

Inclusive school environments – beyond the classroom

Summary paper

October 2024



Background

The Inclusion Ambassadors are a group of secondary school-aged pupils who have a range of additional support needs and attend a variety of educational provision across Scotland. Children in Scotland delivers the group, with support from Enquire.

There are currently 17 members of the group from across 15 local authorities. The group share their experiences of accessing additional support in school through online and in-person meetings. The group meets regularly to discuss their vision for additional support for learning, guided by their vision statement [which can be read here](#).

This summary paper explores the Inclusion Ambassadors experiences of using spaces in school outside the classroom. These spaces include corridors, toilets and dining halls among other places, and are referred to as additional spaces throughout this paper. It builds on their previous work on inclusive classroom environments.¹

The Inclusion Ambassadors vision statement states that “School is a place where children learn, socialise, and become prepared for life beyond school”.² The ability of pupils with additional support needs to feel comfortable and secure both in the classroom and around the school is an integral component of fulfilling this vision.

The Inclusion Ambassadors have previously discussed their experiences of using spaces outside the classroom in the context of topics including relationships and behaviour, support staff and ideal learning environments.^{3 4 5} These discussions allowed the group to consider how the school environment could be made more inclusive for pupils with additional support needs. By focusing discussions on spaces outside the classroom, the group were able to explore how they can contribute to the wider environment of their school and how this can support or promote inclusion.



¹ Inclusion Ambassadors (2023), *Inclusive learning environment* poster.

² Inclusion Ambassadors vision statement (2021), *Vision and overview* document.

³ Inclusion Ambassadors (2024), *Relationships and behaviour summary paper*.

⁴ Inclusion Ambassadors (2023), *Support planning*.

⁵ Inclusion Ambassadors (2023), *Inclusive learning environment* poster.

The group explored this topic over a series of engagement sessions with support from Children in Scotland and Enquire staff. Discussions focused on why it is important that spaces outside the classroom in schools are made inclusive for pupils with additional support needs and, importantly, how it feels to be in these spaces. Members told us that when spaces outside the classroom are made inclusive for them, they feel safe and relaxed and able to socialise with peers and staff to develop positive relationships that help make their experiences in school more positive. The group also had the opportunity to share what their ideal spaces outside the classroom in school would look like if they had an opportunity to design them.

This paper highlights the key themes from these discussions and presents a series of recommendations for school staff and decision makers to help make spaces outside the classroom feel inclusive for all pupils.



Supporting children and young people to feel safe and comfortable

We heard from the group about how spaces outside the classroom are central to supporting them to feel safe and comfortable in school. These spaces can provide calm, relaxed environments that support young people when they feel stressed or overwhelmed. Relaxed environments can also support positive wellbeing.

Providing a space to calm down

Many members of the group shared that classrooms and communal spaces in school can be hectic and busy. Being in busy, loud environments can be overstimulating or overwhelming for some children and young people with additional support needs. They said it was therefore important that there were inclusive spaces outside the classroom that could be accessed to support them to regulate or calm down.

“School staff need to recognise that pupils will be stressed and overwhelmed for a range of reasons. Schools need to provide a space [to de-stress]”

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors

“It’s important for people with disabilities or additional needs to have a space for grounding and de-stressing. Communal spaces in my school don’t always have these”

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors

One member also highlighted that not everyone will have access to relaxing or quiet spaces in their home life and it is important that pupils can find these in school.



A designated space to relax and unwind for pupils with additional support needs

Members were generally in agreement that inclusive spaces outside the classroom provided space for pupils with additional support needs to relax and unwind. Spaces like the library were considered inclusive as they were quieter and less overwhelming than other spaces in the school. Additional support bases were highlighted as a space designated for pupils with additional support needs in the school.

Several members spoke about spaces for pupils with additional support needs including sensory spaces and designated quiet rooms that they could use to calm down whenever required. Importantly, these spaces were designated spaces for pupils with additional support needs ensuring they provided an escape from busy communal spaces in school.

Spaces outside the classroom exclusively for pupils with additional support needs were highlighted by several members as being inclusive. The option to leave busy communal spaces in the school and to enter quieter spaces designated especially for them, supported members to feel included and relaxed outside of the classroom.

“It’s a place for people with ASN or who want quiet space”

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors

“The base is my go-to when I’m not in class”

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors

One member spoke about the importance of feeling a sense of ownership over a space for pupils with additional support needs. This helped them feel included and a part of something in school, especially when they feel excluded from other communal spaces in school.

“[In the ASN base] we have a garden that is only accessible through the base, we can go out and grow things”

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors



The whole school environment supports relationships

We also heard from members of the group that spaces outside the classroom are often where they can develop relationships with both staff and their peers. This was a central reason for the group viewing these spaces as important and is why it is essential that we support them to be inclusive.

Relationships with peers

Key spaces for developing relationships with peers were seen to be the cafeteria, library and outdoor spaces. Members of the group spoke about how these spaces within the school environment can help them build a sense of community as they can be places where you socialise with people with similar interests and experiences. It was clear from our work with the group how these opportunities to socialise helped them to feel valued.

“[Inclusive additional spaces are] a space where you value the relationships within it. It’s good to be with friends and other people who have a similar experience”

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors

Some members discussed how they are allowed to access specific teacher classrooms during break and lunchtimes with their friends, providing them with a quiet space to socialise and build relationships.

They also said that, while using these classrooms, the teachers would sometimes be present and that this helped them to feel safe, particularly if they already had a prior relationship with the teacher.

“At lunch we like to go to the art rooms because there are teachers in there and you can chat to your friends”

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors

“It feels safe being around teachers that you have a relationship with”

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors

Using classrooms during break and lunch times was said to have a positive impact on these members as they felt trusted by staff to respect the space. Members reported feeling a sense of ownership over the classroom and a responsibility to ensure it is left in the same condition as when they entered.

We also heard that designated social spaces within the school were viewed as welcoming and inclusive for members whose school offered them. These spaces were provided in addition to communal spaces and allowed smaller groups of pupils to gather in a quieter environment. These members said that pupils and staff in the designated spaces were “kind” and “helpful”.

“[Our school’s] social spaces are welcoming and pupils there are kind and helpful. Teachers help us [pupils who speak English as a second language] to chat and learn”

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors



For members who spoke English as an additional language, these designated social spaces, and the facilitation of coffee mornings before the school day, allowed them to practice their English language skills with support from staff and other pupils.

Most members described a designated quiet space as part of their ideal spaces outside the classroom in school. Several members considered the lighting of the space important, suggesting the space should have adjustable lighting to suit sensory preferences and for pupils with visual impairments. Fairy lights and lamps were also noted as ways to make the quiet space feel calm and relaxed.

“Generally, low or adjustable lighting across all school environments would be preferred for those with sensory issues and specific visual impairments”

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors

Relationships with staff

The Inclusion Ambassadors also spoke about how they develop vital relationships with school staff outside of their time in class.

Some members said that they were allowed access to spaces like the support for learning base or classrooms supervised by staff during break and lunch times. They said this helped a space to feel safe, and supported them to build trusting relationships with staff. Members of the group clearly differentiate the classroom as a learning environment from when they get to use it at lunch time.

“It helps support your relationships with teachers, being in a relaxed space and a trusting environment”

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors

The group have done a range of work on the importance of relationships in supporting their learning which you can access on their webpage.^{6,7,8} It is clear that the whole school environment has a role to play in supporting this.



When the wider school environment does not feel inclusive

Spaces are overcrowded and too busy

The majority of members identified that spaces like dining rooms and canteens can often feel overcrowded, loud and busy, all of which contribute to them not feeling inclusive for pupils with additional support needs. Some members said that they avoided these spaces due to this.

“It’s the main hub for most people in school so it can be overwhelming”

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors

“I don’t use the canteen anymore; I go to the base”

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors

Members of the group suggested that adding more spaces outside the classroom where people could eat would help avoid eating areas becoming overcrowded and allow pupils to find quieter, more comfortable spaces to eat.

⁶ Inclusion Ambassadors (2024), *Relationships and behaviour summary paper*.

⁷ Inclusion Ambassadors (2023), *Support planning*.

⁸ Inclusion Ambassadors vision statement (2023), *Inclusive learning environment poster*.

We also heard how outdoor spaces sometimes do not feel inclusive, despite typically being associated with calm. We heard how they feel overcrowded and that some people use them to smoke or vape. All of this can make people feel unwelcome and overwhelmed.

Having consistent access to outdoor spaces was seen as important to the majority of members. Being able to access a large and open outdoor space to play was mentioned as an important addition to additional spaces in the school.

“Even teenagers can play!”

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors

The importance of accessing nature was also stressed by many members of the group who identified a garden space with lots of plants and flowers as a feature of their ideal additional spaces. A couple of members also recommended bringing nature inside the school by introducing plants around the building. They believed that this could create a calm and grounding environment for pupils with additional needs.



“A community garden that everyone can use and have opportunities to contribute to the caring of”

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors

Busy corridors

Members of the group shared that corridors are often too overcrowded to move around the school comfortably between classes. They said this can feel overwhelming for many children and young people with additional support needs.

Corridors were highlighted by most members as a space where they had experienced negative physical interactions with other pupils while moving between classes during the school day. This was in part due to them feeling overcrowded but also a result of loud, boisterous and bullying behaviour exhibited by other pupils.

Members of the group shared that they had been shoved into walls and lockers and hit by school bags making it “not safe for people”. Deliberate shoving and pushing were experienced by members whilst using the corridors in their school.

“I got a bruise from being shoved into a radiator and my hat stolen”

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors

We heard from one member of the group that their school allowed them to leave classes early to avoid overcrowded corridors.

Toilets not being accessible or safe

Toilet spaces were also acknowledged by members as spaces that are often too crowded to access and use comfortably. Several members spoke about toilets being used as social spaces for some pupils, where their peers would often meet with friends during break and lunchtimes. One member described pupils being “territorial” over toilet spaces, making them exclusive spaces for a group of pupils.

“[The toilets] sometimes are just full of people doing their own thing and then you can’t use them”

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors

Toilets were also highlighted by many members as spaces that did not feel safe to use in the school. Some members spoke about toilet cubicles not having locks to ensure privacy. Others mentioned that some pupils would use toilet spaces to vape during break times which prevented them from feeling comfortable or able to use the toilets when needed. One member spoke about staff supervision in toilets due to disruptive pupil behaviour. They said this didn’t necessarily make them feel safer and that school toilets no longer felt like private spaces.

“We have to have the janitor standing near the bathrooms so that they [pupils] don’t set the fire alarm off because that kept happening”

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors



Fighting

We heard how communal spaces like dining halls and corridors sometimes do not feel safe or inclusive as there can be fights. Several members discussed pupils fighting as a factor that contributed to certain spaces outside the classroom feeling unsafe and not inclusive for pupils with additional support needs. Communal spaces like dining halls and atriums were said to be spaces where fighting in schools tended to occur. Other pupils running to witness a fight added to feelings of being unsafe in these spaces.

“There are fights and lots of people go running to see them. The kids running to see the fight don’t take into consideration any other people at all”

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors

The Inclusion Ambassadors discussed their experiences with pupils fighting in school in more depth in their relationships and behaviour summary paper.⁹

⁹ Inclusion Ambassadors (2024), *Relationships and behaviour summary paper*.



Lack of provision outside the classroom

Accessibility requirements not met outside the classroom

One member of the Inclusion Ambassadors discussed how their specific accessibility requirements that were met in the classroom were not consistently met in other spaces in the school.

They shared that they were not always supported to move between classrooms. This contributed to them feeling overwhelmed and unsafe outside the classroom. They also shared that while they were supported to eat in an additional needs base, this support would not be given if they were to eat in communal spaces like the canteen. This made them feel excluded from the canteen and limited their options of additional spaces they could use when at school.

“Accessibility needs aren’t always accounted for... I just want to feel safe amongst other pupils”

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors

Lack of provision and lack of understanding of what is available

Generally, members of the group felt that there was a lack of spaces outside the classroom where they feel comfortable. Several spoke about consistently being moved by staff from spaces outside the classroom to busier communal spaces that did not feel inclusive of pupils with additional support needs.

“Where else can we go?”

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors

“There is nothing to do, outdoors and indoors”

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors

We also heard that many young people are not aware of the different spaces they might be able to access outside the classroom. They shared that more could be done to make pupils who could benefit aware of these spaces. This is really important as children and young people have a right to an environment which supports their education.

“Some people say, ‘what is the SFL base [support for learning base]?’ – you don’t need a disability to use the space and get support if you need it”

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors



Other ideas to make the wider learning environment more inclusive

Members of the group also shared a range of other ideas to make the wider school environment feel more inclusive and accessible.

We heard how different and flexible forms of seating arrangements around the school could make spaces outside the classroom feel more inclusive. Members said that bean bags and booths would allow for more comfortable and private seating options around the school.

"I like to sit differently. I sit sideways and backwards – it is more comfortable. Having more freedom would be good"

Member of the Inclusion Ambassadors

We also heard from one member that therapy dogs had visited their school and that they found this helped them de-stress, however, this was not a frequent occurrence. This member said that more consistent visits from therapy pets would be encouraged in their ideal school environment.



Summary and recommendations

Members of the Inclusion Ambassadors were clear that it is important to them that spaces outside the classroom and the wider school environment are inclusive of pupils with additional support needs. When spaces outside the classroom are inclusive, our members said this made them feel safe and comfortable and supported them to socialise and develop relationships that positively enhanced their school experience.

Members of the group shared that designated quiet spaces for pupils to escape busy and loud communal spaces in school helped them to calm down when they felt overstimulated or overwhelmed. Having spaces designated for pupils with additional support needs, such as an additional needs base, was also identified as an important aspect of the wider school environment.

Inclusive spaces outside the classroom were said to be important to developing positive relationships with peers and staff. When members could visit a quiet and private space with friends who shared similar experiences to them, they said this created an inclusive sense of community where relationships could be built.

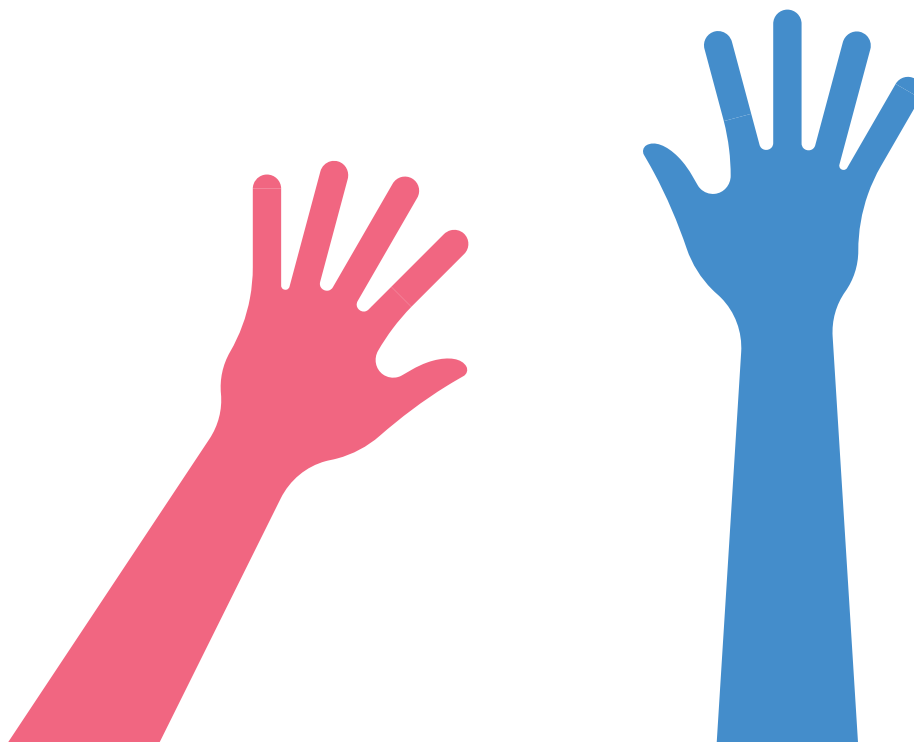
The presence of teachers and support staff in these spaces allowed members to develop vital relationships with school staff, effectively facilitating a relationships-based approach to meeting pupils' additional needs.

We also heard from members about the factors that prevented spaces in the school environment from feeling inclusive. Several spoke about support needs and accessibility requirements not being met outside classrooms or designated additional needs bases. They said that overall provision for inclusive spaces outside the classroom in their schools was lacking and that there was a general lack of awareness of provision if it was available.



The below recommendations have been proposed by Children in Scotland, based on what we heard from the Inclusion Ambassadors.

- 1. School staff should work closely with pupils with additional support needs to understand their experiences of using spaces outside the classroom in their own school context.** Staff should act on these views to make all spaces outside the classroom more inclusive for pupils with additional support needs in their school.
- 2. Schools should raise awareness among pupils with additional support needs of the wide range of spaces on offer in the school** to ensure that all who can benefit from accessing these spaces are provided an opportunity to.
- 3. Staff should trust pupils to take ownership and show respect for all spaces in their school – including the outdoors and green spaces where pupils can access nature.** The Inclusion Ambassadors tell us this promotes inclusivity and makes pupils feel valued.
- 4. Schools should not prevent all pupils from accessing additional spaces (including toilets) when ‘negative behaviour’ is exhibited in these spaces.** This can reduce access to necessary amenities for pupils with additional support needs and is inconsistent with a children’s rights approach.
- 5. Schools should provide support for accessibility needs beyond the classroom and designated additional support needs bases.** Support should be provided for pupils who need it in all feasible spaces a pupil wants to access.
- 6. When schools are redesigning, adapting or creating new spaces, pupils with additional support needs should participate in making decisions about what these spaces look like, feel like and include.** This promotes a sense of inclusivity for pupils and supports the fulfilment of several children’s rights as laid out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.¹⁰



¹⁰ United Nations (1989), United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.