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# SEND Inclusion in Mainstream Primary Schools

## Strategies That Actually Work

INCLUSION | SEND | WHITE PAPER



## A Message from Alice, Director of Product & Co-Founder



More children with special educational needs and disabilities are being educated outside mainstream schools than at any point in the last 50 years. That is not a statistic to file away. It is an indictment of how we have designed learning - and a call to do something different.

The Government's Education White Paper '**Every Child Achieving and Thriving**', published in February 2026, makes the expectation explicit: children with SEND must be able to attend their local mainstream school and have their needs met there, by highly trained teachers, with the right support. Not in specialist provision unless truly necessary. In their neighbourhood school. With their friends.

For headteachers and SENCOs, this is both a moral imperative and a practical challenge. This article sets out what the evidence says about what actually works - not in theory, but in real classrooms, with real children.



## Why Mainstream SEND Inclusion is Failing

The gap between the aspiration and the reality is significant. Children with SEND consistently underperform their peers in attainment, attend less regularly, and report lower levels of belonging and wellbeing at school. The White Paper is clear about why: the curriculum has been too narrow, too text-dependent, and too passive.

Most teaching assumes a relatively uniform learning style - children who can sit still, read independently, and process information sequentially. Children with SEND, by definition, often do not learn this way. Dyslexia, ADHD, autism spectrum conditions, sensory processing differences, and communication needs - all of these are poorly served by the dominant model of classroom instruction.

The result is not a failure of the children. It is a failure of the design.



## What Actually Works: The Evidence

The research on effective SEND inclusion in mainstream settings consistently points to a handful of principles. These are not new ideas — but they are ideas that are rarely embedded systematically enough to make a sustained difference.

## 1. Multi-sensory learning

Children with SEND learn more effectively when information is presented through multiple sensory channels simultaneously. Sound, movement, visual stimulus and narrative context together create stronger memory traces than any single input. A child who cannot retain information from a textbook may retain it vividly from an experience that engaged their whole body.

This is not a concession - it is simply good pedagogy. The most effective primary classrooms already use multi-sensory approaches. The challenge is making them systematic rather than occasional.

## 2. Removing performance anxiety

Many children with SEND experience heightened anxiety about visible failure - getting an answer wrong, reading aloud, being singled out. This anxiety is itself a barrier to learning, quite separate from the underlying need.

The most effective inclusive approaches remove the performance element from the learning experience itself. Children need space to encounter, process and respond to new material without the social risk of being wrong in front of peers.

## 3. Shared experience, differentiated response

Inclusion does not mean giving every child the same task. It means giving every child access to the same experience - and allowing the response to be differentiated. A child who cannot write can still participate fully in a lesson if the learning itself does not require writing. The follow-on activity can be adapted. The experience does not need to be.

This distinction matters. When schools differentiate the experience rather than the response, they inadvertently signal to SEND pupils that the 'real' lesson is not for them. The most inclusive classrooms share the experience entirely and differentiate at the point of output.

## 4. Movement as cognition

The relationship between physical movement and cognitive processing is well-established in the research literature. Children who are physically engaged during learning demonstrate better retention, better focus and better emotional regulation than those required to remain still.

For children with ADHD, sensory processing differences or high levels of anxiety, movement is not a distraction from learning. It is a condition for it. Classrooms that build movement into the lesson itself - not as a reward or a break, but as part of the instructional design - see measurably better outcomes for these children.

## How now>press>play Applies These Principles

now>press>play was designed from first principles around the question: how do we reach the children whom the current system consistently fails?

In a now>press>play Experience, every child in the class puts on a pair of wireless headphones and becomes the protagonist of an immersive audio adventure. From the Amazon rainforest to Ancient Egypt, from the Stone Age to NASA - the curriculum comes to life through sound, story and movement.

**The design choices that make this work for SEND pupils are not accidental:**

- Individual volume control means children with auditory processing differences, hearing aids or cochlear implants set the level that works for them - without drawing attention to the need.
- No reading or writing is required during the Experience itself. EAL learners and children with dyslexia access the full richness of the curriculum through listening and movement.
- Movement is structural. Children crouch, reach, run in place, and act out the narrative. This is not optional - it is how the Experience is designed to be delivered.
- There is no visible performance. Children respond privately, within the story. The social risk of being wrong in front of peers is removed entirely.
- Every child has the same experience. Differentiation happens in the follow-on resources - 500+ options, adaptable for every level.

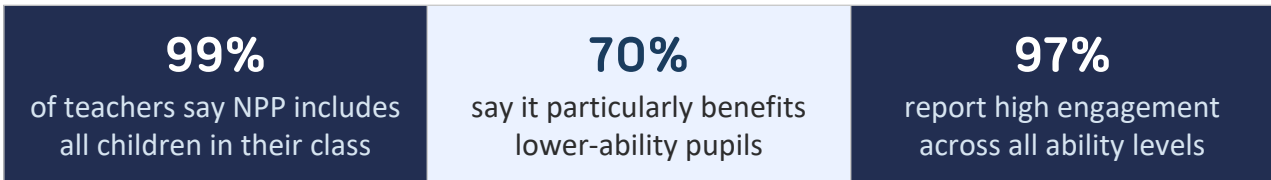
**"I have seen children with a short attention span develop the ability to remain focused for longer periods. Children become so entirely engrossed in the story that they lose their inhibitions and the fear of making a mistake."**

*Class Teacher, Primary School*



## What the Data Shows

now>press>play is used by over 500 primary schools across the UK, and the impact data on SEND inclusion is consistent:



*\*Teacher Survey 2025*

The 70% figure for lower-ability pupils is particularly significant. It is not unusual for an EdTech product to perform well for high-attaining, highly motivated learners. A product that particularly benefits the children at the margins is doing something genuinely different.

## Practical Steps for Headteachers and SENCOs

Does your curriculum start from your most excluded child - or does it start from the average child and make concessions downward?

1. Does this approach require children to demonstrate their need to access it? Or does it include every child without anyone needing to be singled out?
2. Does the experience itself differentiate - or does it allow differentiation at the point of response?
3. Does it build movement and multi-sensory input into the lesson design, or treat these as add-ons?
4. Does it give teachers a manageable implementation pathway, or does it add to planning and workload?
5. Is there robust evidence of impact specifically on SEND and disadvantaged learners?

now>press>play is designed to answer yes to all five. But the principle matters more than the product. Whatever approach you take, the starting point is a curriculum design that assumes a diversity of learning styles - not one that accommodates it reluctantly.

**"Our SEND pupils are able to take a full and active part – adjusting the volume and interacting on an individual basis. It has transformed how we think about inclusion across the school."**

*SENCO, West Midlands Primary*

## A Final Word on the White Paper

The Education White Paper is not a bureaucratic document. It is a statement about what we believe children deserve. The ambition that every child should be able to thrive in their local mainstream school is not a target - it is a moral baseline. As a social enterprise, now>press>play exists to support that ambition, placing educational impact at the centre of everything we do.

Meeting it will require curriculum design that starts from the most excluded child and works outward, not from the average child and makes concessions downward. That is a different kind of thinking. But it produces better outcomes for every child in the room - not just those with identified needs.

The children who benefit most from immersive, multi-sensory, movement-based learning are SEND pupils. The children who benefit second-most are every other child in the class.

**Want to see how now>press>play works in a school like yours?**

Book a free Taster Week and see the impact on your SEND and pupil premium learners. Over 500 primary schools already have.

[Book your free trial >](#)