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'Did I do things right?' Teachers' experiences of the policy-practice gap in SEND provision in secondary schools in England

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ABSTRACT

Students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) in England are educated in mainstream schools amid rising demand, funding cuts, and staff turnover. While prior research has highlighted teacher workload and lack of training as barriers to inclusion, less attention has been paid to how national policy and accountability structures shape teachers' perceptions of their capacity to deliver inclusion in practice. This study draws on interviews with 11 mainstream secondary school teachers to examine the systemic and policy-level barriers they face in supporting students with SEND. Thematic analysis revealed three interconnected challenges: the distortive pressures of accountability culture; the mismatch between supply and demand in provision; and teachers' limited confidence due to insufficient training. Teachers' accounts illuminate the contradictions between political rhetoric on inclusion and the structures that undermine it. By situating their experiences within the broader context of a shifting policy discourse, this study provides original evidence to suggest that persistent barriers are not simply practical or pedagogical, but symptomatic of long-standing, centrally made choices about funding, training, and accountability. We conclude that proposed reforms to the SEND system provide a generational opportunity to confront these entrenched contradictions, but only if it goes beyond rhetorical commitments to deliver substantive reforms.

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Introduction

The proportion of students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) in England has risen steadily since 2016, with almost one in five children (over 1.67 million) now identified as having SEND (Department for Education & Ofsted 2024). As specialist provision has failed to keep pace, growing numbers of these students are educated in mainstream schools, many of whom present with increasingly complex needs. Despite policymakers responding with two major reforms – the 2015 SEND Code of Practice (Department for Education/Department of Health 2015) and the SEND and

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Alternative Provision Improvement Plan (Department for Education 2023) – concerns about the adequacy of provision have only grown deeper and more widespread, with the National Audit Office (2024) reflecting the national mood by declaring the SEND system 'broken'.

Recent initiatives, and policies that precede them, have promoted the principle of inclusion, yet there remain deep-lying and systemic challenges within the English education system that have impeded progress (Chen 2023). This paradox – strong rhetorical commitment to inclusion alongside persistent reports of failure in practice – forms the backdrop to this study. Prior research has consistently identified barriers such as workload, underfunding, and insufficient teacher training (e.g. Goodman and Burton 2010; Ward and Powell 2025; Warnes, Done, and Knowler 2022). However, much of this work either predates the austerity and accountability-driven reforms of the 2010s, or focuses on primary education. Less attention has been paid to the secondary sector, where subject specialisation, exam-oriented curricula, and league-table pressures create distinctive challenges for inclusion.

This paper addresses this gap by examining the perspectives of secondary school teachers in England on the factors that enable or constrain their ability to support students with SEND. Drawing on data from qualitative interviews, this paper shows how teachers' accounts highlight not only operational barriers but also deeper systemic tensions between inclusion as a political and social ideal, and inclusion as an educational practice. By situating their voices within the wider landscape of policy discourse and political rhetoric, this paper contributes to debates about how inclusion is shaped, and often undermined, by policy choices.

This paper adds to the literature in two important ways. First, by focusing specifically on secondary schools, we capture and reflect voices and experiences that are often absent from debates about inclusive education. Secondly, by connecting teachers' everyday realities to broader policy frameworks, we move beyond documenting barriers to inclusion, and instead critically interrogate why these barriers persist. This perspective is timely in the context of the Labour government's pledge to reform the SEND system (Department for Education 2025; His Majesty's Treasury 2025). Our findings therefore provide an empirical basis for assessing the extent to which prospective reforms can resolve the longstanding contradictions that have left teachers questioning their competence and confidence in including and educating students with SEND.

Teachers' experiences with inclusion

The principle that every child is entitled to a high-quality education means that schools are increasingly expected to guarantee equitable and lifelong opportunities to students of diverse backgrounds and conditions (Arnaiz-Sanchez et al. 2022). However, teachers may find implementing inclusive strategies challenging, due to barriers concerning attitudes, perceived social pressure and beliefs of control (Humphrey and Symes 2013; MacFarlane and Woolfson 2013). The growth of external demands and pressures relating to accountability, alongside the limited and stretched resources of SEND departments within mainstream schools, also hinder teachers' ability to effectively support students with SEND in their classrooms (Warnes, Done, and Knowler 2022; Webster and Blatchford 2019).

Teachers often rely on their individual skills and knowledge to support diverse learners (Warnes, Done, and Knowler 2022), despite concerns about the quality and variability of training on SEND that goes back decades (Hodkinson 2019).

A strong predictor of teachers' use of inclusive practices is self-efficacy, or their belief in their capacity to successfully plan and deliver appropriate teaching (Sharma et al. 2021; Wray, Sharma, and Subban 2022). When teachers possess a strong foundation to meet a wide and complex variety of student needs, they are more likely to buy into inclusion (Forlin 2010). Conversely, teachers who report lower levels of self-efficacy are more likely to resist or show less commitment to inclusion due to a fear of failing to deliver outcomes (Shevlin, Winter, and Flynn 2013). Encouragingly, teachers' self-efficacy can be improved via targeted training to build confidence in implementing effective and inclusive strategies in classrooms (MacFarlane and Woolfson 2013; Wray, Sharma, and Subban 2022).

These challenges underscore the enduring tension between inclusive rhetoric in policy and the realities of operational practice in classrooms. This study examines how these tensions are experienced by secondary teachers.

Barriers to implementing inclusion

In her 1978 landmark report on special education, Mary Warnock suggested that 'some 40 years will need to elapse' before the English education system is at a point where all teachers had undertaken adequate SEND training as part of their initial training, and therefore have the requisite skills to teach students with SEND effectively (Department for Education and Science 1978). That milestone was passed some years ago, and while there has been some definite improvement in the quantity and quality of training in SEND offered to pre-service teachers, the overall pattern in the four-and-a-half decades since has been one of missed opportunities.

While research within the English context consistently emphasises the importance and impact of training on teachers' ability to implement inclusive education (e.g. Dixon, Braye, and Gibbons 2022; Goodman and Burton 2010; Hind, Larkin, and Dunn 2019; MacFarlane and Woolfson 2013), studies reveal initial teacher training programmes lack coverage on inclusion and its practical operationalisation (e.g. Ward and Powell 2025). A 2025 report by the school inspectorate, based on visits to 78 teacher training providers, found that while SEND coverage was introduced late in the programme or delivered in a fragmented way. Gaps in SEND knowledge were particularly apparent in secondary schools, where trainees' lesson plans were 'generic rather than tailored' (Ofsted 2025).

Teachers report feeling unprepared and having to improvise to ensure students with SEND engage in learning (Dixon, Braye, and Gibbons 2022; Goodman and Burton 2010). Once qualified, professional development opportunities to improve teachers' understanding of learning, emotional and behavioural difficulties are similarly limited (Hind, Larkin, and Dunn 2019; MacFarlane and Woolfson 2013; Ward and Powell 2025). There has been little reform of pre-service and in-service training since the introduction of the first SEND Code of Practice in 1994 that placed greater emphasis on inclusion in schools (Hodkinson 2023; Roberts 2024). Consequently, many teachers enter the profession underprepared to support students with SEND and with few opportunities to develop and enhance these skills once in post (Smythe 2025; Ward and Powell 2025). Surveys of pre-service training for teachers in England have

consistently shown early career teachers rank their confidence in knowing how to teach students with SEND consistently lower than their levels of confidence in other areas of their craft (Ginnis et al. 2018; Pye, Stobart, and Lindley 2016). As Alan Hodkinson (2009, 2019) concludes in his skilful assessments of the teacher training landscape over many decades, the rhetoric from successive governments on the position of SEND has come to sound 'like a scratched record'.

Recent national reports corroborate these concerns. The Parliamentary Education Committee's report *Solving the SEND Crisis* highlights that, although the Early Career Framework and revised Initial Teacher Training and Core Content Framework have strengthened the profile of SEND, 'SEND is still not fully integrated across all training modules', and practical application is lacking (Education Committee 2024). Similarly, the DfE/Ofsted Independent Review of Teachers' Professional Development (2024) found that many teachers describe professional development as 'irrelevant' or 'low quality', with satisfaction markedly lower outside Early Career Teacher or NPQ pathways. These findings show that deficits in both pre-service and in-service training are now formally recognised at policy level, yet remain unresolved.

Another notable barrier to implementing inclusion is teachers' frustration with excessive workload (e.g. Gaona, Mahmud, and Castro-Kemp 2024; Warnes, Done, and Knowler 2022), and the accountability culture that deprioritises inclusion (Cotson and Kim 2023; Warnes, Done, and Knowler 2022). A National Education Union (2021) found that workload stressors reflect the systemic pressures placed on schools and teachers to emphasise academic outcomes over all other considerations. Through their representative bodies and advocacy groups, teachers have called for radical reform of the expectations placed on schools to practice meaningful inclusion, and greater emphasis and action on safeguarding the wellbeing of education professionals (Cotson and Kim 2023; Kim and Asbury 2020; Warnes, Done, and Knowler 2022).

The present study

The present study aimed to identify and explore the factors influencing teachers in mainstream secondary schools to support the inclusion and education of students with SEND. To this end, it addressed the question: what factors shape the ability of mainstream secondary school teachers to support students with SEND? By focusing on secondary schools, the study highlights a sector often overlooked in prior research. Previous qualitative studies on this topic have focused mainly on the experiences of teachers in primary schools (e.g. Broomhead 2013; Gray, Hill, and Pellicano 2023; Warnes, Done, and Knowler 2022; Webster and Blatchford 2019). The most recent comparable study we could find (by Goodman and Burton 2010) was conducted just before a 14-year period of government that did much to undermine and degrade concepts of inclusion and social cohesion in the UK (Webster 2023).

The present study offers an admittedly limited, but nonetheless timely reflection of secondary school teachers' views on their role in inclusive education to update the literature. This study focuses on England only as educational policy is a devolved matter, handled separately by each UK nation. As well as extending and updating what is known about secondary school teachers' views on SEND provision and inclusion, this paper contributes to the ongoing discourse about the characteristics of effective inclusive

education and efforts to improve teacher well-being, in the context of the increasingly challenging culture within English education.

Methods

Participants and recruitment

Participant recruitment took place between March and June 2024. The study employed convenience sampling in the first instance, with the invitation to participate initially distributed through the first author's network of teachers currently working in mainstream secondary schools using social media channels. Thereafter, snowball sampling ensured wider spread of locations and subjects represented.

The main eligibility criteria were that participants had experience of teaching students with SEND in a mainstream secondary school in England as a qualified teacher. Data saturation informed the final sample size, which consisted of 11 participants, 10 of whom worked in schools in Greater London, and 1 based in the West Midlands. **Table 1** summarises participants' key characteristics.

Data collection

This study employed semi-structured interviews that encouraged discussion about participants' experiences of including and teaching students with SEND in their lessons and classrooms. Follow-up probes were used to clarify responses, explore nuances, and encourage further elaboration on personal narratives to gain in-depth data on mainstream secondary school teachers' experiences with inclusion. The study received ethical approval from the School of Human Sciences at the University of Greenwich in

Table 1. Demographic and job characteristics of participating teachers ($n = 11$).

	Category	N	%
Gender	Male	5	46
	Female	6	54
Age	25–34	8	73
	35–44	2	18
	45–54	1	9
Ethnicity	White British	5	46
	Black/African/Caribbean/Black British	1	9
	Asian/Asian British	2	18
	Other ethnic group	3	27
Years of teaching experience	0–5 years	5	46
	6–10 years	4	36
	11+ years	3	18
Region of school in 2023/24 academic year	London – Central	2	18
	London – North	5	46
	London – East	2	18
	London – West	1	9
	West Midlands	1	9
Subject(s) taught*	Core (English, Maths, Science)	3	27
	Foundation (Computing, PE, Citizenship)	3	27
	Humanities/Social Sciences	4	36
	Arts	2	18
	Modern Foreign Languages	2	18

*Participants could select more than one option if applicable.

February 2024. All participation was voluntary following informed consent. Participants were assured of anonymity, confidentiality, the right to withdraw and data protection. Informed consent was obtained through an online survey, where participants accessed detailed information about the study objectives and procedures. They also indicated their interview format preferences and contact information to arrange an interview. Participants' demographic information and teaching experience were collected via the online survey.

All interviews were conducted by the first author: six in-person and five online, via MS Teams. The semi-structured interview schedule was partially based on the open-ended questionnaire used by Warnes, Done, and Knowler (2022), which encouraged discussion about participants' experience pertaining to SEND provision at their schools, and elicited detailed views about the training and support teachers receive on implementing inclusive practices. However, unlike Warnes et al., which used open-ended surveys, this study used in-depth semi-structured interviews to elicit richer narratives through follow-up probes, which allowed participants to connect their experiences more explicitly to policy and systemic issues.

Participants in the present study were instructed not to reveal any identifiable information concerning students, professionals and locations. Interview length ranged from 31 to 67 minutes, with the average duration being 51 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data analysis

Data were analysed using the six step thematic analysis approach developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis was led by the lead author, whose background as mainstream secondary school teacher, not long out of the profession, informed the coding of transcripts and generating of initial themes. While this allowed for a nuanced understanding of the research's context, a reflexive approach was required to minimise biases in interpreting transcripts (Braun and Clarke 2020). NVivo was utilised for data coding, analysis and organisation.

The analysis involved several phases, starting with familiarisation of the data by the first author through repeated readings of the transcripts. From the first four interviews, preliminary codes were generated inductively, whereby codes were derived directly from the content of transcripts rather than the influence of the first author's background or theoretical frameworks. This initial coding framework was reviewed by the third author for consistency, before applying the coding to the remaining seven interviews. Subsequently, the research moved and merged codes into broader categories based on similar patterns and issues, which were then reviewed by the second and third authors. This process was collaborative and iterative until agreement was reached regarding the final themes.

Findings

Our thematic analysis of the interview data identified three key barriers to supporting SEND students in mainstream secondary schools: (1) the distortive pressures of accountability culture; (2) the mismatch between supply and demand in SEND provision; and (3)

Table 2. Coding framework: themes and subthemes.

Name	Cases (out of 11)	Frequency count
Accountability culture	11	263
Scrutiny of schools	6	8
Leadership priorities	11	39
Curriculum expectations	10	33
Scrutiny of teachers	6	22
Workload	11	104
Professional wellbeing	11	57
Supply and demand	11	231
Demand	10	50
Legal frameworks	9	21
Enrolment demands	9	29
Supply	11	181
Funding	10	22
Resource strain	11	89
Resource efficacy	9	42
Collaboration	8	28
Teacher confidence and competency	11	78
Training	7	18
ITT	3	7
CPD	7	11
Coping mechanisms	9	29
Emotional toll	11	31
4 - Impact on students	11	109
Academic	11	59
Personal	11	50

teachers' confidence and competence with SEND. These themes interact to demonstrate how the challenges faced by teachers shape their perceptions of how students with SEND experience school, culminating in a fourth, deductive theme describing the impact on these students. **Table 2** summarises these themes and their corresponding sub-themes.

Below, we describe these themes and experiences with indicative quotes from the interview transcripts. Where relevant, we provide indications of prevalence to illustrate the extent to which teachers within our sample had the same or similar or expressed the same or similar viewpoints.

Accountability culture

Teachers described the influence of accountability culture in England's education system, and how this impacted the way their school prioritised support for SEND students. Six teachers highlighted the pressure placed on schools to maintain a high academic standing, citing school inspection and the school leaderships' pursuit of a favourable league table position as common stressors. As one teacher described, maximising the number of students capable of contributing to high performance, at the expense of those who were less likely to contribute to boosting academic outcomes, had a financial dimension, which also influenced behaviour:

[SLT] care about how many are gonna pass the exam [...] How many can we have? Let's fill up the classroom and that's going to give us lots of money because every child brings in £4,500. (Participant 3)

In the minds of teachers, school leaders' decisions about curriculum and assessment were shaped by the perceived demands or expectations of accountability processes.

Students with SEND were 'not going to get a [grade] 7, 8, 9 in the GCSEs, which is what positions your school well' (P9). Students with SEND were disadvantaged within what was described as a 'one-size-fits-all' system. Six participants described how schools' focus on the GCSE curriculum squeezed out alternative practical and vocational qualifications, which are often better suited to the needs of learners with SEND: 'It's not fair to expect them to learn or access subjects that they cannot access' (P6)

School inspection was another key component of the accountability system that was mentioned and drove institutional behaviour, again to the detriment of students. Several teachers drew particular attention to the performative nature of inspection. Their comments revealed that while inspection catalysed action, what they believed inspectors might see was not indicative of everyday provision and practice:

If Ofsted [the school inspectorate] is coming, then of course we're going to design the best SEND provision for the inspections. (P9)

I feel like it's all a bit of a tick box exercise at the moment [...] There's not anything that is really striving to make sure that our low ability or SEND students have just as good an experience as our other students. (P7)

The pressure to increase the schools' standing in league tables was inevitably felt by teachers, as it was they who were expected to 'produce the grades for the school' (P6). As one teacher described, little or no allowances were made for students with SEND – who are 'expected to achieve as much as their peers' – or teachers: 'If the SEND student is not learning, it's the teacher's fault' (P9). One teacher described how the leadership team encouraged teachers to maximise grade projections in order to determine on which students to focus effort:

There are these packages [...] where basically you can manipulate the system, [...] then you realise, 'Oh, actually I can afford to ignore five students [with SEND]. These five are the lost causes'. That's really horrific terminology to use, but many times, we are forced as teachers to think like that (P3)

Teachers reported the demands of accountability were a cause of increased workload, with school days described as 'hectic' and 'unpredictable'. As a result, every teacher reported working additional hours, often extending into evenings, weekends and school holidays. Several also described skipping lunch breaks to keep up with workload demands. All of this contributed to feelings of pressure and work-related stress.

Supply and demand

Teachers were cognisant of 'the huge increase in SEND' (P3) and reported a growing complexity of diagnoses:

You have emotional support, and then you have learning support. And you have other students who may be looked after [in care]. But that might mean they don't have any learning disability, but may very much have home life situations that will bring difficulties in other ways. (P1)

Teachers described the elements and impact of what we have labelled the 'SEND supply and demand crisis' in England, and specifically how this affects mainstream schools. First, teachers emphasised the lack of funding:

The more funding available, the more support you can bring in for that child or group. You can bring in staff who are qualified to tailor for their needs [...] But at the moment, our hands are tied, not just at my school, but in other schools as well. (P6)

Additionally, six teachers referred to what they felt was a lack of transparency in terms of how the funding schools receive is spent. This may contribute to the general sense of frustration that permeates the comments from teachers.

Secondly, due to insufficient funding, schools' SEND departments were described as 'overstretched' and 'overworked', and 'struggling with long backlogs'. Eight teachers suggested this may mean some students progress through secondary school without their needs being diagnosed. Teachers reported the burden on SEND departments affected the rate and quality of information. SEND departments produced 'generic' and 'outdated' profiles of students' needs, and SENCOs 'did not seem to have answers to our inquiries' (P2), or were simply unavailable.

Thirdly, all teachers in this study mentioned a diminution in the availability of teaching assistants (TAs), with this section of the school workforce similarly stretched due to the increase in students requiring specialist provision and support. TA availability was described as 'unpredictable', making it difficult for teachers to plan lessons:

If [the SEND department] tell you beforehand that you will have a TA, you will plan accordingly [...] But if you go to your lesson every week and then, suddenly, one week you see [a TA], do you improvise? You don't know how to make the most of the professional in the room. (P9)

In addition, seven teachers remarked on how untrained TAs were being deployed to support students with behavioural and/or emotional needs, as access to or the availability of skilled specialists (e.g. mentors and counsellors) was rare. This provision was viewed as falling short of what students required:

[TAs] were watching kids run down corridors, keeping an eye on them, taking that 'movement break' instead of keeping them in the classroom. (P11)

Without adequate support and resourcing, teachers struggled to balance giving attention to every student in their classroom and ensuring each students' needs were met in order to achieve their target grades:

I have to spend more time dealing with those who are struggling [...] which means we're not giving the high achievers all the attention that they deserve (P2)

Teachers described creating bespoke lessons and resources for individual students, in addition to class-level planning, in order to compensate for the lack of support. However, some teachers found this expectation unmanageable, and sometimes felt forced to compromise the quality of education they provided:

You had to kind of cut corners to get the job done. (P11)

You lower your expectations. If they don't learn A, B and C, and instead just learn A and B, then I'm happy. (P9)

Teachers' confidence and competence with SEND

Teachers highlight several factors affecting their confidence and competence regarding SEND. Nine teachers described how the training they received about SEND was overly theoretical and lacked practical strategies:

There's always a SEND [training] day where someone will come in and talk about things from a PowerPoint, which isn't always helpful [...] we want an example to show us what has worked and what hasn't worked. (P5)

Reflecting on the coverage of teacher training, three teachers described how SEND was a low priority, such as being treated as a tick-box exercise:

When I trained [...] it's very easy to just print out several different types of worksheets and say I've differentiated it, but [...] is my mentor just ticking off a list saying that I've been able to differentiate? (P8)

You are trained that this is how a student learns to do this [...] or this student is not doing this, therefore they will not be able to do this. That is not necessarily true (P10)

These teachers questioned whether initial teacher training guidelines adequately prepared them to implement meaningful inclusion practices. Asked to describe what teachers would need to better support students with SEND, they suggested training tailored to their school's SEND population. In the absence of quality training on SEND support, teachers relied on their colleagues, with many citing the value of observing and talking with experienced teachers:

Sometimes just hearing other people's experiences and knowing that things can go very wrong as seasoned teachers is helpful [...] to know how they mitigated it or what they could have done (P1)

As one teacher described, the pressurised environment and general poverty of time that typified teachers' working environment meant sharing practice more often occurred in the 'artificial' context of a staff training session than the more 'organic' context of a live lesson in which they observe. Teachers expressed feelings of personal frustration, touching on feelings of inadequacy, in being unable to enable every student to achieve:

That is my biggest frustration as a teacher. Like, did I do things right? What else could I have done? (P2)

It can be very difficult as a teacher to feel that you are doing your best and that everyone's needs are met. (P1)

The mix of pressures and the challenging context in which they operate puts teachers at risk of burnout. The comment below was indicative of how all of these factors negatively impact teachers' performance and wellbeing:

It's a constant thing [...] the expectation from those who have not been teaching for some time that a teacher fulfil a thousand little tasks, not realising that another thousand has been put on by another [...] it's a death by a thousand cuts. (P10)

Impact on students with SEND

The interviews revealed how the factors affecting teachers' ability to support students with SEND combined to further disadvantage these students pastorally and academically. Firstly, they highlighted the way in which the pressures of workload and time led to miscommunication between colleagues and disruption to students' learning:

If teachers are kept in the loop, then it means that there's better preparation that a teacher can make when it comes to resources [...] Now that student has been pulled out of my lesson halfway through, but they've got no work to carry on practising and consolidating that knowledge you gained in the classroom. With the SEN needs being very challenging already, it means that you're behind even more. (P8)

Secondly, teachers described how, within the context of an academically demanding curriculum, limited resources impacted the learning and progression of students with SEND within an exam-based educational system:

[My student] needs a scribe or to type for their exams. But they cannot type because they find it difficult to. If [school leaders] knew that, the student could have been put into intervention to help them type faster [...] They should be typing but they have lots of days where there just isn't a laptop available [...] We don't have the budget for those resources. It's really affected their confidence and they started to not be engaged and not wanting to try. (P7)

Teachers noted a wider impact when students with SEND fell behind academically. For example, they described how students with SEND tended 'to believe they are a little bit different' (P8) and knew 'they're not at the same level as the rest' (P9), indicating an impact on their sense of self. This was perceived by teachers to drive a negative impact on behaviour in the classroom, which most interviewees suggested stemmed from the view that 'they feel like they would feel better if they were the class clown instead of admitting that they struggle with the learning'. (P2)

Disruptive behaviour could result in students being removed from the classroom. In some cases, teachers felt some students with SEND actively sought to 'avoid the classroom' (P5, P10), particularly in subjects they found difficult. One teacher summarised how poor communication among staff, lack of training and curriculum demands impacted a particular student:

[Student B] cannot read [...] Most teachers aren't informed about [Student B] by staff who've worked with them before. I think, at the moment, it's left [Student B] to be pretty abandoned, like we've given up on them. They now spend a lot of time roaming the corridors instead of being in lesson because there isn't support there for them. And when the support is there, the support will often take them for a walk around the school instead of keeping them in lesson and trying to resolve the problem that has caused the issue in the first place [...] It's a self-fulfilling prophecy. (P10)

This, in turn, affects other students with SEND who miss out on support because their classmate took up a disproportionate amount of resources. As another teacher described, this situation could mean the learning needs of these 'quieter' students went undetected for longer:

You're maybe marking their books and you realise 'Wait a second, this kid is always quiet in my lesson, but they've only managed to write the date and answer a few questions from the starter. (P8)

Finally, limited or inconsistent TA support was cited as a factor in the impact on students with SEND. One teacher discussed how this added to workload and feelings of being over-stretched, with knock-on effects for students:

There's never enough TAs [...] They simply cannot be with everyone and that affects teachers [...] I simply cannot get myself around to every single person and give them the attention they deserved and need. (P7)

Teachers said that when in lessons, TAs provide stability, reassurance, and the 'positive encouragement' needed to help students with SEND participate. But when TAs are not in lessons, a student can 'tend to feel detached' (P8), and from there, is more likely to engage in disruptive behaviour.

In a broader sense, the competitive school environment, limited resources and overall toll on teachers creates a cycle that perpetuated the struggle students with SEND faced in trying to succeed in mainstream education:

If we're not catering for the generation that we have, where more of them do have SEND, then we've set them up to not succeed how we think they should succeed. (P4)

Discussion

Our thematic analysis of rich qualitative data obtained through semi-structured interviews revealed three key barriers to teachers' supporting students with SEND in England's mainstream secondary schools. The first concerns the demands exerted by England's high-stakes accountability system, which places a disproportionate emphasis on exam outcomes and sits uneasily with teachers' aspirations for authentic inclusion. The second reflects the supply and demand crisis affecting the SEND system, which has eroded the structures of support teachers regard as essential. The third describes teachers' perceived lack of competence and confidence with SEND, which they attribute to the persistent underrepresentation of SEND within both pre-service and in-service training. These barriers are consistent with those found in previous research both in the UK (e.g. Goodman and Burton 2010; Ward and Powell 2025; Warnes, Done, and Knowler 2022) and elsewhere; for example, in Greece (Mouchritsa et al. 2022) and Saudi Arabia (Almalky and Alrabiah 2024). The fourth theme, describing the academic and social impact of these barriers, underscores how the experiences students with SEND have of mainstream education diverges from that of their peers, echoing previous research highlighting the greater isolation and disruption that characterises their day-to-day life in school (Dixon, Braye, and Gibbons 2022; Webster and Blatchford 2019). Taken together, the themes mirror findings from research by Goodman and Burton (2010), 15 years previous on the outsized impact of accountability-related scrutiny and feelings of being over-stretched have on teachers.

The present study also diverges from prior work by focusing specifically on secondary schools, where subject specialisation, exam-focused curricula, and league-table pressures amplify the systemic contradictions of inclusive education. Whereas primary schools have

been the main context of earlier qualitative research (e.g. Gray, Hill, and Pellicano 2023; Warnes, Done, and Knowler 2022), our findings reveal how secondary teachers face unique and intensified tensions between policy rhetoric and professional practice.

These findings extend existing research in two ways. First, they demonstrate how these barriers are not isolated, but interact within a wider policy ecosystem that constrains teachers' professional agency. For example, teachers' sense of inadequate preparation for SEND cannot be understood solely as a weakness of individual training providers; it must be read against the policy decision to prioritise accountability measures over investment in professional development.

Second, our study highlights the political character of inclusion rhetoric. In view of these broader secondary school-specific factors, the barriers described by teachers in our study should not be interpreted as professional shortcomings, but as structural consequences of political choices about funding, training, and accountability. While the teachers we interviewed had ideas about potential solutions – for example, better in-service training to enhance their self-efficacy (MacFarlane and Woolfson 2013) – the policy paradox is clear: teachers are positioned rhetorically as central to inclusive education yet are repeatedly denied the resources, training, and professional autonomy required to enact it.

Policy and political rhetoric

Accordingly, our findings suggest that teachers' concerns cannot be understood in isolation from the wider policy environment. The persistence of identical barriers across decades is indicative of a system with questionable commitment to inclusion. In the context of the English system, this is perhaps best expressed in the Conservative-led coalition government's explicit intention to 'end the bias towards inclusion' (Cabinet Office 2010; Runswick-Cole 2011). This rhetoric, which problematised inclusion, ran counter to a formal commitment to international goals of inclusion, reducing it from a mechanism for structural change to a symbolic reassurance. This positioning situates inclusion as an issue of individual differences rather than one of equity. Teachers in our study described a daily reality shaped by underfunding, inconsistent training, and high-stakes accountability, while also charged with delivering inclusivity and improved outcomes across the board.

This tension points to the political function of inclusion rhetoric: while governments affirm their commitment to equity, they simultaneously sustain conditions that, at worst, undermine and work against, and at best, limit its potential. Evoking Hodkinson's (2019) assessment that the government's position has come to sound 'like a scratched record', the most recent comprehensive review of the SEND system (undertaken by the cross-party Education Select Committee and published in September 2025), predictably enough recommends that SEND be embedded throughout initial teacher training, and that teachers have access to high-quality, ongoing CPD (Education Committee 2025). This provides yet more evidence of the paradox: policy-makers acknowledge the problem, yet reforms continue to fall short of addressing the systemic barriers that teachers face daily in classrooms. The risk is that future reforms prioritise balancing teachers' duties and workloads, rather than effectively implementing inclusive education. In this sense, the barriers identified by teachers are less an

indictment of professional capability and more evidence of systemic contradictions embedded in educational policy that stretches back decades, where teachers have remained an afterthought in the conversation. Unless such recommendations are acted on fully and decisively, teachers will continue to experience the dissonance captured in this study: being rhetorically positioned as central to inclusion, while practically denied the training and resources to fulfil that role. More broadly, a radical reframing of inclusion in the educational discourse is therefore critical to shifting priorities away from measurable outcomes and towards equity for all students to and within education.

Limitations

While our study provides fresh empirical evidence of how inclusion in English secondary schools has been both promoted and undermined by policy over the past decade, we have to acknowledge its small-scale nature and sample size. There is also the potential for researcher bias due to employing convenience sampling from the lead author's professional network, which could have led to biases in participants recruited and, therefore, views shared. Notably, it explains the geographical bias in the sample (all but one participant taught in Greater London schools). That said, our findings align with views expressed by teachers elsewhere (e.g. Chow, de Bruin, and Sharma 2023; Ward and Powell 2025; Wray, Sharma, and Subban 2022), demonstrating the prevalence of key concerns, and the broader systemic issues in educational policy they reflect.

Another limitation is that the present study did not specify whether support was tailored to specific types of student need. While focusing on SEND, broadly construed, can appreciate the uniqueness and complexity of various needs prevalent in today's cohort, it may also inadvertently conflate the experiences of provision for all types of needs and their manifestations. Additionally, this study does not differentiate between students who receive more or less intensive forms of support. However, given that SEND departments in mainstream schools work with a diversity of needs, this study may offer a realistic and relatable representation of these experiences and challenges.

Future directions

Future research could explore views on SEND provision based on teachers' subject speciality. Despite subject specialism being a key feature of the secondary school experience, few studies on subject-specific teaching experiences have been conducted (Black 2019). Physical education (PE) is an exception, where previous research reported PE teachers have consistently been denied SEN support on the grounds of the subject's more physically oriented nature (Dixon, Braye, and Gibbons 2022; Maher and Macbeth 2013; Morley et al. 2021). Exploring experiences within subject specialities could further reveal variations in the allocation of SEND support, offering deeper insights into the supply and demand crisis outlined in our results.

Finally, as the present study did not distinguish between state-funded schools and schools in multi-academy trusts, future research could examine and compare how

teachers working in different types of mainstream setting experience working with students with SEND of teachers – not least because teacher turnover is reportedly higher among schools in multi-academy trusts (Weale 2024).

Conclusion

This paper has reported findings from a qualitative examination of the barriers mainstream secondary school teachers in England face in supporting students with SEND. It was carried out amid a period of intensifying demand and political transition. By foregrounding teachers' voices, we have shown how accountability pressures, systemic under-resourcing, and inadequate training intersect to produce conditions that undermine inclusive education. Crucially, our analysis demonstrates that these are not isolated operational problems, but the cumulative – and arguably predictable – outcome of policy decisions and political priorities.

The contribution of this paper is twofold. First, we provide original qualitative data from secondary school teachers, a group underrepresented in prior research, whose experiences highlight how high-stakes, exam-driven accountability creates distinctive challenges for inclusive practice. Secondly, we situate the experiences of secondary teachers within the broader landscape of educational policy and political rhetoric, exposing a persistent paradox: inclusion is championed in legislation and speeches by politicians of the centre-left and centre-right, yet systematically undermined in practice.

This critique is timely and important, given the Labour government pledge to address the 'broken' SEND system (Department for Education 2025; National Audit Office 2024). Our findings provide insight into the systemic contradictions that must be resolved if this latest policy initiative is to move beyond symbolic commitments and confront the entrenched tensions between accountability, funding, and teacher training. A failure to achieve this will result in inclusion remaining aspirational rather than achievable.

Finally, this paper contributes to the wider international discourse on inclusive education by showing how policy rhetoric can obscure the structural realities that teachers and students confront daily. Protecting the rights of students with SEND requires more than legislation. Among other important things, it demands sustained investment in teacher expertise, reform of accountability structures, and recognition of teachers' agency as central to delivering equitable education.

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Data availability statement

Qualitative data from this study cannot be shared due to ethical restrictions.

Ethics approval statement

The study received ethical approval from the Psychology and Counselling, School of Human Sciences Research Ethics Panel at the University of Greenwich in February 2024.

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