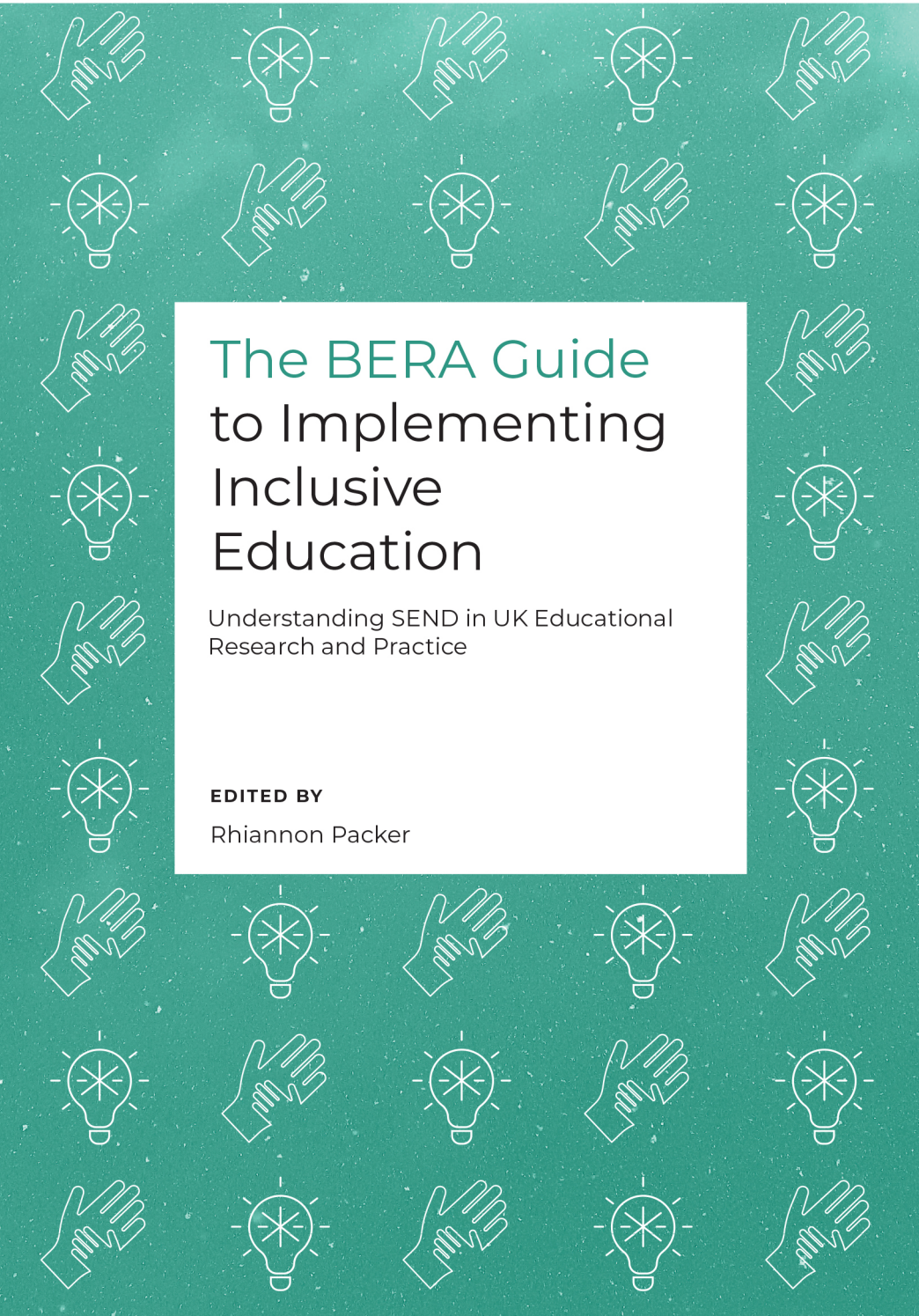
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The BERA Guide to Implementing Inclusive Education

Understanding SEND in UK Educational Research and Practice

EDITED BY

Rhiannon Packer

The BERA Guide to Implementing Inclusive Education



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Critical Insights into Educational Research and Practice

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Edited By

Rhiannon Packer
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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Hoffwn gyflwyno'r llyfr hwn i staff a myfyrwyr y llwybr MA Addysg Genedlaethol: Anghenion Dysgu Ychwanegol. Eich angerdd, ymrwymiad a'ch mewnweliadau sydd wedi ysbrydoli'r tudalennau – diolch am lunio'r gwaith hwn.

This book is dedicated to the staff and students on the National MA Education: Additional Learning Needs pathway. Your passion, commitment, and insights have been the inspiration behind these pages – thank you for shaping this work.

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About the Contributors

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Foreword

This book is to be welcomed for a couple of reasons in particular. First of all, it is encouraging to see that the British Educational Research Association is giving attention to the importance of inclusion as a policy agenda. Secondly, it is timely to consider this theme in relation to the four nations of the United Kingdom, not least because there is so much variation between these contexts from which to learn.

I am encouraged, too, to see that the authors of the various chapters are sensitive to the complexities involved in the idea of making education systems inclusive. As a result, the field remains confused as to the actions needed in order to move policy and practice forward.

The tendency in many countries is to think of inclusive education as being concerned only with students with disabilities, and others categorised as having 'special educational needs'. Furthermore, inclusion is often seen as simply about the movement of students from special to mainstream contexts, with the implication that they are 'included' once they are there.

In contrast, I see inclusion as an educational reform strategy. This involves a never-ending process, rather than a simple change of state, and is dependent on continuous pedagogical and organisational developments within schools. The implication is that every school is inclusive to some extent and that all schools have to continue a never-ending process of finding ways of reaching new students who bring with them new challenges.

This thinking calls for coordinated and sustained efforts within schools and across education systems, recognising that improving outcomes for vulnerable learners is unlikely to be achieved unless there are changes in the attitudes, beliefs and actions of adults. All of which echoes the views of Michael Fullan, an internationally recognised expert on educational

change, who argues: 'If you want system change you have to change the system!'

My experience of improvement initiatives in different parts of the world suggests that clarity regarding purpose is crucial. In particular, it is helpful to use a definition of inclusive education that involves the following elements:

- *Inclusion is a process*. That is to say, inclusion has to be seen as a never-ending search to find better ways of responding to diversity. It is about learning how to live with difference, and learning how to learn from difference. In this way, differences come to be seen more positively as a stimulus for fostering learning amongst children and adults.
- *Inclusion is concerned with the identification and removal of barriers*. Here barriers may take different forms, some of which are to do with existing policies, the way schools are organised and relationships and the forms of teaching provided. Consequently, it is necessary to collect, collate and evaluate evidence about these factors in order to plan for improvements in policy and practice. This involves using evidence of various kinds to stimulate creativity and problem-solving.
- *Inclusion is about the presence, participation and achievement of all students*. Here 'presence' is concerned with where children are educated, and how reliably and punctually they attend; 'participation' relates to the quality of their experiences whilst they are there and, therefore, must incorporate the views of the learners themselves; and 'achievement' is about the outcomes of learning across the curriculum, not merely test or examination results.
- *Inclusion requires a particular emphasis on those groups of learners who may be at risk of marginalisation, exclusion or underachievement*. This indicates the moral responsibility to ensure that those groups that are statistically most at risk are carefully monitored, and that, where necessary, steps are

taken to ensure their presence, participation and achievement within the education system. At the same time, it is necessary to be vigilant in watching out for learners who may be overlooked.

Through our research, my colleagues and I have found that a well-orchestrated debate about these elements can lead to a wider understanding of the principle of inclusion. Furthermore, such a debate, though by its nature slow and, possibly, never-ending, can have leverage in respect of fostering the conditions within which schools can feel encouraged to move in a more inclusive direction.

These debates must involve all stakeholders within communities, including families, political and religious leaders and the media. They should also involve those within national and local district education offices.

This thinking is guided by a belief that inclusion should not be seen as a separate policy. Rather, it should be viewed as a principle that informs all national policies, particularly those that deal with the curriculum, assessment, school evaluation, teacher education and budgets. It must also inform all stages of education, from early years through to higher education. In this way, inclusion must not be seen as somebody's job. Rather, it is a reform agenda that must be the responsibility of everyone involved in providing education.

All of this reinforces my argument that educational improvements in relation to inclusion require a social process that involves practitioners in learning from one another, from their students and from others involved in the lives of the young people they teach. Reform efforts must therefore create the conditions that will encourage such developments. The chapters in this book provide helpful thoughts on what all of this means for the four nations of the United Kingdom.

Mel Ainscow
Manchester
August 2026

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The idea for this book emerged from our weekly conversations within the National MA Education (Wales) Additional Learning Needs team. I am deeply grateful to Anne, Carmel, Cathryn, Clive, Dai, Kristina, Laura, Meg and Nanna for their ongoing constructive and thought-provoking discussions since we began teaching on the programme. Their insight and collegiality have been invaluable.

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My thanks go to all chapter authors for their thoughtful and considered contributions. While each chapter stands as a significant contribution in its own right, collectively they offer a rich and comprehensive exploration of how Special Educational Needs and Disabilities and inclusion are enacted in both policy and practice across the UK and beyond.

Finally, to my family – Tony, Tomos and Alys – diolch yn fawr i chi am eich cefnogaeth a'ch amynedd di-derfyn. Thank you for your unwavering support and endless patience.

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CHAPTER 1

Implementing Inclusion: Setting the Scene

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ABSTRACT

This chapter introduces the rationale and context for the book, establishing the foundation for subsequent chapters. It provides a comprehensive overview of inclusion and inclusive education, exploring its theoretical underpinnings, as well as its practical implementation across the four nations that constitute the United Kingdom (UK).

Divided into two sections, the first section examines the complexities of inclusion in education, addressing tensions, dilemmas and challenges in implementation. It explores factors underpinning successful classroom inclusion, emphasising clear definitions, practitioner training and adequate resources. The chapter establishes the context for the book by analysing issues such as consistency of terminology and identification of inclusive principles. It provides a foundation for critical debate and discussion on inclusive education and practice, setting the stage for deeper exploration in subsequent chapters.

The second section of the chapter outlines the content of subsequent chapters in the book. Chapters 2–5 critically explore the inclusive education practices, challenges and tensions within each country, in alphabetical order starting with England. Chapter 6 places the discussion within a wider context with examples from Europe and beyond. The final chapter draws

together the key themes arising from the chapters with regard to legislation across the UK and the complexities of implementation in relation to inclusive education practice.

Keywords: Inclusive education; inclusion; United Kingdom; legislation and policy in practice; special educational needs

Introduction

Legislation across the UK provides statutory frameworks for educational settings to promote equity of provision for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). The principle of inclusion is a fundamental cornerstone of current legislation and policy, in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (United Nations, 2016), reflecting a shift from segregated education towards more inclusive approaches. Critical to inclusion is understanding how to best support all children and young people, particularly those with learning needs; however, the understanding of inclusive practices and practical implementation is both complex and challenging.

This book explores the multifaceted concept of inclusion by examining how it is legislated for and implemented in education systems across the four devolved nations of the UK: England, Northern Ireland (NI), Scotland and Wales. The commonalities and distinctions across the four nations will be explored, outlining key legislation and policies and offering a critical analysis of how these policies are implemented in practice, considering the social, political and cultural contexts that shape each nation's education system.

Each chapter offers valuable insights into legislative approaches to supporting learners with SEN, with examples of effective practices through critical analysis and case studies while highlighting both the benefits and challenges encountered in implementing the principles of inclusive education. Recognising that inclusion is on the global agenda, discussion is later placed within a wider international perspective, facilitating a deeper understanding of current trajectories in inclusive practices (Wood & Bates, 2020). This comprehensive examination

of the devolved approaches to inclusive education positions the book as a key resource for educational practitioners, researchers, academics and students in the UK and beyond seeking to enhance their understanding of inclusive practices and engage with current debates within the compulsory education sector.

This first chapter establishes a foundation for the subsequent chapters in the book, emphasising the significance and complexity of inclusion in contemporary education, particularly within the UK context. It recognises the evolution and widespread acknowledgement of the significance of inclusion in education while addressing the inherent challenges associated with defining inclusive education. The chapter examines how the lack of a universally accepted definition of inclusion presents challenges for policymakers, researchers and practitioners in understanding, interpreting, implementing and later evaluating, approaches to inclusion in the UK. These discussions are designed to highlight key considerations for reflection, fostering a deeper understanding of the concept of inclusion within an educational context and enriching engagement with the debates explored in the following chapters.

It is important to clarify the meaning of significant terminology used in relation to inclusion to facilitate comprehension and consistency of approach within the context of this chapter. While various terms related to SEN are used throughout the UK for the purpose of this chapter, we have chosen to predominantly employ the term *special educational needs (SEN)* as it is the most widely used. However, when discussing nation-specific issues, the terminology used in that country will be referenced. Furthermore, while the concept of inclusion encompasses various societal dimensions – such as social, political, economic and cultural aspects – and integrates a broad spectrum of intersectionality – including race, gender, age, disability and socioeconomic status – this chapter primarily focuses on the notion of inclusion within the context of education.

Understanding Inclusion in Education

Inclusion is not a new concept. It is a fundamental principle of education that has been recognised and applied in educational

policy and educational settings globally for several decades (Ainscow, 2020; Dunne, 2009; Essex et al., 2021; Slee, 2018). Its emergence in the UK began in the 1960s as part of a human rights movement in reaction to ineffective educational and social systems that marginalised and excluded disabled children. Subsequent educational reviews and policies (e.g., the Warnock Report, 1978; HM Government, Education Act 1981) highlighted the importance of an integrated system of education for those with 'Special Educational Needs' (Hodkinson, 2011; Woolfson, 2024). The legislation emphasised the importance of meeting diverse learning needs and integrating pupils with SEN into mainstream education where schools could reasonably accommodate them (Hodkinson, 2016). Over time the integrated system was considered inefficient, in part due to increased understanding and knowledge around the needs of learners, substantial changes to primary and secondary education systems (Lindsay et al., 2020) and the perception that the integrated system prioritised the school's perspective over the child's needs (Hodkinson, 2016). This, together with the Salamanca Statement on SEN in 1994, sparked debate and a wave of transformative intent across the world, including the UK, which led to significant shifts in educational policy and practice towards inclusion (Hodkinson, 2011).

The Salamanca Statement on Special Needs Education (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, UNESCO, 1994) established the fundamental principles of inclusion in recognising that every child has a basic right to education, with the guiding principle that ordinary mainstream schools should accommodate and respond to the needs of all children. It reasoned that the importance of inclusive education was threefold offering educational, social and economic benefits (Ainscow et al., 2019). Since then, advocacy for inclusive education has gained momentum with recognised concerns over attainment gaps for learners with SEN, with lasting implications for employability, economic status and personal autonomy. In 2006, publication of the UNCRPD (United Nations, 2006) superseded the Salamanca Statement in two significant ways, by making the commitment to inclusive education a legal

obligation for signatory countries under Article 24 and by providing an authoritative definition stating:

> *Inclusion involves a process of systemic reform embodying changes and modifications in content, teaching methods, approaches, structures and strategies in education to overcome barriers with a vision serving to provide all students of the relevant age range with an equitable and participatory learning experience and environment that best corresponds to their requirements and preferences. (United Nations, 2016, p. 4)*

The UK ratified the convention in 2009, agreeing to protect and promote the rights of disabled people in society. However, more recently in 2016, following a formal request by several disability organisations, the UK was investigated by the UNCRPD and found that 'grave or systematic violations' of disabled persons had taken place because of the UK welfare reforms since 2010 (United Nations, 2016, p. 3).

Despite this, since the Salamanca Statement the international movement advocating for inclusive education has emphasised the crucial role of inclusion within educational systems. Described as a cornerstone for a more equitable and just society for all, inclusion is a primary objective of both policy and practice globally. The significance of inclusive education is further underscored by an increasingly diverse population and pressing social, educational and economic factors. For example, the significant costs associated with academic failure and arguments of the enhanced efficacy of education systems that adopt inclusive principles (Ainscow, 2020; European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, EASNIE, 2016; Knight et al., 2023). Indeed, UNESCO (2017) highlights that, besides promoting benefits of inclusive education, such as valuing diversity and fostering social understanding among all students, differences can serve as a catalyst for innovation that benefits all learners.

Despite the importance of inclusive education there remains a lack of consensus regarding the definition of inclusion (Florian, 2019; Florian & Spratt, 2013; Göransson & Nilholm, 2014; Krischler et al., 2019, Nilholm & Göransson, 2017). The term

is used broadly, encompassing various interpretations (Black-Hawkins, 2017) and ambiguities (Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2021), which differ based on context, experience and in referral to specific groups of individuals. It is argued that the issue of achieving consensus on a definition of educational inclusion requires a more comprehensive and culturally nuanced understanding of inclusion in education (Krischler et al., 2019).

Despite the lack of a concise definition, there is a broad consensus around educational inclusion, though interpretations and emphases vary (Ainscow, 2020; Florian, 2008; Lauchlan & Greig, 2015). In discussions related to human rights and social justice, the discourse surrounding inclusion emphasises the importance of participation, equality, equity, democracy and rights while also addressing and removing institutional barriers – whether social, political or environmental – to prevent exclusion, discrimination and stigma (Essex et al., 2021). In relation to inclusive education more specifically, the importance of human rights is recognised with an emphasis on ensuring that *all* students, irrespective of ability or background, are educated together within their local communities (Hodkinson, 2011; UNESCO, 1994). This requires acknowledging and addressing the diverse learning needs and backgrounds of *all* individuals within educational settings to ensure both participation and needs are met effectively. UNESCO (2017) indicates that inclusion is not only about ensuring access to education but also about providing *quality* opportunities for learning, as well as creating effective learning spaces and pedagogies to help all learners thrive.

Inclusive education is generally understood to be driven by the belief that all learners, regardless of their abilities, backgrounds or needs, have the right to access equitable and high-quality education. This is especially the case for learners with SEN who may require additional support or other adjustments to thrive in an inclusive environment. It needs to be an ongoing process that requires the regular monitoring and reviewing of learners' needs to identify the barriers that need to be addressed (UNESCO, 2017). These rights, and those related to the quality of educational provision, align with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal for Education 2030, highlighting the

global commitment to inclusive and equitable education for all and emphasising lifelong learning (UNESCO, 2017). Awareness and consideration of these rights are crucial for educational practitioners today, as inclusion and the development of inclusive educational environments remain at the forefront of educational discussions. Understanding the importance of inclusion for all learners will enhance practitioners' understanding of the concept and will assist in complying with legislation and removing barriers to learning.

Complexities in Defining Inclusion in Education

A comprehensive understanding of the challenges in defining inclusion can deepen our insight into the complex layers involved, encouraging further reflection on what it means to be inclusive in an education context. This, in turn, will support effective implementation of inclusion for both practitioners and those interested in inclusive education. Some of the key challenges related to agreeing on a clear definition of educational inclusion are discussed in this section.

A central debate regarding the definition and comprehension of inclusive education focuses on the placement of learners within educational settings (Florian, 2008). Numerous definitions place the location of where children with SEN are educated at the centre of their definitions of inclusion (Göransson & Nilholm, 2014; Nilholm & Göransson, 2017). It is argued that such perspectives promote a restricted understanding and narrow perception of inclusion (Florian, 2008; Woolfson, 2024).

The concept of placement and 'mainstreaming' is complex with inherent tensions, raising several important considerations concerning inclusion in educational settings, for instance, whether the placement of learners with SEN in mainstream schools should be viewed as the primary goal of inclusive education or whether special schools provide a more inclusive and supportive experience for children with SEN, particularly when these children may experience exclusion or othering in mainstream settings (Dunne, 2009; Lauchlan & Greig, 2015). Alternatively, questions arise over the extent to which special schools

facilitate authentic inclusion, both socially and academically, particularly given the diversity within contemporary society today. This includes rising diagnosis rates, challenges among minoritised communities regarding diagnosis, such as autism, and increasing pressures on services due to growing demands for support. Other arguments emphasise the importance of learners having the opportunity to achieve and reach their full potential, regardless of the context in which this learning takes place. Therefore, engagement and achievement rather than the physical placement of the learner are important when considering inclusion in education (Warnock, 2005). Awareness of these tensions enables practitioners to reflect on their understanding of inclusion and what this means to their practice.

Additional contentions around placement and inclusion emerge regarding the ideology of 'full inclusion'. This argument stems from a rights-based perspective, rooted in the disability movement of the 1960s which provided a forerunner to the social model of disability (Hodkinson, 2011). Understanding the social model of disability, and its alternatives, is useful when grasping the concept of inclusive education by prompting consideration of the systemic and environmental barriers, rather than individual impairment. The ideology of full inclusion challenges the existence of special schools with the premise that inclusive education can only be truly achieved through the mainstream system (Booth, 2001; Florian, 2008). However, contemporary perspectives regard special schools and special education within a broader and more pragmatic approach to inclusion, capable of addressing the needs of learners and ensuring access to resources to ensure progress (Merrigan & Senior, 2021). This further emphasises tensions in discourses around inclusive education, reflecting that special education is perceived as both a solution and a challenge to inclusion (Florian, 2019).

Such dialogue contributes to the confusion surrounding the meaning of inclusion, particularly regarding the interpretation of legislation and policy. For instance, there is an emphasis on the need to remove barriers for everyone, ensuring that all individuals can succeed regardless of their abilities within a mainstream context while simultaneously supporting and promoting the development of special education as a 'continuum