider this diversity of experiences, and avoid focusing on how a policy impacts only one particular kind of child.

Don't forget to assess impacts on staff members, as well as pupils. For example, are there day-to-day time costs or time savings involved in implementing the new policies compared to the old ones?

3D Feasibility check

In addition to generic guidance...

Carefully consider *how many* changes or new choices you are planning right now. If all of them are implemented at once, what would that look like day-to-day for staff and learners? For example, could it be confusing and stressful to offer *too many* new options and choices in one go?

Step 4: Implement your planning and begin measuring

In addition to generic guidance...

Implementation includes communicating changes and new options to pupils, and making sure all staff are clear on the plan. Planning a non-stigmatising, non-deficit-based explanation of changes/options will be important to how people perceive them, and their willingness to engage.

Step 5: Evaluate, and reflect on your changes

Follow generic guidance



Linking the Belonging in School Suggested Changes to this approach

Several of our 12 Suggested Changes are examples of system-level changes, in the sense that they create policy changes that apply to all pupils *as standard* and for use where needed, instead of creating accommodations or exceptions for individual children. For example, a school might introduce flexibility into uniform policies (change #9) as standard for all pupils. Many pupils may not change what they wear at all, because the current policy isn't posing a challenge for them. However, *any* pupil could use that flexibility if they want or need it, without needing to justify themselves or seek "special" treatment. On their side, the school no longer needs to track or manage which pupils have exceptions or not—saving time and paperwork.

As a completely different type of system-level action, Suggested Changes #10-#11 could be about working on staff skills and attitudes at a school level.

Ultimately, applying inclusive design principles in your school will involve some creative thinking. What are some supports currently offered to individuals, and can those supports be generalised in a manner that might help more pupils, if they were available to them? What are some routes by which you could offer more flexibility and a greater sense of agency to your pupils?

Suggested changes 9-11 could be examples of system-level policy changes

9. Uniforms

Reduce barriers and sensory distress around school uniforms by making policies more flexible for all pupils, i.e. pupils can make uniform choices that fit their own sensory needs,

10. Inclusion CPD

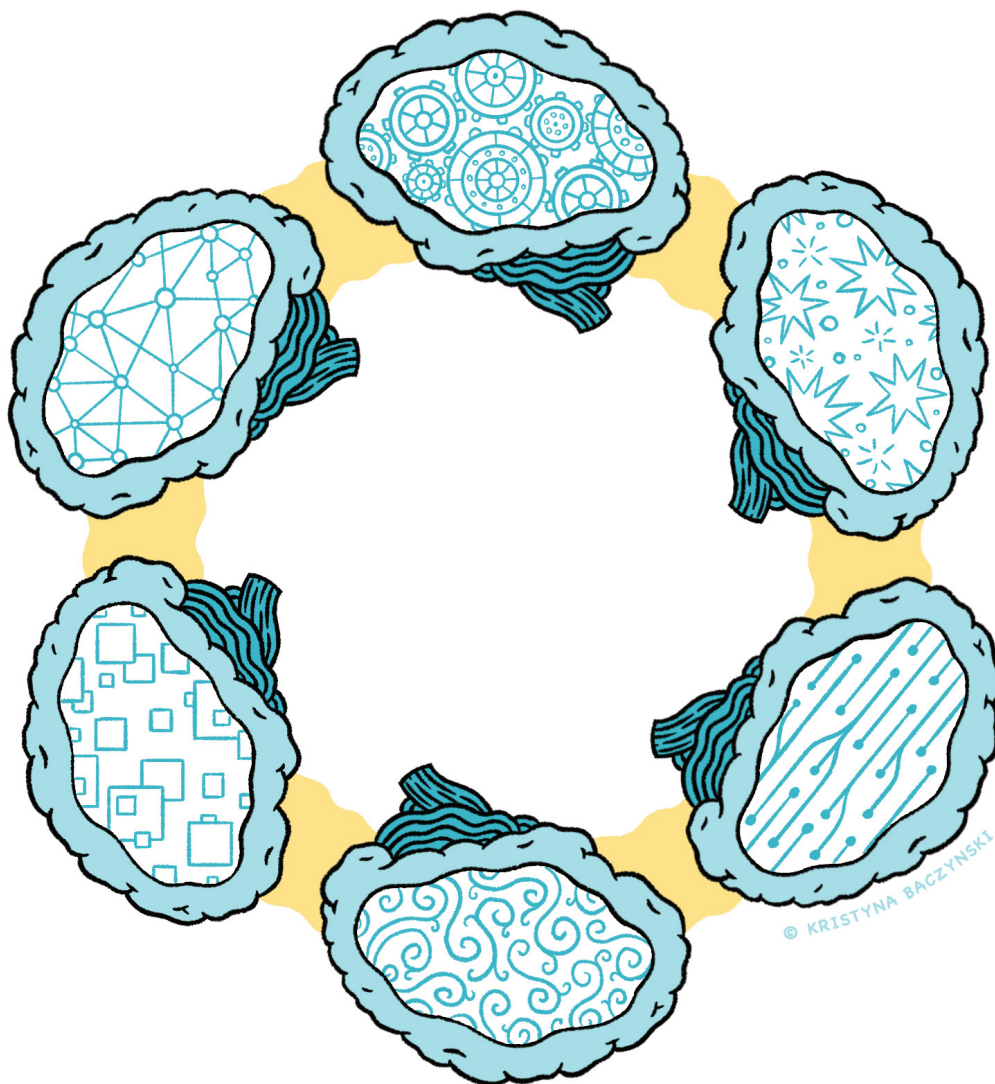
At the whole school level, intervene to help better equip staff to support learners by investing in awareness and training related to inclusion.

11. Everyone supports inclusion

Intervene to change messages, attitudes, and decision-making at the school level, especially regarding staff. All staff play a role in making their school inclusive, and contribute to whether learners feel respected, safe, and included.

See the Section 5 in the Belonging in School PART 1 for the full text of the Twelve Changes.

2.4 Committing to be a neurodiversity-affirmative school





Introduction

This is a complex, evolving topic. It's not possible to say everything about it in this guide, or any guide! We have tried to provide a level of detail that helps readers get a sense of what this approach would mean in practice, and whether they want to (or think it is feasible to) engage with it in more depth.

This planning approach is about explicitly adopting the neurodiversity paradigm and using it to reflect on your school's existing culture, values and policies, and to drive development of new policies.

Neurodiversity means that we are all different in how we think, feel, and learn, because our brains process information differently. More simply, it is “the diversity of human minds” (Walker, 2014). This diversity of brains and minds within our species is a biological fact, supported by many types of evidence, such as about differing trajectories of brain and neural development. The **neurodiversity paradigm** is a position or perspective on this biological fact of human cognitive diversity. For now, we will focus on two key ideas from the paradigm:

- Neurodiversity is naturally occurring, and thus differences in our thought and experiences are naturally occurring too. It is part of the wide variation present within our species.
- It rejects the concept of a “normal” brain, or any type of brain/information processing being “right” or having more value and validity than another.

This paradigm provides a positive framework for talking about neurodevelopmental differences (diagnosed or otherwise) while still recognising needs (e.g. Milton, D., Ridout, S., Murray, D., Martin, N., & Mills, R., eds., 2020). It rejects categorisation of some needs as being “extra” or “special”, instead drawing attention to *all* people having cognitive, social, sensory, and support needs, which may be met to different degrees in a given environment—such as a classroom. Like other types of human diversity, “neurodiversity” is a characteristic of a *group*. **One individual cannot be neurodiverse**, but a *group* of people may be neurodiverse if the members of the group have different characteristics.

Neurotypical people have the type of information processing that is in the majority, for the group they are in; i.e. they are typical members of that group. A group could be as small as a family, or as large as the whole human population. Your classroom, school, or town are all groups in this sense. **Neurodivergent** people are in the minority for their group, meaning they have information processing that significantly differs from the majority. There may be many different types of neurodivergence present in the same group. Some neurodivergent people *may* have neurodevelopmental diagnoses such as ADHD or autism, but neurodivergence is not in itself any type of diagnosis, and not shorthand for a list or collection of diagnoses.



It's vital to stress that *neurotypical* and *neurodivergent* are terms that designate processing that is more or less common, or *typical*, within the group you are looking at. These terms *do not* set up a categorisation of “normal” or “healthy” brains versus “unhealthy” or “deficient” ones. *Neurodivergent* or *neurotypical* are not judgements of validity or value.

In general, schools and wider society tend to be designed with the needs of the neurotypical majority in mind. This isn't particularly surprising, but has major repercussions for accessibility and inclusion. As stated at the start of this section, **this planning approach is about explicitly adopting the neurodiversity paradigm and then reflecting on your policies and practice through this lens.** You would seek to increase inclusion and accessibility in your school by choosing changes that move you closer to neurodiversity-affirming values. The rest of this section unpacks further what that might mean and look like.



It is important to underscore how radical and different a neurodiversity-affirming school could really be, compared to most mainstream educational systems. **Adopting this paradigm requires us to acknowledge the persistent messaging, in both education and society, that *not all people have equal value, or that their value is fragile or conditional.*** In schools, that value is often contingent on performing and achieving in certain ways, and following certain standards of “acceptable” behaviour and communication. This framework *actively disadvantages neurodivergent students*. A significant number of pupils are multiply disadvantaged here due to their neurology *and* their backgrounds. Beyond more concrete disadvantages, this messaging can be stigmatising, demotivating, and demoralising, with potentially very long-lasting effects¹⁰. A **neurodiversity-affirming school** would make those narratives of conditional value explicit, and work to question and reject them.

¹⁰ See Sidebar, page 55



Adopting this paradigm also requires honest reflection on our own beliefs and attitudes around neurodivergence, around support needs, and around differences generally. Can we move away from the belief that some ways of being are more *valuable* or *valid* than others, and choose to act accordingly? Deep acceptance is really at the centre of it all. Autistic author and teacher Oolong reminds us,

“It is possible to wholeheartedly accept someone for who they are, while offering them the help and support they need to thrive in life. It is not possible to fully accept someone if you have a problem with who they are at a fundamental level, and that includes any neurodivergence they might be born with. You can help a child to grow and learn, but know that there are things you will never change about them, and appreciate what makes them unique” (2019).

Committing to neurodiversity-affirming values and actions will challenge messages we have spent a lifetime hearing from society, from our professions, or even from ourselves. It will be very natural to feel like you have work to do on acceptance—indeed a growing awareness will be a hallmark of this approach. The entire point of offering this planning strategy is that *change is possible!*

Neurodiversity language

The goal of this approach is NOT to adopt neurodiversity vocabulary in lieu of medicalised or deficit-focused vocabulary.

While the terminology is useful, changing words is a cosmetic change without working on day-to-day practice, and on people’s *beliefs* about neurodevelopmental differences. It doesn’t really matter what terms are used, if a school is working to ‘fix’ their learners, and treats neurodivergent ways of being and learning as less valid than neurotypical ones. On the other hand, your school might already have taken major actions to de-stigmatise and normalise supports or to implement other elements of a neurodiversity-affirmative classroom (*see below*), but not be using these vocabulary terms. This said, it can be very useful to have a shared vocabulary within your team as you embark on your planning.



What might a neurodiversity-affirmative school be like?

A neurodiversity-affirmative classroom or school is one that applies the principles of the neurodiversity paradigm, in different ways. Here are 10 characteristics or actions that begin to outline such a school, *but are not exhaustive*.

- 1. They expect heterogeneity *in general*, and assume that every classroom and staffroom is neurodiverse** (i.e. contains a mix of neurotypical people and different types of neurodivergence) and operate accordingly, because neurodivergence is both naturally occurring and common.
- 2. They actively teach about neurodiversity and neurodivergence in relation to human diversity.** Pupils and staff have the vocabulary to talk about these ideas, and see how they apply to their own school and lives.
- 3. They actively seek to identify and remove policies and practices that systematically disadvantage neurodivergent pupils.**
- 4. They actively reject normalisation, and that certain ways of being are “better” than other ways of being.** In the process of becoming neurodiversity-affirming, a school will actively seek to identify and remove policies and practices that intend to normalise children. They actively affirm that there are many equally valid and valuable ways of being, doing, and learning. They seek to identify where practices make implicit or explicit value/validity judgements, and to change these practices.
- 5. They counter transactional views and narratives around support needs.** These schools do not treat support provision as making an exchange. By exchange, we mean messaging that implicitly or explicitly states that having your support needs met is conditional: learners must “earn” help or “justify” struggling in some domains by demonstrating their talent, useful contributions, or good behaviour in another part of school¹. *All* pupils deserve to be part of a school environment that respects them and works to meet their needs and support their access to learning.
- 6. In these schools, receiving and asking for support is de-stigmatised and does not mean a person has less value than a person who does not need help or supports.** Everyone has a right to have their needs met.
- 7. Interventions and supports are led by people’s goals, not diagnoses. They seek to facilitate access to learning and the school community, rather than “correcting” deficits.**
- 8. They treat neurodiversity like other protected dimensions of equality and diversity. They actively fight stigma and discrimination.** This may need dedicated interventions for staff, pupils, and/or the wider community to change people’s beliefs and actions.
- 9. They cultivate pupils’ self-knowledge and self-advocacy,** so that they can understand, talk about, and advocate for their own needs.
- 10. These schools are environments in which people can safely and freely choose whether or not to disclose their neurodivergence, or to explore whether they might be neurodivergent, and all choices are equally acceptable.**



One professional contributor shared this: the more time you spend considering educational practice in terms of the neurodiversity paradigm, the more normalisation and ableism you begin to see. You can't sweep it all away in one go, because you can't see *it* all at once. It's more like an onion, peeling away one layer at a time and encountering others underneath. In this way, the action cycle lends itself very well to this planning approach, because by definition you will keep revisiting your policies and practices over time, and seeing them differently as the school community evolves.

It can be admittedly difficult to envision what a strongly neurodiversity-affirming setting is like. As we have repeated throughout *Belonging in School*, applying *any* of the approaches will look different across settings, because their communities and starting points are different. There is no *one* way a neurodiversity-affirming setting will look.

Here is one concrete example of a behavioural expectation that can actively disadvantage neurodivergent students (especially autistic students) and would be handled very differently in a neurodiversity-affirming school. **Many schools communicate specific expectations around what “good listening” looks like, and expect or actively demand that pupils make eye contact when speaking to/ listening to others, or immediately look at the teacher when they address the class.** Autistic people often don't show the same patterns of eye contact as neurotypical people, and making eye contact can be immensely effortful, even painful (e.g. Trevisan, Roberts, Lin & Birmingham, 2017). Autistic adults have written eloquently about how they can feel forced to choose between *actually* listening and *looking like* they are listening¹¹. This has obvious repercussions for students in the classroom! Not only can it be distressing to force eye contact repeatedly all day, but autistic pupils will miss important information. A neurodiversity-affirming school would instead openly discuss that there are many ways of “good listening” [points #2, 4 above], and encourage people to listen in the way that works for them [point #8 about self-advocacy]. They might talk about adjusting our expectations of looking and listening, and encourage patience and acceptance when others may not do what we expect.



the more time you spend considering educational practice in terms of the neurodiversity paradigm, the more normalisation and ableism you begin to see.



If you begin with this example and reflect on other behavioural expectations in the same way¹², you may start to see similar ways in which they privilege some ways of being (usually neurotypical ways) over others, or may actively disadvantage pupils who cannot meet those expectations due to their neurodevelopmental differences.

¹¹ See this great comic from artist Beth Wilson <http://doodlebeth.com/eye-contact/>, or this page which has collected content on eye contact from multiple autistic creators <https://stimpunks.org/eye-contact/>

¹² For example, the expectation to sit still for long periods of time!



Potential benefits and risks of this planning approach

It would be disingenuous to deny that there *is* an element of uncertainty in this approach, because it hasn't been heavily studied in relation to educational practice. As yet, it has a limited evidence base. However, developing inclusive policies around the neurodiversity paradigm *does* align with other diversity and inclusion initiatives that are more established in schools, and with individual concepts and methods that *are* well-established (e.g. participatory working, staff leadership, promoting belonging, self-advocacy, anti-stigma interventions).

Working towards being a neurodiversity-affirming school has potentially extensive and long-lasting benefits across all pupils. The vision is for a school in which all children are respected, valued, understand themselves, and can advocate for their own needs. They have *not* been implicitly taught to feel ashamed or deficient because of their differences from others. In a neurodiversity-affirming school, it *truly* is not wrong to be different. More specifically, benefits could include:

- A greater understanding of neurodevelopmental differences, and normalising these differences.
- Reduction in stigma around neurodevelopmental differences. Stigma has a causal relationship with poor mental health outcomes (*see page 55*).
- Greater empathy and understanding between pupils, reduced conflict around use of supports or differences in treatment from staff.
- An increase in pupils' sense of belonging in school, which is linked to other positive outcomes (*see Approach 1*).
- Reductions in inequalities, including in non-attendance and exclusion.
- Greater support and acknowledgement of needs for all pupils, not only those with diagnosed differences.
- Preparing pupils with the vocabulary and self-advocacy skills to help talk about and seek support for their needs, both in school and across other settings.
- All pupils being more respected and valued.

All of these potential benefits apply to *all pupils* and in many cases staff members, because neurodiversity is about the entire group, not neurodivergent children alone.



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Stigma and wellbeing outcomes for neurodivergent children and young people

Promoting acceptance and understanding is badly needed. In childhood and longer-term, there are unacceptable disparities between neurodivergent children and young people's wellbeing compared with neurotypical peers (e.g. Cassidy & Rodgers, 2017; Fink, Deighton, Humphrey & Wolpert, 2015; Paget, Parker, Henley, Heron, Ford, & Emond, 2015; Law, Rush, Schoon & Parsons, 2009; Emerson & Hatton, 2007). In schools, negative attitudes from both staff and peers can compound existing daily-life challenges, and limit educational potential (e.g. Macmillan, Goodall, & Fletcher-Watson, 2018; Sasson et al., 2017; Wood & Freeth, 2016; May & Stone, 2010).

There is widespread evidence that **stigma** is a driver of this group's strikingly poor mental health outcomes, and in turn **lack of acceptance** from others, bullying, and peer victimisation (e.g. Lever & Geurts, 2016; Schroeder, Cappadocia, Bebko, Pepler, & Weiss 2014). *All of these are serious barriers to attainment and thriving in education. Addressing information gaps and stigma tackles a root cause of poor mental health in neurodivergent young people. Dedicated teaching about *neurodiversity* and *neurodivergence* can directly address poor knowledge and stigma (e.g. Heijnders & Van Der Meij, 2006; Pinfold et al., 2003).*

Adopting neurodiversity-affirming approach also has **risks**. More so than the other planning approaches we describe, it relies on structural change and consistent culture across the whole school in order to be truly successful. **Neurodiversity affirmation requires a deep and sincere level of acceptance in the school community—and getting to that point asks people to be vulnerable about their experiences and needs.** In a school community with very uneven attitudes and beliefs around neurodevelopmental differences, there is a real risk that drawing attention to neurodiversity issues may be used *against* openly neurodivergent people.

Finally, as already acknowledged, the neurodiversity paradigm points towards a radically different set of values and actions than many current education systems and practices. There are obvious conflicts with current education legislation and funding models that aggressively gate-keep access to scarce resources (though the exact points of friction won't be the same in all the UK nations). **Even if you are in a school system where a diagnosis is a pre-requisite for offering certain types of support, this does not automatically mean your school cannot work toward being more neurodiversity-affirming.** As we have stressed throughout *Belonging in School*, school culture, knowledge, attitudes and beliefs are extremely important. Your school can still work on knowledge and attitudes, and on changing deficit-focused narratives around needs, support and help.





Action cycle guidance for this approach

Please use these tables with the generic action cycle guidance in Section 1. This table focuses on questions and actions in that are specific to *this approach*.

As in Approach 2, we recommend a ‘reality check’ in step 0. As with “inclusion as belonging”, neurodiversity affirmation is both a position you hold, and a vision for the type of inclusive school environment you want to create. While you can make some changes immediately, it is *highly likely* to be a longer-term programme of reviewing and revising, over multiple action cycles. Is there sufficient support for neurodiversity-affirming beliefs and actions in your school, such that it makes sense to use them as a basis for change?

Step 0: Reality check

Purpose: Estimate how well prepared your team may be, and how much support (or opposition) there may be within your school community.

Key tasks:

- If they are not already familiar with this topic, request key team members to read around neurodiversity and neurodiversity-affirming practice, to get more comfortable with these concepts and the types of changes that may be involved.
- Have a discussion about the feasibility of committing to a neurodiversity-affirming position, and using it to drive your planning. Is this position likely to have sufficient support from key school stakeholders and the wider community? There may be other groundwork to do first, for example if people lack the factual knowledge to judge if they would support this position or not.
- Consider pupil and staff interactions now. If your school has known issues with pupils and/or staff members bullying one another, we would encourage you to work on those issues first, before embarking on *any* programme of change that brings additional attention to people’s differences.

As a special note for senior leaders and staff in inclusion-focused roles, staff attitudes and interactions with children are a *critical* ingredient to the success of this approach. If you are a senior leader or other staff member with responsibility for inclusion, it will be important first to understand the current culture of your school. Trying to drive this planning approach “top down” in the context of generally low support, or a contingent who will actively oppose it, or eye-roll and treat it as a joke, could be counterproductive. In this circumstance, it would be better to opt for another approach in the short- to medium-term, and, in parallel, build knowledge and awareness of neurodiversity across the school.



staff attitudes and interactions with children are a critical ingredient to the success of this approach.





Low support right now doesn't mean that neurodiversity issues are completely off the table. There are other steps you can take towards better neurodiversity understanding, like improving factual knowledge, tackling stigma, and understanding your colleagues' current beliefs and reservations. If support for these values or this vision for inclusion is low, why? Knowledge of neurodiversity and neurodivergence alone may not be the issue, and there may be practical and pedagogical problems to solve first.

Step 1: PLAN the planning process

In addition to generic guidance...

Level of policy you plan to change: This strategy is most likely to be successful and has the fewest ethical concerns at **school level**. Implementing it only in certain classrooms poses challenges, particularly for neurodivergent pupils, if attitudes and teaching practices vary widely across the school. For example, it would be—at minimum—extremely distressing to move from a neurodiversity-affirming classroom in one year to a strongly normalising one in the next.

Focus in this cycle: While many aspects of neurodiversity-affirming practice are interconnected, you can't do it all at once. *Do* choose a more specific focus, and remember it's OK to start small.

See the notes at the end of this section, suggesting some possible foci for early action cycles.

Step 2: ASSESS your current situation and resources

This is an especially critical step for this approach, and it is worth investing time here to explore the gap between the vision of a neurodiversity-affirming school, and where various aspects of your school's values and practice are now.

In addition to generic guidance...

Give particular attention to mapping out current knowledge and attitudes, particularly (but not only) for staff. Your findings might point to necessary, early actions in Step 3 around training.

Consider your internal resources around neurodiversity and neurodivergence. Do you have staff members or parents/carers who are openly neurodivergent, and who might want to contribute to planning or feedback? If you're not sure, do you want to explore options for people to volunteer themselves, or to privately feed back on planning?

Consider external resources that might help give input or directly work with staff or pupils. For example, are there third-sector organisations or family/adult groups related to neurodivergence in your area, or neurodivergent adults who deliver training and workshops?



Step 3: PLAN goals, actions, and measurement

3A Goals

This approach's vision for inclusion:

Schools adopt the neurodiversity paradigm, and commit to policies and practices that reflect that position and its values. They work toward becoming a neurodiversity-affirming school, for example through the actions detailed on Page 52.

In addition to generic guidance...

Consider whether the school will make a public commitment to this goal, and announce that to the community. That type of commitment could be a useful shared understanding and framework for explaining individual changes, but there may be drawbacks to being public. It would also be possible to pursue individual goals and actions, but without positioning them as part of a bigger programme. What might serve your school best?

3B Actions

In addition to generic guidance...

Consider what you may need to do to implement actions/changes as consistently as possible across the school. What can you do to help facilitate that? Will there be trade-offs on how many actions you can take now, and consistency?

3C Plan to measure

In addition to generic guidance...

Qualitative data collection will likely be very important, regardless of your exact goals. This is both because there are relatively few existing quantitative tools that might be useful, and because beliefs and attitudes are such a big component of the approach as a whole.

Make sure that you are collecting information from both neurodivergent **and neurotypical** learners and staff members. It's unhelpful to focus exclusively on neurodivergent people in your measurement, as it sends a misleading message about who neurodiversity concerns, or is about. You are also then likely to miss people who are not on the books as neurodivergent: they may not know it, or may not want to share with the school or peers, or may not have formal documentation.

3D Feasibility check

Follow generic guidance



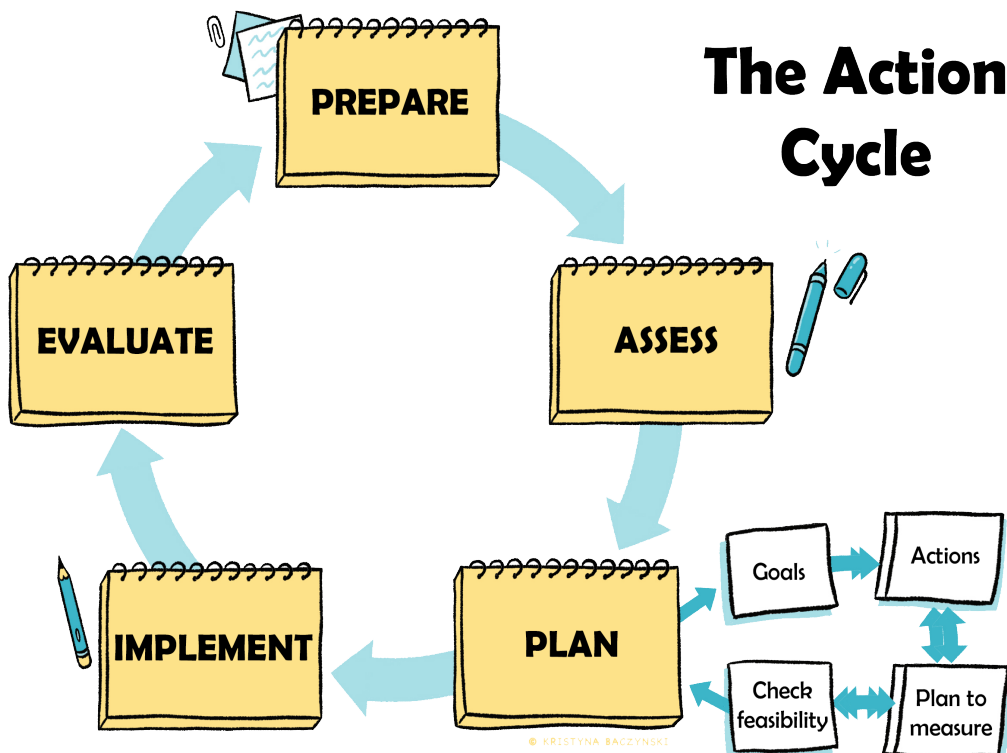
Step 4: Implement your planning and begin measuring

In addition to generic guidance...

Plan in advance how you will **explain specific changes to pupils** (and others in the school community), especially if you haven't announced an overall commitment. For example, what if your school removed an expectation that "good listening" requires eye contact? How will you explain the new expectation—and also why the old rule was taken away? Piloting these explanations with other staff or a small number of pupils may help improve and clarify them.

Step 5: Evaluate, and reflect on your changes

Follow generic guidance





Focusing your early action cycles

If your school is interested in this approach but feeling stuck on how to narrow your focus in early action cycles, here are some suggestions. This is an un-ordered list (not ranked in terms of difficulty or importance).

Try taking one of these areas as a focus in your first (or an early) action cycle:

- **Staff and pupil knowledge of neurodiversity:** Invest in staff training on neurodiversity, or teaching lessons on neurodiversity for pupils¹³.
- **Everyday, basic classroom rules and expectations:** Reflect on official school rules, or unwritten but strong expectations. For example, around sitting still and moving, listening, looking, types of communication people are expected to use (or not use) and so on. Do these expectations privilege neurotypical ways of doing things? Might any of them particularly advantage (or disadvantage) certain pupils? Most importantly, can any of these expectations be changed?
- **“Additional” supports, “special” needs:** Reflect on the attitudes and beliefs that are present in how your school talks about and treats pupil support needs. Look for language or attitudes that implicitly position these things as exceptional or negative, *even if this has not been staff members’ intention*. Do you currently acknowledge that *all* pupils have needs in the school environment? Are supports positioned as trying to “fix” deficits? See what actions you might be able to take around changing language, de-stigmatising supports, and expanding discussion of “needs” to include all in the school community.
- **Discussions, record-keeping, and feedback about or to pupils:** What type of attitudes and value judgements may be communicated when you talk to pupils about their work and behaviour, or *about* pupils? Do they privilege neurotypical norms and expectations, even if that is unintentional? For example, *which* pupils might currently be judged as being helpful, or cheerful, or well/poorly behaved, and why? If we think we see problems in discussions, record-keeping, and feedback, what can we do to shift our values and attitudes, and how can we (kindly) hold one another accountable?
- **More detailed review of policies/practices in a particular area:** For example, looking at policies around attendance, or those related to break/lunch time spaces and expectations. Are there choices or issues that may be specifically disadvantaging/excluding/causing distress for neurodivergent pupils?

This is not an exhaustive list by any means, but may help your thinking in identifying a manageable focus to start your action cycle. You will see that most of these do ultimately come back to attitudes and beliefs in one way or another. What do we truly believe about differences, and how does this show up in our daily interactions and practice?

As an alternative to the above list, you could start with a **listening exercise or focus group with neurodivergent pupils and/or staff**. For those who choose to be involved and share their experiences, can they help identify priorities for change, and do they want to be part of making those changes happen?

¹³ For example, the free Learning About Neurodiversity at School (LEANS) programme for primary school classes (Alcorn et al., 2022).



3. Monitoring and evaluating your policies and changes

Whatever inclusion-related actions you choose to take, it's important to monitor your activities (individually and as a whole), regularly evaluating them and adjusting them for continuous improvement. By evaluation, we mean collecting and using evidence to make judgements about the performance of policies and practices. Did they have the effects they were designed to have? In the simplest terms, “did it work?”.

“
did it work?
”

Let any planned monitoring and evaluation be **led by your goals**. What do you want to find out, and how would you use that information, when you have it? You will need to establish meaningful and feasible way to gather data *in your setting*—for example, the picture of what's feasible may be different in a class that has a device available for every pupil, versus one that doesn't.

As highlighted in Step 3C of the generic action cycle guidance (“Plan toward measurement”) in Section 1.3, the best time to consider your evaluation is when you are **planning your new activities or your changes to practice**, not after they are implemented. Sometimes, small up-front changes to the plan can make things far easier for your team when it comes time to gather your data. It can also make sure you have planned for things like time to score questionnaires or analyse results.

Remember that evaluation can start before you have implemented anything, by collecting **formative feedback** on your plans. For example, as part of your ‘feasibility check’ in Step 3D of the action cycle. This is a great place to involve staff, pupils, and/or families. Make sure you only seek out that feedback if you have time and capacity to reflect on it and revise your plans.

Ideally, the data you collect to measure the effects of inclusion policies should be both qualitative—collected by talking to children, staff and families—and quantitative, collected through school records, surveys and questionnaires. The following sections explain these in more detail, and give specific ideas and tips.

Finally, your goal will be to facilitate positive changes for learners and/or staff, it is extremely important to be alert to the possibility of *negative* impacts, and to evaluate your efforts in a way that will help you to find out about these, if they happen. *See the 3.2, the Qualitative Data subsection ‘Biased questions and other pitfalls’.*



3.1 Quantitative data

What is quantitative data?

Quantitative data is about quantifying things—how much and how many? It is expressed in terms of numbers and statistics. For example, you might **count** the number of children in your school and the **percentage** receiving free school meals, **rate** happiness on a numerical scale, or report **test scores**.

Examples of quantitative data

Your school likely collects a lot of quantitative data already about pupils and staff, some of which might be useful for understanding inclusion now (action cycle step 2: Assessing current situation), or for looking at changes over time (steps 4 and 5, implementation and evaluation).

Examples of quantitative data you might have or collect in the future include:

- Data on how many pupils you have, and how many are in certain categories (e.g. classified as having Additional Support Needs [Scotland]).
- Counting instances of exclusion, suspension and isolation (including formal and informal instances).
- Counting how often/how long particular resources or spaces are used.
- Counting certain events in the classroom.
- Attendance data (though this is not unproblematic, as many factors around attendance may be outside of pupils' control).
- Test scores.
- Standardised questionnaires or assessments (see box), such measures of wellbeing¹⁴.
- Use of numerical ratings or rankings. For example, you might ask staff to rank their priorities for training, or how to use some funding.

Creating a custom measure is complex, even for researchers or others who have specialised training. It's even harder in an area like inclusion, where there may not be clear standards and definitions. **Rather than immediately creating your own measures, check for existing measures that may fit your needs** (see box on Page 63, for a list of things to check). Using existing measures also allows for comparison across schools, which can be useful. While some measures are proprietary and very expensive to buy and use, there *are* free, high-quality measures available. For one example, the CORE measurements of young people's mental health and wellbeing (e.g. the CORE-10, Barkham et al., 2012). As noted in Section 2.1, there are also existing, research-backed tools to measure specific constructs like **school belongingness**.

¹⁴ For example, the Stirling Children's Wellbeing Scale (Liddle & Carter, 2015) is an accessible and easy-to-score option https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/sci/med/research/platform/wemwbs/using/faq/scwbs_children_report.pdf



Suggestions and tips for using standardised measures

If you are planning to use standardised questionnaires or assessments, make sure to read the fine print in any introductory materials or manuals. First, do they appear to be evidence-based, and validated? Then, are they appropriate for *you*?

When looking at measures, check for...

- **Age groups** for which they were designed and validated. A few years older or younger than your pupils may *not* be close enough.
- **Whether or not they are intended for measuring change over short timescales** (e.g. <6 months, <1 year). Some instruments aren't suitable for capturing those changes. Check the fine print—do they say not to administer again within a certain time period?
- **Whether the questionnaire/instrument itself poses accessibility barriers for pupils.** For example, barriers related to the type or wording of questions, presence of time limits, or rules that prohibit an adult from helping the child to complete the questions. Don't hamper your own evaluation by choosing a measure that might be particularly inaccessible to neurodivergent children, such as those with challenges around reading and language!
- **Similarly, will any parent/carer report measures be accessible to families at your school?** (e.g. complex language, need for internet access, time)
- **Where and when measure was developed:** English-language measures developed elsewhere in the world, including the USA (or particularly old measures) may include terms or cultural references that could pose a problem for your pupils.

Finally, don't forget to consider **staff impacts** of choosing a particular measure, especially if using paper. How hard will it be and how long will it take to score it, and to enter and analyse any data?

Some online sources exist to help teachers find and decide between options, and can provide information on a large number of options. The [Educational Endowment Foundation website](#) includes information on assessments (and regularly adds new content). The Childhood Outcomes Research Consortium (CORC) includes [lists of outcome assessments](#) with notes about each measure, e.g. age groups, scoring, how to access the measure.

The [free e-book "Assessing Wellbeing in Schools"](#), authored by education researchers, reviews a large number of existing measures for pupils *and adult staff members*, and includes tips on choosing measures for your school (Bates & Boren, 2020).



Digital tools

If your school has suitable technology, **digital surveys, assessments** and other tools can be fast, flexible and low-cost for a large number of pupils. **Often, the greatest benefit is that they can automatically score and visualise data, saving staff members' time.** For example, [Artemis-A](#), developed by mental health experts at the University of Cambridge, is a fast, digital “mental health check” for secondary school pupils (free to eligible schools).

As with paper tools, check carefully if they are suitable for the age groups you are working with, and the questions you want to ask. Find out as much as you can about any digital tools, especially if they are *not* computer-based versions of established measures (e.g. an online version of a paper questionnaire). Who made this, and how did they test it? These questions are equally as important for paid and free tools. A free tool isn't a bargain if it doesn't do what you need.

When reviewing options, be suspicious. There are many digital tools out there (for example, claiming to measure pupils' wellbeing), many are commercial, and anyone can make ANY claim. If you cannot find any information about who made a tool or if it was tested, that's not good news. As a *very* rough rule, tools created by (or in partnership with) universities, charities/ educational organisations or governments are more likely to be based on evidence, provide information on how they were made, and have been tested in some way prior to release. This is not to say reputable commercial tools don't exist, but it can be harder to find out their details and features before paying for them.

Don't forget about security and privacy issues! Read the fine print about how and where your learners' or staff members' data are stored, and who can access them. Is this tool GDPR compliant? Make sure it complies with any school or local authority policies about security, privacy, and data processing.



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3.2 Qualitative data

What is qualitative data?

Qualitative data is descriptive or narrative. It is often about understanding situations, experiences, and relationships. Quantitative data can tell you how many children receive teaching assistant support in class, but qualitative data could help you understand how children *feel* about that. You might have collected qualitative data already, if you have interviewed someone or run a focus group. *If you have had any training in these skills or in survey/questionnaire design (for example, in initial teacher training or as part of professional development) now is the time to dig out your books or notes!*

Qualitative data might include text or recorded conversations, but also could be videos, photographs, objects, or a mixture of content. You may want to collect qualitative data to better understand the views, values, or experiences of people in your school community—and how these may differ from one another. For example, to find out about people's experiences of a new programme or policy change your school has tried.

Just like with quantitative data, it's important to be clear about your goals. What type of information do you want to find out from people, and why? What will you do with the information once you have it? **Analysing qualitative data** is not the same as quantitative data analysis, and can vary in complexity. Some reference books or sources will seem scarily complex, because they are focused on qualitative research projects and have different concerns than you might in your school or classroom. Introductory information is out there! (see box on Page 66).

It's possible to get useful qualitative information to inform planning or evaluate your services without all the complexity and steps of an academic research project. Worrying over which community members you are—or are not—hearing from will be more important than worrying over your exact analysis methods.

For example, in many cases simple **content analysis** might be all you need—such as categorising the content of feedback you've received, and noting which ideas or issues have been raised by more or fewer people. You may have done something similar to that already!





Searching for qualitative research guidance: don't get scared!

Searching online for “qualitative research” or “qualitative data analysis” produces an overwhelming number of results, some of which are for commercial contexts like market research, some of which are paid services, and some of which are for academic researchers. Beware going down the rabbit hole! Commercially-focused sites are not likely to be relevant for educators, and many research-focused sources may have far more complexity than what you need.

If you want general tools and information, your best bet may be to go to the library for an **introductory textbook** on qualitative research, or **advice books for taught students** doing qualitative research projects. You can sometimes get older editions of such books very cheaply online. Or, look for **online materials for students**, such as how-to guides or lecture notes for research methods courses.

Some academic journals publish “**how-to**” **articles** about particular methods, which may be open-access (free). Burnard, Gill, Stewart, and Chadwick (2008) is a short, accessible methods example article, showing **thematic content analysis** of real data from a dental public health study, exploring primary school children’s understanding of food.

Examples of qualitative data you could collect

There are many media in which you could collect qualitative data—it doesn’t have to be written! Especially for younger pupils or anyone who has challenges around language and literacy, using methods *not* focused on writing can remove a barrier. Examples include...

- Conversations (interviews)
- Keeping a diary or photo diary
- Asking people to respond to a prompt by making a drawing, collage, or other piece of art, or by sharing something that is important to them (bringing an object, a song...)

You can also *combine* these methods, such as asking a child to take photos of “things that help them feel like they belong”, and then talking through their images to explain what they chose and why. Or, asking a parent/carer to help the child make some notes about their images.

Qualitative data collection can also be low-key and ongoing all the time. A “feedback mailbox” in the classroom or school library could be a way for pupils to share ideas or worries as they have them, and anonymously if they choose.



When choosing a method, actively consider whether there are options that might better facilitate participation from certain pupils/groups, or may disadvantage them. For example, do you have pupils who would happily talk to their teacher about their experiences, but struggle to write down feedback? Or others who would nervously say “I don’t know” in conversation, but write down thoughtful ideas?

Consider also which options are most likely to produce *honest* feedback, even where this feedback may be critical, or sharing that something doesn’t help. Given your goals, would it be OK for feedback to be anonymous, especially if you are trying to evaluate a broad response to a policy or activity, rather than checking in with individuals? Can you let people *choose* how they want to answer?

Tips for successful qualitative data collection

In our experience as researchers, it’s very easy to be over-ambitious with qualitative data collection, and create problems for yourself with any or all of these:

- Asking people (especially children) to respond to too many questions in a given time. Keep the list short. Think carefully about the thing you *most* need to know, and ask it first!
- How long it will take a person/team to *look at* all the data, across everyone you are asking.
- How long it will take to summarise or analyse the data, for example to report back to staff and the community.

Keep it simple! Collect the information you most need, and know you can review and use.

Top tips: If you are planning to collect any qualitative data...

- *Test* new questions or methods with at least one person in each target group (e.g. pupils of different ages, parents). It’s a way to find and fix problems fast like if instructions aren’t understood.
- Always ask an open “anything else?” question. *They often bring in the most valuable information you hadn’t anticipated, so did not know to ask about!* This question is equally important in writing, or speaking to people. E.g. “is there anything else you want to say about things that make you feel like you belong [don’t belong] in our school?”



Biased questions and other pitfalls

When your goals are to create positive changes, it's very easy to over-focus on positive effects and outcomes when planning your evaluation an unintended result can be **biased or "leading" questions**. As a result, you can miss important information about ambiguous or negative effects and experiences. This is a serious problem, if you are using the information you collect to make decisions. Biased questions are a similar idea to "leading the witness" in a courtroom drama. It means that the wording of a question itself suggests a particular answer.

If you are writing bespoke questions, for example as written feedback prompts or to interview people, it is *extremely easy* to unintentionally create biased questions! **Let's say your school has recently made ear defenders available to more learners, to use during the school day if they wish. Consider the difference between these four similar questions for a learner who has tried them out:**

- A) How much did it help you to use the ear defenders yesterday?
- B) Did it help you to use the ear defenders yesterday?
- C) Did it affect you to use the ear defenders yesterday?
- D) What was it like using the ear defenders yesterday?



Question A is essentially putting words in the respondent's mouth: it *assumes* the ear defenders were helpful, and frames the response in those terms. In a situation that already has a power imbalance, learners may say (or write) what they think adults expect. It may be harder and much more uncomfortable to say that the ear defenders weren't very helpful after all, or to share ambiguous or mixed views. It may not even occur to people to share other types of feedback, because you have asked specifically about helping. For example, maybe the biggest issue is that the ear defenders were the wrong size! **Question B** is less directive, but still has a big clue about the 'right' answer, and many of the same issues as in A. **Question C**, asking about **effects**, is more open and more likely to elicit mixed or negative answers, if that was the learner's experience. **Question D** is more open still, and might elicit more varied or broader information than B. For example, a pupil might volunteer that while ear defenders were useful yesterday and helped them feel calm, when they *really* needed them was on the bus coming to school this morning!

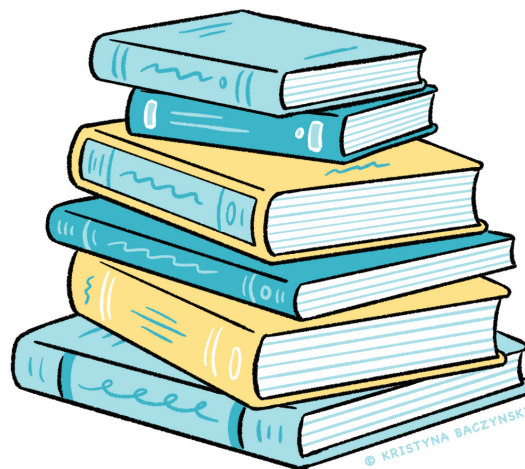


More common question pitfalls

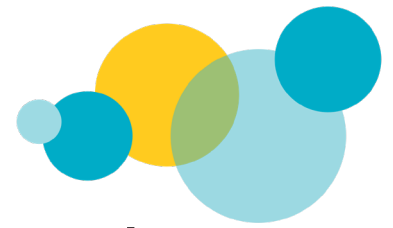
Creating your own feedback questionnaire or planning to interview people? Check your questions for these common issues...

- **Double-barrelled questions** asking about two things at once, e.g. “Have you taught pupils diagnosed with ADHD **or** autism?” “Does your school have flexible uniform **and** attendance policies?”. Ask about only one thing at a time.
- Does the question use **jargon** or rely on **knowledge all respondents may not have**? For example, using policy acronyms in something for parents/ carers?
- **Prestige or social desirability biases**: are some answers likely to be perceived as “better” or more acceptable than others, and might this colour how people respond? For example, asking staff non-anonymously about attitudes toward inclusion or neurodivergence might have a *strong* social desirability bias. Professionals know how they “should” respond.
- **Ambiguous questions**: Piloting your questions can help you find out if respondents understand them the way you meant them.
- **Questions are too long!** If you can trim them down, do it.

Creating clear informative interviews, surveys, and questionnaires is tricky—but fortunately there are *many* available books and guides. If your school plans to rely heavily on these methods for decision-making, we would encourage you to **look up further guidance**, or check if any of your staff members have had prior **training** in this area (for example, a research methods course).



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3.3 Trust and managing expectations around feedback and measurement

In multiple places, we have encouraged you to seek community input while making plans, to get feedback on draft plans, or get feedback on how things have worked out in practice. So often, even a little feedback can reshape plans for the better, or head off a course of action that works on paper but wouldn't in practice. With this in mind, it can be tempting to think, “we'll ask people, just in case, even if we don't end up using it.”

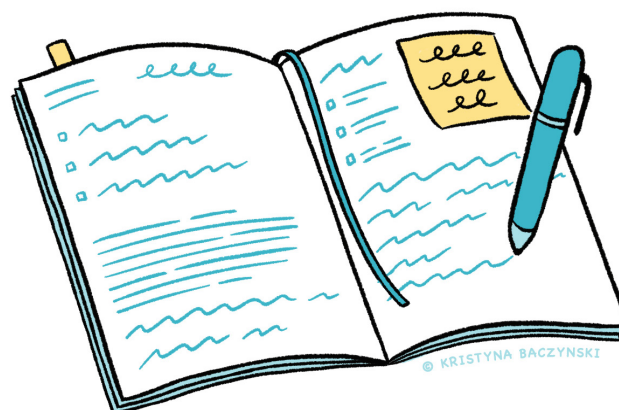
A report contributor with extensive experience in school research and participatory design cautions that **collecting feedback or ideas at any point or in any medium can require careful expectation management**, particularly (but not only) for children. Inevitably, not all suggestions are actionable. A teacher or school asking for feedback or new ideas *does not* mean that all (or any!) of these things will be changed, just because people asked for them. It can create mistrust if people think they are being heard and that there will be changes—and then there aren't. Or, if people believe you asked for their ideas and feedback without ever intending to use them.

We recommend being as honest and up-front as you can about...

- Why you are asking particular people/groups for information, and why now.
- What will happen to the information next? Who will see and/or discuss it?
- Who else gets a say in the current issue? (For example, school governors or local authority?)
- Who has the power to decide on the current issue(s)?
- The overall predicted timeline of collecting information, decision-making, and implementing change—it may be far longer than people expect.

The more personal the feedback issue is, the more important this clear and honest communication becomes.

If the truth is that nothing will happen to the information you collect, or that there is no capacity to act on people's input, the most ethical course may be not to collect it in the first place. Be honest with colleagues, children, and other community members if decisions have already been made.





4. Conclusion

In this document, Part 2 of *Belonging in School*, we've moved from the general introduction in Part 1 to a focus on planning and measuring. The **Action Cycle** and **Four Approaches** provide structure and 'lenses' for schools to reflect on their choices, policies and values around inclusion, and plan towards policies and practices that better meet the needs of neurodivergent learners.

Even if using a tool like the action cycle to break things down and set measurable goals, inclusion is still a *huge* issue that touches on many areas of practice. It can feel overwhelming, especially if you see a big gap between what you *want* to happen in your school, and where things are now. Whether you engage with one of the four approaches or work on policy development in some other way, we want to stress that **incremental progress on inclusion matters.**

It is valuable. It can positively affect learners' experiences.

None of the planning guidance in this document assumes a single huge, transformative period of change that "fixes" your school's policies once and for all. It assumes that some things may be working well now, and others less well. It assumes that schools will be making and evaluating a series of changes over time, towards a shared vision for inclusive practice and positive daily experiences.

As we said in relation to Part 1, there are indisputably major, national-level inclusion barriers related to funding and staff workload. Across the board, schools are asked to do ever more for their learners and local communities as other sources of support are lost. Even so, we truly think it matters to dedicate time to reflecting on, and developing, more inclusive practices. The beneficiaries are not only learners with known neurodevelopmental differences, but *all* learners, who can benefit from greater accessibility and acceptance, vocabulary and skills for self-advocacy, and an environment in which differences or needing help are not sources of shame.

Even if what's manageable for your school now is planning *one* change, we would encourage you to do that. It matters. It's a start!



Inclusion issues can feel overwhelming, especially if you see a big gap between what you want to happen in your school, and where things are now.



Before you go, we encourage you...

1. To identify at least one change to make **this year**.
2. To set a **timeline** towards undertaking an inclusion planning cycle—even if this may be a longer-term goal at your school.
3. To share the *Belonging in School* resource with your colleagues.

Thank you for reading!

If you started with this document, *Belonging in School* also has a Part 1 providing background on inclusion and characteristics of inclusive policies, as well as 12 Suggested Changes to school policies. *Don't have Part 1? Download it here:*
<https://inclusion.mrc-cbu.cam.ac.uk/>



5. About the Belonging in School project

The Belonging in School resource is the final output of a series of stakeholder workshops, and builds on earlier reporting for a policy audience (Lewis, Zdorovtsova & Astle, 2023). **It was not stand-alone research project, but resulted from opportunistically developing and extending the policy-focused outputs into a hands-on, action-focused tool for educators and schools.**

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5.1 Initial workshop

In October 2022, Professor Duncan Astle received a donation from the Templeton World Charity Foundation to run a workshop as part of the Global Scientific Conference on Global Flourishing. The November 2022 Diverse Trajectories to Good Developmental Outcomes Workshop aimed to integrate our growing scientific understanding of the diversity that exists in neurodevelopment with pragmatic policy recommendations for achieving good developmental outcomes. The workshop included over 80 experienced contributors from education, policy, the charity sector, academic research, and clinical practice, alongside people with lived experience of neurodivergence.

5.2 Policy briefing, feedback, and second workshop

The first output based on the *Diverse Trajectories* workshop was a **policy briefing** about barriers to inclusion and potential solutions in UK schools (Lewis, Zdorovtsova & Astle, 2023). Following this output, the team sought additional feedback from the original workshop attendees, and from a mixed group of researchers, practitioners, and community members with lived experience as part of the *Delivering Inclusive Education* workshop (ITAKOM conference, Edinburgh, March 2023). These inputs contributed to a revised briefing.

5.3 From Policy to Belonging in School

The policy briefing was originally tailored to a very broad audience of educators and policymakers, and was concerned with policies, barriers, and actions at multiple levels from classroom level up to national level. An additional goal was to build on the workshop contributions and revised policy briefing to develop new resource content that could help schools implement inclusive practices. Here, the focus would be more specifically on educators and schools—local inclusion issues, not national ones.

This second writing and development phase became Belonging in School. It launched in June 2023, and the team welcomed Dr Alyssa Alcorn as the Public Engagement Lead. While the outputs of the *Diverse Trajectories* and *Delivering Inclusive Education* workshops informed the current resource and its recommendations, *Belonging in School* adds new content and references. It is a different type of content, oriented towards engaging in reflection and taking action.



Thank you!

We would like to thank all participants in the Diverse Trajectories to Good Developmental Outcomes Workshop (2022) and the Delivering Inclusive Education Workshop (2023) for sharing their experiences and professional insights during the events, plus giving feedback on the earlier policy briefs. We would also especially like to thank Dr Sian Lewis for her work on the Diverse Trajectories Workshop and on the policy brief.





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