

Bridging the SEND practice gap:

NASBTT report on mainstream ITT and SEND



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Executive summary

Initial teacher training^[1] carries more of the system's hopes for SEND reform than at any previous point. Providers are implementing the new ITTECF unified training framework, navigating recruitment pressures and responding to the Schools White Paper's expectations that teachers can teach more children with complex needs in mainstream schools.

NASBTT recognises the scale of this shift and the work still required to make it sustainable. Drawing on national focus groups with NASBTT members and our ITT Insights Survey^[2] of 75 providers, this report describes a current picture of SEND within school-led initial teacher training and sets out what needs to change so new teachers are better prepared for inclusive classrooms. It proposes the foundational knowledge, skills and dispositions that will drive the inclusive practice we hope to see by 2030.

There has been genuine progress. Providers have made efforts to move away from the "SEND afternoon"^[3] towards more built-in models where SEND is deliberately integrated into the wider aspects of teaching and learning in ITT course design, and Ofsted has recognised that ITT SEND training has improved in visibility and impact. Yet serious tensions remain. In our ITT Insights Survey, 65% of providers do not believe new teachers are well prepared for complex SEND in mainstream settings, and only 39% feel their own organisation is ready to develop trainees' capability at the level required. Trainees themselves describe a gap between what they learn with SCITT providers and the different cultures and contexts they encounter in schools.

The evidence suggests that adding more SEND hours to already crowded programmes is not the answer. What needs reconceptualising and redesigning is how we prepare teachers to work with pupils who learn and present in diverse ways that are perceived as atypical and unpredictable, and how we build their confidence to hold uncertainty in the classroom and respond with thoughtful adaptation.

In making the shift to inclusive education, we need to decide as a first principle, what constitutes the core dispositions, knowledge and understanding that every inclusive educator should hold.

This report explores ways to achieve this through a SEND specific^[4] lens, starting with an 'outliers first' approach, meaning the ITT curriculum treats those who face

barriers to learning as exemplary. We refer to this ambition as a ‘permeated curriculum’.

The report makes six recommendations:

1. Co-create (through NASBTT’s SEND Co-Creation Group and others) a revised, permeated national content map for SEND across the ITTECF.
2. Strengthen school-based SEND expertise and mentoring capacity.
3. Value, measure and monitor trainee self-efficacy in relation to SEND.
4. Align the 2027 ITTECF review with evidence of what works in SEND preparation.
5. Support collaborative resource development that underpins teacher decision making.
6. Invest in longitudinal research.

NASBTT is committed to supporting the government’s ambition for SEND and inclusion and to making that ambition deliverable in practice.

^[1] This report is focused on school centred initial teacher training. We refer to ITT as the professional training period a person (trainee) undergoes to become a qualified teacher and stress that the development of new teachers goes well beyond training per se to consider the broader, more critical understanding of education.

^[2] NASBTT survey 2026

^[3] A discrete one-off session in an ITT programme, often as little as two hours.

^[4] Whilst the report is focussed on SEND and inclusion, we recognise barriers to learning for all children whether through vulnerability, disadvantage, ethnicity or learning difficulty.



Introduction

Mainstream education has shifted significantly over the past decade. SEND identification now reached 20% of the school population, 40% will have been on the SEND register at some point whilst in school and the complexity of needs in classrooms continues to rise^[1]. The government's White Paper sets out ambitions to build teacher capacity so children who would previously have been in specialist settings can have their needs met in local mainstream schools.

The aim is to create a more consistent and sustainable system where inclusion, high standards and teacher support sit together. Achieving that requires cultural change as well as structural reform. If mainstream schools are to be truly inclusive, every new teacher must enter the profession enabled to teach pupils with SEND and to do so with confidence and with a foundational level of competence that goes beyond current framework expectations.

ITT has a unique role here. Providers shape the habits of reflection, responsiveness and collaborative problem-solving that underpin inclusive practice. What trainees experience and rehearse in this phase influences their future teaching for years. NASBTT's findings^[2] show that providers are doing more on SEND, but concerns about teacher readiness remain, especially for pupils with overlapping and complex needs.

There is also a limit to what a nine-month programme can achieve. We should be realistic about the ongoing support Early Career Teachers need, and be clearer about ITT's role in a wider ecosystem of professional learning, what this means for the curriculum, what is foundational to establish inclusive professional learning during ITT and what to build across early career and beyond. For the profession to retain teachers after three years, new teachers must continue to be supported to achieve a sense of professional efficacy and achievement through their concerns to meet their pupils' needs.

^[1] <https://epi.org.uk/annual-report-2025-send/> Refers to 2017 study and contextual updates: 'Four in ten children are identified as SEND at some point between the ages of 5 and 16' and 2025 annual report. 'In recent years there have been notable changes in the types of need associated with pupils with SEND. Since 2016 there have been decreases in the proportion of pupils aged 2-19 with SEND who were identified as having moderate or severe learning difficulties, by 11 and 1 percentage points (ppts) respectively. Over the same period there have been increases in the proportion identified with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (+7ppts), Speech, Language and Communications needs (+5 ppts), or Social, Emotional and Mental Health needs (+5ppts).'

^[2] NASBTT survey/ groups research

Five years ago, SEND provision in ITT was still being criticised as constituting a ‘one off workshop’ to cover the required disability and SEND knowledge in a single short programme session. This bolted on approach was woefully inadequate and unfair for teachers entering diverse classrooms.

NASBTT focus groups with providers in late 2025 confirm that this model has largely been abandoned. Instead, most programmes now seek to ‘thread through’ SEND knowledge and skills and the progress in conceptual understanding by trainees of inclusive practice is tangible.

Examples include:

- Specialist placements where trainees spend time in special schools, alternative provision, resource bases or mainstream schools with strong inclusive practice.
- Condition-specific input on autism, ADHD, speech and language needs and other common profiles, often delivered with specialist involvement.
- Workshop sessions and specialist input emphasising a social rather than a medical model of disability^[1] and the importance of moving beyond diagnostic labelling.
- Conferences and masterclasses that bring together research evidence, practitioner expertise and lived experience.
- Shadowing opportunities so trainees follow pupils with SEND through the day and see the cumulative impact of school systems
- Anchoring in ‘quality-first’ teaching so adaptive teaching and in some cases inclusive pedagogy are framed as central to teaching all pupils rather than seeing SEND as an add-on.

The 2017 NASBTT/nasen ITT SEND Toolkit^[2] provided a practical framework for this work. The audit tool enables providers to evaluate their practice across three strands 1) professional practice 2) SEND expertise and 3) support systems for developing teachers.

This represents important progress. However, our research suggests that threading SEND through a programme, while necessary, does not by itself guarantee that trainees will experience a coherent and consistently inclusive journey across both centre-based training and school placements.

Whilst Ofsted’s thematic work on ITT notes that SEND training is now more

“comprehensive and well-integrated”, inspectors still raise useful questions about coherence and sequencing.

Providers and trainees themselves have identified weaknesses, for example limited time on child development, insufficient or short special setting placements and inconsistent opportunities to connect theory with real pupils. Some trainees do not recognise that they are practising approaches that support pupils with SEND, because the work is not labelled as such which raises both the question of more opportunities for self reflection to secure underdeveloped professional knowledge, and the challenge of seeing explicit labelling of the SEND input as the solution.

This is a dilemma that reflects on the wider system’s obsession with measuring curriculum coverage rather than teacher development or pupil understanding.

NASBTT’s ITT Insights Survey 2025 underlines the concern:

- 65% of providers do not believe new teachers are equipped to meet increasingly complex SEND in mainstream classrooms.
- Only 39% feel their organisation is adequately prepared to develop trainees in this area.
- Around two-thirds highlight a gap between centre-based SEND teaching and the reality of placements.

As one provider put it, *“We have probably tripled our SEND input over five years. The sessions land well, but in schools, trainees still feel underprepared. It is not a content problem; it is a context problem.”* [\[3\]](#)

Alongside the tensions of content and context sits a reductive concern held in some parts of the wider system that early teacher development is linear, where new teachers must first secure routines, behaviour and “consistency” before they can flex or adapt.

Such ‘teacher as technician’ approaches risk depositing the agency of the novice teacher from the beginning thus forcing adaptive teaching to become either a set of efficient strategies to be learnt and deployed or as a later-stage skill to be added instead of fundamental to early teacher development. Secure routines are of course essential, but inclusive practice and nurturing relationships are not chronological.

In 2019, the ITT resource Pack [\[4\]](#) developed alongside the Teacher Handbook SEND introduced the notion of a “permeated curriculum” with permeated themes.

A permeated approach is a fully embedded model of inclusive practice. It ensures

consideration of those who face barriers to learning as a priority and therefore are considered explicitly throughout a an ITT curriculum consistently viewed through an inclusive lens. A permeated curriculum also focuses on the dispositions and skills required to include *all* children in high quality teaching as fundamental to teacher identity. NASBTT is exploring whether this permeated curriculum can support ITT to be inclusive by design.

^[1] The medical model: a student's disability as a personal defect to be "fixed" or accommodated. The social model: students are not inherently disabled by their condition, but by inflexible environments, inaccessible curricula, and societal barriers.

^[2] <https://www.wholeschoolsend.org.uk/itt-resources>

^[3] NASBTT survey/ groups research

^[4] <https://www.wholeschoolsend.org.uk/resources> (updated regularly since 2019)



The ITTECF: new framework, new challenges

The new Initial Teacher Training and Early Career Framework (ITTECF), implemented from September 2025, brings the Core Content Framework and Early Career Framework together. It strengthens expectations on adaptive teaching, oral language and SEND across all eight standards, aligning with the direction many providers were already taking.

However, it also introduces some new complications.

The expectation to “learn from experts” sets an intention that trainees work alongside specialist practitioners and learn from those with deep expertise. Our focus groups suggest that this level of expertise is not yet consistently available in placement schools and that heavy emphasis on specialists can unintentionally reinforce the view that SEND is someone else’s domain.

Our focus group feedback also indicates that providers have been implementing significant framework changes at pace, and many have not yet had sufficient time or implementation space to explore fully all the opportunities these create for strengthening inclusion. The way in which new requirements are specified, monitored and implemented can unintentionally incentivise visible evidence of coverage, rather than the coherent, permeated curriculum many providers are seeking to develop.

The government has committed to reviewing the ITTECF in 2027, offering up an important opportunity to address these implementation issues that risk compliance over coherence.

⁽¹⁾ NASBTT survey/ groups research

⁽¹⁾ <https://www.wholeschoolsend.org.uk/resources> (updated regularly since 2019)



Culture and context of trainee experience matters

Across our review, the most consistent theme is the disconnect between centre provision and school placements^[1]. Providers and trainees describe structured, evidence-informed sessions on adaptive teaching, graduated responses and inclusive classroom design as valuable. Yet in many placements they are seeing quite inconsistent modelling of inclusive practice.

- classrooms managing increasingly complex need with limited additional capacity;
- schools at different stages in developing whole-school approaches to inclusion;
- SENCOs whose capacity to support trainee development is constrained by substantial casework;
- variation in how teaching assistants are deployed and included in planning;
- mentors with differing levels of confidence and professional development in SEND.

Although not representative of all placements, one trainee described an experience that illustrates the sharpest form of this disconnect: *“In training sessions we learned about high-quality adaptive teaching and how to use assessment to identify barriers to learning. Then I went into school and was told to ‘give the SEND kids to the TA’. Everything I learned suddenly felt irrelevant.”*^[2]

This highlights the serious risk here for providers of a front-loaded curriculum and solution-focused ITT design perpetuating input followed by reality shock for trainees.

Ofsted’s thematic work confirms that mentors’ understanding does not always align with what trainees are taught. There are wide differences in school climates, cultures, their contexts and in how far inclusion is treated as a core school improvement priority. Ofsted also highlights these challenges as situated with the school ecosystem.

This points to the need for a more explicit clinical practice model^[3]. Trainees nor their providers should expect to see perfect enactment of every theory or evidenced strategy in every classroom. They need structured support to observe, analyse and reflect on practice, including where it falls short. This enables them to develop the habit of practical theorising^[4], challenging the notion of teaching to the typical and linking what they see to principles of learning and inclusion and

testing out small, evidence-informed changes.

“Integrating inclusive pedagogy and practical theorising offers scope to enable a student teacher in a changing policy environment to cultivate the adaptive skills needed. The approach preserves the complexity needed to meet acute SEND needs but more broadly facilitates student teachers to commit to an inquiry-based approach that supports their learning and ask bigger questions about context.”^[5]

Research on teacher development also suggests that self-efficacy for SEND often increases during training then dips as teachers take full responsibility for a class. Arguably, this is less about new subject and pedagogic knowledge and more about the demands of decision-making with a full class and its social, emotional and cognitive diversity, multiple overlapping needs and limited access to additional support. Early career teachers need more than strategies; they need confidence that they can keep learning, seek help and experiment in a culture that values this inquiry approach: the self-efficacy that will sustain them throughout their careers.

Teacher agency isn’t just held within; it is held within the environment we are in^[6]. This means provision for trainee teachers must also look to their developmental environment, and equip them with tools to recognise the challenge of culture and context they find themselves in. The feedback they get, both implicit and explicit, must help them feel secure that they can make a difference.

New research^[7] also shows how established teachers can experience guilt and defeatism in relation to SEND (as they feel they are letting pupils down) and the inevitable impact emotionally this has on trainees or ECTs.

We also need to address the subtle perception problem that arises where SEND is truly permeated across the ITT curriculum. Trainees may not recognise it as “SEND training” and instead count only sessions and placements with explicit labels such as ‘e.g. an introduction to Speech Language and Communication Needs or a session on Scaffolding for SEN learners, as equating to specialist knowledge building. This drives pressure for visible SEND-badged content and risks a drift back towards bolt-on models.

A particular issue arises when it comes to placements in special settings. In a permeated and well sequenced ITT experience, there would be more access and availability of special settings and alternative provision by default, so every trainee teacher has every opportunity to build greater confidence and knowledge to support learners with a range of complex needs. Whilst the DfE has provided guidance to encourage further use of specialist placements^[8], the take up is still unevenly distributed nationally. More work is needed here to celebrate the value specialist placements can bring both for the host school and trainees.

What also appears to be missing from the policy narrative is explicit support for metacognition, that is: how teachers monitor their own learning and performance, how they reason about practice and how they use that reasoning to adapt. Practical theorising offers one route to building these habits and is particularly powerful when applied to work with learners (and indeed beginning teachers) who do not follow 'expected' developmental paths. The ITTECF 'learn that' and 'learn how to' statements need developing to reflect this rather than continuing to act as a straight jacket that can become a curriculum checklist.

It's also important to recognise the DfE's ambition as part of the SEND reforms to evolve the frameworks so they no longer continue to reinforce an evidence base that only reflects what works for 'most' children rather than all children.

[1] The reality shock for inclusion: How does teacher attitude, perceived knowledge and self-efficacy in relation to effective inclusion in the classroom change from the pre-service to novice teacher year? Joseph Mintz et al <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0742051X1930071X>

[2] NASBTT survey/ groups research

[3] <https://www.thersa.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/bera-rsa-interim-report.pdf> The BERA-RSA interim report advances this idea: teachers as professionals who integrate practical wisdom, technical knowledge and critical reflection, drawing on research to inform both pedagogy and enquiry into their own practice. It frames this as enquiry-oriented, research-informed "clinical practice," in which academic study, evidence and classroom experience are continuously brought together to reason about what to do, why, and with what impact on pupils' learning.

[4] Practical Theorising in Teacher Education: Chapter 7 challenge for initial teacher education Mulholland, Thompson and Todd, Routledge, 2023

[5] Ainsworth, S., Adamson, C., Agius, C. & Oldfield, J. (2026). What are the possibilities for promoting teacher resilience at the school level? Insights from the co-development of a participatory approach in England. *British Educational Research Journal*, 52, 1850–1877. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.70198>

[6] <https://neilgilbride.co.uk/2025/01/09/why-i-wrote-a-book-on-self-efficacy/>

[7] Dr Steph Ainsworth et al, Manchester Metropolitan University, 2025 <https://www.mmu.ac.uk/about-us/faculties/health-and-education/research/projects/teacher-resilience>

[8] [Initial teacher training: special schools and alternative provision - GOV.UK](#) (updated June 2026)

When concerns about SEND rise, policy often reaches first for “more training”. ITT and the early career phase then become the vehicle for system anxiety, with extra content framed as the solution. For nine-month programmes operating at capacity, this creates overload.

Providers describe the effect as turning a tapestry into a patchwork: every new priority is added, but nothing drops away. The result is a packed curriculum, squeezed placement time and less room for rehearsal, feedback and reflection. There is a danger that ITT is seen as responsible for the totality of teacher quality in a few short months.

In preparing trainees for every aspect of teaching, providers face agonising trade-offs. Structural and funding constraints make the decision making around the balance between SEND, subject pedagogy and phase-specific development challenging. There is a compound effect of challenges: school placement capacity and expertise; establishing partnerships for placements in special settings^[1]; funding for external SEND expertise; developing high-quality scenarios and materials; all taking time from staff already stretched.

One provider described the dilemma: *"We know that a two-week placement in a special school would be transformative. But that's two weeks out of an already short placement cycle. Do we prioritise breadth of SEND experience or depth of teaching competence in their main setting? There's no easy answer."* ^[2]

Ensuring a rich tapestry of development opportunities requires coherence and a curriculum that is inclusive by design.

There is also a fundamental structural disconnect when SEND is not seen as core to pedagogy in schools. This disconnect is compounded in several ways. Where teaching and learning leads are not always involved in SEND mentoring and SENCOs do not always have teaching and learning responsibilities, the opportunity for deliberate and visible collaboration is lost, and lost on trainees.

If the SENCO is the only reference for guidance on SEND practice, this too reinforces the idea that SEND is a bolt on. There should be far more points of reference for SEND across the teacher workforce in an education system that takes whole school inclusion seriously.

Ofsted has identified variation in mentors' familiarity with the developing

evidence base around SEND. This reinforces the need for accessible professional development and shared language, so that mentors and providers can review practice together and model the strongest available approaches. Low impact teaching for children with SEND can manifest in low confidence and a readiness to default to a lack of belief that 'I can make a difference' as a teacher or mentor.

The ongoing research by MMU referenced above^[3] gives us insight into the longer effect of structural conditions on teacher resilience. *'SEND is often discussed in relation to pupil outcomes, far less attention has been paid to how current SEND systems shape teachers' working conditions, professional confidence and capacity to sustain themselves in the profession. These challenges are particularly acute for early career teachers.'*^[4]

The findings suggest that improving teacher wellbeing in SEND-intensive contexts cannot rest solely on individual coping strategies and reform needs to recognise teachers' working conditions as a core part of successful inclusive education.

ITT providers cannot solve these problems alone. Good system-level thinking is needed, about realistic expectations, resource allocation, teacher wellbeing, and the division of effort between ITT, the early career framework, and ongoing CPD.

We need more research. DfE's rapid review^[5] highlights limits in teacher training on SEND identification and a lack of longitudinal research on which approaches best build capability over time. Ofsted data shows that some ITT inspections barely mention SEND. Without stronger evidence, reforms risk being assessed on inputs and assumptions rather than on impact.

Under previous governments, the influence of cognitive science on teaching and learning could and should have played a more significant role in supporting inclusive teaching. This is because it has helped the profession to understand the science of how children learn better, using Rosenshine's principles, for example.

However, in the implementation process there has been so much focus on teacher performance, that there appears to have been limited progress in helping teachers to use this new knowledge to understand cognitive diversity in the classroom.

Instead, the desire in the system to produce teachers able to teach a heavy curriculum efficiently, prioritise pupil attainment and improve academic outcomes, has tended towards a one size fits all delivery of teaching strategies, well supported by routines and codified pedagogy.

However, this has been at the expense of children who face barriers to learning. If an understanding of working memory is being used in planning teaching and

learning to 'go faster' this knowledge should also be used to support those who need additional scaffolding or more time to grasp concepts.

The structural dilemma now is that when the act of codifying teaching and the 'best bet' evidence-informed strategies is too reductive, beginning teachers are given less opportunity to realise how to solve complexity in the classroom *themselves* through better understanding the children in front of them.

Whilst there are many reasons for the attrition rates of teachers within the first three years, one is being 'oven ready' to survive for a while but at enormous cost to professionalism that fails to support agency. Fledgling decision making by new teachers to tentatively identify practice that 'may' support some of our more complex learners must be supported as part of their early professional development.

With the accepted and future diversity of need in the classroom, the system needs teachers who have the criticality to recognise barriers to learning and challenges that exist in supporting all children to learn, and a training approach and early career support that encourages long term professional pathways.

This requires a level of 'permission' in the system to learn with the children we teach rather than look to 'fix' them. This approach is aligned to the social model of disability as referenced in the EEF's SEN in Mainstream Guide. A contextual approach to identifying barriers and seeking collaborative solutions (looking to collective responses) is a significant shift in system thinking and structural design that the white paper reforms look to address.

Finally, we must address the Teachers' Standards.

All standards should relate to teaching all children but particularly important (and most overlooked) is the power of formative assessment to inform inclusive teaching. Standard 6 should be recognised as the engine of evidence collection that informs a teachers adaptive practice. Adaptive teaching Standard 5 has been seen in isolation from other standards as a 'fix' or 'solution' for meeting the needs of SEND. As a result, adaptive teaching in its current implementation has not always been underpinned by a wider recognition that consideration of children who struggle must be part of *every* aspect of teacher development.

All these structural conditions will need to be addressed.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/64664930d23688000c5bdfa6/ITT_-_special_schools_and_alternative_provision_May_2023.pdf

[NASBTT survey/ groups research](#)

^[3] p6 above: Dr Steph Ainsworth et al <https://www.mmu.ac.uk/about-us/faculties/health-and-education/research/projects/teacher-resilience>

^[4] Ibid

^[5] <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/identifying-and-supporting-the-needs-of-children-with-send-in-mainstream-settings>

The most important shift needed is conceptual. NASBTT, with Margaret Mulholland and Education Support, has been exploring an “outliers-first” approach to curriculum design. Instead of designing for the typical learner and adding SEND as an addition, this starts with the question: “Which pupils will find this hardest, and what would make it work for them?”

This inquiry model is not about ‘favouring’ those on the margins, rather pivots our thinking on marginalised pupils to first rather than last. By teaching early career teachers to understand the difficulties experienced by pupils in accessing any given lesson, they can see why curriculum accessibility is such a significant barrier for these children.

Teachers therefore need knowledge of their learners to design lessons and tasks proactively that can overcome these barriers. They can do this, with the support of mentors, by continually testing hypotheses about how pupils learn, identifying barriers, and adapting in response, using formative assessment that helps them elicit evidence and notice patterns. Together, these perspectives point to a more sophisticated model of teaching: one that is inquiry-driven, ethically grounded, and responsive to variability.

This is not simply a practical adjustment. It is grounded in a well-established body of scholarship. The work of Linda Darling-Hammond and the Learning Policy Institute outline specific foundations for enacting the science of learning and development in ITT. According to their research, to develop inclusive practice, providers must ground their programmes in an understanding that development is shaped by social, emotional, and cognitive factors. Future teachers need to be trained to support the “whole child”.^[1]

The work of Florian et al on inclusive pedagogy^[2] explicitly recognises the limitations of ‘teaching to the average’ and has helped many teachers and teacher educators think about the value of inclusive pedagogy.

It does need underpinning with beliefs about self-efficacy and ethical education. These principles are addressed in studies on inclusive pedagogy which move away from learning which strategies **may** be more effective for struggling learners to understanding **why** they are effective.

Darling Hammond recognises these attitudes and beliefs are essential to developing inclusive practice and deploying knowledge and skills that recognise

the needs of all, especially those with SEND.

A permeated curriculum is better placed to deliver this. As an example of the way the curriculum can be flipped, a session on explicit instruction would be reframed through the lens of the child experiencing barriers to learning such as working memory, processing speed, or oracy challenges.

When classroom diversity and complexity is a given, the process of inquiry^[3], an iterative process of multi-layer problem solving to remove those barriers to learning becomes foundational. With the support of their mentors, trainee teachers should develop their agency and capacity to recognise the significant value of unlocking evidence that can help identify a need, and the importance of small improvement steps.

Designing for outliers strengthens provision for all pupils and positions SEND as everyone's responsibility, embedded across every subject, age and stage, exactly in line with the ambition of the government's *Every Child Achieving and Thriving* white paper^[4].

In making the shift to inclusive education, we need to decide as a first principle, what constitutes the core dispositions, knowledge and understanding that every inclusive educator should hold. Then, these can be explicitly developed to support teachers as they progress through a nine-month curriculum.

'We need a far more holistic picture for each child, capturing aspects of cognition and environment, interests, strengths, fears, and so on. Adopting detective inquiry as a skill, behaviour, and disposition for teachers is a deliberate methodology that informs more insightful teaching.'^[5]

In this vein, curiosity is often described as a nice to have rather than a core attribute and methodology that is particularly important when working with pupils with SEND. Planning and teaching should be based on assessment rather than assumption, and inquiry and curiosity are essential to this.

There is also tension for providers between ensuring condition specific training has a place but is not the dominant lens for developing teachers to frame the expectations on them to 'identify need'. This is important to clarify. We must assert the expectation of a teacher to be an expert in their pupils, not in diagnostic labels.

As education further embraces a social model of disability, the teacher's role is to identify where there is a barrier to learning, what form that barrier takes in the classroom, what issues it is creating for engagement with the curriculum or with

their peer group. Where teachers believe their role is to spot whether a child has ADHD, they experience disempowerment, feeling 'I am not 'expert' enough to teach this child'.

It is far more empowering for a trainee teacher to focus on the skills of noticing, analysing and acting rather than guessing about what specific diagnostic condition these challenges may constitute. Knowing there is a speech and language difficulty can be supported by developing insights on how these manifest in the classroom^[6].

Of course we do want to foster awareness of conditions. The various categories of need, the effect of diagnoses, likely barriers to learning, and some understanding of the language of complexity (co-occurring need, interlocking, interlinking and so on) are all good starting points.

However, this needs to be in the context of building the self-efficacy of teachers - imagine how empowered trainees could consistently become in their first year of teaching with the skill to identify what the child can do and can't do yet, in how to adapt their approach and what it means for planning lessons to support.

Encouragingly, many ITT providers report that they are increasingly well placed to ask these questions. However, making this shift at scale requires greater clarity about what teachers need to know, do and become.

NASBTT's contribution is to define and embed these foundations within initial teacher training and beyond. This includes:

- Establishing a clear core of knowledge: child development, common profiles of need (including conditions such as autism, DLD and PDA), and the language of complexity, including co-occurring and interlocking needs.
- Embedding inclusive pedagogy and adaptive teaching as central to all aspects of training, aligned across all Teachers' Standards rather than confined to Standard 5.
- Developing key professional dispositions: seeing inclusion as non-negotiable, adopting an inquiry stance, and building the habit of identifying and removing barriers to learning.
- Reframing curriculum design across ITT programmes so that key areas (instruction, behaviour, assessment) are consistently taught through an outliers-first lens.
- Strengthening the role of mentors and teacher educators in modelling this approach, including attention to ethical considerations and the social and emotional dimensions of learning.

NASBTT is also reviewing how success is measured. Counting hours of SEND training tells us little about whether a trainee can identify need, adapt teaching, work with families and professionals, or sustain effective decision-making under pressure. Instead, NASBTT proposes a stronger focus on self-efficacy and decision-making competence, assessed through observation, case analysis, contextualised mentor judgement and reflective portfolios.

This strategy recognises that teacher development is non-linear. Trainees will progress at different rates and will not all find it easy to interrogate and adapt their own practice. The role of ITT, therefore, is not to focus on producing immediate expertise, but to establish the habits of mind required for sustained, inquiry-driven professional growth.

^[1] Darling-Hammond et al. https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/Educator_Learning_for_SoLD_REPORT.pdf

^[2] Florian, L., & Black-Hawkins, K. (2011). Exploring inclusive pedagogy. *British Educational Research Journal*, 37(5), 813–828.

^[3] Timperley's Spiral of Inquiry is the exemplar; <https://www.exeterconsortium.com/uploads/1/1/5/9/115936395/innovationandthespiralofinquiry.pdf>

^[4] <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/every-child-achieving-and-thriving>

^[5] <https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/think-like-a-detective-the-vital-clue-to-inclusive-teaching>

^[6] <https://www.ambition.org.uk/inclusive-teaching-framework/>



What works: emerging practice from the sector

NASBTT's focus groups provided excellent practice examples that point the way forward.

- Structured **placements in special settings**, with clear objectives and linked reflection, help trainees see inclusive teaching in action and then translate those insights into mainstream classrooms, for example in recognising the importance of relationships in supporting cognitive development. The strongest specialist placements already include clear objectives, supported reflection and deliberate links back to mainstream practice. There is an opportunity to make these features more consistently available nationally, so that specialist experiences shape trainees' beliefs, confidence and professional judgement rather than functioning primarily as exposure to a different settings.
- Some providers facilitate **reciprocal peer observation** specifically focused on adaptive teaching. Trainees observe each other, using a shared protocol to notice and analyse adaptive decisions. This develops their observational skills and professional vocabulary for discussing inclusive practice.
- **Authentic case studies**, based on real (anonymised and ethically managed) intersectional pupil profiles^[1], enable trainees to analyse assessment information, hypothesise about barriers, plan adaptations and evaluate impact. This approach can help to develop the diagnostic (identifying need rather than condition) and decision-making capabilities that underpin effective inclusive practice. It also helps to show how identifying need is not about identifying a condition (medical model) it's about being able to provide a deeper insight into a child's social, emotional and cognitive development. The task of the teacher being to recognise barriers and support next steps progress rather than diagnose ADHD.
- **Whole school-based inputs** from teaching/learning leads and subject leaders and not just from SEND leads makes clear that SEND sits at the heart of pedagogy and school improvement.
- SEND and inclusion conferences bring research, **practitioner expertise and lived experience together** and create space for deeper engagement.

We also found increasing interest amongst providers in strategies to help trainees identify the micro or macro adjustments needed to enable diverse groups of learners to thrive. These include the development of '**noticing**' skills^[2], the opportunity to use **formative evidence collection** to support adaptive teaching^[3], and **the use of the graduated approach in schools**^[4] to build problem solving

systems and processes. Such strategies enable new teachers to see the role collaborative systems play in embracing shared responsibilities and sharing of knowledge that makes inclusion work.

The government's £200 million SEND training programme, announced in January 2026, has the potential to strengthen this work across the workforce, not only in ITT. For providers, the opportunity lies in connecting ITT curricula to this national infrastructure so that trainees encounter more consistent messages in placement schools.

Evidence, though incomplete, offers several clear messages: teachers can and should play a key role in early identification; **attitudes to inclusion matter as much as knowledge**; confidence grows through supported practice rather than instruction alone; generic strategies are not enough without explicit attention to contexts; and partnership with families is essential.

^[1] The SEND Teacher Handbook is an excellent resource for these (and other examples): <https://www.wholeschoolsend.org.uk/teacher-handbook>

^[2] Ibid

^[3] <https://webcontent.ssatuk.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/25093629/SSAT-Formative-Assessment-Adaptive-Teaching.pdf>

^[4] [Reassessing-the-value-of-the-graduated-approach-in-England.pdf](#)

<https://www.ascl.org.uk/ASCL/media/ASCL/Our%20view/Consultation%20responses/2025/Reassessing-the-value-of-the-graduated-approach-in-England.pdf>

NASBTT's agenda for change focuses on six priorities:

1. **Co-create a national SEND content map for the ITTECF**

NASBTT should, through its Co-creation Group, lead cross-sector work on the development of a co-created content map and practice resource for ITT providers. This work should draw on the professional judgement of ITT leaders and be informed by the lived experience and expertise of young people, trainees and ECTs, mentors, parents, SEND experts and specialists in ITT and inclusion. It should identify the foundational professional learning needed to prepare trainee teachers to meet the needs of children and young people with SEND, while supporting providers to consider how this learning can be embedded coherently through their existing curricula.

The resource should support providers to move beyond 'coverage' towards 'capability'. It should help trainees to have a methodology to acquire and hold better knowledge of the children who face barriers to their learning, and to support growing their competence and confidence to address educational needs rather than limit expectations on the basis of a diagnostic label. This resource should afford trainees the opportunity to work effectively with others, reflect critically and make informed professional decisions in complex classroom contexts.

The ambition should be a permeated ITT curriculum in which inclusive pedagogy is endemic: embedded in how trainee teachers think, relate, plan, teach, reflect and continue to develop.

2. **Strengthen school-based SEND expertise and mentoring**

The government's SEND training investment should include specific support for mentors of ITT trainees on inclusive pedagogy, recognising teacher mindset as well as instruction matters, ensuring mentors have both knowledge and pedagogical language to develop trainees' inclusive practice. Joint training for ITT tutors and school mentors, resources for observing and feeding back on adaptive teaching, structured roles for SENCOs and teaching leads, and protected time for mentoring are essential. Trainees need to observe expert teachers thinking aloud about their adaptive choices; to receive feedback on their own inclusive practice; and to reflect systematically on what works, for whom, and why.

3. **Value, monitor and measure self-efficacy**

NASBTT proposes the DfE moves away from assessing inclusion based on curriculum 'SEND' inputs and recognises the importance of developing teacher

attitudes and beliefs. The DfE should research and recommend a self-efficacy for inclusion measure that monitors the development of confidence and competence of trainees through their ITT experience and into early career years. Data from this measure can inform provider improvement and consideration of how this is developed into the 2027 ITTECF review and a continuous cycle of improvement.

4. Clarify priorities for the 2027 ITTECF review

The review should distinguish foundational content from what develops later, align expectations about “learning from experts” with realistic school-based capacity, shift quality assurance towards demonstrated competence in classrooms and give clearer guidance on sequencing teacher development for supporting difference, recognising and embracing complex profiles of needs across the ITTECF continuum.

5. Support collaborative resource development and sharing

A national repository of high-quality SEND resources for ITT would reduce duplication and raise quality. This should include case studies, video exemplars with commentary, specialist placement protocols, assessment frameworks and research digests linked to practical tools.

6. Invest in longitudinal research

Government and sector partners should commission longitudinal studies that follow trainees into their early years of teaching, examining how self-efficacy develops, which ITT approaches best predict confident inclusive practice, how theory–practice gaps evolve and how inclusive school cultures shape these trajectories.

ITT providers have made great strides away from bolt-on SEND afternoons. Many trainees now experience richer preparation for inclusion than at any previous time, and Ofsted acknowledges this. Yet the system is still some way from where it needs to be. The next stage is to build on increasingly integrated SEND provision by moving towards a more consistently permeated curriculum, supported by aligned school-based experience.

NASBTT will continue to support providers to build strong foundations: core knowledge, essential adaptive skills, and professional dispositions that treat inclusion as central to teaching. We will work with partners to ensure policy frameworks, funding, school cultures and professional expectations move in step with this ambition.

By 2030, our aim is that:

- Every trainee finishes ITT feeling ready to teach pupils who face barriers to learning.
- SEND and inclusion are so embedded that an “inclusive lens” is the default.
- Placements model and mentor inclusive pedagogy and adaptive teaching as a norm.
- Self-efficacy *rises* as teachers move into their early years.
- Assessment focuses on decision-making and problem-solving, replacing checklists

The pupils who struggle most, who do not respond to standard approaches and who rely on our curiosity and creativity, should feel that school is designed with them in mind. Teachers should have the learning experience in their training that makes this possible.

Margaret Mulholland - July 2026