# Praise for *The Inclusive Classroom*

'Practical, concrete advice peppered with brilliant anecdotes. This utterly readable book is not just for teachers of children with SEND; it has the power to absolutely change the way every teacher approaches every child.'

**Charlie Allison, SEND Lead at the Xavier Catholic Education Trust, consultant and lecturer**

'It's rare to come across an educational book that I both wish I'd written and wish I'd read at the beginning of my career. *The Inclusive Classroom* is exactly such a book. It is packed with practical, relevant and insightful advice that will enable any classroom practitioner to really meet the needs of all their children. What I love most is its simplicity. Complex theory and years of knowledge are distilled into bite-sized tips that everyone, from new teachers to experienced leaders, can apply immediately to support the creation of a calm, secure learning environment for all. This should be essential reading on initial teacher training if we're serious as a nation about ensuring every child gets the education they deserve whilst giving teachers more precious time.'

**Sarah Bailey, Headteacher of Croydon Virtual School and former primary school headteacher, @SarahBa19844848**

'*The Inclusive Classroom* is essential reading for new and experienced teachers. It is insightful, accessible and packed with practical ideas.'

**Dr Helen Curran, Senior Lecturer in SEN at Bath Spa University, @drhelcurran**

'An honest, genuine and authentic read by two authors with personal, first-hand experience of SEN. The book is peppered with tangible ways to look to the needs of all children as individuals. The "Try this… Instead of this" sections are particularly useful for practitioners. I highly recommend it.'

**Helen Frostick, former headteacher and educational consultant**

'This book is a comprehensive, step-by-step guide for professionals on how to best create a well-balanced and supportive classroom. It's a must-read to improve your planning and delivery of lessons and take a holistic approach to SEN.'

**Alice Green, primary school teacher, @mrsalicegreen**

'This is a practical, honest and supportive guide to illuminate the importance of establishing an inclusive environment where all children can shine, be engaged and love their learning journey. It supports teachers to take structured steps to improve inclusivity for all children in their care. This is a must-read for every teacher and school leader!'

**Stephen Lawler-Smith, National Leader of Education and Headteacher of Moorside Community Primary School, Salford**

'*The Inclusive Classroom* urges us to really know what makes each young person in our care tick in order to support their learning. This is a must-have for everyone who works in schools.'

**Jez Piper, CEO of Diocese of Bristol Academies Trust, @DBAT_UK**

'*The Inclusive Classroom* provides the perfect blend of tried and tested pedagogy with a fantastic and easily accessible way to advise all educators on how to be more inclusive. I thoroughly enjoyed the pearls of wisdom shared by two passionate educators who are refreshingly open and honest about the challenges they face with their own learning difficulties.'

**Baasit Siddiqui, Director of Siddiqui Education, @SiddiquiEdu**

'Dispelling myths, generously sharing their own personal experiences of the education system and breaking their helpful advice into easily applicable chunks, Daniel and Sara empower and enable teachers to make a difference to children's outcomes and life chances.'

**Leanne Symonds, Headteacher and National Leader for Education, Ringwood School and the SPELL Alliance**

'Each and every pupil is both unique and special. An additional learning need is not necessarily a difficulty. This book provides a timely, personal and welcome reminder of the importance of individual pupils' needs, instead of an obsession with a diagnosis.'

**Allison Yarrow, Deputy Headteacher and Wellbeing and Achievement Lead, Cardiff High School, @AllisonYarrow**

# The Inclusive Classroom

## A new approach to differentiation

Daniel Sobel and Sara Alston

BLOOMSBURY EDUCATION
LONDON OXFORD NEW YORK NEW DELHI SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY EDUCATION
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK

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First published in Great Britain, 2021 by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: PB: 978-1-4729-7792-2; ePDF: 978-1-4729-7789-2; ePub: 978-1-4729-7790-8

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1 (paperback)

Typeset by Newgen KnowledgeWorks Pvt. Ltd., Chennai, India
Printed and bound in the UK by CPI Group Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY




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# Acknowledgements

I wrote this book to help better our world for the next generation and I dedicate it to my personal next generation: my children, Boaz, Toby and Abi, and my nieces and nephew, Leora, Gavriel, Zahava and Adina. I have genuinely tried my best to contribute something valuable and helpful to better our world somehow. I did it for all of us, but I did it with you in my heart.

I should say one of the most important thank yous and 'without you this would never have happeneds' to the ever so patient, deeply inspiring and utterly brilliant Sara Alston. Of course, it takes two to tango, but it's like you arranged the music, got the hall, designed the choreography and did everything else in between. Despite my frustrating you with missed deadlines and cancelled Zoom calls, I have learned a lot, a heck of a lot, from you, and I enjoyed slogging up this killer mountain together!

I always mention my core team, wherever I am and to whomever will listen. I do this because they are my bedrock and without them I would be nowhere. I absolutely love working with you guys. Thank you, my colleagues-friends-family, Sharon, Ren and Gosha.

A very special thanks to my sister Kate Gerstler for some very patient and clever editing of this book: and boy, did my contributions in particular need her wisdom, experience and frankly, intuition!

I'm not sure I would have done this all without the help of Hannah Marston at Bloomsbury, who is super-smashing-great-fun and warm, encouraging, clear and guiding. She is the perfect nudger that an author needs; three cheers for Hannah the Great.

My efforts are only a small element of my productivity. I'm supported, far more than anyone would ever expect, by my wonderful wife. I owe her everything. Unless one day we get divorced, in which case I owe her half. But I love her endlessly and she is my rock, not just to bash with me, but to uphold me every day, in facing any and every storm, in being the stable platform for my life. I owe her everything (or half if necessary).

Daniel Sobel

No book is the work of just one or, in this case, two people. It is a team effort involving many people, some of whom are conscious of their role and some of whom are unconscious of it. I want to start by thanking my co-author Daniel for his inspiration and big-picture vision. We are an odd partnership incorporating two very different work styles – lastminute.com compared with 'get everything in a week ahead of time'. But we managed to work together in reasonably good humour and without killing each other, possibly thanks to the COVID-19 lockdown, which meant much of our writing was done online. Thank you, Daniel, I couldn't have done it without you.

We have been ably supported by Hannah Marston at Bloomsbury. Also, by the amazing Inclusion Expert back office team. Special mentions should go to Sharon Finn, who

coordinated diaries and ensured Daniel made most of our meetings, and Jude Farshi, who worked with me on the online courses I wrote for Inclusion Expert, which laid the foundation of the approach Daniel and I developed in this book. Thanks to Deborah Lewis, Kate Gerstler, Joshua Alston and others who have read different versions of the book, commented and helped with the editing. The mistakes remain mine and Daniel's.

Behind this are the many teams I have been part of over the years, all of whom have fed into this book in different ways. The Inclusion Expert consultants team are a wonderful group of educational experts who are a constant source of support, inspiration and challenge. Over the last 30-plus years, I have worked in a range of schools that have enabled me to form, develop, practise and refine my ideas about learning and teaching. All the staff, parents and children have contributed to this book in some way. I would like to thank particularly my colleagues and the families at Pyrcroft, Leatherhead Trinity and Pirbright Village Primary Schools and the multi-agency teams in Surrey, particularly the EPs, Specialist Teacher Team, SALTs, social workers and safeguarding trainers I have worked with.

In this book, we have included the stories of many children. All of these are fictional, though the inspiration comes from the children I have had the privilege to teach, who have probably taught me more than I have taught them.

I would like to thank particularly and dedicate this book to the female educators who believed in me when I didn't believe in myself: my mother Janice Rich, my great aunt Sarita Ricardo, Margaret Riddell, Jennifer Pullig, Rabbi Julia Neuberger, Meg Gibbons and Brenda Hamblin, as well as the next generation, Helen Borley and Alison Walsh. They are a constant source of inspiration.

Last, but not least, I would like to thank my sons, Sam and Joshua, without whom not only couldn't I have written this book, but there would have been no point.

Sara Alston

# Preface

A person with ADHD and a dyslexic walk into a bar. That's literally how we started this journey. One of us was completely distracted and the other made messy notes. We both got sensory overload, gave up and walked away. And so, our journey to writing began. We weren't the usual pair of bespectacled wordsmiths; instead we were a hilarious duo – we promised to enjoy each other's foibles and not let normal expectations haunt us.

Daniel Sobel had already published a couple of successful books and, through his work with thousands of schools, really wanted to cover what he considered to be the most important aspect of inclusion: how to help teachers do it successfully. However, with Daniel's area of expertise being in whole-school management and pastoral leadership, he reached out to his most obvious writing partner, someone he thought was the best person in the world to bring this vision to reality: Sara Alston. Sara was initially anxious about writing a book because of her dyslexia, despite a long career in writing and having written for Daniel's online training courses.

The initial stages were enjoyable as we eagerly swapped ideas about how we could structure this book and what we would want it to say, but we realised there was a long way to go! It's strange to be sitting together now, at the end of this massive journey, writing this final sentence (no, you don't write a book in order!). A person with ADHD and a dyslexic walked into a bar, bought a drink and reflected on the book that they had just written!

The guidance in this book comes from a wealth of first-hand experience, both as teachers and professionals working in primary and secondary education, and also as children with special educational needs. With that in mind, we wanted to begin by each taking the time to introduce ourselves and tell you a little more about why and how we came to be writing this book together.

## Sara Alston

Despite, or possibly because of, my dyslexia, I have been teaching for over 30 years in primary schools and special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) units as a class teacher, school leader and designated safeguarding lead. I still work part-time at the 'chalk face' as a special educational needs coordinator (SENCO), as well as working as a successful education consultant and trainer.

Teaching never came easy for me, but it was and is driven by my belief that the child and their welfare are paramount. This must be the starting point for everything that we do as teachers. I was not one of those 'outstanding' teachers because I wouldn't play the game. I believed that being a teacher who cared for and supported their children every

day was more important. The children had to come before the Ofsted criteria. This means that when I work with teachers, I know that it is often not easy, and I make a point of never asking teachers to try something that I don't think I could manage myself. It is this, along with my experience of working with children, teachers and support staff, backed by academic research, that I want to share with you in this book.

I have been fortunate in my career to have had the opportunity to extend my experience beyond the classroom. As an advisory teacher, I was involved in the development of resources to support the delivery of the first National Curriculum for history, and more recently through safeguarding and SEND work. This has allowed me to focus on what we do in schools, how it works and how it can be developed.

I first met Daniel in the intimidating surroundings of the Institute of Directors in London and had expected a besuited 'corporate' man. Instead I found an inspiring maverick who cared deeply and passionately about education and supporting teachers to support children. He had taken this vision and built a successful partnership of real experts in his organisation Inclusion Expert, sharing his perception and wisdom as widely as possible. Quickly, I found that Daniel shared much of my personal and professional understanding about the impact of both 'good' and 'bad' experiences of schools on children. Through five years of working together and numerous, at times unlikely and disjointed, conversations, we developed a shared understanding of what it means to support children with SEND in schools. It is also clear to us that the strategies that best support children with special needs in fact support all children to learn better and make teachers' lives more manageable. Our approach is not about major interventions, but about the small tweaks and adaptations that make the difference. This is what we hope to share with you in this book.

## Daniel Sobel

Before I write another word in this book, I feel I should confess. Actually, whenever the topic of classroom teaching comes up, I'm very open with everyone that I have never been one of those super-amazing teachers who make it all look easy. I was a firmly 'good' teacher who, when observed, would always get an 'outstanding' for no other reason than I knew when the observation was going to happen and what they were looking for. I was always surprised when someone didn't get an outstanding rating – surely observation is a simple game to win.

Part of the reason I wasn't a consistently 'outstanding' teacher is because I didn't actually agree with a lot of the criteria and had my own thoughts about what teaching could or should be. I'm not promoting rebellion in the ranks! But, as a teacher, I was never going to simply fit in and just do as I was told. I found my way to the back office and school administration as a SENCO, pastoral leader and senior leader, and it was there that I developed my individual approach and invented new ways of doing things.

So, it's clear that I don't profess to be a great teacher. By working with thousands of schools, I have had the privilege to meet some of the best teachers and educators in the country, and have certainly learned a lot along the way, but I could not have written this book on my own. It is for this reason that I partnered with one of the best in the business: Sara Alston. She brings to our duo that genuinely outstanding teachership, as well as vast experience coaching thousands of teachers, and a deeply sophisticated appreciation of how classrooms can work for all in an easier way.

What I bring to the table are a lot of questions and thoughts about teaching and inclusion based on my experiences, which I believe helped to drive our book. We extend a variety of good ideas for all teachers, regardless of age, stage and curriculum, but it is a bit more than that for me. I view this book as a manifesto for a new epoch in the way we approach inclusive thinking.

# Introduction

When we set out to write this book about what it means to support children with special educational needs (SEN) in the classroom, our fear was less about what we were going to say and more about what the entire SEN industry has already solidified into the minds of teachers and school leaders. In particular: SEN is expensive; it takes up huge amounts of time; it is the bane of teachers' classes and it can be one of the toughest challenges in parental relationships. Anything we suggest, therefore, has to consider these preconceptions, which is why we have kept the focus of all of our writing on the following principle:

*For it to be effective, inclusion has to take up less time, less money and less stress.*

Our book is all about how to do inclusive teaching in a stress-free and time-saving way. We look at how to make an 'inclusive classroom' without the pain and effort usually attributed to inclusion. Our focus is on workable tweaks and adaptations that any primary or secondary classroom teacher can use to differentiate for children with SEN. Our whole approach is rooted in a macro idea, which in itself isn't new, but is new in application to efficient SEN and inclusion in the classroom: the phases of the lesson. We break down the lesson into a series of manageable chunks or 'phases'. Inclusion is hard if you think of the lesson as one long marathon with lots of differentiated points along the way for lots of different children. Instead it's easier to think of a lesson as a series of routines and priorities that can become enmeshed in good practice and that can be useful for all children, not just those identified as SEN. By SEN, we include any child who requires additional educational support for cognitive and neurological needs, social and psychological needs, as well as physical and medical needs and so on. This may go significantly beyond the official SEN register.

## We know that it's not easy

Teaching children with a range of strengths and needs can be a real challenge. We will be the first to hold up our hands and declare we've got it wrong – we've had days where we felt that we were no good as teachers or that we'd failed to do enough, whether it be in marking or preparation, and so on. There is no such thing as a teacher who gets it consistently right all day, every day without fail, even those declared to be outstanding.

It's funny, though, that we seem to be OK with putting teachers in the firing line to face a group of children when they are woefully untrained and underprepared. There may be some very good reasons for this, but we must confess we can't think of any. Perhaps it is due to the cost of training in both time and money, but we dare say it doesn't cost

as much as the sick days of stressed teachers and the teachers who end up leaving the profession in droves (Department for Education, 2020). If you were tasked with a job in a hands-on profession but were not fully prepared for it, HR would view it as negligent, and most likely the line manager would get a rap on the knuckles for insisting you use a piece of machinery you had inadequate training for! We are genuinely worried for the teachers, but the impact that under-trained teachers have on the number of children who are excluded each year is sadly immense. The number of permanent exclusions across all state-funded primary, secondary and special schools has increased from 6,685 in 2015–16 to 7,720 in 2016–17 (Department for Education, 2018). Although we tend to think of it as the 'child's fault', unfortunately it is nearly always our collective failure as teachers and schools when such cases go wrong.

Indeed, one of the most common causes of exclusions is attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD; UK ADHD Partnership) and those cases usually have something to do with just how (understandably) disruptive the excluded child is for teachers and the normal operation of the school. In those cases, it becomes 'normal' to talk about the child needing another setting – somewhere more specialised where the staff have more or different training. Actually, those special settings, such as a pupil referral unit (PRU), alternative provision (AP) and even social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) provision, are not that dissimilar to the mainstream, and the smaller classes don't make ADHD or other needs disappear. Exactly the same challenges exist in those settings as the mainstream, such as encouraging the child to participate in learning throughout the lesson. Being a specialist setting doesn't give those teachers a magic wand to change the children. Those who do it best are not doing anything different from the outstanding mainstream schools that don't need to exclude students because they have fantastic pedagogy. Pedagogy is the key – how inclusive the teaching is comes down to how skilful the teacher is in understanding and catering for the needs of all children. If you're a school leader, think about how many teachers in your school know how to easily adapt their teaching to meet the needs of a child who bursts into the class and won't settle. If they don't, then is it really fair to ask them to teach that child? If you're a teacher and you feel you haven't had adequate training to cope in these situations, then you've come to the right place. We wish we had had the benefit of the training that is contained in this book. In our view, it is not just 'nice to know stuff'; rather, it should be considered absolutely fundamental to any teaching of mixed groups.

*I was about 13 in the mid 1980s, when the craft, design and technology (CDT) teacher set a project for us boys to do over two terms. It was simple: design and build a plane to be launched from a standing position. This is something that the school had done for decades and the school record was something like 20 metres. Most of the boys worked studiously, employing what they had learned about balsa wood and various types of metal work. For me, this was tantamount to a free double period every week.*

*There was no way that a child with my ADHD could plan and execute a six-month-long project. With just two weeks to go before the showdown (so that's the final four hours), I looked at the fierce competition and admired their varnished wood and fanciful launch contraptions appearing like Iron Age weapons of war. It occurred to me that instead of submitting the absolute zilch that I had failed to produce, I might give this a go, and the easiest and quickest possible thing for me to do would be to make a paper aeroplane. I made the five types every boy in my class knew how to make and worked out which one actually went furthest once and for all. I then tried it with the next paper size up: A3. That worked. I wondered whether it would still work at A2. It did. Each time it went further but the wings got a bit floppy. So, I thought, why not make it in A2 card paper? That sorted out that problem. Hang on, what about an A1 card paper aeroplane? I discovered after one try that with a bit of reinforcing here and there, I had achieved perfection in aviation (why wasn't I working for NASA?). That took one lesson. Now I was into it, I thought about it some more at home. My launch arm was only so long and strong so I figured out that I could use a huge elastic band – but I didn't have one... except in my sports shorts. I quickly cut them open with scissors, pulled out the elastic and took it to school for the next lesson. I made a latch under the plane, reinforced it with a bit more cardboard and double checked it did not alter the aerodynamics. I took the plane outside, put the elastic in the notch and pulled it back like a catapult. I didn't measure it, but it went further than the length of the field, which was at least 50 metres.*

*The day of the showdown arrived and when I arrived late at the start line, most of the planes had already taken off. Most had flopped, despite looking very sophisticated. My turn. There was only one to beat: his had gone 8.6 metres. I drew back and I remember hearing the surprise of my peers as my plane landed some 70 metres away. For someone who had never achieved anything in CDT and had struggled at school in a myriad of ways, this was a moment for me that I would never forget. I beat the school record by more than three times. One week later, we received the marks for our projects. I was given a D.*

*Daniel*

*One of my earliest memories of school, after solving the mystery of why the six Sara(h)s in my class were not listed together in the register (apparently it had something to do with surnames), was spelling tests. The teacher used to point at us and make us spell the words aloud. If we spelled the word wrong, we had to stand up, then stand on the chair if we spelled another word wrong, and then on the desk. Of course, I couldn't spell and certainly couldn't spell out loud. The more I failed to spell the words, the more the teacher pointed at me and demanded I did. I got to the point where I was*