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Preparing teacher trainees for inclusive practice: A randomised controlled trial of grouping strategies in Initial Teacher Education

Submission date
14/05/2025

Recruitment status
No longer recruiting

Registration date
10/06/2025

Overall study status
Completed

Last Edited
16/05/2025

Condition category
Other

[ ] Prospectively registered
[ ] Protocol
[ ] Statistical analysis plan
[ ] Results
[ ] Individual participant data
[ ] Record updated in last year

Plain English summary of protocol

Background and study aims
Inclusive education is a central priority in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) in England, yet teachers often face challenges implementing inclusive teaching effectively. A key aspect of inclusive practice involves how teachers group pupils in their classrooms to meet diverse pupil needs. There is pressing need to examine how ITE can best prepare trainees to make dynamic, context-specific grouping decisions. Whilst policies promote inclusion, little is known about the best ways to develop teachers' decision-making skills for effective grouping within the classroom. This study aims to identify the relative strengths and weaknesses of two training approaches: a systems-thinking approach ('Beyond the Classroom') that considers broader systemic factors influencing grouping decisions, and a skills-based approach ('Within the Classroom') focused solely on flexible grouping strategies.

Who can participate?
Teacher trainees specialising in secondary education enrolled in NIoT's ITE programmes, based at campuses in the North and West, South and West, East, South and London, or North and East regions of England.

What does the study involve?
Trainee teachers within each campus will be randomly assigned as a cohort to one of two training approaches. The intervention will take a 'Beyond the Classroom' approach, supporting trainees to consider broader systemic factors—such as policy, stakeholder expectations, and structural tensions—when making these decisions. The comparison condition will reflect business-as-usual training, aiming to deepen trainees' understanding of 'Within the Classroom' flexible grouping strategies without engaging with broader contextual factors. The two approaches will run over two sessions —one session on key concepts, the other on hands-on practice through scenario work, deliberate practice, and reflection.

Scenario-based assessments will be used to measure the trainees' ability to prepare for, make and communicate inclusive grouping strategies in diverse classroom settings. Trainees will complete a scenario-based assessment at baseline, and then will be given the opportunity to

justify what (if any) changes they would make to their initial response at endline testing. This approach is expected to stimulate reflection from the trainees and give them an opportunity to grow. Surveys will also be used to capture trainees' self-reported perceptions regarding their confidence, motivation and preparedness in making inclusive grouping decisions.

What are the possible benefits and risks of participating?
Participating trainees will be offered the opportunity to be named in the acknowledgements of the outputs associated with the research. They will also be invited to express interest in joining the Research Advisory Group and provide input on aspects related to dissemination and impact. In terms of risks, while attention and care will be taken by the research team to reduce the risk that participants may be identifiable, qualitative data carries the risk that some may be identifiable through in-depth description being used. In addition, while we will change wording of staff titles to reduce risk of re-identification (e.g. Head of ITE Faculty will be written as 'Senior ITE staff'), a small staff team includes risks to confidentiality for individual staff participants. These risks of re-identification will be made clear to staff member participants in the consent process, and they will be given the option to review any direct data or described scenarios from their transcripts used in the final report, and to remove if they feel uncomfortable.

Where is the study run from?
National Institute of Teaching (UK)

When is the study starting and how long is it expected to run for?
December 2024 to December 2025

Who is funding the study?
Department for Education (UK)

Who is the main contact?
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Additional identifiers

Study information

Scientific Title
Preparing teacher trainees for inclusive practice: A randomised controlled trial of grouping strategies in Initial Teacher Education

Acronym
ITE Inclusive Practice Trial

Study objectives
This study aims to identify the relative strengths and weaknesses of training that incorporates systems thinking compared to training focused solely on specific flexible grouping strategies in preparing teachers for inclusive practice within the complex English educational system. The null hypothesis is that there is no significant difference between the two approaches in terms of key trainee outcomes identified.

Ethics approval required
Ethics approval required

Ethics approval(s)
Approved 01/05/2025, National Institute of Teaching (Potovens Lane, Wakefield, WF1 2PF, United Kingdom; -; research.ethics@niot.org.uk), ref: NIOT-25-3

Primary study design
Interventional

Study design
Dual-strand design integrating a randomized controlled trial and a mixed-methods implementation and process evaluation

Study type(s)

Treatment

Health condition(s) or problem(s) studied

Teacher trainees' ability to make principled grouping decisions, and to prepare for implementation of these, as well as self-efficacy, motivation, communication skills and reflexivity around inclusive practice

Interventions

The study employs a dual-strand design, integrating a randomised controlled trial (RCT) and a mixed-methods implementation and process evaluation (IPE).

RCT:
The intervention will take a 'Beyond the Classroom' approach, supporting trainees to consider broader systemic factors—such as policy, stakeholder expectations, and structural tensions—when making these decisions. The comparison condition will reflect business-as-usual training, aiming to deepen trainees' understanding of 'Within the Classroom' flexible grouping strategies without engaging with broader contextual factors.
The two approaches will run over two sessions—one session on key concepts, the other on hands-on practice through scenario work, deliberate practice, and reflection.

The key concepts regarding the 'Beyond the Classroom' approach will be focused on understanding system structures and taking action within the system. Specficially:
1) Historical and policy developments shaping SEND in England
2) Evolving attitudes towards SEND: Implications for teachers today
3) Special vs mainstream schools: Purposes, benefits, and challenges for students with SEND
4) Historical and philosophical drivers of grouping practices (e.g., special schools, inclusion, and ability-based grouping)
5) Research on mixed-ability teaching vs setting and streaming for SEND
6) How systems thinking can help teachers navigate complexity in grouping students
7) Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory: Understanding student experiences in different groupings
8) Identifying key stakeholders and their influence on grouping decisions
9) Recognising potential tensions between perspectives and accountability measures

The key concepts regarding the 'Within the Classroom' approach are focused on scaffolding through grouping, and the importance of oracy in groupwork. Specifically:
1) Setting stretch tasks within a challenging curriculum: Balancing rigour with achievable outcomes
2) Scaffolding techniques: Providing structured support to build independent learning
3) The importance of grouping strategies: Considering familiarity, prior knowledge, and ability levels
4) Intentional and consistent language: The role of language in promoting challenge and aspiration
5) The importance of oracy: Developing high-quality classroom talk to support learning
6) Teaching, modelling, and requiring high-quality oral language: Structuring discussions and dialogues effectively
7) Developing pupil responses into full sentences: How oracy supports literacy and broader learning outcomes
8) The relationship between spoken language, reading, and writing development

Session facilitators will be offered training by NIoT ITE Faculty and NIoT Content Design senior staff prior to the delivery of the two sessions, as per normal ITE delivery. Participants will be current trainees specialising in secondary education enrolled in NIoT's ITE programmes across multiple training sites in England, randomised within each campus to one of the two training conditions.

Mixed-Methods IPE:
The implementation and process evaluation uses surveys, focus group discussions, individual interviews with trainees and ITE staff, and observations to explore the mechanisms and contextual factors influencing decision-making about student grouping.
Respondents for the feedback survey will be secondary trainees and tutors/facilitators who have consented to take part in the research. Participants for the qualitative research will be trainees (estimated n = 23 overall) and NIoT staff (estimated n = 10 overall) participating in and delivering the inclusive practice training.
Across a minimum of 2 NIoT regional campuses, an estimated 8-15 trainees will participate in focus group discussions and an estimated 6-8 trainees will participate in individual semi-structured interviews. Trainees for the focus group discussions and individual interviews will be sampled purposively, where possible, with the support of regional NIoT ITE programme leads, aiming for a diverse representation, considering various characteristics such as age, gender, engagement levels in the ITE programme, fee-paying vs salaried routes, and SEND status.
An estimated 6-10 individual interviews will be held with NIoT staff designing and delivering the inclusive practice training, including tutors/facilitators (n = 4) and other relevant NIoT ITE Faculty staff (n = 6), including those designing the training materials. NIoT ITE Faculty staff (including facilitators and design staff) will be recruited and selected by NIoT study team members and reached out to directly through verbal or written communication. All staff that meet the eligibility criteria will be invited to participate.
Trainees for individual interviews will be recruited by the study team and NIoT regional ITE Faculty teams collaboratively. One or two study team members will attend 2-3 campus days in person and request volunteers, guided by regional teams.

Intervention Type
Other

Primary outcome(s)
1. The ability to make principled, contextually responsive grouping decisions for diverse pupil needs will be measured using scenario-based assessments generated by the study team. Trainees will complete a scenario-based assessment at baseline, and then will be given the opportunity to justify what (if any) changes they would make to their initial response at endline testing.
2. Trainees' self-efficacy in implementing and sustaining inclusive grouping practices will be measured with surveys at baseline and endline.
3. Trainees' motivation to implement and sustain inclusive grouping practices will be measured with surveys at baseline and endline.
4. The ability to effectively prepare for inclusive grouping strategies in diverse classroom settings will be measured using scenario-based assessments generated by the study team. Trainees will complete a scenario-based assessment at baseline, and then will be given the opportunity to justify what (if any) changes they would make to their initial response at endline testing.
5. The ability to effectively communicate grouping decisions and rationale to colleagues, administrators and parents will be measured using scenario-based assessments generated by the study team. Trainees will complete a scenario-based assessment at baseline, and then will be

given the opportunity to justify what (if any) changes they would make to their initial response at endline testing.
6. The ability to reflect on and adapt grouping practices based on evolving pupil needs and classroom dynamics will be measured using scenario-based assessments generated by the study team. Trainees will complete a scenario-based assessment at baseline, and then will be given the opportunity to justify what (if any) changes they would make to their initial response at endline testing.

Key secondary outcome(s)
1. Trainee perceptions of the training day measured using a survey at endline.
2. Tutor/facilitator perceptions of the training day measured using a survey at endline.

Completion date
31/12/2025

Eligibility

Key inclusion criteria
To be included in the study, campuses must meet the following criteria:
1. The ability to host and facilitate two parallel in-person training sessions on the designated intervention delivery day (15th May 2025).
2. A sufficient number of secondary trainees enrolled in their ITE programme to allow for meaningful participation (min n = 6)

Randomised Controlled Trial:
1. Eligible participants will be current trainees specialising in secondary education enrolled in NIoT's ITE programmes, based at campuses in the North and West; South and West; East, South and London; or North and East regions of England.

Process Evaluation:
1. Eligible participants will be NIoT ITE trainees and NIoT tutors/facilitators participating in and delivering the inclusive practice training across the four NIoT regions as well as ITE tutors and ITE Faculty members.
2. Trainees eligible for individual interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) will need to be enrolled in the NIoT ITE programme at one of the participating campuses across England.
3. Eligibility criteria for NIoT staff participating in individual interviews will include role(s) in designing or facilitating the inclusive practice ITE training sessions, ITE tutors or other facilitators leading the training, and ITE Faculty members who oversee NIoT training.

Participant type(s)
Employee, Learner/student

Healthy volunteers allowed
No

Age group
Adult

Lower age limit
18 Years

Sex
All

Total final enrolment
276

Key exclusion criteria
Trainees pursuing specialisms in primary education; trainees who participated in pilot study

Date of first enrolment
15/05/2025

Date of final enrolment
22/05/2025

Locations

Countries of recruitment
United Kingdom

England

Study participating centre
National Institute of Teaching - South & West Campus Birmingham
Woodview Drive
Birmingham
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B15 2HU

Study participating centre
National Institute of Teaching- North & West Campus
Shadsworth Road
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United Kingdom
BB1 2HT

Study participating centre
National Institute of Teaching - South & West Campus Bristol
The Greenway Centre, Doncaster Road
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United Kingdom
DN6 7EQ

Study participating centre
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112 Peckham Road, Peckham
London
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Study participating centre
Windsor Academy Trust
Trinity Point, High Street
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Sponsor information

Organisation
Department for Education

ROR
https://ror.org/0320bge18

Funder(s)

Funder type
Government

Funder Name
Department for Education, UK Government

Alternative Name(s)
Department for Education (DfE), Department for Education, educationgovuk, DfE

Funding Body Type
Government organisation

Funding Body Subtype
National government

Location
United Kingdom

Results and Publications

Individual participant data (IPD) sharing plan
The anonymised datasets generated and/or analysed during the current study will be stored in a publicly available repository (Harvard Dataverse).

IPD sharing plan summary
Stored in publicly available repository

Study outputs

Output type	Details	Date created	Date added	Peer reviewed?	Patient-facing?
Study website	Study website	11/11/2025	11/11/2025	No	Yes