

Belonging Schools

How do relatively more
inclusive secondary
schools approach and
practise inclusion?



Teach First

RESEARCH REPORT

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Funded by Teach First | April 2023

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Executive Summary

About the research

This research addressed two questions:

1. What does 'inclusion' mean to pupils, teachers, and leaders?
2. How do relatively more inclusive secondary schools approach and practise inclusion?

The research included: a review of literature; focus groups with school and trust leaders; an online survey; and detailed case studies of six secondary schools in challenging contexts across England which are achieving relatively good outcomes for both inclusion and attainment.

The background to the research includes the Covid-19 pandemic, which has presented phenomenal challenges for all schools. Meanwhile, families and communities face a cost of living crisis which is impacting on the poorest families most acutely. Despite interventions by the government, for example to alleviate the cost of energy bills, these financial challenges have been exacerbated by cuts to wider welfare support.

The literature review highlighted that there is no consensus on what inclusion means or 'should' look like in contemporary mainstream secondary schools. That said, there has been a shift from seeing 'special education' as the dominant issue, to it becoming one issue within a broader 'inclusion for all' conceptualisation which encompasses all children, as well as school staff and wider communities, whilst still recognising the complex ways in which children's backgrounds, characteristics and identities intersect in ways that are connected with systemic disadvantage in education.

What is clear is that current practices in many mainstream secondary schools are not consistent with the government's aspirations for inclusion (DfE, 2022; DfE, 2023). In some schools, practices such as 'off-rolling' harder to teach children indicate how shockingly un-inclusive the system as a whole has become (Ofsted, 2022).

In this context, it is timely to ask how mainstream secondary schools in England understand and approach inclusion. The findings highlight that there is no 'one best way' to achieve inclusion, but we show how a sample of relatively more inclusive schools adopt an 'inclusion for all' approach founded on equity, relationships and belonging.

The title of this report – Belonging Schools – highlights the centrality of human relationships underpinned by shared values in all six case study schools. These relationships and values created a sense of belonging – of students being seen, known, cared for, understood and supported in ways which best met their needs – from which inclusion was an outcome. Interestingly, three of the six schools explicitly told us that 'inclusion' was not a word they commonly used to describe their values or practice.

Belonging schools: foundations

Rather than a separate 'vision for inclusion', **the case study schools had a vision within which inclusion was one – highly significant – feature.** These visions also included a commitment to high expectations for all students, not least in relation to academic learning and achievement through a broad and balanced curriculum.

The six schools viewed inclusion as a whole-school focus concerning all children. Within this broad conceptualisation most schools also focussed on one or more group/s of students or priorities, reflecting their different contexts and cohorts, with four being particularly prominent: SEND; Social, Emotional and Mental Health difficulties (SEMH); disadvantage; and discrimination. The focus groups and survey suggested that schools more widely often adopt a narrower interpretation of inclusion: rather than 'inclusion for all' it appears common to focus on inclusion for children with a particular set of needs and characteristics.

A key unifying feature across the case study schools was **a focus on cultivating a sense of belonging amongst students.** Core to this was a focus on relationships and relational approaches which ensured that all students were seen, known and supported in ways which met their needs. This was evidenced in whole school systems as well as micro practices (for example, how students are greeted, with careful attention to language). Whole school approaches often centred on pastoral teams, for example using vertical tutoring, small group coaching, and/or one to one support. Students told us that they felt safe in school, that their concerns were listened to, and that they had a trusted adult they could turn to.

Fresh starts and second chances after an incident or disagreement were another important practice across schools, often drawing on restorative practice (RP) as a core philosophy and approach.

The schools demonstrated **an orientation towards equity rather than equality.** For example, rather than treating every student equally through the application of standardised behaviour policies, the schools acknowledged that some students needed different opportunities and treatment (often working with the wider student body to help

them understand why such differential treatment is not 'unfair').

Governance, leadership and culture: enablers

Committed governance: The trust and/or governing body played an important role in shaping and sustaining the case study schools' inclusive ethos. For the four schools in trusts, the size of the trust determined the extent to which it could afford to support the school in specific areas such as safeguarding and SEND.

Leadership – transformational, distributed and strategic: Interviewees in the case study schools talked consistently about how school-wide values permeated decision-making and practice. Middle leaders and wider staff, including non-teaching staff, felt trusted and empowered to make professional decisions in line with these values and in the interests of students. Strategic leadership was apparent in various areas, including how the schools worked to codify and embed shared practices, for example through the development of shared language and ways of working. The leadership structures in the case study schools do not indicate 'one best model': for example, while three schools had non-teaching heads of year, three did not, and while four schools included their SENDCo on the SLT, two did not.

School cultures: five features: We describe five common aspects of culture across the case study schools, although these played out in different ways: trust and professional judgement; consistency and flexibility; communication and joined up working; deliberative – sense-making and drawing on diverse perspectives; outward facing – community linked. These features enabled the practices outlined in the following section by providing an open, high trust and collaborative environment for staff to work in. A particular

feature of this work was its flexibility – guided by values, relationships and professional judgement – as opposed to a reliance on standardised rules and protocols.

Key areas of practice

Pastoral support and relationships: Two schools had highly developed pastoral models (small group coaching circles in one and a college-based vertical tutoring model in the other) which provided core structures through which all other pastoral support operated across the school. The remaining schools had more traditional approaches, with year group-based tutoring, Heads of Year, and related pastoral roles.

Early help, safeguarding and multi-agency support: Several schools employed staff from non-teaching backgrounds, such as social workers, therapists and police officers. All six schools worked closely with external agencies to provide specialist support. One school had established a community hub on a nearby site which hosts: a community and youth venue; a café, community garden and small farm; a short term Alternative Provision (AP) site for students from local secondary schools; and the Local Authority's family support workers.

Behaviour, inclusion and exclusion: Five schools used a version of a '3 strike' behaviour model (e.g. 'chance, choice, consequence'), but always with an emphasis on student ownership of their own behavioural choices and consequences. In two schools detentions occurred on the day of the incident and always included a restorative conversation with the teacher involved, thereby enabling a 'fresh start' for the student the following day. We observed a continuum of practice in relation to exclusion, isolation, and alternative provision. One school had stopped permanently excluding students and had closed its isolation

room. The other five schools used permanent exclusion sparingly, but argued it was necessary in cases where there were risks to the safety of staff and students. These five schools also used isolation rooms, although most were working to modify these spaces with inclusive principles in mind. Two schools ran their own internal APs and a third had plans to open one, while the other three schools used external provision sparingly.

Teaching, learning and curriculum: Many aspects of teaching, learning and curriculum in the case study schools were similar to other secondary schools, but with five more distinctive aspects:

- four schools had developed whole school literacy (specifically reading) initiatives, positioned as a 'social justice' approach to ensure all students could access the curriculum;
- several schools used student learning agreements with the aim of instilling collective ownership and responsibility for learning;
- all the schools used setting or streaming to some degree, especially in core subjects and at Key Stage 4, but several were introducing mixed ability classes in Key Stage 3;
- access to a broad and balanced curriculum was seen as central in all schools, in particular to provide breadth of experience and learning opportunities for disadvantaged students. The schools were also committed to providing a rich extra-curricular learning and 'enrichment' offer;
- five schools were working hard to embed diversity within their curricula and to develop and anti-discriminatory cultures.

Student voice, parents and community: Student voice was valued and students were empowered to play an active role in fostering belonging, diversity and inclusion in all six schools, including through student parliaments and asking student councils to organise significant community events. In one

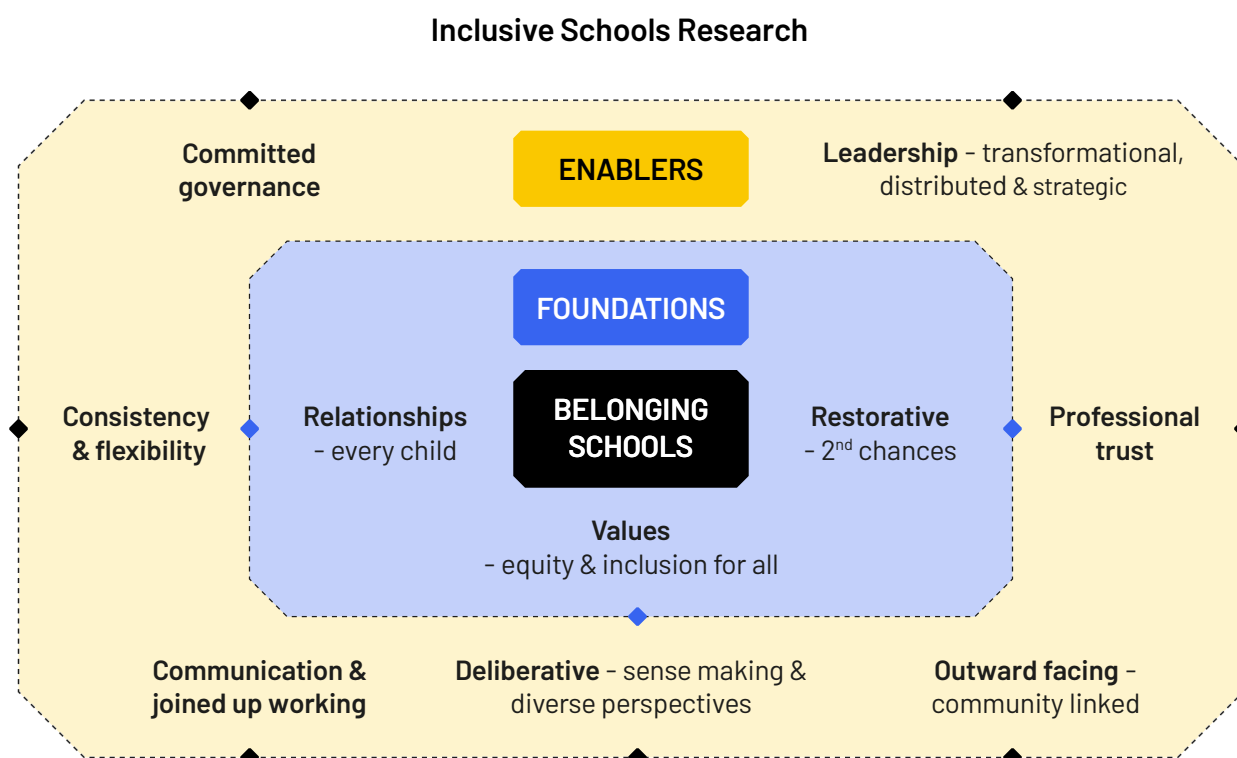
school, all students receive training in Restorative Practice and many go further to act as peer coaches and counsellors. Parental engagement was a priority in all six schools, but whereas three described strong relationships with parents, the other three characterised this area as more challenging.

Staffing and Continuing Professional Development (CPD): Five of the case study schools reported stable leadership and staff teams, with low levels of turnover, which was seen as contributing to the positive development of relationships, practices and cultures. The sixth school had experienced seven different headteachers in the last ten years, and still struggled with staff recruitment, for example the school did not have a permanent SENCo at the time of our visit. In terms of recruitment, at four of the schools new staff were recruited on the

basis of their commitment to the school's vision and ethos, as well as on the basis of their skills and experience. School leaders invested in high quality CPD and the well-being of staff, seeing this as important for developing a shared, high trust professional culture.

Feedback and continuous improvement: Processes for monitoring and evaluating inclusive practice were regular, data rich, and formative in the case study schools, in line with the deliberative cultures outlined above. The schools used centralised data intelligently and diagnostically, with senior leaders regularly reviewing data on academic performance, behaviour, and participation in extra-curricular activities in order to inform strategic decision-making.

We draw these foundations, enablers and areas of practice together into the visualisation below.



Key areas of practice:

- Pastoral support
- Early help, safeguarding & multi-agency
- Behaviour, inclusion & exclusion
- Teaching, learning & curriculum
- Student voice, parents & community
- Staffing & CPD
- Continuous improvement

What are the challenges to inclusion?

A variety of issues were identified by interviewees in the case study schools and focus groups as challenges for inclusion. These broadly fall into the following five categories:

- **Post pandemic issues:** these were seen as particularly significant for students in years 7 and 8, but with challenges around attendance, behaviour and additional needs across all year groups.
- **Issues related to SEND:** Interviewees highlighted increasing levels of need across the country. The case study schools frequently described themselves as 'magnet' schools, because they were so popular with parents of children with SEND. While this was seen as positive in many respects, the schools sometimes felt overwhelmed when staffing and resources were insufficient to meet students' needs.
- **Funding:** In addition to core school funding concerns, cuts to wider services were seen as problematic, with prolonged wait periods for specialist services and/or students not being deemed serious enough to meet threshold assessments.
- **System level issues:** Several schools described system level barriers, such as the lack of a 'level playing field' for schools with an inclusive ethos when they are judged against other local schools, using metrics that do not always value inclusive practice.
- **Wider societal issues:** Interviewees acknowledged the increasing complexity and challenge that families and communities face as a result of the cost-of-living crisis, Covid, and reductions in wider services and community support structures over the last decade.

Implications

We pose three questions for wider policy in relation to school inclusion:

1. Leadership is a key foundation for inclusion – what more could be done to support a focus on 'belonging' and 'inclusion for all' as part of the National Professional Qualifications for leaders?
2. Given the funding and policy challenges outlined above, and building on reforms already in development following the SEND and AP Green Paper, what more could be done to ensure all schools have the opportunities, incentives and resources they need to ensure inclusion for all?
3. How can we broaden our conception of high-quality schools, to encapsulate both inclusion and attainment, informed by FFT Education Data Lab's useful work on the Schools' Quality Index?

Acknowledgements

We are hugely grateful to the leaders, staff and students in the six, anonymised case study schools who welcomed us in and who shared their thoughts, experiences and practices in such open and helpful ways. Their time was particularly precious given that these visits took place in autumn 2022 and spring 2023, when the schools were still dealing with numerous challenges, including frequent staff illness, following the pandemic. We are also grateful to the school and trust leaders who attended the focus groups and/or completed the survey.

At Teach First we are grateful to Jenny Griffiths and Luke Boccock, who steered and supported the research with such passion.

At FFT Education Datalab we are grateful to Dave Thomson, who provided access to data and very helpful advice on the case study sample.

At the University of Nottingham we are grateful to Professor Pat Thomson, who advised and supported the research throughout.

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01

Introduction



01 Introduction

Schools in England have faced unprecedented challenges as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic (Thomson et al, 2022). These challenges have evolved and continued long after schools returned to providing in person education for all children, with numerous reports highlighting the long-term impact of the pandemic on children’s attendance, mental health, learning loss, and attitudes to school (HoC Education Select Committee, 2022) and on the health and well-being of teachers and school leaders (Greany et al, 2022). Of course, the pandemic has been challenging for schools worldwide (OECD, 2021), but for schools in England it has followed on from over a decade of cuts to education and wider children’s services budgets as well as the fragmentation of local provision and school support structures (Greany and Higham, 2018; West and Wolfe 2018). Meanwhile, families and communities face a cost of living crisis which is impacting on the poorest families most acutely. Despite interventions by the government, for example to alleviate the cost of energy bills, these financial challenges have been exacerbated by cuts to wider welfare support (Barnardo’s, 2022).

In this context, it is timely to ask how mainstream secondary schools in England understand and approach inclusion. As we outline in the literature review section of this report (Section 2), school inclusion has been promoted, enacted, studied and theorised over many decades. These debates and developments are both important and dynamic, not least given evidence that how inclusion is conceived impacts on how it is practiced (Terzi, 2005; Ainscow, 2018; Holmqvist & Lelling, 2021). Two implications are clear: first, there is a ‘theory-practice gap’, reflecting the extent to which ideals and aspirations can prove challenging to achieve within the messy reality

of schools and in contexts where policies, for example on school standards and accountability, can be in tension with inclusive values and ideals; second, perhaps as a result, there is no consensus on what inclusion means or ‘should’ look like in contemporary mainstream secondary schools.

Despite this lack of consensus, we argue that there is a broad trajectory of change in how inclusion has been conceived over the past few decades. This trajectory has seen a shift from ‘special education’ being the dominant issue for inclusion, to it becoming one issue within a broader conceptualisation in which inclusion is perceived to be about – and to benefit – all children, and to extend to school staff and the wider community. Within this ‘inclusion for all’ approach there is clearly still a need to recognise the complex ways in which children’s backgrounds, characteristics and identities – for example related to poverty, social class, ethnicity, gender identity and/or sexuality – intersect in ways that are connected with systemic disadvantage in education.

What seems clear is that current practices in many mainstream secondary schools are not consistent with the government’s aspirations for inclusion. The government’s Green Paper on SEND (DfE, 2022) and subsequent Implementation Plan (DfE, 2023) recognises that there is “low confidence in the ability of mainstream settings to effectively meet the needs of children and young people with SEND” (DfE, 2023, p.15). In some schools, practices such as ‘off-rolling’ harder to teach children indicate how shockingly un-inclusive the system as a whole has become (Ofsted, 2022).

The government's Improvement Plan also commits to pass new legislation "to facilitate intervention in education settings if (SEND) standards are not met" (DfE, 2023, p. 27). In this context, this research into the practices of relatively more inclusive secondary schools can help to inform both policy makers and practitioners who are interested in how inclusion is conceptualised and practiced.

Our findings highlight why and how a sample of relatively more inclusive schools adopt an 'inclusion for all' approach founded on equity, relationships and belonging. As researchers, we found these schools to be hugely impressive: they were focussed on ensuring that every child is known and supported, with highly committed and

expert teams finding flexible ways to meet diverse student needs. At the same time, these schools had high expectations for academic learning and progress, offering rich, broad and balanced curricula which helped students from diverse backgrounds to develop into confident, capable and empowered young adults. While we focus mainly on drawing out the common aspects of the schools' approaches here, we also highlight some of the differences and tensions which emerge, for example in relation to the use of isolation rooms, Alternative Provision (AP) and exclusion. In this way we hope that this research will signal that there is no 'one best way' to achieve inclusion in contemporary secondary schools, but that there is much to be learned from schools that do this well.

02

About the research



02 About the research

This research examined: how inclusion is understood, experienced and enacted in English secondary schools; how inclusion is affected by wider policies, systems and events, including Covid-19; and what relatively more inclusive schools do and how.

The primary research questions were:¹

1. What does 'inclusion' mean to pupils, teachers, and leaders?
2. How do relatively more inclusive secondary schools approach and practice inclusion?

Methods

This report is largely based on an analysis of case studies in six secondary schools across England which are achieving relatively good outcomes for both inclusion and attainment. In addition, we: undertook a review of literature; held a series of focus groups with school leaders; and ran a national online survey. These other elements of the study are drawn on to complement the case study analysis.

At the outset of the project, ethical approval was secured from the University of Nottingham School of Education Ethics Committee. This included a commitment to anonymise all schools and individuals, based on informed consent. As far as possible we have sought to anonymise schools, including by using pseudonyms and by obscuring some data, while including sufficient detail to bring the schools and their practices to life.

SAMPLING

Our aim was to sample relatively more inclusive schools in order to identify practices and systems which underpin successful inclusion. Schools were sampled using data from the (2018-19) School Quality Index (SQI), developed by FFT Education Datalab, initially on behalf of the Children's Commissioner.² The SQI aims to create an encompassing measure of school quality by combining a set of measures for attainment and inclusion to provide schools with a composite score. This can then be used to compare and rank schools within and across the nine English regions.

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- 1 The research also considered a number of sub-questions, as follows: What do secondary school pupils, teachers and leaders understand by the term 'inclusion' and what does it mean for them in practical terms? How do they enact and experience this in their school? What impact has COVID-19 has on their understanding and experience of inclusion? How are school leaders' and teachers' theories, concepts or ideas about inclusion translated into beliefs, behaviours, policies, processes, the curriculum and practices within the school 'system'? How are these experienced by the school workforce and pupils?
 - 2 See <https://ffteducationdatalab.org.uk/2021/09/the-school-quality-index-an-answer-to-the-accountability-question/> for a fuller description of the SQI. For a more detailed explanation of the methodology underpinning SQI and a discussion of limitations see https://ffteducationdatalab.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/methodology_sqi.pdf - both accessed 10.4.23.

SQL uses the following domains and sub-domains as proxies for inclusion and attainment:

Table 1: School Quality Index domains and sub-domains

Inclusion	Attainment
1. Disadvantaged pupils	1. Contextualised attainment 8
2. Special Educational Needs	
3. Pupils with English as an Additional Language (recent arrivals)	
4. Joiners and leavers	
5. Exclusions	
6. Absence	

SQL thus offers a way to assess the characteristics of pupils on roll at each school and how representative they are of the local area, alongside absence, exclusion and attainment rates.

The indicator used for attainment is the contextualised Attainment 8 scores (three-year average) for disadvantaged students, defined as students who have: been eligible for free school meals in the last six years, been looked after in social care for at least one day, or are a military service child. This focus on disadvantage reflects the SQL's core interest in inclusion.

At the time this research was undertaken (2022-23), the SQL was in prototype form and its rankings of schools nationally were not publicly available. Given the hiatus in national data and assessments at that time, due to the pandemic, the version used to inform sampling drew on data from 2018/19 SQL data.

This research sought to sample six schools nationally that achieve relatively good outcomes for both inclusion and attainment. In addition, we

wanted to ensure a broadly representative sample in terms of other school characteristics, including: geographical spread (north, midlands, south); governance arrangement (multi-academy trust, local authority maintained); and ethos (faith/non-faith). Finally, given the focus on inclusion, we selected schools with intakes of children in receipt of Free School Meals that were at or above the national average (22.5%). FFT Education Datalab provided us with SQL data for the top ten highest ranked schools (using a composite score for both inclusion and attainment) in each of the nine English regions. Using these lists, we contacted schools drawn from the top three ranked places in each region (n=27), seeking to ensure representativity across the other characteristics outlined. Where school headteachers did not respond or declined to participate, we selected substitutes from the list of 27 schools nationally.

The final list of anonymised schools is shown in Table 2, with data from 2021-22 used to illustrate their key characteristics.

Table 2: Case study schools – key characteristics (data for 2021-22)

	School 1	School 2	School 3	School 4	School 5	School 6
	Riverdale	Shilton Valley	Greenway	Jacob Gardiner	Philip Otter	Saint Joseph's RC
Region	Midlands	North	North	Midlands	South	North
Size (NOR)	500-600	>1000	900-1000	700-800	900-1000	600-700
Governance	Maintained	Member of small foundation trust	Academy (Trust size > 10 schools)	Academy (Trust size > 10 schools)	Academy (Trust size < 10 schools)	Voluntary aided
Faith	No	No	No	Church of England	No	Roman Catholic
Latest Ofsted rating	Good (2022)	Good (2018)	Good (2022)	Outstanding (2017)	Good (2021)	Good (2022)
FSM (National rate = 22.5%)	40-45%	30-35%	35-40%	30-35%	30-35%	35-40%
SEN EHCP Need (national rate – 2.15%)	Above national rate	Slightly below national rate	Above national rate	Slightly below national rate	Above national rate	Above national rate
SEN support (national rate – 11.92%)	Above national rate	Above national rate	Slightly below national rate	Above national rate	Above national rate	Above national rate
EAL (national rate – 17.48%)	Much lower than national rate	Above national rate	Much lower than national rate	Much lower than national rate	Above national rate	Slightly below national rate
Resourced Provision (e.g. autism unit)	No	Yes	No	No	No	Yes

CASE STUDY ACTIVITIES

Prior to case study visits, a member of the research team interviewed the head teacher/ principal of each school online. Each school was then visited for one or two days by two members of the research team, during which the following data-collection activities took place:

- Interviews with senior staff, including those with responsibility for issues connected with inclusion across the school
- Interviews/focus groups with a range of teaching and support staff
- Tours of the school with students
- Observations of relevant activities, such as tutor groups, class teaching, staff meetings etc.
- A review of relevant data and documents, including Ofsted reports, DfE data, school websites, and any additional documentation schools provided.

In total in the case study schools we conducted 48 staff interviews/focus groups and undertook 15 student-led tours as well as two student focus groups, which engaged around 57 students.

The student tours were used as opportunities to hold informal discussions on topics related to inclusion, such as: student experiences at school; what they enjoy about school; where they go when they are having a difficult day; and about broader themes of belonging and wellbeing. The informal nature of these interviews together with changes in location provided opportunities to ask questions and seek clarification on aspects about the school in general, and inclusive practice in particular, whilst seeking to understand students' experiences in the school. Students conducting the tours were selected to reflect characteristics of high relevance to inclusive practice, including: special educational needs with SEN support and EHC plans; involvement of social care in the family; working at lower levels with additional

support in and out of class; and students who had experienced managed moves or been permanently excluded from a previous school.

All interviews, focus groups and tours were recorded and transcribed. Members of the research team kept notes of each visit, which were shared internally. The research team met regularly throughout the process to review emerging findings and to agree a coding framework for the analysis. Detailed case studies of each school were developed and sent to the school for validation. These case studies, along with the original transcripts, were coded using the agreed framework. From this, common themes were identified, which form the core structure of this report. In late March 2023, an online workshop was held with leaders from the case study schools at which the emerging headlines were shared and discussed, helping to shape the project conclusions.

As noted above, data from the six case studies form the primary evidence base in this report. This is supported by the literature review (Section 4) and data from the other research strands, which comprised:

- Four online focus groups with 21 senior members of staff in secondary schools, held in spring 2022. Two focus groups were with secondary headteachers and senior leaders from MATs and two were with senior leaders from schools with direct responsibility for pastoral and inclusion issues. Through these focus groups we explored understandings of, and approaches to, inclusion within schools and the wider systemic factors that influence these.
- Online survey of headteachers and senior leaders in secondary schools, which sought to ascertain: how leaders understand inclusion; the enablers and constraints of inclusive practice; and how schools have altered their practices as a result of Covid-19. Completed responses to the survey were low (n=87), but we draw on these where relevant.

03

Inclusion in schools: lessons from the literature



03 Inclusion in schools: lessons from the literature

Introduction

This section provides an overview of key debates in the inclusive education literature, as they relate to the research questions. It necessarily draws in a selective way from the vast literature on inclusion, focussing on the particular conceptualisations of inclusion that emerged through this study, and drawing out some of the tensions and questions that surface as schools seek to enact inclusive values in practice.

Inclusive education: characterising the field

Inclusive education can be characterised as both a mature and dynamic field of theory and research (Torraco, 2016). The literature on inclusive education is vast, international in scope and has a lengthy history. In England, issues, debates, principles, practices and policies of educational inclusion have circulated since at least the early 20th century, although the legacy of some issues and debates stretches back much further than this, particularly in relation to the education of children considered to have special educational needs and disabilities (Hodkinson, 2019). This has led to a significant evidence base for the field, including substantial theoretical and philosophical contributions, which identify key principles and dilemmas for inclusive education, alongside more practice-oriented evidence on how best to educate learners with diverse needs. The field is also dynamic; across the post-world-war two period there have been significant changes in the way that inclusive education has been understood and practiced, amidst wider

shifts in the policy, human rights and legal context of schools. Inclusive education is also intertwined with wider social movements and advocacy, which have sought to improve the participation and life chances of minority groups, including the disability rights movement and race equality movement. Most recently, the Covid-19 pandemic has had significant implications for inclusion, although understandings of the nature and extent of the impacts of the pandemic are still unfolding (Schleicher, 2020; Greany et al, 2021; Education Endowment Foundation, 2022). This contributes to the current dynamism in the field.

In this context, many education researchers and practitioners are grappling with the question ‘what does inclusion mean’ (Norwich, 2014; Brown and Hodkinson, 2021; Rapp and Corral-Granados, 2021). The salience of this question arises in part because of the longstanding, contested, and dynamic nature of the field. As wider changes in society occur – for instance demands for equal rights and justice by different groups – so understandings of inclusion shift and refocus. This leads to ongoing interest in what is meant by the term ‘inclusion’, which is only made more pertinent by its ongoing use and modification by national governments and international organisations, making it a feature of public and political discourse (Dunne, 2009). Brown and Hodkinson (2021) characterise these varied and changeable understandings as ‘inclusion confusion’ and note that inclusion has variable meanings across theory and practice, and within and across national and international contexts. Booth (1996) argues that it is not possible to identify a single English perspective on inclusion,

rather the development of the term has resulted in fragmented and variable definitions. Dunne (2009) notes that there are competing definitions of inclusion, which advance different meanings, and result from different investments or vested interests in inclusion, which often have a long history. For some, inclusion has become a performative concept: it can be deployed to signal a set of ideas or principles expected to receive broad agreement, whilst its more specific meanings, and implications for practice and outcomes, remain more opaque (Armstrong and Spandagou, 2011; Kauffman and Hornby, 2020).

Finally, there is evidence that conceptualisations of inclusion impact on practice (Terzi, 2005; Holmqvist & Lelinge, 2021). This suggests that it is important to untangle the different ways inclusion is understood, as a way of interrogating the basis for different practical approaches to inclusion in schools, and for understanding and contextualising what it is that 'relatively more inclusive schools' do - a key question we address through this study.

Conceptualising inclusion: a shifting landscape

Many of the key concerns of inclusive education have evolved through its historical association with the education of children and young people deemed to have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). This way of conceptualising inclusion retains a significant hold on thinking about inclusion by researchers, policy makers and practitioners in England (Goodley, 2016). Yet there has been an important shift here from 'special education' being the dominant issue for inclusion, to it becoming one particular issue within the broader field of educational inclusion.

In its narrowest interpretation, inclusion centres on the entitlements of children with SEND to have

their educational needs and entitlements met, and historically the focus has been on this happening in a mainstream setting wherever possible (Farrell and Ainscow, 2002; Thomazet, 2009; de Boer et al, 2010). In this orientation, inclusion is intended to address the cross-national, routine segregation of children with learning difficulties and disabilities into special schools and provisions, as one aspect of the much broader discrimination children with disabilities face across the world (Goodley et al, 2016). These concerns have developed in response to a long history of children with SEND being provided with no, partial, inappropriate, segregated or sub-standard education (Armstrong, 2007).

This conceptualisation of inclusion is presented in key human rights treaties such as the Salamanca Statement and the UNCRC, which promote anti-discriminatory, rights-based approaches to education (Florian, 2019). These treaties position integration as a crucial way of combatting wider discriminatory behaviours and attitudes in society, and therefore prioritise the educational placement of children with SEND alongside their peers in regular schools (DeBoer et al, 2010).

Yet over time there has been a widespread, international shift in understandings of what educational inclusion means, who it is about, and the key practices involved. This has involved a broadening of the student populations considered to be able to benefit from more inclusive practices, from the historical focus on children with SEND, to encompass children with a wider set of needs, characteristics or identity categories (Youdell, 2006) that are related to less favourable educational outcomes and experiences. This broader conceptualisation still problematises the educational experiences and outcomes of particular groups, but these are much broader. In part this stems from a growing evidence base on

the complex ways that particular characteristics and identities intersect in ways that are connected with systemic disadvantage in education, such as poverty, social class, and being a member of a minority group including on the basis of ethnicity, gender identity and sexuality.

Commentators argue that this broadened definition of inclusion is a response to other developments too. First, it has stemmed from continuing concern that a focus on special education as 'inclusion' can lead to practices where children with SEND are physically included, yet continue to experience forms of curricular, pedagogical or emotional exclusion (Clough, 1998; Webster, 2022). Students with SEND being physically included in a mainstream school reveals little about the quality of education they are receiving, or whether within-school segregation practices are occurring, such as children with SEND being supported through one-to-one sessions for the majority of the day (Farrell and Ainscow, 2002; Webster, 2022).

Second, this broadening of how inclusion is understood arises from a growing recognition of a broader set of needs that exist in the student population, and that there are multiple populations of children who might face disadvantage and exclusion in educational settings. This broader definition is embraced in the Brussels Declaration that followed the 2018 Global Education Meeting, which declared that all people have a "right to safe, quality education and learning throughout life" and these rights required that "particular attention be given to those in vulnerable situations, persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, those in remote rural areas, ethnic minorities, the poor, women and girls, migrants, refugees, and displaced persons whether as a result of conflict or natural disaster" (UNESCO, 2018). Broader interpretations of the right to inclusive education can also be read through 'inclusion as human right' discourses, which have also developed

over time. For instance, although The Salamanca Statement was originally focused on children with SEND, its conceptualisation has broadened over time to a focus on any groups who might be more likely to face exclusion from, or less favourable experiences and outcomes in, education (Florian, 2019).

In its broadest articulation, inclusion is perceived to be about – and to benefit – all children, and to extend to school staff and the wider community. The presuppositions underpinning this conceptualisation of inclusion centre on the equal worth of all children, that difference should not be marked out through categories and labels and can enrich learning, and that all children require and benefit from an inclusive school (Farrell and Ainscow, 2002; Norwich, 2019; Rapp and Corral-Granados, 2021). This conceptualisation stems from an understanding that evolving circumstances and needs mean that all children may require something additional or different at some point in their schooling career. This orientation is in evidence in inclusive literature which promotes, and sees education as fundamental to the cultivation of belonging, community and democracy (Slee, 2019).

Inclusive practices

Despite this general shift, narrower and broader interpretations of what inclusion means and who it is about are still evidenced across research, theory, policy and practice. Whilst some stakeholders frame inclusion through its relevance to specific groups, others position it as applicable to all students, whilst some move between and merge these positions (Nilholm and Göransson, 2017; Hornby, 2015). Conceptualisations of inclusion are therefore best understood as a continuum. This continuum of ways of thinking about inclusion is mirrored in the practice literature, which in turn connects with

different ways of understanding needs: as common universal needs, as specific needs that are shared with a group of pupils, and as unique needs (Lewis and Norwich, 2001).

Leadership practices are seen as a driving force in moving education systems towards inclusive values and bringing about sustainable change (Ainscow, 2005; Blackmore, 2006; Ainscow and Sandill, 2010). School leaders play a central role in establishing an inclusive school environment and in ensuring that students' specific needs are addressed (Day and Leithwood, 2007; Theoharis, 2007; Riel, 2009; Waldron, McLeskey, and Redd, 2011). A number of studies have explored school leaders' attitudes towards inclusion, showing how principals' beliefs and values can either promote or obstruct the inclusion of students with additional needs (Praisner 2003; Horrocks, White, and Roberts 2008; Schmidt and Venet, 2012), while leadership preparation programmes can play an important role in developing skills and attitudes in this area (Pazey and Cole 2013; DeMatthews, Kotok and Serafini, 2019).

The leadership practices that promote inclusion are seen to be similar to those required for successful school leadership more generally, for example as captured by Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins (2008) in four areas - "building vision and setting directions, understanding and developing people; redesigning the organization, and managing the teaching and learning programme" (p. 30). However, Muijs et al (2010) also highlight the need for inclusive leaders working across disadvantaged contexts to promote wider personal and social growth, merging the "inclusion agenda with the standards agenda" (ibid, p. 143), and to manage complex interactions with communities and staff. As Kugelmass and Ainscow (2004) suggest, the development of a whole school inclusive approach is not a mechanical process, but instead a mutual commitment among everyone at the school and

wider community to promote participation among all students. Successful leadership for inclusion is thus dependent on the ability of leaders to generate shared concepts of inclusion and to create and maintain a culture of collaborative partnership focused on inclusive values (Mongon et al, 2008; McGlynn and London, 2013; Poon et al. 2013).

In addition, there is a substantial literature on differentiated and specialist practices that provide quality education for young people with particular needs. More recent publications in the English context include reviews of the interventions and approaches most effective for: children with different categories of SEND (DfE, 2017), including specific categories of SEND such as Autism (e.g. Guldberg, Bradley and Wittemeyer, ND); the inclusion of children with special educational needs in mainstream contexts (Cullen et al, 2020); and explorations of the experiences of children and young people with SEND in mainstream settings (Webster, 2022).

The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) recommendations on supporting students with SEND in mainstream contexts synthesises a repertoire of teaching strategies recommended for teachers to emphasise and use flexibly with students with SEND - including flexible grouping, cognitive and metacognitive strategies, explicit instruction, use of technology and scaffolding - whilst also noting that "to a great extent, good teaching for pupils with SEND is good teaching for all" (EEF, 2020), which speaks to a more universal view of inclusion and a recognition of diversity of needs beyond students with SEND. The impacts of longstanding practices of setting and streaming, which have been integral to differentiated curricula and qualifications, are subject to increased critical scrutiny for being particularly detrimental to the most disadvantaged learners alongside limited evidence of their positive impact on student progress (EEF, 2022).

Meanwhile the move towards a universal approach to conceptualising inclusion (Cigman, 2007), proposes some particular points of focus for school-level systems and practices for inclusion, as captured through materials and toolkits designed to guide schools in adopting a reflective, self-review approach to creating an inclusive environment for all students and staff, which extends into all areas of a school's activities (Booth and Ainscow, 2016; Ekins and Grimes, 2009) and even beyond, in terms of creating more socially inclusive communities and societies (Booth and Ainscow, 2016).

Complexities, tensions and questions

The literature evidences connections and complexities between the more conceptual level (how inclusion is thought about) and the practice level (how inclusion is enacted), which can inform our understanding of the questions and tensions that emerge as different needs and priorities are balanced in practice. A key issue that emerges across academic, practitioner and public discourses about inclusion is the potential for a theory-practice gap. Thus whilst there is widespread theoretical support for inclusion as a rights based and anti-discriminatory principle (Florian, 2019) which has "strong intuitive ethical appeal" (Norwich, 2014, p. 496), many countries still retain a high level of special and segregated provision for children with special educational needs and those excluded from school and there is an ongoing questioning of whether the challenging realities of inclusive practice have been adequately grasped by proponents of full inclusion (De Beco, 2017; Cooper and Jacobs, 2011; Kauffman & Hallahan, 2005; Leany, 2023).

Several barriers to the realisation of inclusion are highlighted across research and practice, which are relevant to the present research study.

First, that inclusive education can be difficult to achieve in a wholesale way because contexts and individuals vary from one situation to the next (Rapp and Corral-Grandos, 2021). Second, the focus on mainstream inclusion has led to an overemphasis on the 'where' of education rather than the 'how' (De Beco, 2017), which can result in students remaining within mainstream sites yet accessing a highly segregated provision in the name of 'inclusion' (Webster, 2022; Farrell and Ainscow, 2002). Third, that the move to focus on inclusion for all, and a desire to move away from deficit models of difference, can result in a tendency "to deny the challenges and difficulties associated with disability" and that some young people experience their disability as a difficulty and require additional support (Norwich, 2014). As the EEF review notes, recognition of pupils' needs may warrant:

➤ *some targeted and specialist approaches being included in the school's collective 'toolkit' and teachers' repertoires. These characteristics may well set some limits on what can be taught and learned (not all aspects of disability can be overcome by adjustments to the environment and the activities and interactions that take place there). (EEF, 2020)*

Statements of this nature connect to a growing recognition of the limits of inclusion as equality, and suggests a move towards equity in education: a recognition that fairness lies not in providing the same to everyone, but in recognising that the diversity of all learners' needs, characteristics and experiences may mean they require something different or more than the 'common' offer, at particular times (Ainscow, 2016).

Another issue in the theory-practice gap is that inclusion is not enacted in schools in a vacuum, rather it is one policy impetus amongst many, some of which may be in tension with inclusive

values and ideals. Research suggests that some barriers to implementation are systemic rather than in the command of individual schools, with a prevalent focus on the ways data-led accountability contexts (Ozga, 2013) may make inclusive work more challenging (Ball, Maguire and Braun, 2012; Partridge et al, 2020). For example, government policy retains permanent exclusion as part of the disciplinary toolkit available to schools under the rationale that some student behaviour may impact on the rights and entitlements of other students to education. Recent national policy documents depict exclusion and managed moves as “essential behaviour management tools [which] can be used to establish high standards of behaviour and maintain the safety of school communities” (DfE, 2022). Yet research suggests that such behaviour management practices

can also be about impression management; an opportunity to move out students who are a risk to school performance data (McIntyre and Hall, 2020; Partridge et al, 2020). Meanwhile there is concern that the curriculum and qualifications landscape is not working in the interests of inclusion, with a narrowed curriculum and restricted availability of vocational qualifications cited as key challenges for staff seeking to retain a diverse group of learners in mainstream contexts (Partridge et al, 2020). This alerts us to key contemporary challenges in the enactment of inclusion in English secondary schools, which often depend on the balancing of different rights, needs and priorities, amidst a wider-policy context of multiple, and sometimes competing, goals and rationales.

04

The six case study schools: overviews



04 The six case study schools: overviews

This section provides brief overviews of six case study schools, all using pseudonyms, building on the key characteristics outlined in Table 2.

Riverdale Community School (School 1)

Riverdale Community School is an 11-16 school located in a post-industrial Midlands town with a largely white working class population. Riverdale is currently LA maintained but is set to become an academy and join a medium sized regional MAT during 2023. The school estate comprises several separate 'blocks' for different subjects, such as the 'arts block' and 'science block' which are separated by playgrounds and leafy green spaces. The majority of the school buildings date from the latter half of the twentieth century, although building work is currently underway to modernise some of the facilities. Students told us that they value the open spaces and fresh air between lessons, and were observed moving calmly around the site, confidently greeting one another, staff, and school visitors.

The school is smaller than the average secondary school in England, with just under 600 pupils on roll, although this marks a significant growth in student numbers over the past five years. 40-45% of pupils are eligible for free school meals (FSM), which is significantly higher than the national FSM rate of 22.5%. The school sits in an area which is in the 20% most deprived nationally according to the index of multiple deprivation. The school has 36 FTE teachers, 4 FTE senior leaders and 20 FTE teaching assistants.

The school was inspected by Ofsted in 2022, receiving a Good rating, which built on its previous Good rating in 2017. The reputation of the school has shifted in recent years. Some newer staff said that they had recognised this was a school on the up that had a reputation for being inclusive, which attracted them to the school. Staff also mentioned that they had seen an increase in admissions, including in-year admissions, for students with SEND, as the school's reputation for being inclusive grew. There was a general acknowledgement that the student population had become more ethnically diverse in recent years too.

Shilton Valley School (School 2)

Shilton Valley School is located in a suburb of a large city in northern England. It is part of a foundation trust created in 2018, which includes three schools all based in the same Local Authority. The school was rebuilt almost 20 years ago, with a new adjacent primary school built even more recently. The buildings are light and well-kept, encircling a central courtyard with trees and benches. The school feels calm and relaxed, with students circulating quietly during break times and interacting well with a range of staff.

The school is all-through (4-19), having opened a primary phase in 2012, and has a PAN of around 1200, with nearly 1500 students attending in 2020/2021. The school has a resourced provision for children with autism. In total, 22% of pupils have a special educational need (SEN Support), which is higher than the national average (12%). 30-35% of students are eligible for free school meals, which is higher than the average for

England (22.5%) and the average for the region in which the school is based. The school has a diverse intake: around 60% of pupils are from an ethnic minority, with almost 70 different languages spoken by pupils at home. In comparison, around 80% of the wider city's population identified as white in the 2021 census.

The school has been judged Good by Ofsted in its past four inspections, before which it was judged Satisfactory. In their most recent reports, inspectors praised the extent to which the school's values are embedded, its strong community culture and inclusive ethos, and the very strong relationships between staff and pupils.

The school has over 150 staff (FTE), of whom around half are qualified teachers. There are five members of SLT, 36 teaching assistants, 36 non-classroom-based support staff and six auxiliary staff. When compared with similar schools nationally, the school's expenditure is in the highest 10% for spending on educational support staff, and in the lowest 20% for spending on teachers. The school's leadership team and wider staff group have been stable over many years. For example, the Executive Head has been in post for nearly 18 years, while the Headteacher joined the school 13 years ago. Interestingly, around 15% of the school's staff were previously pupils at the school.

The school's leaders describe it as "truly comprehensive in terms of abilities, ethnicities, backgrounds, political views - it's a really broad church, different families, which we think is a strength of the school" (Executive Head). This picture has changed over time: when the Executive Head first started, 18 years earlier, the school was underperforming, only a third full and facing closure, but as its culture and performance have improved it has "become increasingly popular, the catchment has become much more

competitive, much more localised and much more comprehensive" (Executive Head). The headteacher explained that "statistically, we're becoming more average. So the attainment on entry in Year 7 now is broadly in line, but when I joined 12 and a half years ago, we were significantly below the national average."

The school's current Year 7 joined from 29 different primary schools, with many parents of children with SEND choosing the school because of its inclusive ethos: "there's children far flung all over the city who've travelled past several secondary schools to be able to get a place with us because of the inclusive practice" (Headteacher).

Greenway Academy (School 3)

Greenway Academy is an 11-16 school located in a medium-sized town in the north of England. It is part of a MAT that operates 10 schools, including five secondaries, across the region. The current school was built in the last 10 years - a two story building with a series of large, double height atrium spaces with open balconies connecting the classrooms and corridors on the first floor, alongside open plan staff work spaces. Students moved around the space with confidence and were lively as they greeted and interacted with their peers and school staff. The design of the space means that students are constantly visible, and anyone out of lesson is easy to spot.

There are just under 900 pupils on roll, and 35-40% of pupils are eligible for FSM, which is higher than the national average. The school has an above national and local authority average progress 8 score and the percentage of students being entered for the EBacc is above local and national average. Greenway received a 'Good' rating at its 2022 Ofsted inspection.

The school's reputation has improved a great deal over the past 7 or 8 years and it is now recognised locally as being a good school. There is recognition of a transformation in the school over this time, with Greenway now achieving very positive outcomes and being oversubscribed. There is a very low turnover of staff at the school. Greenway has a relatively new, purposely designed school building, and students pointed out some of the areas available in the school for those seeking a quieter space to socialise or eat their lunch.

The school has its own alternative provision, which is located off-site, and an area in the school which has recently been repurposed as a key stage three support area. Calm and positive interactions were observed between staff and students, and between students.

The Jacob Gardiner School (School 4)

The Jacob Gardiner School is a smaller than average sized secondary academy, located in a central suburb of a Midlands city. It is part of the Aspire to Succeed Multi Academy Trust (ASMAT) which runs ten schools (eight secondary schools and two primary schools) across the region. The school was built in the last 10 years, on a tight site but with a large light multi-use atrium and several outdoor spaces for sport and breaktimes. Students talk and jostle as they move through the crowded corridors, sometimes greeting members of staff by name.

The school is a mixed gender Church of England school, catering to students aged between 11 and 16 with no sixth form. The school has a PAN of 750, with over 780 students attending in the last academic year. Out of this, 30-35% of students are eligible for Free School Meals, which is higher than the average for England (22.5%), and the proportion of pupils who have SEND is well above average.

The school's last Ofsted inspection was in 2017, when it achieved 'Outstanding' in all areas, and was specifically praised for its "strong culture of ambition" and "culture of inclusivity and acceptance". The school is in the lowest 20% of similar schools in terms of spend on teaching staff, but in the highest 10% of similar schools in terms of spending on education support staff.

Leaders described the school as "small by design" and explained that the cohort reflects the local diversity of the community in both ethnicity and faith. Approximately 1/3 of the student body are Christian, 1/3 are Muslim, and 1/3 are a mixture of other faiths and backgrounds. The school has a wide catchment area, with over 50 feeder schools (for an intake of 150 students per year), which means that in the current Year 7 there are nearly 40 students who came to the school "on their own and didn't know anybody".

The school is heavily oversubscribed (last year they had 750 applications for 150 places) and under pressure to grow, although they are resisting that pressure, not least because the small site cannot accommodate more students: "Our school is about family and we have a feel to our school that we know all the students and we are desperate to try and keep hold of that" [HT].

The influence of the Multi Academy Trust was clear in the branded materials visible in the school (including classroom displays and posters), and also in interviews with staff at all levels. The Headteacher described the Trust as "courageously inclusive", and one Head of Year explained that inclusion is very clearly communicated as one of the top priorities from the trust.

The Philip Otter School (School 5)

The Philip Otter School is a sponsor led secondary academy in a predominantly white working-class town in the south of England. It is part of the Aim High Multi Academy Trust, a trust created in 2012 with four schools based in the same Local Authority. The school itself joined the MAT when it academized in 2013, replacing the predecessor school. The main school building opened in 2000 and has benefitted from several refurbishments and additions since 2010, including the addition of a swimming pool. The school is currently made up of three two-storey blocks, separated by small park-style areas (with greenery and benches) and larger play areas with paths winding around the school grounds. Students moved between the buildings confidently, and were keen to engage with the staff who were dotted around the site on duty during breaktimes and lesson change overs.

The school has no sixth form, catering only for 11-16 year olds, and has a PAN of 900, with around 950 students attending in 2020/2021. Out of this, 30-35% of students are eligible for free school meals, which is higher than the average for England (22.5%) and much higher than the average for the region in which the school is based. The school has higher than average pupils with SEND, alongside higher than average pupils with EHCPs.

The school's last Ofsted inspection was in 2021, when it achieved 'Good' in all areas, and was specifically praised for its focus on positive relationships and family ethos.

The school has just over 100 staff, of whom just over half are qualified teachers. There are 12 members of SLT, 15 teaching assistants, 25 non-classroom based support staff and 3 auxiliary staff. Over the last ten years there has been

significant staff turnover in leadership, including 7 different Headteachers, some of whom remained in post for less than a year. The current head was appointed in 2021, from a role within the MAT, and had previously taught at the school. The school's spending is 'broadly in line' with similar schools for all areas except for energy use, where it is in the highest 10% of similar schools.

The town in which the school is situated is predominantly white (almost 90% of the population according to the 2021 census data), and the teachers we spoke to described the challenges they faced as "typical of those associated with white working class areas" [Pastoral leaders/DHs/HT], although the student intake is somewhat diverse.

The small size of the MAT means that the school feels supported, whilst also free to do what it needs to do for its own cohort. Leaders acknowledged that their school's cohort and circumstances are unique within their MAT and believe that the MAT leaders have allowed them to identify and prioritise their own areas for development, one of which is inclusion.

Saint Joseph's Roman Catholic High School (School 6)

Saint Joseph's Roman Catholic High School is a voluntary aided mixed-gender secondary school located in an inner city area of a large city in the north of England. The school was completely rebuilt around 15 years ago, with a large atrium space used as a dining hall and meeting area. Classrooms are a mix of sizes, including some that are open plan at the end of corridors. The school feels welcoming, airy and vibrant, with students talking as they circulate during break times.

Saint Joseph's is a relatively small school with a PAN of around 650 (with 680 students attending 2020/2021), of whom around 35-40% are eligible for free school meals, which is higher than the average for England (22.5%). Around 7% of students at the school have an EHCP and around 16% receive SEND support, which is higher than the national average (4% and 12% respectively).

The school is located in an urban area that is majority white, with higher population growth over the last 10 years than the national average (15.4% compared to 6.6% in England). The school's intake is drawn from across the Local Authority area, reflecting its faith ethos and associated admissions criteria. The school's intake is ethnically diverse: for example, just over 30% of students speak English as an additional language.

The school has a specially resourced SEN provision for students with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs). The provision specialises in providing support for students aged 11 to 16 with Speech, Language and Communication needs (SLCN) and Moderate Learning Difficulties (MLD).

The school employs over 80 staff (full time equivalent), of whom half are qualified teachers, with a senior leadership team of 5, 16 teaching assistants and just under 15 non-classroom based support staff. When compared with similar schools nationally, the school's spending is broadly in line with similar schools in all categories.

05

Belonging schools - findings



05 Belonging schools - findings

The title of this report – Belonging Schools – highlights the centrality of human relationships underpinned by shared values in all six case study schools. These relationships and values created a sense of belonging – of students being seen, known, cared for, understood and supported in ways which best met their needs – from which inclusion was an outcome. Five of the schools explicitly used the word ‘belonging’ to describe their approach, while all six used related language and sentiments – such as care, family, love, participation, every child being known and valued – to emphasise the centrality of belonging to their vision for inclusion. Interestingly, three of the six schools explicitly told us that ‘inclusion’ was not a word they commonly used to describe their values or practice.

The findings are structured into three main sections, each with various sub-sections.

The first section (5.1) focuses on how inclusion is interpreted and enacted, showing how it is embedded within the core vision and values of all six schools. It explores the concepts and philosophies which underpin different schools’ approaches, arguing that creating a sense of ‘belonging’ is common to all, and considers some of the differences, debates and tensions that were observed.

The second section (5.2) focusses on the ways in which senior leaders create an environment for inclusion. This includes an assessment of how different governance arrangements appear to influence school-level approaches and of how leaders work to embed inclusive values into the culture and daily life of schools through a combination of transformational, distributed and strategic leadership.

The third section (5.3) describes the systems, processes and practices that schools have developed to achieve their inclusive vision. It structures these in seven sections: pastoral support and relationships; early help, safeguarding and multi-agency support; behaviour, inclusion and exclusion; teaching, learning and curriculum; student voice, parents and community; staffing and CPD; and feedback and continuous improvement.

5.1 What does inclusion mean?

This section addresses the first research question – What does ‘inclusion’ mean to pupils, teachers, and leaders? It outlines the ways inclusion was understood and conceptualised in the six case study schools, showing how these conceptualisations underpinned the schools’ core vision and values. It also explores some of the tensions that emerge as inclusive values are enacted through systems, processes and practices.

Inclusion in school vision and values

Across the case study schools inclusion was connected to and embedded within the overall vision and values of the school. Rather than a ‘vision for inclusion’, it would be more accurate to talk about a vision or set of overarching aims within each of the schools, of which inclusion was one – highly significant – feature:

- *I think we're really lucky that the senior leadership team... it's noticeably just more grounded in the values that have been the values for a long time. And we've got a senior leadership team who are very committed to a way of working in a vision and that then feeds into every decision that's been made.... there is always a why and it always links back to our values. And you know, even like, I'm in charge of the CPD programme and we always look at that through the lens of our values. So just to ensure that everything that we do is linking back to our original vision for pupils at the school. (Associate Leader for Staff Development, Shilton Valley)*
- *Our vision and values permeate everything we do. Inclusion is subtly present in everything we do. We might not use the word but it is ever-present because the moral imperative of working in this school is present every day. (Head of Department, Greenway)*
- *I don't have a very neat and concise way of talking about inclusion, it's more ingrained throughout the school and has been for a very long time. (Headteacher, Riverdale)*

This core inclusive vision was always integrated with a commitment to high expectations for all students, including in relation to academic learning and achievement. School leaders and staff in all six schools emphasised the importance of challenging and supporting all students to aim high and achieve their best, although the strength of this emphasis differed to some extent between schools. As we outline in Section 5.3, several schools linked their vision for inclusion to students' entitlement to a broad and balanced curriculum and to high quality teaching and learning. This chimed with findings from the survey, where over four fifths of respondents viewed "quality first teaching for all children" as a high or very high priority for improving their inclusive work.

Inclusion for all children

As noted in the literature review, there has been a widespread, international shift in understandings of what educational inclusion means, who it is about, and the key practices involved. This has involved a broadening of the student populations that are seen to benefit from more inclusive practices, shifting from the historical, exclusive focus on children with SEND, to include children with a wider set of needs and characteristics that reflect disadvantage in education. In its broadest conceptualisation, inclusion is now considered to be for, and to benefit, all students in a school. Furthermore, all young people may have periods of their schooling where they need something more or different.

A key finding of this research is that the six schools were oriented towards this broader conceptualisation, where inclusion is a whole-school focus that concerns all children. This broad conceptualisation is captured in the following comments:

- *Every child is important. It's not about special education. We're all special. And I find it quite a hard term to use. I don't like using it. I prefer to use, you know, the child's individual needs. And it's about if you need help, we need to provide it... this is the inclusive practice that we have to have for every child. (Assistant Principal, Greenway)*
- *Every child matters and deserve[s] every opportunity. They are just as important as anybody else in this world... and need to be treated with dignity and respect, and their maximum potential achieved. (Governor, Riverdale)*

That said, the broad conceptualisation was not always consistently adopted by all staff or across all areas of practice in the case study schools. Furthermore, as we outline below, most of the schools had a particular focus on one or more group/s of students or thematic priorities, reflecting each school's particular context and cohort. We highlight four of these groups/themes which were particularly prominent: SEND, Social, Emotional and Mental Health difficulties (SEMH); disadvantage; and discrimination.

The findings from the focus groups and survey, which potentially included a more representative range of schools, suggested a more mixed picture in terms of how inclusion is conceptualised, with a broader spectrum of views ventured:

- *So actually, for our school inclusion is about accepting everybody and expecting the best from everybody. (Focus group participant)*
- *I think the first thing is about students really, genuinely belonging and feeling safe at school and wanting to come to school (Focus group participant)*
- *For me it's about removing barriers and it's about keeping children in mainstream, whatever that means. And you know that could be with a package with some vocational provision and a couple of days in school. (Focus group participant)*
- *And inclusion, you know, it's about keeping the kids in, which generally means working with those that are looking like they're on their way out, you know, so it's trying to find a pathway there. (Focus group participant)*

Despite this continuum of perspectives being represented, the most common orientation in the focus groups was on inclusion for children with a particular set of needs and characteristics; broader than an 'inclusion as SEND' conceptualisation,

but not as broad as an 'inclusion for all' approach. Similarly, although just over half of the survey respondents agreed that inclusion is about 'All students', the other half were split across other, narrower conceptualisations: a fifth of respondents felt that inclusion was about 'students with additional needs wherever they exist', and another fifth agreed that inclusion is about 'students with particular characteristics that are related to lower educational achievement/poorer educational experiences'.

Creating a sense of belonging – inclusion for all

This leaning towards a broader 'inclusion for all' approach in the case study schools was encapsulated in what we have identified as their key unifying feature: a focus on cultivating a sense of belonging amongst students. As we note above, five of the schools explicitly used the word 'belonging' to describe their approach, while all six used related language and sentiments (see vignette 1). This choice of language was intentional; used to evoke the idea of all students being seen, known, cared for, understood and supported in ways which best met their needs.

VIGNETTE 1: Belonging as inclusion

Across the schools, belonging and associated terms and ideas were prevalent in the ways schools articulated their vision, values and practices.

In several cases this centred on the idea of the school as a family:

- ▶ *Our school is about family and we have a feel to our school that we know all the students... And you know, that's something really, really huge because families are massive.* (Headteacher, Jacob Gardiner)
- ▶ *We're one big family, but we're made up of four smaller families. It's really great. Everybody knows you and they really care about you.* (Year 9 student, Jacob Gardiner)
- ▶ *...it's a good school I feel really safe here, and like it's my family.* (Year 8 student, Philip Otter)

At St Joseph's, staff at all levels described the school as "a family" and based on "family values" (Pupil Progress Lead). This focus stemmed from its Catholic ethos, at the centre of which is a commitment to relationships, relational practices, and restorative approaches:

- ▶ *I would describe our culture... as warmth. That's what we talk about and what we mean by that is that we love our children and will openly say that as well here. We are a Catholic school, it's Catholic love. We love our children."* (Headteacher, Saint Joseph's)

In some cases, this move towards creating a sense of belonging reflected intentional and continuing work over many years. For instance, one member of staff who had attended Shilton Valley as a pupil 20 years earlier noted that:

- ▶ *When I started working here, one thing I felt straight away was this sense of community... and I was blown away by that, because it's something that we definitely didn't have when I was here (as a pupil). It was all disjointed. It felt there was groups of friends and no one really mingled, whether that be different ethnic backgrounds, different religions, etcetera. There was very much a divide.* (Safeguarding Officer – former pupil, Shilton Valley)

Other interviewees reflected on how the culture of the school differed from that in other schools they had worked in, with belonging encompassing staff as well as students:

- ▶ *To bring this back to inclusion, I think that is about your staff feeling included in the organization and there not being the teachers and the non-teachers... And if the support and the operation staff don't feel included, it doesn't matter what your approach to inclusion at that student level is, it will fall down because you haven't got TAs that feel like they're making a difference... So I think we've probably got that right over the last four or five years.* (Headteacher, Greenway)

Relationships for belonging

Decision making around inclusive values and practices was therefore geared towards creating an environment which cultivated a sense of belonging for all students and staff. Core to this was a focus on relationships and relational approaches across the case study schools. Practices around relationships varied across the schools but were evidenced in high level systems as well as micro practices, many of which are described in Section 5.3. Pastoral teams and systems were often core to this: examples included vertical tutoring and small group coaching models, volunteer pastors providing one to one support, and the adoption of restorative practice (RP) as a core philosophy and approach. Every-day micro practices, integral to good relationships, were also described and observed. For instance, a member of teaching staff in Riverdale described an intentional approach to giving praise, such as stopping students in the hallway and making a point of praising something from a previous lesson. Fresh starts after an incident or disagreement were another important relational practice across schools, and staff at all levels spoke of the importance of showing students they had moved on from incidents, and that grudges were not held:

- *What makes us Catholic is the fact that these kids get a fresh start every day... and we forgive them no matter what happened and we move on.* (Pupil Progress Lead, Saint Joseph's)

Belonging was also evidenced in what students told the research team. Feeling welcome and supported, despite differences or challenges being faced, and experiencing joy and excitement about school were common themes across student accounts.

- *The school makes you feel really welcome. And you're praised if you do something good.* (Year 11 student, Shilton Valley)
- *...It's a good school here. It feels like they accept everyone for who they are.* (Y 9 student, Saint Joseph's)
- *It's a good school. I have always felt part of it and included here.* (Year 10 student, Philip Otter)

All the students we spoke to were able to name a member of staff who had given them support in the past or who they would go to if they faced challenges. Feeling safe was also a key aspect of belonging: students could pinpoint specific, intentionally created spaces in the school that they could access if they needed quiet time or someone to talk to. Feeling listened to and being able to make a difference was another aspect of belonging, with various examples of how schools heard and acted on student voice, as outlined in Section 5.3. Other examples included student proposed clubs which centred on themes of gender identity and sexuality, which had been developed in some schools and thereby helped to create acceptance of differences.

Inclusion and equity

Part of the focus on belonging, care and every child being known, seen and valued was an orientation towards equity rather than equality across the schools, as illustrated in Vignette Two. In some schools equity was framed as both a within school practice, and as a way of mediating wider societal inequalities. In the former, equity is about recognising that students within the school may need something different to be able to experience the sense of belonging that schools were striving for, for instance a nuanced interpretation of the behaviour system. In the latter, equity is about recognising that if the school serves a more disadvantaged student

population, part of its “moral duty” is to provide students with an education and opportunities which may go above and beyond what is offered to students in schools in more affluent areas, in

order to enable these students to stand “shoulder to shoulder” with their peers when they leave school (Principal, Greenway).

VIGNETTE 2: Equity and Inclusion

A focus on equity was distinguished from attempts to achieve equality by giving all students equal support despite the reality of unequal opportunities in life.

➤ *It's about that equity in education. Building a future for every child in that direction they want to go... we're on a journey which a lot of schools are moving towards of making education more equitable, rather than focusing on inclusion (Assistant Principal, Greenway)*

At Shilton Valley, various interviewees – including students – referred to the school's underlying purpose in terms of equity and social justice, often distinguishing this from attempts to achieve equality. Referring to a graphic illustration of three people of unequal height all trying to look over a fence, which is widely used by the school, one middle leader explained:

➤ *Basically the idea is that long term we want to either get rid of the fence or restructure the tree so that actually we're looking*

at the root causes of injustice within the education system. (Associate Leader for Staff Development)

Staff at St Joseph's explained that inclusion is about making sure that every child has the same opportunities, and “there's no one left behind” (Pupil Progress Lead). But school leaders were also clear that “treating everybody equally doesn't mean treating them the same” (Pupil Progress Lead), so inclusion is about making sure things are adapted to the individual needs of the child in a way that allows them to make good progress.

At Greenway, equity was also about tailoring the offer for these students to give them what they need to stand “shoulder to shoulder” with their peers in more affluent schools. This included introducing a reading curriculum, which staff described as a way to support students to access “powerful knowledge” and “hinterland knowledge... to enhance students' cultural capital” (Principal and Curriculum Lead for Reading).

For the case study schools, inclusion thus centres on creating a culture in which all students feel they belong, founded in strong relationships, restorative practice and second chances, and a values-based commitment to equity. Knowing every child as an individual supports an environment in which equitable practice becomes intuitive and in which differential treatment is accepted by students as fair. This is nuanced work which requires trust in the professional judgement of staff, all of which occurs in the details of day-to-day interactions as well as high level systems and vision statements, as encapsulated by this interviewee:

➤ *It's difficult and nuanced... I can see how it is hard to understand from outside... it's about the recognition of the complexity of what it is to be a human... the school did a lot of work with the students around what the difference is between equity and equality... if they've got the relationship with you then they'll trust you... that's the difference between a system and a culture and ethos approach. Students understand about fairness, and what it means to be treated differently. (Shilton Valley)*

Different schools resolved these nuances – or tensions – in different ways. Some interviewees indicated the limits to an equitable approach. For instance, both the Head and the Deputy Head of St Joseph's spoke about students whose SEND needs meant that they were working at levels below which their staff had been trained, and as a result the students experienced challenges with accessing the curriculum:

➤ *We're talking about Y1 work in primary school and we feel we're not equipped and that's what makes it the wrong setting. If they come in, we can't meet those needs." (Saint Joseph's)*

Different stances on exclusion and related practices

The students we spoke to during case study visits described many positive aspects of their school experience, indicating that they largely experienced the sense of belonging school staff were striving for. These were students with a range of characteristics and needs that are relevant to inclusion, including SEND, involvement of social care teams and from minority ethnic groups. However, they were generally students who were engaged in school life and bought into the ethos and values of the school. Several of these students explained that they had needed – and received – additional support from the school in the past, for example to help address 'anger issues' or to help them integrate into life in Britain as a migrant. Some continued to face challenges and most were able to identify peers in their school who were having a less positive time in the school. This included students who were spending time outside of lessons, and those at risk of exclusion. This highlights the ongoing challenge schools face to support every single student to belong in the school, with some staff also noting cases where they had not been able to keep particular students in school despite their best efforts.

➤ *There are students who like, just don't like school and they are never going to be happy here. (Year 8 student, Greenway)*

Despite their shared emphasis on belonging and equity, the six schools varied in their views on how this vision was to be enacted and whether particular disciplinary practices – exclusion, isolation, alternative provision – should form part of this approach to inclusion or not. Across the schools we observed a continuum of practice in this area, as exemplified in detail in Section 5.3. For instance, Shilton Valley had taken a decision some time ago to stop permanently excluding students and had later decided to close its isolation room, as

part of a deliberate effort to become more inclusive. Meanwhile, the headteacher at Saint Joseph's spoke of the necessity of keeping permanent exclusion as an option in cases where there were risks to the safety of staff and students:

➤ *I'm not one of these heads that thinks that you should never, ever exclude... I just don't think that works. I think it's really important to have lines that you won't cross or... to understand that there are actually consequences to actions... if somebody brings drugs into school, we will permanently exclude them because our job is to keep the children safe. (Headteacher, Saint Joseph's)*

For staff in some schools, values for promoting care and belonging were compatible with exclusion in a minority of cases because this was viewed as necessary to ensure the rights of others to safety and respect, including staff:

➤ *"...everyone's got the right to live and everyone's got the right to teach and everyone's got the right to feel and be safe in school. And everyone's got the right to dignity and respect and to be able to have all these rights. And we've all got to take our own personal responsibility and teach pupils with respect, and that's mutual respect from the pupils and that they speak to each other with respect so that everybody can be happy in school." (Assistant Head, Saint Joseph's)*

A vision of inclusion which foregrounds belonging is thus not antithetical to the use of exclusion in some circumstances. This highlights that the schools had different orientations towards the thorny issue of how the rights and entitlements of different students can be balanced within a school, as discussed in the literature review. Inclusivity and related values, such as belonging and equity, are thus somewhat subjective and depend on perceptions of issues and possibilities in the context where inclusion is being enacted

(Rapp and Corral-Granados, 2021). Varied use of fixed-term exclusions was also reported by school staff responding to the survey. Whilst two fifths of respondents said that fixed-term exclusions are always or mostly used, over half reported using fixed term exclusions sometimes or rarely.

This variability of stances was also evidenced in relation to isolation rooms. While one school no longer used these, five schools did. However, there were examples of work to modify these spaces with inclusive principles in mind. For instance, Riverdale had created an integrated student support centre, where English, maths and science teachers were timetabled to work with students who had been removed from lessons in order to reduce the impact on their learning (described in more detail in section 5.3). Again this variety of perspectives and practices was also evidenced in the survey responses. Whilst two fifths of respondents reported that internal isolation rooms are always or mostly used as a behaviour sanction, half reported using these spaces sometimes or rarely, and 10% of respondents reported not having isolation rooms in their school. Interestingly, at both Greenway and Philip Otter, students were clear about their dissatisfaction with the schools' internal isolation rooms and policies:

➤ *Interviewer: If you could change one thing about the school, what would it be?*

Year 8 student: It would be to get rid of that room [Retrack]. It's a room you get sent to if you're naughty and you have to miss all of your lessons. (Year 8 student, Greenway)

➤ *I think it's pointless because they tell us that we're here to learn and they're supporting us to learn, but then if you do anything wrong you get taken out of lesson and put in the conference room and you just have to read a book for three hours. How is that going to help us learn anything? (Year 11 student, Philip Otter)*

All six schools were reluctant to commission off-site alternative provision (AP), as discussed in more detail in Section 5.3. Greenway and Shilton Valley both ran their own internal APs for small numbers of children, while Philip Otter had plans to open one. In the other three schools, rates of AP commissioning were low, sometimes due to a perception that local provision was low-quality and costly and/or that the school itself could provide the best possible environment. Importantly, even in schools which used alternatives to exclusion, some students told the research team about peers who they described as being excluded. This suggests that being moved to an in-house AP may be viewed and experienced as exclusion by students, even if it is aimed at avoiding a permanent exclusion on a student's record. This connects with a broadened conceptualisation, as noted in the literature review, and highlights the importance of attending to the many potential micro practices that may be experienced as exclusionary by young people in a school.

Four issues shaping inclusive practices: SEND, SEMH, disadvantage and discrimination

As well as cultivating a culture of belonging, each of the six schools also positioned inclusion as a response to a particular set of issues and inequities for some student populations. In this way, inclusion was framed as a response to context; it was shaped by local needs, concerns and gaps, which shaped how the different schools thought about inclusion. This section draws out the four most prominent issues that shaped inclusion in particular schools: SEND, Social, Emotional and Mental Health difficulties (SEMH); disadvantage; and discrimination.

I. INCLUSION AND SEND

There were relatively few mentions of SEND across the case studies. Shilton Valley and Saint Joseph's have specialist resourced provisions for young people with particular needs³, so – unsurprisingly – references to SEND were more common in these schools. In both schools, students attending these provisions access as much of the mainstream timetable as possible and are provided with a bespoke timetable designed around the lessons that they are able, and not able, to access. For instance, one Year 9 student explained that because of her ASD and ADHD she found it very difficult to be in music lessons because of the sensory overload. She was therefore able to attend the resourced provision during this time instead.

Across all the schools there was a focus on students with SEND accessing as many mainstream lessons and activities as possible:

➤ *We also don't separate kids out. I know some schools do that, but for example, our SEND students are in lessons. If you go to our SEND department most of the time it will be empty, which is how I wanted it to be because they should be in lessons, being part of the school and not taught separately or away from everybody else. (Headteacher, Jacob Gardiner)*

A flexible approach was key here; rather than a perception that once students are accessing specialist provision that should continue all the time, the need for specialist provision was regularly assessed and reduced or ended as appropriate. Greenway's decision to move to mixed prior-attainment groups across most subjects and year

3 Shilton Valley has a bespoke provision for autism while Saint Joseph's has a resourced provision for students with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), which specialises in supporting students with Speech, Language and Communication needs (SLCN) and Moderate Learning Difficulties (MLD).

groups (see Section 5.3) was partly justified by a desire to avoid there being any “sink sets” (Principal), which is important for students with SEND (as well as other groups) who are often placed in such sets, even when apparently included in mainstream school (Webster, 2022).

Catering for students with SEND was seen as an area where some challenges emerged for schools where they became the first port-of-call for all students with SEND in a local area, leading their provision to become stretched (Section 7).

II. SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL AND MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS AND STUDENT WELLBEING

As well as more general discussions of SEND, there was a considerable discussion of rising rates of Social Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) needs and challenges in the pupil population, alongside widespread concerns with student wellbeing. In some accounts this rise in SEMH concerns was explicitly tied to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns.

Schools adopted a range of practices and accessed diverse external offers of support for SEMH (see Section 5.3), although there was widespread recognition that external provision was often insufficient or not timely enough, as discussed in Section 7. The impact of inequalities and disadvantage on these issues was recognised across the schools we visited.

III. DISADVANTAGE

One of the most significant issues that inclusion is deemed to address is the impact of disadvantage on students’ learning, educational and wider experiences and well-being. This was a particular area of focus in Riverdale, Greenway, Philip Otter and Saint Joseph’s, with staff highlighting local poverty and disadvantage as key priorities

for inclusive practice. Repeated connections were made between ‘inclusion’ and supporting students and families experiencing poverty and financial hardship, often combined with a wider set of challenges, such as domestic violence. Despite this shared focus, the schools espoused slightly different perspectives on this aspect of inclusion.

At Greenway the challenges students face in communities and households that are experiencing the effects of poverty were positioned as an underpinning moral obligation or social justice rationale for decision-making in the school. The Principal’s own experiences shaped his educational philosophy and his view that education can “open doors and broaden horizons... it’s clichéd but it is true in my experience”. We were told that staff who work at Greenway share the fundamental belief that their actions can positively influence outcomes for a young person:

➤ *The headteacher is very clear about that vision. We are all in the senior leadership very clear about the vision for social justice for students from this background. So it comes from our context, and then it comes from the head teacher and then it filters down to the rest of the staff. (Assistant Principal for Curriculum, Greenway).*

The Headteacher at Jacob Gardner explained that 40% of its students live in the 20% most economically deprived areas nationally, and this was positioned as an important shaper of inclusive practice. Similar to Greenway academy, this underpinned a focus on the “transformative power of education” and conveying to students that “whatever your background, or whatever your starting point is, this is your opportunity to change that, and we’ve got lots of examples of children that have done just that, and that helps with our inclusivity” (Headteacher, Jacob Gardner).

Riverdale school has such high rates of disadvantage and poverty amongst its student intake that, the headteacher told us, it is logical for the school's entire approach to inclusion to be designed with this in mind. There were examples of poverty aware practice built into every day practices in the school. For instance, the school operates a food bank which can be accessed by the families of the students, and Riverdale also helps pay for bedroom furniture and curtains in cases where children do not have these. The school also finds ways to give things to students that they need, without drawing attention to this, for example using Secret Santa gifts to provide stationery and clothing to students in need. Students told us that if you could not afford the ingredients to do catering lessons then the school provides these.

At Philip Otter and Saint Joseph's disadvantage was referred to in relation to the intersection of social class and ethnicity, and white working-class families in particular were described as a focus for inclusion. At Saint Joseph's recent local population growth had increased the diversity of the school's intake. School leaders described how education was seen as the way out of poverty – and therefore prioritised – in many of the school's ethnic minority families. This was in contrast to many of the school's white working-class families who were felt to espouse less commitment to schooling and education. The school's Pupil Premium Lead believed that “middle ability white British boys” were the most challenging group to work with at the school, and were a key group in terms of inclusion. Meanwhile, staff at Philip Otter spoke of some of their greatest challenges for inclusivity stemming from the majority cohort of students coming from “classic white working-class backgrounds” (Deputy Head, Philip Otter). Philip Otter's teachers described the challenges they faced as “typical of those associated with white working-class areas” [Pastoral leader]:

➤ *Many of our children's lives are fractured beyond our imagining. Most of them are dealing with secondary trauma... we're definitely recognising that this is a community where our children are not safe much of the time, but they think that that's just normal. The bottom third of students are likely to have issues at home, no parental support, and I think they're the saddest ones around inclusion because we're doing all we can but...we get no support from home.* (Philip Otter, Deputy head).

In order to make the case for resource intensive work to support students from more disadvantaged backgrounds, school staff sought to convey the nature and severity of the challenges they observed and its impact on education. A variety of explanations were used here, some non-judgemental and other more deficit-oriented. Disadvantage and poverty were viewed as sources of challenges and problems across schools, which inclusive vision and practice could help to overcome, whilst there were few references to community assets and value – particularly in white working-class communities – and how they might be drawn on to enhance teaching, learning and belonging.

IV. DIVERSITY AND DISCRIMINATION

A final prominent issue that inclusion was perceived to address in the schools was discriminatory attitudes and behaviours both in school and in wider society. This was taken up in a variety of ways, and focused on different aspects of discrimination including racism, and that experienced by the LGBTQI+ community and young people with disabilities.

At Riverdale and St Joseph's there was a perception that the growing ethnic diversity of the local area in recent years meant that understanding and embracing difference and diversity had become a more pressing issue. As described in Vignette 5 in section 5.3, tackling racism was an important area of focus at Riverdale. This was developed partly in response to the perception that discriminatory views are prevalent in the local, largely White British, community. Rather than being pitched as an intervention for minority groups who might be discriminated against, Riverdale's work to tackle racism was viewed as whole-school work, dedicated to educating students and staff about what racism is and how it operates in education and wider society. In this way, the work tied back to the inclusive aims of creating a culture of belonging for all students. This work was reflected in what students told us in the school.

➤ *...the school doesn't accept any discrimination. So if that happens we all know that it will be sorted out immediately. (Year 8 student, Riverdale)*

At Riverdale and Philip Otter, students spoke with pride about embracing diversity and respecting one another regardless of any differences. In Philip Otter several students mentioned the impact that the high profile LGBTQI+ extra-curricular group had on fellow students feeling more comfortable to be themselves and get involved with activities such as the annual school play. Similarly, students in Greenway had developed a lunchtime club focused on LGBTQI+ identities, which was well-attended and mentioned by students and staff alike as evidence of growing acceptance around important minority issues.

➤ *...it's important that like people who are different are also respected and that's what we try to do here all the time. They are treated just the same as us. Just normal kids like. (Year 8 student, Greenway)*

5.2 How do senior leaders create the environment for inclusion?

The last section (5.1) outlined how a commitment to inclusion, broadly defined, was embedded within the core vision and values of the six case study schools. It explored how this commitment was made apparent, most clearly by working to ensure that all students and staff felt a sense of belonging in the school. That section also began to indicate some of the ways in which senior leaders seek to embed their inclusive vision and values: for example by encouraging the use of shared language and understandings (e.g. between equity and equality). The next section (5.3) outlines the practical steps that leaders had taken to develop and refine specific systems, processes and practices for inclusion. This section provides a bridge between these two sections by focussing on the leadership of inclusion, illustrating how senior leaders work to develop cultures that combine high challenge and high support for all students.

The governance of inclusion

In Section 3, we outlined the sampling approach for the case study schools, informed by the School Quality Index (SQI). At that time the SQI itself was still being developed by FFT Education Datalab, so the scores and rankings for individual schools had not been made public. Unsurprisingly, therefore, when the case study schools were first contacted, they were not aware that their data placed them among the most inclusive and high achieving schools in their region. The staff and students in all six schools were certainly aware that their school was among the most inclusive in their local area, often using terms such as 'magnet' to reflect these reputations. However, the motivation for this inclusive work appeared to be deeply intrinsic, based on the shared vision and values

outlined in the previous section, rather than on a desire to achieve external validation. This is not to say that external scrutiny had not played a role in the schools' journeys: five had been judged by Ofsted as less than 'Good' in the past⁴ and in most cases this was described as having spurred a process of change and renewal, with inclusion as a central plank. Nevertheless, we were struck that these schools had developed and sustained a core commitment to inclusion despite the national accountability framework, rather than because of it.

Leaders in all six schools acknowledged that the trust⁵ and/or the school's governing body played an important role in shaping and sustaining the school's inclusive ethos, with Christian faith adding a further dimension in the two religious schools. At Riverdale, an LA maintained school, two members of the Governing Body were interviewed as part of the research. These governors were clearly committed to the school's inclusive vision and described how they held the school's leaders to account for decisions in this area:

➤ *We come with very searching questions and want evidence. We don't believe everything we're told. That's not to say it's not true. But we don't just accept it. We say tell me how you know that? (School Governor, Riverdale)*

For the four schools in trusts, it was clear that the trust was an important source of support and challenge for their inclusive work, although the nature of this support differed quite widely. A key variable was the size of the MAT, since this determined the extent to which the trust could afford to employ central office staff with specific skills in areas such as safeguarding and SEND.

Jacob Gardiner School operates within the largest of the MATs, with more than 10 schools in total. The Principal of Jacob Gardiner described the MAT as "courageously inclusive", while several other interviewees from the school highlighted the role of the MAT Chief Executive in communicating the importance of inclusion:

➤ *It sort of like cascades down from trust level, you know, when we have INSET days or when the CEO speaks to us, inclusion is one of the first things that mentioned... so it's sort of like spoken about all the time and it gets to the point where you live and breath it. (Head of Year, Jacob Gardiner School)*

Jacob Gardiner's MAT was large enough to employ staff in its central team who provided the school with support and challenge, for example through termly quality assurance 'deep dives', as well as more specialist support in areas such as SEND and safeguarding. The Trust also facilitated school to school networks; for example, with school SENDCOs meeting together each term, while the school has drawn on the MAT's internal AP provision in the past. Jacob Gardiner School was also the most clearly trust 'branded' and aligned of the six schools; for example, with trust branded materials visible throughout the school and examples of trust-required changes to the curriculum and school day. The school's leaders described the trust's support as helpful, giving reassurance that decision-making was appropriate:

➤ *Sometimes it's nice to get an external person, like from the trust, to come in and say 'yeah, this student actually is more capable of doing this, you put them on a pathway that they potentially don't need to be on, look at it differently. (Principal, Jacob Gardiner)*

4 The sixth was newly opened within the past decade and had only had one inspection.

5 Four of the schools were in a trust, one was LA maintained and one was Voluntary Controlled (but expecting to move into a Catholic diocesan trust in the near future) (See Section 3, Table 2).

Greenway's MAT includes 10 schools, of which five are secondaries. It has a deliberately small trust-level team, with a focus on "keeping as much of the budget and resources in schools as possible". The Trust's Director of Education described how inclusion is "writ large in our values...every single child regardless of status, background, race or ability has the same opportunities". There are occasions where a particular area of focus is agreed at trust level and must be adopted in each school, for example a current focus is on outcomes for students with SEND. However, the MAT does not dictate particular practices and approaches. Instead, schools have local autonomy to enact their values in ways which best serve their local context:

➤ *One of the great things about our MAT is every school retains autonomy...there are trust wide collaborations, but we have autonomy over our decision making. (Principal, Greenway)*

As a sponsored academy, Philip Otter School serves a more deprived cohort with much higher levels SEND than the other two local secondary schools in its trust. The school's leaders explained that, given these circumstances, the trust's leaders had allowed the school to identify and prioritise its own areas for development, including a core focus on inclusion. In addition, the MAT had helped the school with two practical challenges: i) recruitment and retention, where the school had historically struggled with "massive challenges", so the trust had encouraged the movement of staff across the group, including the current headteacher and several members of SLT; ii) SEND, where the school has been unable to appoint a SENCO for some time, so the MAT had loaned staff from other schools.

Finally, Shilton Valley is part of a small foundation trust, which is also linked to a wider network of local organisations, including schools and colleges as well as community groups and businesses, all of which are committed to working collaboratively to improve inclusive learning and equitable growth across the city. This wider network has helped to connect the school to many of its external partners, such as the community groups involved in its off-site provision. The foundation trust includes one other local secondary school, which Shilton Valley has supported to adopt many of its inclusive practices, including coaching and restorative practice.

The leadership of inclusion: transformational, distributed and strategic

The case study leaders displayed characteristics and approaches that are common to other studies of school leadership in challenging circumstances (Mongon et al, 2008), in particular transformational, distributed and strategic leadership. There was less consistent evidence of an instructional focus on improving the quality of teaching and learning, but this seems likely to reflect the nature of our interviews geared towards issues of inclusion. Certainly, as we show in Section 5.3, leaders and staff in all six schools had high expectations for students and were focussed on improving learning, teaching, curriculum and academic outcomes.

The challenge, it seems, was how to keep inclusion and achievement in balance: on the one hand avoiding the pitfall of seeing disadvantage or additional needs as an 'excuse' for low achievement, while on the other hand avoiding the risk that 'achievement of the many' dominates everything to the point where children who, for whatever reason, struggle to engage are seen as unfortunate but necessary casualties – a utilitarian, Benthamite

mindset⁶. The need to balance these tensions played out in multiple ways across the research, but are exemplified by the following two statements from leaders:

Avoiding seeing disadvantage as an 'excuse' for low achievement:

➤ *We will do them no favours if they leave with nothing but have felt loved.* (Assistant Headteacher, Philip Otter)

Avoiding the utilitarian mindset:

➤ *We definitely have a mindset of every child every chance, so be it at a class level, or even at a strategic leadership level, it's about constantly drilling down into 'well, why aren't you making good progress in maths? And rather than it be 'well, this is the offer, and the offer is really good, so I don't get why it's not working for you too'... that kind of view that the adults are doing it right and if the children don't get it, well then there's a deficit with the children... it's more painstaking this way, but in some cases, literally, pupil by pupil going through to, well, diagnose really, what are the barriers? And then stepping up to say 'we think this is part of our responsibility'... and I think if we can have an influence on it and make it better then we should step up to that.* (Principal, Shilton Valley)

Balancing these risks required leaders to focus on shared values as a basis for decision making. The senior leadership teams in all six schools talked consistently about their own and their school's inclusive values, often giving examples of how these values permeate decision-making across the school. For example, in Shilton Valley the Executive Principal explained:

➤ *What motivates us is our four values,⁷ which we have tweaked over the years, but are fundamentally the same, which is so simple and so straightforward. But the children can talk to them, the staff can talk to them, the parents can talk to them, we can all hold each other accountable to them.* (Executive Principal, Shilton Valley)

The wider staff we interviewed in all six schools invariably echoed these values, often explaining that this was what had motivated them to work and remain in the school, as these quotes illustrate:

➤ *People know what this school stands for. It's something that, that you live and breathe. And I think I would be surprised if you'd find a member of staff here from the cleaner to the principal that wouldn't share that view.* (Associate Leader, SEN and Autism Provision, Shilton Valley)

➤ *At Philip Otter school several staff explained that they had "self selected" to work at the school: "I mean, there would literally be 1000 places easier to work than here, right? But we work here because you feel like you're making a big difference everyday".* (Assistant Headteacher, Philip Otter)

This staff commitment to shared values reflects the work by school leaders to codify and embed these values in meaningful ways, and to foster high trust cultures, as we explore below. We argue that, in order to achieve this, these leaders adopted different combinations of transformational, distributed and strategic leadership.

6 The philosopher Jeremy Bentham, the founder of utilitarianism, argued that "it is the greatest happiness of the greatest number that is the measure of right and wrong."

7 In Shilton Valley the four values centre on enjoying and achieving in learning, knowing all children well, character and agency, and working in partnership with teachers, parents and the wider community. The values are displayed around the school and feature in core documentation.

Transformational leadership is generally defined as an empowering, motivational and moral form of leadership which ‘wins hearts as well as minds’, in contrast to more transactional, instrumental ‘something for something’ approaches (Bolden et al, 2011). The fact that senior leaders in all six schools emphasised the importance of values in their schools’ vision and approach – and that staff across the schools volunteered these values as a key driver for their work – is a clear example of transformational leadership. Of course, transformational leadership can present risks, for example where it is adopted by charismatic or heroic leaders as a means of furthering their own individual agenda or to boost their ego (Bush and Glover, 2011). However, in the case study schools the focus on shared values had authenticity, in particular because it was combined with distributed leadership, meaning that leaders and staff – including both teaching and non-teaching staff – across the schools felt trusted and empowered to make professional decisions in line with the values and in the interests of students (Gronn 2008; Harris, 2013). In practice, the extent to which staff experienced and embraced this distributed leadership differed across the schools, with some relying more clearly on standardised policies and protocols, while others were more prepared to trust staff’s professional judgement and to allow flexibility in response to student needs, while adhering to shared language, norms and routines. We explore these differences in approach in more detail below, in relation to culture, and in Section 5.3.

Turning to the strategic aspect of leadership, unsurprisingly there were differences between the case study schools as well as common themes. One difference appeared to relate to school size: three of schools had fewer than 900 students and it seemed this small size allowed them to operate more informally, through regular interaction within small staff teams. While the

larger schools also highlighted the importance of informal communication between staff, there was a clearer level of structure in how this worked.

Most aspects of strategy in the case study schools were important but relatively ‘commonplace’, meaning that they could be observed in almost any secondary school in England (for example, decisions about when and how to invest in the school estate). However, many of the responses to these ‘commonplace’ strategic issues were subtly different from those that might be seen in many other schools. Two examples, explored in more detail in Section 5.3, were:

- I. staffing, where three of the schools (schools 1, 2 and 4) are classed in the highest 10% of schools nationally for the proportion of budget spent on support staff according to the DfE’s benchmarking data, reflecting the importance of these non-teaching roles in providing skilled pastoral support to pupils. The Executive Head at Shilton Valley explained this decision as follows:
 - *The way we deploy the staff across the school is disproportionately around the principles or values that we have. So, a large inclusion team, large safeguarding team, as many of the non-teaching tasks being done by administrators or specialists rather than teachers.*
- II. external partnerships, where all six schools were engaged in a range of external partnerships, including with other schools, with local agencies and community organisations and with parents, as outlined below.

In addition, the schools demonstrated four more distinctive forms of strategic leadership.

First was their investment in creating a sense of 'belonging' for all students, based on strong relationships. Building and sustaining these relationships required investment of staff time backed by sophisticated systems, such as the coaching and vertical tutoring models described elsewhere. The schools' senior leaders explained that by working 'upstream' in these ways – by building and sustaining good relationships from day one – they were generally able to pre-empt challenges and problematic behaviours from emerging later on. One outcome was that they were often able to save money that other schools spend on external AP provision:

➤ *There's a school just around the corner, that spends about half a million pounds on having children out of the building. And that's a choice... We spend it on the inclusion team. And you end up with different models. (Executive Principal, Shilton Valley)*

Second was their commitment to giving students second chances and being prepared to put together bespoke packages of support where needed. Working flexibly in these ways is time consuming and often costly, requiring sustained strategic support and investment. Flexibility can also be emotionally demanding for staff, because they cannot rely on standard operating procedures and must always be prepared to consider second chances. The school's leaders therefore paid careful attention to staff well-being and workloads, as we outline in Section 5.3

Third was how these leaders worked to codify and embed practices in line with their shared values. This is something that all school leaders seek to do, but the case study schools were notably adept at developing distinctive school-wide approaches which both reflected and helped to reinforce their inclusive values. One aspect of this was the careful attention paid to language. For example, at

Shilton Valley one leader explained her focus on developing shared language:

➤ *It's about having the same vocabulary, so that when we talk to the children, when we talk to each other, we have terminology that's familiar across the school, that develops our practice in a consistent way, but not in a factory model, repetitive way." (Pupil Opportunities and Development Lead, Shilton Valley)*

At Greenway a set of common phrases has been developed and agreed, which staff are encouraged to use to ensure that interactions are not personal and encounters do not escalate. This includes questioning student behaviour with phrases such as: 'are you being the best version of yourself' or 'are you meeting the school values'. As a member of support staff explained: "You should never underestimate the importance of things you say to students." Related to this focus on language was an impressive level of thoughtfulness about practice and the forensic attention paid to getting key experiences right for students: for example, Jacob Gardiner's work on transition from primary school went down to the level of thinking about which students would travel on which buses together.

Finally, the fourth example of strategic leadership was reflected in how leaders were prepared to draw 'lines in the sand', making values-based decisions which served to force new ways of thinking and working across their schools. Examples included the decisions to stop making permanent exclusions and to close the inclusion/isolation room at Shilton Valley, and the decision to move towards mixed ability teaching in several schools (see Section 5.3). Some of these decisions could be seen as somewhat counter-cultural and brave in England's relentlessly demanding accountability climate. Certainly, these decisions could create additional challenges for school staff, so could not be taken lightly or without extensive

consultation, as we outline below in the section on deliberative and adaptive cultures. Such changes were also introduced iteratively, with regular opportunities to evaluate, review and improve over time.

School cultures: five key features

The transformational, distributed and strategic leadership practices outlined in the previous section clearly served to shape the cultures of the case study schools. As ever, there were many significant differences in culture between the schools, but we identified five aspects that were common to most or all, as follows:

I. TRUST AND PROFESSIONAL JUDGEMENT

In line with the points above about distributed leadership, it was clear that staff in all six schools felt trusted and empowered to make decisions in the best interests of students. This sense of trust was articulated and exemplified in different ways in different schools. For example, at Greenway, every staff member undertakes an independent inquiry question as a core feature of the school's professional development approach, with dedicated staff time and a showcase event at the end of the year to share their learning. Staff are encouraged to try out and evaluate new practices and the Principal explained that he wanted staff to feel safe to experiment, even if that means sometimes getting things wrong - "that's the sort of culture you have to try to cultivate over a period of time". Staff interviewed at Greenway spoke about being given autonomy to pursue their own areas of research and one described it as "an amazing feature of the CPD here".

One of the most powerful examples of trust came from St Joseph's, where we interviewed an experienced member of the teaching staff. He acknowledged the frustration he sometimes felt when a challenging student returned to his class, even after a serious incident, but he accepted these returns because he trusted that his colleagues across school had the bigger picture and were making the right decisions:

➤ *The amount of inclusions that we have sometimes, I'll be honest as a member of staff... you think 'Are they really still here? Are they really still here? What more can we possibly do? But there are people who are working in other areas of school... who have the full story. And I believe, and I trust that they are the people who know the full story. So therefore if that individual is still here... There are people in school who I need to trust and believe that are making these decisions on behalf of those children. And they say because all the interventions that we have in place, we haven't exhausted them all yet. And that really, I guess, is why we, I think, are so good in comparison to many of our peers."* (Teacher, St Joseph's)

II. CONSISTENCY AND FLEXIBILITY

Trusting staff to make professional decisions in the best interests of children carries inevitable risks. What if they make the 'wrong' decision? What if a parent complains because their child is seen to be treated differently from another?

Accepting these risks required a degree of bravery on the part of senior leaders in the case study schools. More importantly, it required the thoughtful development of systems, processes, and routines which strengthened the skills and capacity of staff to make appropriate decisions, outlined in more depth in Section 5.3. Some schools erred more towards imposed consistency here; for example, Greenway had developed a

'Quality of education' handbook, which set out what the start and end of lessons should look, while both Jacob Gardner and Philip Otter had both developed 'SLANT' style mnemonics to structure student behaviour in class.

Shilton Valley had appointed a Director of Research and Development whose job was partly focussed on codifying and embedding shared practices. Shilton Valley had adopted various routines (such as coaching for staff and students and restorative practice), but these were not prescribed in ways which prevented professional judgement. For example, one middle leader explained that in the area of lesson planning:

➤ *Rather than a six-step process where every lesson has to have these six elements in, it's actually about building that awareness of learning and having the same vocabulary, so that when we talk to the children, when we talk to each other, we have terminology that's familiar across the school, that develops our practice in a consistent way, but not in a factory model, repetitive way. (Pupil Opportunities and Development Lead, Shilton Valley)*

This flexibility was particularly apparent when staff needed to support a child who was struggling, as the school's Associate Leader, SEN and Autism Provision explained:

➤ *We have a phrase about being consistently inconsistent... So we're consistent with what we need to be consistent with, and inconsistent when it meets the needs of the child... We've got that flexibility... So we're not a school that has a very strict behaviour policy. We're not a school, that you know, 'if you do this, this will happen'. It's 'if you do this, what do you need to get it right, what can we do to challenge and support you to be on the right line? And that might be a restorative conversation, it might be a restorative conversation with your family, it*

might be changing how your timetable works or changing the subjects that you do. But whatever that child has, it's going to be different from maybe 25 other children. And yet, it can't, it absolutely impacts on staffing, it impacts on time and resource. But it works for that child. (Shilton Valley)

Finally, across all six schools, getting the balance right between consistency and flexibility required a significant and sustained investment in CPD for all staff, but particularly for new joiners, as outlined in Section 5.3.

III. COMMUNICATION AND JOINED UP WORKING

The third common cultural feature across all six schools was how staff communicated with each other and how teams with different but complementary expertise worked together to share information about vulnerable children and to provide appropriate support. This feature clearly relied on the distributed leadership and high trust cultures outlined above. Also noted above is how school size seemed to influence these approaches, with greater reliance on informal relationships in the smaller schools and more systematised approaches in the larger schools.

At Riverdale, in addition to a daily briefing sheet for staff there are weekly meetings held after school for staff members with a specific remit for support, attendance, welfare and safeguarding. If a student is facing particular challenges, meetings are held for everyone who teaches or interacts with the student, in order to ensure a shared and consistent understanding and approach. Similarly, at St Joseph's we observed an after school meeting held for all pastoral heads of year at which individual students were discussed and joined-up support approaches were agreed.

At Shilton Valley, the small-group student coaching sessions held three times each week (see Vignette 3, below) allow staff to identify students who might be struggling for one reason or another. Coaches flag any concerns to a pastoral member of staff if needed. The school's three specialist teams – Safeguarding, Inclusion and SEN – meet together each week, focussing each time on three specific children they are concerned about. These meetings are described as 'solutions focussed', but also involve a 'creative tension', because each team comes with different insights and perspectives on the issues:

➤ *The Safeguarding team, we are coming from the perspective of 'we know everything that's going on with this child and this child might be suffering with X, Y and Z at home'... And the Inclusion team will come from wanting to get this child in, and we need to get them in to lessons and we need to get them learning, which is fine because that's right.... And SEN, if the child's got an EHCP, need to look at things like whether the right support is available in the classroom. (Safeguarding Officer / Deputy Principal of House, Shilton Valley)*

IV. DELIBERATIVE – SENSE MAKING AND DRAWING ON DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES

The fourth aspect of culture apparent across all of the schools was the extent to which staff, students and parents felt listened to, and how leaders then drew on these diverse perspectives as well as wider sources of data and evidence to engage in sensemaking and deliberative decision-making.

Leaders were conscious that this ongoing dialogue with stakeholders was an essential aspect of the collective 'belonging' culture they wanted to sustain, as the headteacher of St Joseph's explained:

➤ *We listen to the staff. We spend lots of time in meetings and in INSETs on strategic planning and giving feedback and taking feedback. We do that. We take the feedback and we go, 'okay you said it wasn't working, so let's do this'. And I think staff know that when we're driving something we're all doing it. We're not just saying this is what you need to do, if we're doing it we're all doing it together.' (Headteacher, St Joseph's)*

Other examples of deliberative listening focussed on student voice. Riverdale, Shilton Valley and Saint Joseph's all explained how they created opportunities for student voice and student leadership as part of their inclusion agenda. Riverdale did this through the Student Parliament, Shilton Valley through training students in Restorative Practice and encouraging them to take on peer support and student leadership roles, and Saint Joseph's through student led events, such as a large scale 'Culture Day' which involves multiple local businesses and community groups and is attended by hundreds of parents each year.

Equally, there were various examples of senior leaders listening to staff and students to identify new priorities. The focus on tackling racism, in particular at Riverdale, was a clear example of leaders identifying and addressing a challenging issue in response to student and staff concerns. Survey participants also reported using student input to develop more inclusive practices, with over four fifths of respondents drawing on student voice activities to inform decisions around curriculum and behaviour policies at least some of the time. During the focus groups, some respondents highlighted the value of student voice activities which go beyond the typical focus on students' views on the school and seek to ascertain what students are interested in more broadly as a basis for developing understanding and relationships.

Finally, at Greenway, the headteacher described several ways through which the school evaluates its inclusive practices. He referred to some of these as soft processes, for instance when he gathers with the senior team for their weekly SLT meeting, he gets a sense of what the climate in the school is like and of any emerging or significant issues. But there was also evidence of a reflective and deliberative approach, with practice continually being reviewed and reflected on, and a willingness to fine tune aspects that are not working as expected.

V. OUTWARD FACING – COMMUNITY LINKED

Finally, all six schools were outward facing in their approach, offering numerous examples of how they worked with their Local Authority, with other schools, and with various community organisations to enrich their inclusive practice. While this might seem an obvious requirement for any school, we were struck that at a time when many schools nationally complain that local services, such as CAMHS, are overwhelmed or non-existent (Greany et al, 2022), these schools were generally able to build on their strong existing relationships with these external services to ensure that students were supported. One example of this was St Joseph’s, where staff gave various examples of external organisations that they worked with to provide support for students, for example in relation to SEMH. They argued that the school was perceived to be a particularly good partner because of its commitment to good data and systems, only referring students once all other avenues have been exhausted:

➤ *We've got a pretty good reputation amongst the agencies for our referrals and we've tried everything else. We've done everything by the book. Now this is where we need to be...*
[Pupil Progress Lead, St Joseph’s]

Shilton Valley was another school with exceptionally strong local partnerships, partly enabled by its innovative local community trust governance. These partnerships grew through its work to develop a community hub over the last 6 years. Having been established by the school, the hub now operates as a separate registered company and has moved onto land on a nearby site, led by a serving police officer. The hub includes:

- a community and youth venue, providing activities for young people and young adults alongside a café run by the young people
- a community garden and small farm
- a small, short term Alternative Provision site (under the school’s URN) that serves students for fixed periods of time from Shilton Valley and other secondary schools in the local area
- the LA have also based their own ‘support hub’ on the site, including family support workers, enabling the teams to build strong relationships within the community.

Leadership structures

One interesting difference between the six case study schools was the length of time that the headteacher and core leadership team had been in post. In two schools (Shilton Valley and St Joseph’s) the executive head or head had been in post for more than 15 years, in both cases working with an established senior team, meaning that they had had time to establish and embed a culture and set of practices over an extended period. This was a continuing process, requiring constant energy and attention, as this quote indicates:

➤ *How are we going to get the best deal for these children, this year, in this school?... If things have changed over the 10 years that I have worked here, the kind of drive and ambition of the leadership team has remained a constant.*
(Pupil Opportunities and Development Lead, Shilton Valley)

In the remaining schools, three had heads who had joined the school more recently (2-5 years) but in all cases they had been promoted from an internal position (either as a senior leader at the school, or from the MAT central team). In one case, Philip Otter, the school had seen significant leadership turnover during the last ten years, with seven different headteachers, some of whom had stayed in post for less than a year. This indicates that while leadership stability over time can be helpful in shaping and sustaining change, it is not an absolute requirement.

Looking at other leadership roles and structures, we see that the schools had adopted a variety of models for the leadership of inclusion. For example, while three schools had invested in non-teaching heads of year, giving these staff the time and flexibility needed to deal with more complex behaviour and safeguarding issues, three had not. Four of the schools included their SENDCo on the SLT, and in two of these schools this was a relatively recent, strategic decision, aimed at ensuring that the needs of children with SEND were informing strategic decision making. In addition, a number of points are worth highlighting in relation to the leadership structures and roles across individual schools:

- **School 1** – “all staff have responsibility for inclusion” (Headteacher), but the named person is a Deputy Head, who is also the school’s SENDCo. This leader has oversight of inclusion, welfare and student support.
- **School 2** – has an Executive Principal and Principal, supported by three Senior Assistant Principals (Inclusion, Curriculum and Character, Progress and Attendance) and the Director of Research and Development. The school’s senior leaders are active in the life of the school – for example, leading coaching groups and donning purple jackets at break and lunchtimes to stand outside with students.

- **School 3** – The headteacher has encouraged ‘diversity of thought’ on the SLT, including by co-opting the school’s SENDCo onto the group. He explained that this sometimes led to different perspectives on how an issue should be approached, but he felt that this diversity of thought was productive and allowed an issue to be viewed in a more holistic way.
- **School 4** – The Principal is supported by an SLT team comprising four assistant headteachers, the SENDCo, and an associate assistant headteacher. The Assistant Head with responsibility for pastoral care, including behaviour, attendance and safeguarding, is not a qualified teacher. This means that although she is the designated safeguarding lead (DSL), the headteacher has assumed the role of the designated person for looked after children because of the necessity to hold QTS to fulfil that role.
- **School 5** – The school’s leadership structure is split into two teams, called ‘Marvel’ (the pastoral side) and ‘DC’ (the academic side), each of which is led by a Deputy Head. ‘Inclusion’ sits between these two deputies. Beneath the Deputy Heads the school has a variety of SLT members with responsibility for areas such as ‘disadvantaged students’, ‘Pupil Premium students’ and SEND (although when we conducted the case study visit that role was currently vacant), alongside the usual subject and operational leaders. The school emphasises the need for leaders to be present and available throughout the school day, with high visibility at pressure points, such as at the school gates.

- **School 6** – The Headteacher is supported by a Deputy Head, three Assistant Heads, a Director of Inclusion (also the SENCo), and a number of pastoral leaders known as Pupil Progress Leaders (similar to Heads of Year). The Director of Inclusion also leads the school’s 20 place resourced provision for young people with Speech, Language and Communication needs (SLCN) and Moderate Learning Difficulties (MLD).

5.3 Systems, processes and practices

This section sets out the key systems, processes and practices through which the case study schools work to achieve inclusion. It structures these in the following sections: pastoral support and relationships; early help, safeguarding and multi-agency support; behaviour, inclusion and exclusion; teaching, learning and curriculum; student voice, parents and community; staffing and CPD; and feedback and continuous improvement. Many of the examples of practice described here are not unique to these schools, and most might be amenable to adoption by other schools wishing to develop more inclusive approaches; however, it is important to remember the extent to which these practices are integrated within the wider inclusive ethos and culture of these schools, as indicated in the previous sections.

I. PASTORAL SUPPORT AND RELATIONSHIPS

Strong pastoral work and a commitment to every child ‘being known well’ by an appropriate adult was at the heart of all of the schools’ ‘belonging’ approaches to inclusion, but this was delivered through a range of different models and structures.

Shilton Valley and Philip Otter both had unique and well developed pastoral models (described in Vignette 3) which provided core structures through which all other pastoral support operated across the schools. The remaining schools had more traditional approaches, with year group-based tutoring, Heads of Year, and related pastoral roles.

At all of the case study schools, staff praised the strength of the schools’ pastoral support teams and saw them as essential to the schools’ ability to create inclusive cultures. At Jacob Gardiner, pastoral leaders perceived themselves as being “at the forefront” of creating the school’s vision for inclusion because school leaders regularly asked them for their insights and opinions on issues to do with inclusion, and they felt that what they said was valued by leaders at both the school and trust level. Students at all of the schools also praised the pastoral teams, and took us to their offices as examples of places they would go to if they were having a difficult day or were worried about something. Individual members of staff also featured regularly on student tours, with the same staff being mentioned as the key person students would go to, irrespective of their year group or house affiliation.

VIGNETTE 3: Pastoral Models: Shilton Valley and Philip Otter

Shilton Valley

The foundation of the school's 'theory of change' is that every child is known well by a trusted adult. Key to this is the school's commitment to coaching circles: all students meet in small vertical tutor groups (8-12 students drawn from Years 7-11) three times each week. Each coaching group is led by a member of staff, who gets to know the students and their parents/carers well over the five years that they work together. The first session, on a Monday morning, is a chance to check in, followed by sessions on Wednesday afternoon (check up) and Friday afternoon (check out). Students sit in a circle and everyone is expected to contribute something in each 20 minute session. Coaches meet with each child's parents or carers six times each year, providing a key point of contact and building strong relationships over time. Attendance at these parent meetings has increased over time to around 80 per cent. The small size of the groups is enabled by the fact that every adult in the school is a coach:

- *What that does is create an inclusive culture. Because if you're on reception or the finance manager or the reprographics person, you are responsible for 8 to 12 children and you are their coach. (Partnerships and Development Lead)*

The following student quotes help to illustrate the importance of the relationships they have with staff:

- *It's not just like a teacher student relationship. We have quite like a deeper relationship with teachers. Yeah, it's like a friend. You can just talk to them about really anything. (Student)*
- *I was born in Africa but came to London and spent most of my life there and I just moved to [city]. I came to this school and... [Miss staff name] we have a really good relationship, and [other staff name]. They were like possibly the biggest help I could ever have with my mental health, just physical, everything. Like they really changed who I was from being like a better version of me, to help me with the way I think, with the way I would talk to people, the way I would act, like they really changed me. (Student)*
- *[The thing I will miss most about this school] is the coaching. I'm worried that nobody will get to know me that well again at college. (Student)*

Philip Otter

The school is structured around what it calls 'the College model' and tutoring and the pastoral support system are delivered through this way of working. The reasoning behind the College system was described as follows:

- *The importance of individual relationships is the foundation of our school, but you can't expect a Headteacher to know 900 students individually. A Head of College can get to know 250 students really well though. [Pastoral leader]*

The school is broken down into four 'colleges', each with a Head of College, non-teaching pastoral officers and affiliated members of SLT. All staff are assigned to colleges. There are no Heads of Year. The staff structure is designed to reinforce the "rounded kind of family essence... so you've got your kind of mum, dad, and kind of grandparent if you like." [HT]

➤ *We're one big family, but we're made up of four smaller families. It's really great. Everybody knows you and they really care about you.* (Student)

All students and staff are assigned to tutor groups of about 18-20 students. Tutor groups are vertical, meaning that they are of mixed age groups including students from years 7 to 10. Year 11 are tutored in single year groups to help them prepare for their exams and next

destinations. Assemblies and whole school competitions are all delivered through the College model, and it was clear that all of the students that we spoke to valued being part of their colleges and what that meant to them, both in terms of identity and being part of a team. Each college also has an office which is staffed throughout the day.

II. EARLY HELP, SAFEGUARDING AND MULTI-AGENCY SUPPORT

In line with the points in 5.2 about the schools being outward facing and community linked, the majority of the case study schools spoke about the strength of their relationships with external agencies as an enabling factor for inclusive practice, while acknowledging that issues with resourcing and availability exist. Schools worked with a range of organisations and services in different ways. For example:

- Shilton Valley paid into a local cluster arrangement which provided access to specialists, such as counsellors, family support workers, and emotional wellbeing workers when needed. See also Shilton Valley's community hub described above.
- Philip Otter hosted their MAT's SEMH provision on the school site, within which student received specialist, therapeutic support.
- Saint Joseph's worked closely with two specific organisations: MAPEX (a Social Work and Therapy service that works with pupils and their families), and YFF (an organisation that provides emotional wellbeing and mental health support).

Shilton Valley and Saint Joseph's also employed staff who were from non-teaching backgrounds, such as social workers, therapists and police officers. For example, the provision lead for Saint Joseph's Learning Support Centre is a qualified counsellor rather than a teacher, and there are three qualified social workers in Shilton valley's Safeguarding team.

The schools also saw it as part of their responsibility to support parents in engaging with external agencies when necessary. Pastoral Leaders at Philip Otter expressed a sense of deep pride that families knew they were able to come into the school and ask for help and support "with 100% confidence that I will go 'sure, absolutely, I'll get that sorted'" (Pastoral Leader).

In addition, Philip Otter and Riverdale ran food banks for the local community. At both schools, these had been set up and were run by members of non-teaching staff who had felt passionately that they wanted to do more to support local families who were struggling. As well as the food banks themselves, these staff members also fundraised for and ran breakfast clubs for students ensuring that every student had access to food before school.

VIGNETTE 4: Riverdale's Early Help offer

Early help at Riverdale is comprised of three levels of support.

The first stage includes a team of voluntary pastors from different local churches who come in to work one-to-one with students, for instance as reading buddies or to provide emotional support. Staff refer students for this support, and students engage on a voluntary basis. Students can also access a 6-week programme to support with strategies to manage anxiety, depression and anger. 10 students are also currently accessing mentoring support provided by teaching assistants.

Level two includes referrals to outside agencies who specialise in a variety of areas, such as:

sexual violence, support for young people who have parents with addiction issues, domestic violence in the family home, and bereavement support. Some students arrive with input from these organisations already in place, whilst others are referred in as issues come to light during students' time at Riverdale.

Level three is classified as intensive support and is where an early help assessment is required for the family, to assess more significant issues, which may reach the threshold for involvement from social care.

Data showing which students have accessed the different levels of early help support are reported at the weekly safeguarding meeting.

III. BEHAVIOUR, INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION

Approaches to behaviour management

All of the case study schools had thought strategically and systematically about their approaches to behaviour management. School leaders described approaches to behaviour that had high expectations at their heart, and were based on school cultures that valued consistency and simplicity. The expectation was for staff to react to behaviour incidents "calmly and consistently" (Greenway), "with fidelity" (Philip Otter), and "without ambiguity" (Jacob Gardiner). The Headteacher at Saint Joseph's explained that she expected staff to always respond to

behavioural challenges with "empathy and understanding", and that staff were trained to use "the smallest tool to crack the nut...".

In order to achieve this, all schools except one used a version of a '3 strike' behaviour model,⁸ but each had a strong emphasis on student ownership of their own behavioural choices and consequences. Whilst not all of the schools explicitly used the language of restorative practice, there was an inherent expectation built into the '3 strikes' that at each stage students would have an opportunity to reflect on their behaviour or have a restorative conversation with their teacher and/or peers. At Saint Joseph's this process was described succinctly as "chance, choice and consequence".

8 Where students are given three chances to correct their behaviour.

It was common for the third strike to result in a detention for the student. At Jacob Gardiner and Saint Joseph's this was seen as an opportunity for restorative work. Detentions are held on the same day they are issued to allow for the member of staff who has given the detention to spend time with the student, reflecting on their behaviour and the actions that led to them receiving the consequence. This is seen to provide a 'fresh start' for the student the following day.

Two of the schools used 'embedded routines', similar in style to 'SLANT' (as made popular in Doug Lemov's 'Teach Like a Champion'⁹), which stands for: Sit up, Listen, Ask and answer questions, Nod your head, Track the speaker. Lemov describes these as "base expectations – default behaviours conducive to learning in class that we want students to demonstrate as a matter of habit." Such approaches are seen to help make expectations clear and easy to remember and follow. At Jacob Gardiner, these embedded routines were codified as part of a wider behaviour and expectations policy known as 'The Jacob Gardiner Way' which is displayed prominently throughout the school:

➤ *It's a document that kind of goes through things like entrances to lessons, how to line up to lesson, how to go into the lesson, what you do at the start of a lesson, what to do when the teacher wants to get you quiet... we have a thing at school, which is 3-2-1 and then the teacher will say [SLANT], which is an acronym and the kids will then sit with hands still, looking up, silent. And it's like those embedded routines we do across for everybody. And we make it really, really clear. (Headteacher)*

Interviewees argued that the simplicity and clarity of 'The Jacob Gardiner Way' was designed for

students "to be successful". The Headteacher also believed that these routines supported the inclusion of SEND students:

➤ *I also think it works for our SEND students because it's calm and it means that they can enter the classroom with everybody else...It's really simple. It's really straightforward.*

However, the Heads of Year acknowledged that there will always be individual students for whom these routines are challenging, and therefore the expectations have to be adapted accordingly. When questioned as to whether or not other students would feel this was equitable, or 'fair', they responded that other students wouldn't even need it explaining to them. The headteacher was clear that whilst there might be differences in how individual students achieved the behavioural expectations, the behaviour policy itself is not "differentiated" – "that's certainly not what our belief is, that you lower your expectations for certain students."

At Philip Otter, the embedded routines were a more recent addition to the school (having been introduced at the beginning of the school year). The majority of school staff and students that we spoke to believed that [SLANT] was a good thing, because it made the expectations of the school clearer and they felt that staff were following it with fidelity across the school. However, some of the older students told us that they believed that it had introduced a "degree of hypocrisy" into the school behaviour system, because:

➤ *On the one hand they are telling you that you need to be in school, and you need to be in all your lessons, and you can't even miss five minutes without it causing all sorts of issues... and then they are telling you that you didn't look*

9 Lemov, Doug, et al. (2016) *Teach Like a Champion Field Guide 2. 0: A Practical Resource to Make the 62 Techniques Your Own*, John Wiley & Sons. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/nottingham/detail.action?docID=4631565>.

like you were sitting up enough or actively engaging enough and they take you out of the lesson and put you into the conference room and you just get to read your book for the rest of the day. How is that right? (Year 11 student)

Inclusion rooms

Shilton Valley was the only school that did not have an 'inclusion room' of some sort, although titles and descriptions of these spaces varied widely amongst the case study schools. Senior Leaders at Shilton Valley saw the closure of the school's isolation room as part of the school's journey to becoming more inclusive:

➤ *It was around about this time (i.e. 2014) that we closed our inclusion room. So we used to have what people called an isolation room... And we decided just to shut it and say we're not doing that anymore. And it's only a small detail, but it's actually, it's another door closes, another condition that the organisation had to work to. We've never reopened it. I mean, some children need to be out of lesson and we have to deal with that as appropriate. (Executive Head)*

An overview of the other case study schools' 'inclusion room' type spaces follows:

- **Riverdale** – 'The Riverdale Support Centre': This space aims to support pupils and their families by removing barriers to learning and participation. It has recently been assigned a repurposed building on the school grounds. Students are triaged by a member of staff at the building entrance. The building includes work stations for pastoral staff, a row of desks with opaque partitions where students can work following, for example, removal from a lesson, and two small rooms where students who are upset or distressed can sit and talk with staff. The final room is set out as a teaching space, with individual desks and

electronic whiteboard facilities. Qualified teachers, particularly of English, Maths and Science, are timetabled to deliver lessons in this space, helping students who have been removed from lessons to stay engaged with the curriculum.

- **Greenway** – 'Retrack' and the 'KS3 Support Hub': Greenway had two separate spaces that functioned as 'inclusion room' type spaces. Firstly 'Retrack' is a narrow room with around 6 desks, each with a PC, and a seat for a member of staff. Students work on the PCs, using google classroom to access work set by the teacher. The same member of staff is always in Retrack, and this consistency is felt to be important for the students. Students go to Retrack if they have been removed from a lesson and not for more than a maximum of three days. Greenway had also recently repurposed an area in the school as a Key Stage Three support hub, which caters for a small group of students who are at risk of permanent exclusion. This was developed to respond to issues that emerged after the pandemic, with a spike in undiagnosed SEND and high levels of social emotional and mental health needs (SEMH). The support centre caters for up to 8 students at a time and acts "as a first base for students at risk of exclusion or who aren't thriving in all aspects of school, so they've got a place to come for breakfast in the morning, so a bit of a soft landing so they can get off to a good start in the day without immediately coming into contact with harder edged processes and structures" (Principal). In comparison with the same point last year, fixed-term exclusions are down by half (from 8 to 4), which the principal sees as emerging evidence that this approach is working.

- **Jacob Gardiner** – ‘The Inclusion Room’: This was a small, office space. Staff explained that the inclusion room is generally only used for mentoring, restorative conversations and early intervention work, led by the Behaviour Manager, with only “the most difficult students” occasionally ending up there for any considerable part of the day: “we don’t want people in there backwards and forwards.” (Headteacher)
- **Philip Otter School** – ‘The behaviour and attitudes provision’. This is a large room on the top floor of the school which is manned by a specific provision team who are trained in trauma awareness and restorative practice. When we visited this provision we observed approximately 18 students present, all of whom were working on laptops. We were told by the staff in the provision that the students follow ‘online learning’ that aligns with the content of the lessons they are missing, and that all teachers provide this for all of their lessons.
- **Saint Joseph’s** – ‘The Learning Support Centre’ and ‘The Seclusion Room’. The ‘learning support centre’ (LSC) is for “students who are struggling in mainstream lessons... causing disruption and distraction or are overly emotional in response to situations” and is led by a qualified counsellor rather than a teacher. Students are selected to attend the LSC based on “who’s getting in trouble in lessons... let’s get them out for a bit, let’s give them a bit of time in a quieter environment, try and find out what the issue is.” Students are withdrawn for one week initially and given a “full cognitive assessment with speech and language.” When students are attending the LSC, they are still expected to follow the majority of the curriculum with teachers still setting them the same work as their classmates, but they complete it in the environment of the LSC. Once they have completed a week, the centre leader will

support them to reintegrate into mainstream classrooms. The seclusion room comprises a series of booths at which students work. It offers a different type of provision, with more of a focus on consequences and punishment than the LRC. Students only usually attend the seclusion room for periods of half a day at a time, where they complete work individually and undisturbed.

Use of alternative provision (AP)

Greenway and Shilton Valley both ran their own offsite internal alternative provision units, and a third, Philip Otter, was planning on opening one next September (this is an offsite provision that is within a school’s own URN). In all three of these cases, the main reason given for the need for this provision was a lack of high quality and affordable alternative provision in the local area, alongside evidence that when they have removed students from mainstream because the students couldn’t cope, student outcomes in the AP didn’t actually improve, leading schools to the conclusion that “they would have been better off with our staff and in our school” (Headteacher, Philip Otter). This view was shared by Saint Joseph’s, even though they do not have an internal AP, meaning that AP was only to be used in response to extreme behavioural cases, or where the school believes a student will be better served elsewhere or as a last resort:

➤ *If they are not going to make it here, they’re probably not going to make it anywhere.*
(Headteacher, Saint Joseph’s)

At Shilton Valley, the internal AP unit was attached to the community hub providing access for students to the farm and recreational areas, whilst also giving them experience of the volunteering and community opportunities that were run through the hub.

The remaining two schools reported using AP only rarely. Jacob Gardiner had used external AP in the past, including their Trust's own small AP unit, but they did not have any students accessing off site provision at the time of the case study visit. However, the headteacher explained that this doesn't necessarily mean that they won't use AP again if they find themselves at that point with a student.

Exclusion

The case study schools represented a continuum of perspectives on the use of Permanent Exclusion (PX), from the Headteacher at Shilton Valley, who saw his commitment to never excluding a child as fundamental to the school's inclusive approach, to the headteacher at Saint Joseph's:

➤ *I'm not one of these heads that thinks that you should never, ever exclude... I think it's really important to have lines that you won't cross or, you know, you kind of just have to understand that there are actually consequences to actions... And that might sound bad or strict or whatever, but actually, in practice, we are very inclusive, but always with the right to do so. One example of that is... if somebody brings drugs into school, we will permanently exclude them... And that's important because drugs are everywhere outside of school. (Headteacher, St Joseph's)*

In practice, the head at St Joseph's explained a recent situation where she had told the school that two students had been permanently excluded, but in fact she had arranged a managed move to another school for them as she wanted to avoid them being left not in education.

For the other case study schools, where the exclusions policies were not so clearly defined, this was clearly an area of tension, and one in which school leaders grappled with how to balance the need for consequences with the

schools' own visions and values. Headteachers described situations in which they had done everything they could to avoid permanently excluding students, but admitted that they sometimes found it unavoidable. The Headteacher at Jacob Gardiner also explained that he sometimes faced challenges from teachers and students for not excluding students: "how do we balance this up? We still need to give people a consequence for doing things wrong."

IV. TEACHING, LEARNING AND CURRICULUM

Many aspects of teaching, learning and curriculum in the case study schools were similar to what you would expect to see in most secondary schools. We focus here on five more distinctive aspects: whole school literacy; student learning agreements; moves away from setting and streaming; curriculum and enrichment; and diversity and curricula that helps to tackle racism.

Whole school literacy

Four of the six case study schools regarded their whole school approaches to literacy (and specifically reading) as key enablers for their inclusive practice. These went beyond 'bolt on' or 'intervention' based approaches, and focussed on embedding practice across the whole school and involving all members of staff, including non-teaching staff in some schools. Schools perceived literacy to be a key issue for inclusion because it could mitigate the isolation and social exclusion that students and their families experienced if literacy rates were poor, and this was seen to be specifically true for EAL students, and those in communities with high levels of poverty. Literacy was therefore understood by the schools as a 'social justice' issue, and an area in which teachers saw their responsibility of one of closing the gaps between their own students, and others in more affluent communities.

All of the schools who highlighted literacy as an element of their inclusive practice had extended responsibility for it beyond their English departments, and staff from across the schools had received training in supporting reading specifically. Each of these schools had developed similar types of layered offers, whereby students who were identified as most in need received higher levels of support, often being removed from lessons for small group literacy sessions with a specialist teacher. Then there was a whole school

element that was woven into subjects across the curriculum, complemented by regular literacy activities that were undertaken in tutor time, such as collaborative reading and peer reading.

At a fifth school, Shilton Valley, during the case study visit we observed a staff CPD session on student reading ages. So, while Shilton Valley did not explicitly include reading or literacy approaches as part of its inclusive practice, it was clear that the issue was a wider school priority.

VIGNETTE 5: The Reading Curriculum at Greenway

Greenway's reading programme was highlighted as a core area of work that underpins inclusion and as a key way that the curriculum responds to students' contexts. This has been developed in response to a perception that some students are "linguistically impoverished" (Principal and SLT Reading Lead). This practice is connected with enhancing opportunities for students: "many of our students come from word poor homes, word poor backgrounds... and we know a greater volume of vocabulary unlocks doors" (Principal).

The reading curriculum was developed to support students' reading skills and access to knowledge and ideas, and to develop reading cultures: "to immerse students in as much good quality reading as possible so they leave Key Stage Three knowing and using more words, and using them in different contexts" (Principal).

The reading curriculum is based on a Reciprocal Reading approach and students typically study a text for two lessons before they move on. A senior leader for reading was appointed, and a new department for reading has been created in the school. This work started with staff CPD on "the science and art of teaching reading" (Principal).

To date 44 staff have been trained to deliver the reading curriculum. Students each have three hours of dedicated reading every two weeks, led by a team of teachers from across subjects. As part of this focus on reading, all students' reading ages have been calculated.

The reading lead, who is also head of English, said that students' vocabulary is improving, alongside their ability and confidence to decode words they do not immediately recognise, drawing on the work they have done on etymology during their dedicated reading lessons. The Assistant Principal for SEND has observed a reduction in behaviours associated with students struggling to access the curriculum.

Student learning agreements

Several of the schools used student learning agreements with the aim of instilling collective ownership and responsibility for learning. At Shilton Valley all teachers agree these with their classes at the start of each year. These include some non-negotiables, such as banning the use of mobile phones in class, but also some aspects that will be agreed with each class. At both Jacob Gardiner and Saint Joseph's there were more generic, whole school 'Charters' which codify the school expectations and set out a criteria for what the students are expected to do each term, including things like attendance and punctuality, engagement in lessons, homework completion, recognition points and attendance at after school clubs.

At Saint Joseph's The Charter is supplemented by the Saint Joseph's 'Respect Card' which is a behaviour and recognition log that every student is given every half term. The card has different sections (such as uniform and attitude) where behaviour issues can be logged, for instance "coat on indoors", "not following instructions first time given" and "too loud/inappropriate language". Next to each issue there are three columns: choice, chance and consequence where challenges to behaviour are logged. This means that the students always get three chances to correct their behaviour in line with the behaviour expectations, as described above. There is no consequence for a behaviour mark in the first two boxes, but a third mark in the same line results in a detention. All students who get to the end of each half term with blank cards are entered into a prize draw within their form group and can win a gift voucher.

Moves away from setting and streaming

All of the schools used setting or streaming to some degree, especially in core subjects and at Key Stage 4, but several were moving to more inclusive groupings by introducing mixed ability (or mixed prior attainment) classes.

Shilton Valley had recently moved to mixed ability teaching in all subjects in years 7 and 8, while Philip Otter had recently changed to mixed ability groupings for all subjects except Maths, Science, and to some extent English (which they described as a "hybrid model" attempting to move away from rigid sets and teach students in wider and more flexible 'bands'). The Deputy Head at Philip Otter explained that this had been a "massive culture shift [for staff]" because the "best teachers" were no longer teaching "all the top sets". As discussed in Vignette 6, Greenway had also recently changed the way in which they stream students, with a focus on language and a move away from descriptors that suggest ability is in any way fixed.

VIGNETTE 6: Greenway and 'mixed prior attainment groupings' at KS3

Students used to arrive at Greenway Academy and be placed in an "ability band", which they would typically stay in for the next 5 years. Drawing on research from the Education Endowment Foundation and opportunities for a re-think created by the pandemic, Greenway has opted to move to mixed prior-attainment classes in Key Stage 3, with the aim of boosting the confidence of lower prior-attaining students and improving overall attainment. This reflected a desire to avoid having perceived "sink sets" (Principal), and there has been a focus on shifting the language from "ability" to "prior attainment" to move away from any suggestion of fixed ability.

The school does continue to have one lower prior attainment group in recognition of some higher levels of need or particularly low reading ages, but the idea now is that this is fluid, so students are not expected to remain in the

group, and it provides tailored support to allow them to join mixed-attainment groups when ready. Staff meet regularly to discuss how students in this group are getting on and to see whether any might be ready to move into a mixed prior attainment group.

At present this mixed prior-attainment approach is used across Key Stage 3 and in most Key Stage 4 lessons. The exception is English, Maths and Science, where the barrier is the way the GCSE examination papers are tiered. However, the principal's aim is to move towards an entirely mixed prior-attainment model across the school. He explained that there has been some work to get all staff on board with this approach, but that they are starting to see positive outcomes which is helping to convince staff about the merits of the approach.

Curriculum and enrichment

Curriculum was another area in which school leaders used the language of social justice and 'student entitlement' when reflecting on their approaches. The headteacher at Philip Otter explained that a student entitlement to a full, broad and balanced curriculum and an expectation of academic excellence underpinned everything at the school, including the school's approach to inclusion.

Access to a broad curriculum was also seen as a facilitating factor in creating equity for students, providing the same opportunities as peers in more affluent areas, and ensuring that different options are kept open for students as long as possible.

Greenway and Saint Joseph's both spoke about the impact that the introduction of the EBACC had had on their curriculum offers, with school leaders at Saint Joseph's describing how it had led to a narrowing of subject options for students. In contrast, the Headteacher at Greenway saw the EBACC as a positive influence, since it had forced them to increase their offer to students (such as introducing a foreign language for all students when previously it had only been available to higher achieving students).

To broaden their vocational offer, Saint Joseph's also ran an on-site construction skills centre. Although the centre didn't offer a formal qualification, students could take it as an option and learn skills such as bricklaying and plastering.

School leaders saw this as an important part of their curriculum offer by providing students with skills and opportunities that they may go on to use in the future.

Several of the schools had also found ways of increasing the time that students could access support to revise and do homework outside of the core school hours, underpinned by a commitment to equity and a view that not all students have access to supportive parents and a suitable study space at home. At Greenway, school leaders had created daily 'Study Zone' sessions after school with the aim of supporting students to "amplify their learning" (Headteacher), and secondly, they

had created a programme of Saturday morning tuition in the school (pre-dating the more recent government-funded catch-up initiatives) upon which they spend about £70,000 per year. The tuition is delivered on a 1-1 or small group basis and is focused on English, Maths, Science and Humanities subjects.

Furthermore, the case study schools also demonstrated a commitment to extra-curricular learning and 'enrichment' activities, again linking them to issues around equity of access (see Vignette 7).

VIGNETTE 7: Enrichment activities at Shilton Valley and Saint Joseph's

Shilton Valley

The enrichment offer (known as 'flexible learning') at Shilton Valley is diverse and very well attended by students across most year groups. Many of these groups are run by non-teaching staff, building on their work as coaches. All coaches encourage students to attend flexible learning (including in meetings with parents and families) and help find areas that will excite students. This is seen as an important vehicle for encouraging student engagement and attendance in school more widely. The school keeps a register of attendance at these sessions, which is broken down by club and student group. This shows trends – Years 7 and 8 engage well, there is then a dip in Y9, followed by an increase in Years 10-11 when the clubs become more focussed on exam preparation and academic work. In response, the school is now exploring more volunteering opportunities for Y9 – given this does not appear 'childish' and can engage

their interests. For example, 150 students volunteered at a school open morning, while the school is part of a local partnership with sports teams, climate action groups, and charities which provides further opportunities.

One example of a flexible learning offer geared towards inclusion is run by the Safeguarding Officer. This is aimed at children in Year 7 or into Year 8 who are flagged up as needing to do some work socially – "it's either that they're being flagged because socially they're not finding friends, or they're struggling a bit to maintain friendships, or due to their vulnerabilities, they're not having the same opportunities to partake in activities". The seven-week programme runs twice a year for around 14 children. Every Thursday, between 3-7pm the group is taken out as a cohort to various activities – bowling, the climbing wall, the tropical world, a farm, a meal.

Saint Joseph's Roman Catholic School

Saint Joseph's launched a new extracurricular programme this year under the direction of a member of the senior leadership team. The programme is focussed on "enrichment type activities" and is supplemented by a reward and recognition scheme that acknowledges student involvement in extracurricular activities. This area was identified as a priority because so many students were missing out on the experiences and opportunities that other young people in wealthier areas would expect to have access to.

Each week an extracurricular timetable is published, and form tutors are encouraged to speak to their students about attending a club. The school has started using diagnostic data to understand patterns of attendance at extra curricular clubs, and to identify groups

of students who are struggling to attend. The data shows that the number of students who had never attended an after school club fell from 192 at the beginning of September, to 100 students by the end of the autumn term. The school's data also showed that students with SEND were attending in lower numbers, and when they spoke to staff and children they realised that this was because they were often the students most reliant on school transport that wasn't flexible and they could therefore not stay after school. In response, the school started a separate lunchtime extracurricular club for students with SEND, and they have now seen an increase in attendance from 4% of SEND students to 29% of SEND students attending the club.

Diversity and a curricula that helps to tackle racism.

With the exception of Greenway, all of the schools were involved in work to embed diversity within their curricula and to develop anti-discriminatory practice. For several of the schools this was seen as especially important because the schools were located in areas that were traditionally 'white working class' but had seen rapid demographic changes over the last decade, sometimes creating tensions in the schools' cohorts and the communities that they serve. As discussed below, representation in the staff body and especially amongst leadership was seen to be a key vehicle for mitigating against some of these tensions, alongside embedding a commitment to diversity throughout all elements of school life, such as in Riverdale's work to tackle racism, discussed further in Vignette 8. Sensitivity to

student diversity was referred to as a key inclusive practice by some focus group respondents, alongside the importance of staff sharing their own experiences of discrimination with students to build rapport and understanding.

VIGNETTE 8: Riverdale's work to tackle racism

An area of practice that has become an integral part of Riverdale's approach to inclusion in recent years is its work to tackle racism. This is led by a member of staff who described his experiences of seeing racism not adequately dealt with in schools throughout his career. He described several stages in Riverdale's development of its work, some of which was informed by the recommendations from The Runnymede Trust's report on Racism in Secondary Schools, particularly in relation to racial literacy, curriculum and policies. The lead for tackling racism spoke of working towards a reconceptualisation of this issue in the school as a first step. He highlighted that a barrier to schools undertaking sustained work on racism is that they see racist incidents as a poor reflection on the school, and staff can struggle to accept that racism is something that happens in their classroom. However, what he tried to convey to staff is that, in his view, racism is rife across the country and is therefore potentially present in all schools, so should be acknowledged and dealt with.

From this starting point, work was undertaken to develop the racial literacy of school staff. An entire staff INSET day was dedicated to the topic of tackling racism. Staff were introduced to a definition of racism as "prejudice with power", and provided with a copy of the book 'why I'm no longer talking to white people about race'. He reported mixed responses

from staff initially, which were used to open up discussions and challenge views and perceptions.

The impact has been gradual, but staff have become more vigilant and understand the process they need to follow if incidents of racism are reported or observed. Anti-discriminatory practice is now one of the 3 objectives that all staff have as part of their performance management.

The school's approach has been informed by feedback from students from minority ethnic groups. There has been an important shift away from tackling racism work being approached through sporadic or what were termed 'tokenistic' events. These sometimes resulted in a spike in racism, and students from minority ethnic groups told staff that they did not always enjoy the heightened focus on them during black history month. Instead the focus is on tackling racism being present and integrated throughout the school and its practices.

Teachers and support staff referred to the school's work to tackle racism when we spoke with them, and felt it had made an important difference to how such issues were being addressed. Ofsted noted this area of work in the school in their recent visit.

V. STUDENT VOICE, PARENTS AND COMMUNITY

Student voice

At all of the schools, student voice was valued and students were empowered to be an active part of the schools' approaches to inclusion. At Saint Joseph's, a commitment to student voice is embedded into the school culture and students are given responsibility for several areas of school life. One of these is whole school events, such as the school 'Culture Day', a planning meeting for which was observed during the case study visit. During this meeting, the researchers observed teachers "skillfully" facilitating students to take on significant responsibility for the planning and delivery of this large scale event (approximately 700 people were expected to attend). It was clear that whilst teachers were on hand to assist with the logistics of the day, students confidently assumed leadership roles, and engaged in complex decision-making processes.

At Riverdale and Jacob Gardiner staff and students also referred to the ownership and responsibility that students themselves take on for ensuring that the values and ethos of the school are respected by the student cohort. At Riverdale this happens through a large and active Student Parliament, populated by confident and articulate students from different year groups, many of whom are from minority ethnic groups. Parliament members said that they have ongoing, informal conversations with students throughout the school and feedback comments and ideas to other students on the parliament, and also to school leaders. They believed this was a strong mechanism for student voice and it garnered more authentic and usable feedback. In this way, students felt they were able to explicitly shape the direction of school practices and policies,

and voice their views and concerns. At Jacob Gardiner, examples were more informal and involved staff and students observing their peers using the the language of 'The Jacob Gardiner Way' amongst themselves: "That's not nice. That's not how we treat each other. That's not 'The Jacob Gardiner Way'". A senior leader reflected that: "it's nice to hear them say those expectations."

Perhaps the most developed use of student voice was Shilton Valley, as described in Vignette 9. Students at the school play an active role in the school's use of Restorative Practice, and receive training and support to work as coaches and peer counsellors, helping staff to manage student behaviour in class, and providing peer support to students whose behaviour falls below expectations.

VIGNETTE 9: Student roles in Restorative Practice at Shilton Valley

Shilton Valley adopted Restorative Practice (RP) in 2011. While RP permeates all aspects of the school, it is particularly significant in how behaviour issues are conceptualised and addressed. Rather than a behaviourist 'rewards and sanctions' approach to behaviour, RP emphasises the need to involve students in considering the needs and responsibilities of everyone involved in a situation. This does not preclude the possibility of sanctions but ensures that these are used in combination with restorative approaches so that students understand the implications of their behaviour and take responsibility for it. This means that teachers and staff are empowered to address issues on an individual basis, taking into account the student's particular needs as appropriate, rather than applying a standard set of sanctions or relying on a central behaviour team:

- ▶ *We don't have a behaviour system per se, like we don't have a three strikes and you're out... And we do a lot of work with new staff to help them understand that process because... when you've worked in other schools where there's like a real strict sort of list, we don't have that. So I think what people most identify that inclusive way of working is through RP where we're actually developing teachers and support staff's toolkit, a myriad of ways that you can work with different pupils to get them to be successful. So it's high challenge, high support, I think, sits at the base of that.*
(Associate Leader for Staff Development)

When RP was first introduced, the school's staff were given extensive training to enable them to understand and adopt restorative approaches.

In addition, all students are trained in RP and many also take on peer support roles, as explained by this interviewee:

- ▶ *We train all year 7 pupils to a basic extent... and then they can decide whether they want to go on to become an RP Rep. So they'll do, sort of, a second set of training with myself, which will focus a little bit more on restorative practise... So what kind of questions we might ask somebody if we're having a restorative conversation with them... And then when they get to year 10, over the last couple of years they've had the chance to become what we call a restorative coach. (Safeguarding TA)*

Various interviewees explained how RP had become embedded over time, so that students as well as staff had internalised this way of working. The RP approach aligns with the 'every child every chance' and 'equity not equality' beliefs of the school, outlined above. The headteacher explains how this reflects a nuanced set of judgements, which are fundamentally different to the approach in most schools:

- ▶ *I hear so many of my peer group of other heads and principals ending up having to do something with a child because they've set up a culture where, you know, well, 'he swore at a senior leader, and if you swear at senior leader'... these things, I think, are foolish and unhelpful. If you don't allow children to restore things, you end up down cul de sacs, and in education cul de sacs are very expensive, because they nearly always involve specialists. (Headteacher)*

Working with parents

There were contrasting experiences of parental engagement between the schools, with Shilton Valley, Saint Joseph's and Jacob Gardiner benefitting from particularly high levels of parental support. At Saint Joseph's, school leaders attributed this to depth of work that is done with parents to encourage them to buy in to the school's vision right from the start:

➤ *There's no conflict about any of these expectations because they know that we're all on board and we all support each other and also it comes from the parents as well because we work very hard to get our parents on board and for them to understand where we're coming from. So it's like we're all singing from the same hymn sheet really. We get them to buy into our vision from the get go. We know that that we do feel that we're a family and in this family you know we're the parents and you're the children and we love each other and we care for each other. (Headteacher, Saint Joseph's)*

At Jacob Gardiner, parents were described by the Headteacher as being "very, very supportive of everything that we do and they want their children to come here. [As a result]... they work with us to make sure that their children are on board with [everything we do] as well." However, the school also experienced challenges as a result of the strength of their reputation with parents, especially in relation to the parents of students with SEND: "we're a victim of our own success!" (Lead Teaching Assistant). As a small school, Jacob Gardiner is incredibly oversubscribed (last year they received 750 applications for 150 places in Y7), and their reputation for inclusivity and their approach to SEND means that parents from all over their city and county are now requesting the school, and getting it named on their child's EHCP.

This is creating capacity issues at the school, especially where the school might struggle to meet the needs of young people with significant SEND needs.

Riverdale, Greenway and Philip Otter all described relationships with parents that were more challenging, which resonated with the focus group discussions where parental engagement was cited as a key challenge to inclusion. However, it was clear that parental engagement was a priority at all of the case study schools, and viewed as a vital aspect of inclusive practice. Similarly to Shilton Valley, Riverdale and Philip Otter referred to improvements in parental engagement as the reputation of their schools had improved, but both schools also saw their progress in this area as difficult and continuing to be an area for development.

There was a general recognition in these schools that families were facing complex challenges, exacerbated by the cost-of-living crisis, alongside entrenched fears and distrust of schools and teachers. School leaders spoke, therefore, about the importance of approaching parents in a "non-judgemental way" (Headteacher, Riverdale); working with parents and avoiding "blame" which can become "toxic, it's not helpful. We're all muddling through life" (Assistant Principal for SEND, Greenway); and "getting the parents to trust you, building those relationships and speaking to them as I would like to be spoken to as a parent" (Attendance Manager, Greenway).

At Greenway, the Headteacher runs parental coffee mornings to "lift the lid on school and what we are doing, not demonising...keep standards high and the threat low". Through these events he hopes to "...help them to see we are on their side and not forcing our values on them, talking them through what we do".

VI. STAFFING AND CPD

As in all schools, staff recruitment, retention, CPD and wellbeing/support were taken seriously by leaders. We seek here to draw out the distinctive ways in which these issues were addressed in the case study schools.

Staff retention

The majority of case study schools reported stable staff teams, with low levels of turnover. This consistency in staffing was referenced by interviewees as being a key facilitating factor in the schools' approaches to inclusion, because it allowed the vision, values and culture to become embedded and to allow systems, processes and practices to be refined. This stability also allowed trust to grow within the staff group, supporting distributed leadership, collective learning (including from mistakes) and professional agency.

At Jacob Gardiner, they credited their success with SEND students specifically to a well established student support team, who are "renowned for doing well with children with SEND". The long term retention of support staff allowed for the development of meaningful relationships with students, and for their needs to be understood by staff with a depth of knowledge and insight into individual learning needs, student contexts and circumstances. This was seen to be particularly important when creating inclusive environments for students with additional needs and allowing them to flourish and "do well".

Staff recruitment

At four of the schools (Shilton Valley, Greenway, Philip Otter, and Saint Joseph's) new staff were recruited on the basis of their commitment to the school's vision and ethos, as well as on the basis of their skills and experience. This was frequently described as "self-selecting" (or similar) to work at a certain school:

- *"We're the ones that can change society and it takes a certain type of teacher to teach in a school like ours..."* (Teacher, St. Joseph's)
- *"[to be a member of staff at our school] you have to fundamentally believe that your actions can positively influence the outcomes of a young person"* (Assistant Principal, Greenway)

Getting recruitment right was therefore seen as central to the schools' approaches to inclusion, and an enabler of the vision sharing and buy-in that underpins the way in which these schools operate.

The majority of the case study schools described how their reputation in the local areas went some way towards easing the recruitment challenges that the education sector is currently experiencing more widely, and in several cases there were examples of potential candidates approaching schools directly as a result of wanting to work for that particular school. However, Philip Otter was the exception, admitting that they continued to struggle with recruitment, especially for specialist roles such as SENCo. Senior leaders believed that this was as a result of the legacy of the poor reputation that the school had 10-15 years ago, when it was seen as a "sink school" with a particularly challenging cohort.

VIGNETTE 10: Shilton Valley – the challenges of recruiting for diversity

For a long time, Daniel* (name changed) was one of only two non-white school leaders in the city. As part of Shilton Valley's focus on inclusivity and belonging, the school made a conscious decision to diversify its workforce with the aim of becoming more representative of the communities they serve. Whilst they found this relatively easy for roles further down the school, they struggled to find suitable candidates for senior roles.

To overcome this the school attempted to run a "blind recruitment process" for an SLT position by removing all of the identifying features of the applicants before drawing up their short list, but they were disheartened to discover on the interview day itself that they had invited a group of entirely white, middle-class women.

Reflecting on what had happened, school leaders realised that the group of people they had invited to interview had the desirable skills, experiences and qualifications for the role precisely because they were white middle-class women.

➤ *"That's not inclusive. Having an inclusive workforce that represents the community it serves is therefore more difficult than you think it is..." [Daniel]*

Shilton Valley is slowly improving the diversity of its staff, and creating a staff body that is more representative of the communities it serves. Interestingly, this has extended into actively recruiting ex-pupils, and at the time of the case study visit, around 15% of the school's staff had previously been students at the school.

CPD

These are schools that take staff CPD, support and wellbeing seriously – teachers at all schools felt well prepared for what they were being asked to do and knew that they could ask for further training if needed.

Whole school approaches to CPD differed, but the following examples indicate the kind of well designed programmes of training and support observed:

- **Shilton Valley:** "a values based approach" which is founded on all staff meeting in their own coaching circles each week, with regular refreshers on the core principles of the school (for example, restorative practice and coaching). The school has adopted a rubric which shows progress from novice to expert in coaching which is used "to help staff, to recognise how you can be continually developing as a coach". New staff are given extensive induction support to ensure that they understand why and how the school's core model operates: "It doesn't matter if you're coming in as admin or if you come in as an associate leader... everybody gets two weeks on coaching, but going round and observing coaching as well" (Associate Leader for Staff Development). The school also invests heavily in externally accredited training (ie Lexia, autism level 1 training, etc)
- **Greenway:** 'an evidence based approach', with an articulated desire to "avoid faddy ideas". The school has a weekly CPD slot timetabled on a Friday morning with a slightly later start for students.

- **Philip Otter:** ‘a staff needs based approach’ where senior leaders engage in the regular reviews of their staff needs, and track skills and strengths to identify areas for development, including through the use of instructional coaching type activities.
- **Saint Joseph’s:** ‘a staff owned approach’, where the same approach to inclusivity and adaption that is used with students is also applied to staff: “we’re talking about people’s entitlement to [training], and you know, to have the same curriculum, but that doesn’t mean that it has to be delivered in the same way...” (Deputy Head)

School leaders saw high quality and consistent CPD as an enabling factor for developing a culture of professional trust, where staff feel trusted to take professional risks and to rely on their own professional judgement. This was most evident at Riverdale, Shilton Valley, and Greenway, where leaders spoke explicitly about how CPD was used to develop teachers who were trusted to operate as professionals. As such, a key element of the CPD programme at Greenway is “the independent inquiry”, an approach which is informed by guidance from the EEF and the Chartered College of Teachers (see section 5.2).

Support and wellbeing for staff

Case study schools were acutely aware that their school contexts and ways of working, especially in terms of relational approaches and providing second chances, could place additional pressures on staff. CPD and support structures were seen as important in supporting staff through difficult periods and in helping to identify when members of staff might need additional support or guidance.

At Philip Otter, senior leaders had identified that staff often felt particularly vulnerable after logging a student safeguarding event on CPOMs, so they had created a process whereby a member of the pastoral team followed up directly, and face to face, with a member of staff immediately afterwards; “not to get any more information about the issue... just to say, are you okay?”. In addition, the Deputy Head designed a ‘deliberate practice’ training session which replicated a disclosure event with a focus on the process and language of reporting the disclosure. Staff were put with a partner that they felt comfortable with and asked to practice: first, what they would say in the moment in response to the student; second, what they would write in an email to the DSL; and third, exactly what they would write in their disclosure report on CPOMs. Similarly, at Greenway, staff wellbeing was seen as an extension of the school’s vision for inclusion, which the headteacher saw as a key lever for staff retention. This had been particularly important during the pandemic when there was an explicit recognition of the challenges that staff were facing, and that treating them with a caring and understanding approach was key to ensuring that they had a staff team left when they came out of the pandemic.

VII. FEEDBACK AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

In all the case study schools, processes for monitoring and evaluating inclusive practice were regular, data rich, and formative. As discussed previously, the schools had well established and effective cycles of staff meetings where real time data was shared, and potential issues were identified early at both the school and student level. The schools also used centralised data intelligently and diagnostically, with senior leaders regularly reviewing data on academic performance, behaviour, and in the case of

Shilton Valley and Saint Joseph's, participation in extra-curricular activities. These data were analysed and used to identify patterns of achievement and areas where there may be emerging levels of need, or individual students who might be demonstrating spikes in behaviour points and therefore might be in need of additional support.

In line with the points made about deliberative sensemaking in Section 5.2, several schools described how staff and senior leaders monitored and reviewed data and different stakeholder perspectives on the school's inclusive work. This included inviting feedback from staff and students, and a willingness to 'fine tune' [Greenway] where necessary. This practice was firmly codified at Greenway, where the headteacher had introduced an "intentional evaluation practice" for all new interventions and changes that were brought into the school. A recent application of this was when the school moved to 'mixed prior-attainment groupings' (see above) where a series of 'quality checks' were planned into the roll out. During these checks the Headteacher drew on the viewpoints and expertise of other senior leaders in the school, alongside specialists from other schools with the school's MAT, inviting them into the school to observe and feedback on particular areas of practice:

➤ *We will bring people in and say 'can we have some objective eyes on that' because you quickly lose your objectivity because you can be quite protectionist about things you've set up. I just want you to probe and interrogate that. Is it as good as we think it is or what aren't we getting right with that?' (Headteacher)*

At Greenway, the MAT also provides an additional layer of scrutiny and support. Members of the executive leadership team visit schools in the trust regularly and engage in informal discussions,

as well as a more formal annual quality assurance process. The director of education at the MAT described their role as:

➤ *Ask[ing] the right questions at the right time. We can become institutionalised and defensive in our own school. The trust's role is to serve, facilitate, help and challenge. To say 'this has shown us this' and 'have you thought about that' and people in the MAT senior team are Ofsted inspectors too which can provide helpful forms of CPD across the trust. (Director of Education, Greenway MAT)*

At Riverside, school governors played a similar role, setting and monitoring progress against the strategic objectives of the school. Governors see their role as to support the school's commitment to inclusion with a strong emphasis on serving the community, and the idea that Riverdale students deserve the same opportunities as other children. Governors are highly supportive of the school and proud of its work. However, they clearly articulated the importance of their role in scrutinising the work of the school. For instance, in relation to pupil premium, they question staff on "where every penny goes" and how the school knows this spend is making a difference.

06

What are the challenges to inclusion?



06 What are the challenges to inclusion?

A variety of issues were identified by interviewees, focus group participants and survey respondents as being challenges for inclusion. These broadly fall into the following five categories:

Post pandemic issues

The pandemic featured regularly in interviews with staff at the case study schools, and was seen to have had a particularly significant impact on students who are now in year 7 and year 8, and who had experienced significant disruption to their last few years of primary education. As a result, transitions between primary and secondary were perceived as having been more difficult than usual, and references were made at half of the schools to the increase in rates of undiagnosed SEND and SEMH needs that students were presenting with. Covid was also perceived to have caused a significant drop in levels of attendance, with school leaders reporting drops to average levels that they had never experienced before.

➤ *How can we teach them if they are not in front of us at school?* (Deputy Head, Philip Otter)

➤ *If they're not sat in front of you, what can you do?* (Headteacher, Greenway)

Covid was perceived to have ramifications for inclusive practice by focus group respondents too, who highlighted increased prevalence of student anxiety and reluctance to attend school since reopening after the pandemic.

However, there were also staff in some of the schools who reported positive outcomes as a result of the pandemic. At Greenway, a variety of

staff (in pastoral, safeguarding and attendance roles) explained how the pandemic had created opportunities for strengthened relationships with parents through the additional outreach work that they had started to do:

➤ *Covid helped a situation for me because we did a large amount of work with families and I built the most valuable relationships at that time* (Attendance Officer, Greenway)

Funding

Funding and lack of resources was named by survey respondents as the biggest barrier that schools face to becoming more inclusive, and it also featured heavily in the focus groups and with case study interviewees. These comments referred to one of four areas:

- I. General school funding
- II. Primary school funding
- III. SEND funding
- IV. External and statutory service funding

Generally, the case study schools felt that they struggled with funding and levels of resource, and this was a barrier to them being able to deliver on their vision for inclusion in the ways that they wanted to. This was seen as a system wide issue, with interviewees also highlighting that they believed lack of resources and funding for primary schools (which tend to be smaller and less well resourced) created a situation whereby students were unable to receive the support that they needed, especially in relation to SEND diagnosis and support. This in turn was seen to lead to challenges at the point of transition to secondary,

with students unprepared to manage themselves during the transition, and needing more intensive support packages from the secondary school throughout this period placing further pressure on the school's available resources.

SEND funding in particular was seen to be challenging for schools, especially for those schools who had developed a very positive reputation for working with young people with SEND. School leaders at Jacob Gardiner explained how they had developed a strong local reputation for working with visually impaired/blind students, and as a result they now had blind students who required full time one to one support with an adult: "[as a small school] that's a lot of our whole student support team, how are we supposed to make that work?" (Student Support Lead, Jacob Gardiner).

Decreases in funding of external and statutory services was also seen to be a major barrier to inclusive practice by respondents from all phases of the research, including the survey, focus groups and case studies. Schools were perceived to be struggling to find and access the support that their students needed. As a result, students were often left waiting for prolonged periods of time, or not being deemed serious enough to meet threshold assessments, so the schools were left to deal with issues that would previously have been managed by professionals or in specialist settings.

Issues related to SEND

As discussed in the previous paragraph, case study schools perceived significant barriers to inclusion as a result of the current levels of funding for SEND, and this was amplified at the schools who had developed positive reputations for supporting SEND students. The headteacher of Jacob Gardiner explained that they were only currently receiving about £3000 per student for students with significant needs, including those

who have one to one support as a requirement on their EHCPs "I'm not going to be able to employ a full-time support for £3000... so the pressure becomes significant."

Beyond funding, interviewees also talked about increasing levels of need across the country pushing existing infrastructure to breaking point, and increasing the thresholds for accessing support at different settings such as special schools. Pastoral leaders at Philip Otter described this as an area that has changed "very rapidly" and one in which schools have struggled to keep up:

➤ *I think across the country, in that context we're seeing a higher percentage of learners coming in to mainstream secondary with very high levels of need and we're having to adapt and learn like where in the past those learners might have opted for special schools... But families want, they want mainstream education, they want normalcy, they want [name] to have access to a really broad and diverse curriculum and all the opportunities. And I think we're having to really kind of to learn how to do things slightly differently for those learners to be successful.*
(Pastoral Leader, Philip Otter)

Having a reputation for being an inclusive school that offers an effective education for students with SEND can lead schools to become stretched if they are required to take a growing number of such students. While this is positive in many ways, there is a risk that the school is asked to take on more than it can cope with. The Headteacher at Jacob Gardiner argued that the school was a "victim of our own success" in relation to SEND; because the school has earned such an excellent reputation locally that parents from all over the city and county request the school for their children, and name it on their EHCPs. This can create challenges for inclusion because of the range of need that the school is therefore catering for:

- *...we've got students where they'll be on an EHCP and they'll name us, and once we're named, obviously we take that student in and we do have some students where we feel it's not always the best place... And we're a very, very small site. We have no additional space, we're 98% capacity. (Headteacher, Jacob Gardiner)*
- *Some of our students, being in a mainstream school for social reasons, for emotional reasons is super, super important. And they do really, really well. But academically, it's not always the right place for them. Because the way the curriculum moves so quickly in keeping up, and because of the levels that they're working at, sometimes primary year one, and then you're trying to keep up with a year 10 and 11... so that's hard, I think socially, sometimes you see the gap there because of their clinical or chronological age compared to their peers, you know, and how they've developed and how they are emotionally, so that's really difficult. (Lead Teaching Assistant, Jacob Gardiner).*

It is not only parents who might be influenced by the reputation of the school's SEND support. During one of the student tours at Riverdale we heard from a student with significant hearing loss that he had specifically asked his parents to apply for a place at the school:

- *This isn't my local school. But my local school is really rough with a lot of bullying. So I literally begged my mum that I can come here. So now she has to drive me 15 minutes either way to bring me here and back. (year 9 student, Riverdale)*

System level issues

Several of the schools spoke about system level barriers to inclusion, such as the lack of a 'level playing field' for schools with an inclusive ethos as they are judged against other local schools, using metrics that don't value inclusive practice.

Interviewees at Shilton Valley indicated a concern that other local schools might not always admit an intake as comprehensive as they should do, and that they might also be using exclusions and off rolling to create the appearance of high standards. In this context, an inclusive school would therefore be penalised in terms of their outcomes and performance measures.

Staff at Greenway also saw the wider accountability framework as a barrier to inclusion within schools, particularly in terms of the standards to which schools are held accountable and judged: "the goal posts and pressures move every year for schools" (Assistant Principal, Greenway). This was considered particularly challenging for issues around inclusion, although staff at Greenway expressed feelings of pride that their school was moving towards an approach where inclusion and attainment "go hand in hand", and was a strength of the school despite the accountability framework, not because of it. Meanwhile a senior member of staff at Riverdale highlighted a narrowed qualification landscape, particularly in relation to the vocational offer, as a contemporary challenge to inclusion as it limited the options the school could make available for students.

Survey respondents, focus group participants and case study interviewees all referred to the current sector wide challenge of staff recruitment, and it was highlighted repeatedly as a major barrier to inclusion, with schools struggling to recruit specialist staff (such as SENCOs) in particular. Recruitment challenges for external services such as Educational Psychologists and Speech and Language Therapists was also an area that came up in the focus groups and in several of the case study schools. At Saint Joseph's, interviewees also discussed the challenge they have faced in attempting to recruit male student support staff, something that they see as essential for supporting some male students.

Finally, another recurring system level challenge was perceived to be the lack of high quality and affordable Alternative Provision. As discussed in greater depth in section 5.2, this had led to two of the case study schools already operating their own internal offsite APs, with another due to open at the beginning of the next academic year.

Wider societal issues

Interviewees at all levels and at all of the case study schools acknowledged the increasing complexity and challenge that their school

families and communities were facing in their lives. These changes were perceived to be as a result of the cost-of-living crisis, Covid, a reduction in wider local authority services and a reduction in community support structures over the last decade. As a result of this, some parents and families were becoming increasingly “hard to reach” (Headteacher, Saint Joseph’s), and therefore schools were finding it increasingly difficult to engage them in their children’s learning.

07

Conclusion and implications

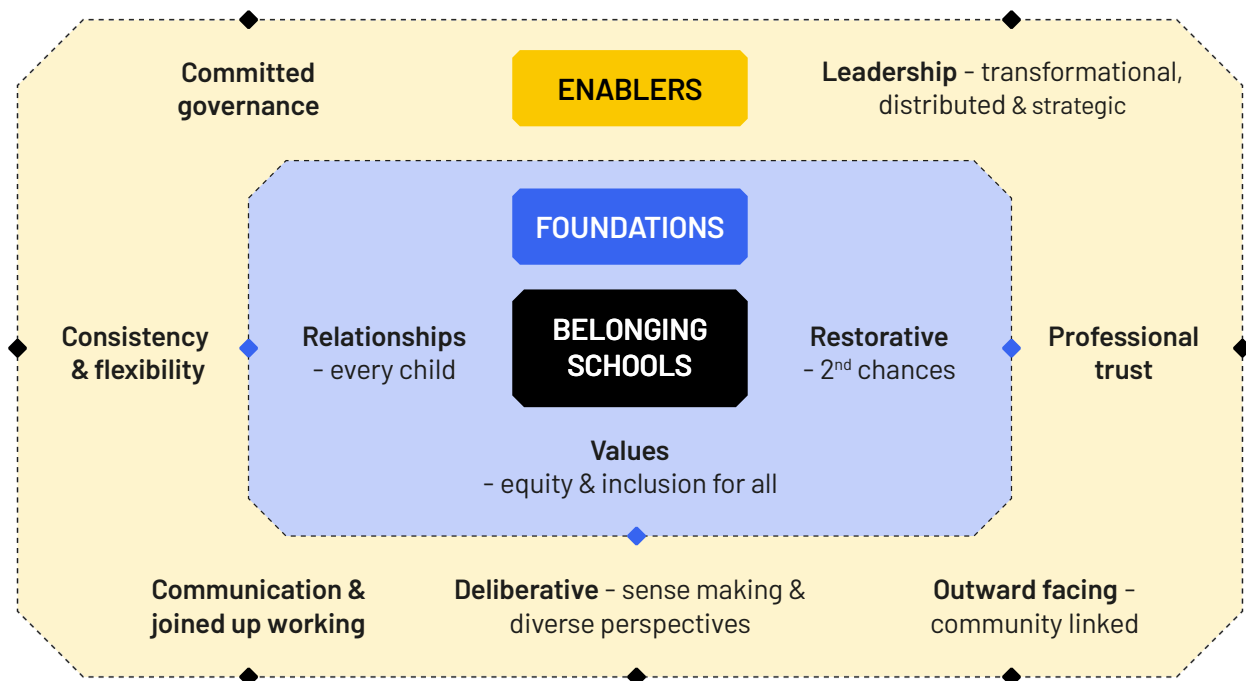


07 Conclusion and implications

Drawing on case studies of six relatively more inclusive schools, alongside four focus groups and a national survey of senior staff, this research has addressed two questions: What does 'inclusion' mean to pupils, teachers, and leaders and how do relatively more inclusive secondary schools' approach and practice inclusion? The findings reported here suggest there is no single way to do inclusion. The six case study schools operated in diverse contexts, each with their own histories and current areas of focus. Yet despite this diversity, the present research has also been able to pinpoint some shared areas of understanding and practice for inclusion in these schools.

A key finding from this study is that the six schools sampled were oriented towards a broader conceptualisation, where inclusion is a whole-school focus that concerns all children. This was encapsulated in what we have identified as a key unifying feature across the case study schools: a focus on cultivating a sense of belonging amongst students. In Diagram 1, we have created a visual representation of the understandings and practices of inclusion evidenced through the case study schools, and the relationships between them. We have placed 'belonging' at the centre: as the underpinning value guiding inclusion in these schools.

Diagram 1: Inclusive schools research findings visualisation



Key areas of practice:

- Pastoral support
- Early help, safeguarding & multi-agency
- Behaviour, inclusion & exclusion
- Teaching, learning & curriculum
- Student voice, parents & community
- Staffing & CPD
- Continuous improvement

The next layer – labelled ‘foundations’ – highlights the integral features of this focus on belonging. Relationships for belonging are central here, and focused on all students being seen, known, cared for, understood and supported in ways which best met their individual, group-specific and common needs. Connected with this are restorative approaches to working with young people. Although the language of ‘restorative practice’ was not used in all six schools, there was evidence of a range of approaches geared towards: giving students fresh starts, including mediation between staff and students; deescalating incidents; and adopting language which avoids personal or deficit notions and supports young people to reflect on their own behaviour in relationship to the schools’ values. Finally, knowing every child as an individual and supporting positive relationships between staff and students appears to support an environment in which equitable practice – which is different to the notion of equality where every student is given the same – becomes intuitive, although staff recognised this is nuanced work which requires a high level of professional trust and judgement, all of which occurs in the details of day-to-day interactions as well as high level systems and values.

This focus on belonging, and foundations of equity, relationships and restorative approaches, was enabled by seven key aspects of school governance, leadership and culture, which are listed in the outer ring of the diagram. The first is committed governance, with both governing bodies and trusts providing a critical friend function and, in the latter case, opportunities for horizontal school improvement activities. Second is leadership approaches, where elements of transformational, distributed and strategic leadership combined to underpin inclusive practice and the embedding of inclusive values. School leaders balanced a focus on inclusion and achievement – which was challenging at

times – by continually connecting back to a set of core values which permeated decision-making across the school. Transformational aspects of leadership – with values presented as a key driver for inclusive work – were combined with distributed leadership, so that staff across the schools felt trusted and empowered to make professional decisions in line with school values. This connects with the third enabling feature of belonging schools: high levels of professional trust.

Other aspects of school culture provided important enablers for an approach to inclusion that foregrounds belonging. This included effective approaches to communication and joined-up working between teams with different but complementary expertise, to provide tailored support to students; all stakeholders – staff across roles, students and parents – feeling listened to, with leaders drawing on diverse perspectives alongside wider sources of data and evidence to engage in sensemaking and deliberative decision-making; and the careful development of systems, processes, and routines which enabled consistency and flexibility. Finally, all six schools were outward facing in their approach, offering numerous examples of how they worked with their Local Authority, with other schools, and with various community organisations to enrich their inclusive practice

A set of systems, processes and practices ensued from this, as listed at the bottom of the diagram. These were variable across the schools as described in detail in Section 5.3, but included seven core areas of activity: pastoral support and relationships; early help, safeguarding and multi-agency support; behaviour, inclusion and exclusion; teaching, learning and curriculum; student voice, parents and community; staffing and CPD; and feedback and continuous improvement. Unsurprisingly, these looked different, and were more or less of a priority, depending on specific schooling contexts, and

offered an important lens for understanding how a focus on belonging plays out through the daily micro practices of schooling.

As the report highlights, inclusion is enacted in these schools in a context of challenges and tensions, which are systemic in nature, forming the backdrop to inclusive work in secondary schools across England. Key tensions documented in Section 6 were: post-pandemic issues associated with a rise in levels of SEMH, undiagnosed SEND and challenges with student attendance; system-wide funding for schools, particularly in relation to the primary sector, SEND funding and the funding of external and statutory support services; resourcing demands and shortcomings in national infrastructure in relation to children with SEND; system-level issues, particularly stemming from the ways national accountability metrics operate to valorise particular areas of schools' work and undervalue or disincentivise inclusive work, and related impacts on staff wellbeing, recruitment and retention; and finally the impact of wider societal challenges – particularly growing levels of poverty, sharpened by Covid-19 and the current cost-of-living crisis – which permeate schools' work.

Meanwhile key tensions permeate schools' inclusive work. Importantly, a common focus on belonging and equity across the schools underpinned some quite different decision making around practices. For instance, we observed different practices in relation to permanent exclusion, isolation and alternative provision, with one school no longer using these practices whilst others maintained them, albeit in different guises and to variable extents. Some staff explained that a vision for inclusion which foregrounds belonging is compatible with the use of exclusion in some circumstances; highlighting the complex work schools engage in on a daily basis to reconcile the rights and entitlements of different students.

As part of this research we asked staff how they understood inclusion and invited them to tell us about their inclusive practice. It is worth noting that the curriculum offer, and how this had been tailored, did not emerge as a particularly prominent inclusive practice in the eyes of these interviewees. The literature highlights different stances on the connection between the curriculum and inclusion. On one hand, there is concern that a narrow and rigid curriculum can impoverish learning opportunities (Wyse, 2020) and exacerbate learner disengagement and exclusion (Partridge et al, 2020), while on the other hand there is an acknowledgment of the importance of foundational knowledge and skills – such as reading – which facilitate access to the broader curriculum. Wyse (2020) suggests that these foundational skills may have taken on increased pertinence as schools reopened after the Covid-19 pandemic, due to lost learning.

The schools in the present research appeared to work between a focus on foundational knowledge and skills and providing a broad and balanced curriculum. There was a clear focus on cross-school literacy – and reading in particular – in four of the schools, which was presented as integral to inclusion. This connected to a perception amongst staff that a key part of their inclusive work was to minimise the impacts of disadvantage on children's learning and access to "cultural capital". Meanwhile, most schools also perceived their enrichment opportunities to be a way of securing curriculum breadth and providing more expansive and enriching learning opportunities for their students than would otherwise be possible within mainstream classrooms. These extra-curriculum offers included diverse, often student-designed activity clubs, themed excursions (for instance for groups at risk of exclusion and around diversity and anti-discrimination issues), and student-led campaigns and projects. This was perhaps a key

way that schools mediated a desire to support all students to have the foundational skills and knowledge to access a broad and balanced curriculum, alongside a focus on particular EBacc subjects that continue to hold sway in policy and accountability mechanisms (James, 2018).

Implications

There is momentum, both nationally and internationally, towards broader understandings of inclusion and a move to acknowledge diverse needs, identities and experiences which can have implications for learning and engagement in school. Given this focus, the findings from this research provide points of potentially useful learning and reflection for mainstream secondary schools in England. Clearly there are risks in seeking to generalise from a study centred on six, relatively inclusive schools and we are wary of suggestions that practice can be easily transferred from one context to another. As we highlight through the report, schools operate in distinctive contexts, with distinctive cultures and practices, all of which must be considered in exploring the replication or transfer of practice.

However, it is interesting that, despite these differences in contexts, the six schools had some important commonalities in the ways they approached inclusion. These have been captured in diagram 1, which might serve as a tool to support schools to reflect on their own foundations, enablers and practices for inclusion, asking whether and how these connect to an underpinning set of values and/or future ambitions in this area.

Finally, by way of drawing out implications, we pose three questions for wider policy in relation to school inclusion:

1. Leadership is a key foundation for inclusion – what more could be done to support a focus on belonging and inclusion for all as part of the National Professional Qualifications for leaders?
2. Given the funding and policy challenges outlined in section 6, and building on reforms already in development following the SEND and AP Green Paper, what more could be done to ensure all schools have the opportunities, incentives and resources they need to ensure inclusion for all?
3. How can we broaden our conception of high-quality schools, to encapsulate both inclusion and attainment, informed by FFT Education Data Lab’s useful work on the Schools’ Quality Index?

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