

Starting Strong in SEND

How the NIoT ECT Programme Supports Specialist Teachers

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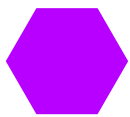


Why start your career in SEND?

In a climate where more and more teachers are expected to manage additional needs in the classroom this article explores why and how the NIoT ECT programme meets not only the needs of those in a mainstream setting, but additionally teachers who have answered the call of working in specialist education settings.

There are currently over 1.7 million children in England receiving some form of SEND support, with more than 483,000 (5.3% of all enrolled students) with an EHCP, this number is growing daily and is double the levels recorded 10 years ago. While mainstream colleagues are developing expertise to manage increased prevalence of SEN in their classrooms, those working in specialist settings, where the complex needs of learners are intensified further, are challenged on a daily basis to balance the removal of barriers to learning with the pressure of delivering an outcome focused curriculum. And some of us love a challenge!!

The focus on SEND in the recent White Paper (published 23 February 2026) recognises schools as 'incredible agents for change', highlighting two key ambitions: ensuring higher standards for all and halving the disadvantage gap by the end of Key Stage 4 - including targeting issues with attendance. Government acknowledgement and support, alongside increased investment in professional development and training in SEND, shows a recognition of the importance of the work completed by professionals working in SEND every day.



A SEND specific ECT experience

For any Early Career Teacher (ECT) it is important to gain experience and develop mastery while applying the knowledge gained through the ITT. The new combined framework lends itself to building on the foundations learned in training and applying them within the induction period.

However, learning for SEND ECTs often needs to occur in a non linear fashion, taking into account priorities relating to barriers to learning, cohorts and curriculums. Flexible and contextualised guidance is therefore even more vital. Not only are SEND ECTs learning to navigate the classroom developing skills in:

Behaviour management and relational practice

Adaptive teaching and individualised learning opportunities

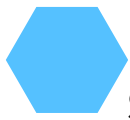
Becoming a reflective practitioner

Flexing theory to hook learners

Additionally, they are required to become experts in removing barriers to learning, understand a range of complex diagnosis and the impact they have on individuals, work with a range of multidisciplinary professionals (integrating their advice into the classroom environment) and manage a team of staff, many of whom often have years of experience in SEND. Mentors who recognise this and are able to guide and support this are crucial and their training and support offer needs to reflect this too.

Cohorts of SEND students can be significantly different, while appearing under the one umbrella title. As a SEND practitioner with over 20 years, I appreciate the flexibility required of teachers in the classroom. My years of experience have enabled me to adapt and be responsive to learners, it is this background that

facilitators like myself expose this when delivering, using real life examples and experience to supplement the core materials. Whilst still more novice, our SEND ECTs need guidance and experience to be shaped and shared with them in a manner that enables them to apply knowledge across vastly broad domains



How can the NIoT ECT offer support those entering into a career in SEND provisions?

Well, it has been written by experienced teacher educators who have designed a programme that delivers the updated ITTECF with contextualised expert advice. Key contributors such as Alex Quigley (blogger & author, providing literacy expertise) and Mohammed Abdallah (writer & speaker, regional director of Reach Foundation, shaping inclusive practice) ensure that SEND ECTs are guided to develop their approaches to meet the needs of their students. Reuben Moore, the Executive Director of Programmes at the NIoT, has articulated this vision, a focus on balancing ECT and student need:

"We have designed a programme that we believe is incredibly respectful of the time of ECTs and their mentors. Our flexible and feasible programme reduces unnecessary workload, while still maintaining high-quality content and delivery."

NIoT utilises a model of deliberate practice designed to build teaching habits through structured, manageable improvements. This approach is based on a specific model of 'practice with purpose', by Deans for Impact, which focuses on five key principles, building towards mastery.

At the start of each half term ECTs complete a diagnostic tool, discuss the outcomes with their mentor and then have the ability to a self-study module for that half term which is most appropriate. Additionally, schools have the flexibility to reorder modules to match a school's development plan. This encourages a model of bespoke learning that balances the individual needs of SEND ECTs alongside any wider school priorities.



NIoT have carefully selected facilitators from a range of mainstream and SEND settings; they have ensured a breadth of expertise to support teachers through their first two years in their careers. Having delivered webinars on the programme it is clear that NIoT recognises the value of these experts and encourages them to interpret the subtle nuances in the materials and relate the scenarios to ECTs own experiences in the classroom. During these sessions delivery partners share and unpick an area of practice, demonstrating explicitly the impact it can have on practice and therefore students and their outcomes. During the second half of the session ECTs have time to work collaboratively in specifically chosen smaller peer groups enabling the contextualisation of materials, ensuring the opportunity to maximise on the relevance of the materials. The core principles of the session can be applied across various domains so that all attendees can relate to the materials and develop their practice as a result of the CPD focus.

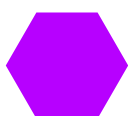


The Transfer of Learning within a SEND Environment

The programme blends self study modules that gradually build, based on what ECTs are ready to learn, with mentoring to contextualise the application of new knowledge within their specific setting. Following a self study module, mentors will observe ECTs and follow up through feedback and deliberate practice to set a specific action step, building new classroom habits. This cycle continues throughout the two years; Year 1 building on the ITT foundations, while Year 2 deepens strategic application and focuses on career development. All of which is covered in small, incremental steps of learning enabling ECTs to embed practice.

To support ECTs and mentors NIoT have developed the 'Prism' platform where instructional coaching and mentoring is logged. This provides a level of structure to the programme, whilst promoting school autonomy through writing targets which are bespoke to the ECTs individual needs. Personally, working in a SEND setting, this level of support, allowing for contextualisation to our setting, is ideal. It enables us to develop staff in a tailormade fashion to meet the demands of the school.

The mentoring cycle sits within a wider offer of a network of online and face to face webinars and conferences delivered by experienced professionals providing a safe space for ECTs to learn and share. In webinars ECTs explore tailored scenarios using six principles of deliberate practice.



The six principles of deliberate practice



National Institute of Teaching model (2025) - adapted from Deans for Impact (2016) and Bambrick-Santoyo (2018)

This model enables ECTs to refine their practice, develop expertise within the context of their role. This is particularly important for SEND ECTs who face additional complexities meeting a diverse range of needs often in an environment of heightened emotion, with additional layers of communication barriers impairing the ability to assess a student's knowledge or skills. The programme takes all of this into account and provides the tailored expertise to enable confidence and ability to be developed.

The Impact NIoT has on ECTs and their schools

Schools are already feeling the benefit of this programme, with ECTs taking advantage of a programme built around a clear knowledge of how to deliver the ITTECF taking into account the range of settings and their needs.

'Our ECTs really enjoyed the recent National Webinar hosted by NIoT. They found it really inspiring and thought provoking!' Jill, Induction Tutor at Whitley Bay High School

Furthermore, ECTs are themselves recognising the value of the materials and the structure of the programme, allowing them to feel confident as learners; appreciating that they are on a journey, moving from more novice to more expert.

Following NIoT events ECTs commented that:

The session went well because...

"[I] was able to connect with being an ECT and not an ITT anymore, recognised within myself that I'm not a full fledged teacher and I'm still learning"

“We got to share ideas with other ECTs which really supports your mental health as well knowing you’re not the only one struggling”

“The content was accessible and delivered by expert demonstrators who have experience within the field.”

It is not just ECTs feeling the value of the programme. Mentors feel empowered and supported in their role:

The session went well because...

“Content was expertly delivered, chunked well with clear instructions and probing questions.”

“I felt supported by both of the facilitators. Very friendly, welcoming and understanding of my needs as a mentor.”

In conclusion, as someone involved throughout the NIoT ECT programme, I recognise the confidence & professionalism brought about through contextualised delivery and mentoring, enabling consistency of practice within a SEND setting. Our SEND ECTs feel supported, recognised and valued; not alone within a cohort trying to relate to materials in isolation. The result of which is a developing professional confidence with increased wellbeing which in turn leads to increased job satisfaction and retention.

