

# Shifting the narrative: How the Affirmation Model can revolutionise inclusion in schools

# Creating a culture of inclusion: The power of the Affirmative Model

Today, I read an inspiring article in [Schools Week](#) titled “How Labour Can Deliver a Truly Inclusive Education System” by [Amanda Wright](#) and [Matthew Shanks](#). A section called “Social, Not Medical” sparked my thinking about how we work with children, young people, and their families, particularly by deepening our commitment towards an [Affirmation Model of disability](#).

Before becoming Managing Director of [Elevate](#), I spent nearly 15 years in higher education as a Senior Lecturer, leading degree programs focused on inclusion. One of the core challenges we encountered was supporting students to explore their own assumptions about special educational needs and disability (SEND). As the article expressed, all too often, students with SEND are perceived as in need of ‘fixing’ which can unintentionally perpetuate a narrative that views SEND as a deficit rather than as part of a student’s identity.

In creating inclusive environments, it’s essential to consider gender, ethnicity, sexuality, socioeconomic background, age and religion, elements that shape every individual’s identity and experience. But for today, I’d like to focus on how we can expand our understanding of disability, in particular, by considering moving toward a more affirmative, strengths-based approach to inclusion and inclusive practice.

The social model of disability has already brought significant progress, encouraging us to focus on societal barriers rather than individual ‘deficits’. This model places responsibility on the environment, structures, and attitudes that very often restrict disabled people. However, we can go even further by adopting the Affirmation Model of disability, which offers a lens to value and celebrate disability as an integral, positive aspect of human diversity.

Unlike traditional models, the affirmation model frames disability through a ‘non-tragic’ perspective, recognising it as an integral, positive aspect of a person’s identity. It arose in response to the prevalent ‘personal tragedy’ narrative, which sees disability as inherently limiting. Instead, the affirmation model embraces disability as a valid, distinctive experience, informed by the voices and perspectives of disabled children and young people themselves. It’s about moving beyond removing obstacles to actively affirming and respecting disability as part of human diversity.

## What could this look like in school settings?

Many schools are already doing inspiring work to make environments more accessible and inclusive, and the affirmation model is simply about adding depth to these existing efforts. This approach sees each student as a whole person, with unique experiences that enrich the school community. Here are a few reflective questions to consider in advancing this perspective:

**How are we challenging narratives that view disability as a ‘tragedy’ or something needing to be ‘fixed’?**

Shifting to an affirmative view starts with language and messaging. Schools might look at how disability is represented in school newsletters, assemblies, and classroom conversations. By celebrating the diverse strengths and perspectives of disabled students, we can affirm students’ identities rather than viewing disability through a deficit lens.

## Are we involving disabled students in shaping accessible and inclusive environments?

Moving beyond compliance, the Affirmation Model invites students to actively contribute to accessibility solutions. Schools could consider gathering input from students on changes to the physical environment, technology, and learning approaches, ensuring that these reflect their insights and experiences.

## How do we avoid framing disability as an individual 'problem' and instead see accessibility as a shared, community responsibility?

The Affirmation Model resists the idea that disability is a personal challenge to be overcome. Schools can embed a community-wide approach to accessibility by fostering solidarity among peers, incorporating group discussions on inclusive practices, and encouraging collaborative problem-solving to create a supportive culture for all.

## How are we engaging the entire school community, including families, in understanding and adopting the affirmative model?

To foster a truly inclusive school culture, it's vital to involve students, staff, and families in discussions about the Affirmation Model. Hosting workshops, community forums, or information sessions can help build a shared commitment to inclusion, deepening everyone's understanding of disability as a valued and essential part of diversity.

# The role of Level 5 Specialist Teaching Assistants

As schools explore more inclusive practices, the new [Level 5 Specialist Teaching Assistant apprenticeship](#) offers vital support in this area. With three key areas of specialisation, Teaching Assistants play a crucial role in ensuring that every child can thrive:

**SEND Specialist Teaching Assistants** are experts in advancing the learning and development of students with SEND. By supporting SEND policies and practices, they foster environments that celebrate each learner's abilities and encourage their growth without a focus on 'fixing' perceived deficits.

**Social and Emotional Well-being Specialist Teaching Assistants** play a key role in supporting students' social and emotional health. This role is crucial in fostering a school culture that recognises and nurtures each student's unique needs, creating a supportive and inclusive environment.

**Curriculum Provision Specialist Teaching Assistants** provide targeted support within specific curriculum areas. They advance learning in ways that acknowledge each student's strengths and adapt teaching practices to meet individual needs.

Level 5 Specialist Teaching Assistants interact with a wide range of educational and support staff, including SENCOs and external agencies, creating a bridge between policies, practices, and the lived experiences of their students. Through their daily work, Teaching Assistants can play a significant role in embodying the values of the Affirmation Model, promoting positive identities, fostering participation, and valuing diversity. The Affirmation Model moves us beyond simply breaking down barriers to actively cultivating an inclusive culture that celebrates every student's identity and experience. In doing so, we strengthen our learning environments and create a community where all students can thrive.

I'd love to hear your thoughts on this approach, feel free to reach out and share your reflections or ideas on how we can continue to build inclusive, supportive spaces for all children and young people.