

TEA & CHAT

Understanding SEN (Special Educational Needs) Without Labels

15 JULY 2026 • KUNAFI TEA

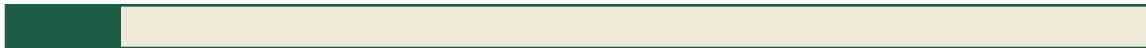


Ethnicity of Participants – 35 Attendees

Pakistani 85%



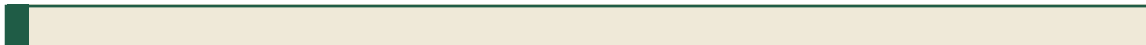
Indian 10%



White British 3%



Middle Eastern 2%



Led by Fiona Ensor

Location: Kunafa Tea

Time: 12:00pm – 2:30pm

Attendance: 35 women

The session was attended by women from a range of backgrounds, with 85% identifying as Pakistani, 10% Indian, 3% White British and 2% Middle Eastern.

Facilitator Biography

Fiona Ensor began her teaching career in 1976 after graduating from the University of Sussex. She taught in both mainstream primary and secondary schools before moving into the special school sector, where she spent eight years. She later joined Bradford's Special Educational Needs central service, specialising in cognition and learning difficulties, before retiring as Headteacher of Bradford's Learning Support Service. During her time leading the service, Fiona managed a team of around 75 specialist teachers and teaching assistants supporting schools, parents and children across Bradford, including children with autism, physical disabilities, visual and hearing impairments, and a wide range of learning needs. She now works independently, providing specialist assessments, training and strategic advice to schools and families.

Session Overview

Fiona delivered an engaging and insightful session encouraging parents to look beyond diagnoses and understand children through their behaviours, strengths and individual needs. Drawing on almost fifty years of experience in education, she challenged the idea that labels define children and instead encouraged attendees to recognise that every behaviour communicates something meaningful.

Behaviour as Communication

To begin the session, Fiona invited everyone to reflect on something they had personally found difficult, whether it was learning to read, mathematics, riding a bike or swimming. Participants spoke about feeling anxious, frightened, nervous and overwhelmed. Fiona explained that these emotions create physical responses such as becoming tense, shutting down, fidgeting, feeling hot or needing the toilet more frequently. She linked these feelings directly to children's experiences, explaining that when children become overwhelmed, they often communicate through behaviour rather than words. A child complaining of stomach aches, refusing school or displaying challenging behaviour is often trying to communicate that something is wrong rather than simply misbehaving.



Learning Through Observation

Fiona explained that much of her assessment work involves observing children while they play. Although children believe they are simply enjoying activities, she is carefully watching how they communicate, solve problems, respond to challenges and interact with others. Observation often provides a far greater understanding of a child's needs than formal testing alone.

Stories from the Classroom

Throughout the afternoon, Fiona shared stories from her own career that illustrated the importance of understanding behaviour rather than making assumptions. One memorable example involved a young girl whose teacher believed had selective mutism and insisted she would never speak. Fiona gently invited the girl to read each day without placing pressure on her. For six days the child silently shook her head, but stood behind her shoulder watching. On the seventh day she nodded, collected her reading book and read beautifully. Fiona explained that the child had always been capable; she simply needed to feel emotionally safe before she was ready to participate.

She also spoke about a pupil named Roy, who was considered extremely challenging at school after being removed from mainstream education. During a train journey from London to Brighton, Roy chatted happily with Fiona throughout the journey and behaved impeccably. The following day he returned to school and once again displayed challenging behaviour. Looking back, Fiona believes that something within the school environment had caused him embarrassment or distress, reinforcing her belief that behaviour is often an expression of unmet emotional needs.

Another story focused on David, a quiet and withdrawn pupil who rarely spoke. Rather than concentrating on what he could not do, Fiona deliberately planned activities that allowed him to experience success. She explained that children build confidence through achievement and that repeated failure quickly damages self-esteem. She also recalled teaching a boy named Steven, whom she estimated she had tried to teach numbers one to three over a thousand times. Despite every possible approach, he simply could not retain the information, reminding her that every child learns differently and success cannot always be measured in conventional ways.

Fiona shared another example from her time in a special school, where one pupil experienced epilepsy. His classmates recognised that rubbing the side of his nose was an early sign that a seizure was about to occur and would immediately alert staff. She reflected on the remarkable care and empathy children often show one another when they are encouraged to understand each other's needs.

From Labels to Understanding

The discussion then explored how terminology surrounding Special Educational Needs has changed over the decades. Fiona reflected on outdated terms such as “maladjusted”, “remedial” and “educationally subnormal”, explaining how these labels reflected a medical model that focused on deficits rather than recognising children's strengths. Although language has improved considerably, she believes labels still have limitations and should never define a child's identity or potential.

Legislation and Provision

Fiona provided an overview of how SEND provision has evolved through legislation, highlighting the significant changes introduced by the 1981 Education Act, which promoted the integration of many children from special schools into mainstream education. She explained that the SEND Code of Practice introduced in 2002 formalised the process of identifying and supporting additional needs, while the 2014 Code of Practice strengthened expectations around early identification, assessment and partnership working with families. She noted that further changes to the Code of Practice are expected in the near future.

The conversation moved on to resource provision within schools. Fiona emphasised that successful support is not simply about funding but also about ensuring schools have appropriately trained staff who understand children's needs. She expressed concern that some of the children with the greatest needs often spend the majority of their time with the least qualified members of staff, highlighting the importance of investing in training alongside resources.

Parents as Advocates

Parents were encouraged to see themselves as advocates for their children. Fiona acknowledged that obtaining an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) can often feel like a lengthy and frustrating process, with waiting times for assessments in some areas extending to four years before assessments even begin. She encouraged parents not to wait for a diagnosis before seeking support, reminding everyone that if a child needs help today, that support should begin immediately rather than being delayed by administrative processes.

A recurring theme throughout the session was that labels can sometimes help families access services or provide reassurance, but they should never define a child. Fiona explained that no two children with the same diagnosis are alike and every child should be understood as an individual with unique strengths, challenges and aspirations. She also noted that many adults now seek assessments later in life because they want an explanation for lifelong experiences, but the diagnosis itself does not change who they are.

Fiona explained the four broad areas within the SEND Code of Practice: cognition and learning, communication and interaction, social, emotional and mental health (SEMH), and sensory and physical needs. She emphasised that schools should carefully assess children's needs within these areas and tailor support accordingly.



The Power of Language

One of the strongest messages of the afternoon centred on the importance of language development. Fiona described language and vocabulary as one of the greatest predictors of future educational success and encouraged parents to talk frequently with their babies and children, regardless of which language they speak at home. She reflected that modern life often limits opportunities for conversation, particularly when parents are distracted by mobile phones while out with young children. Regular conversation, storytelling and everyday discussion all play a vital role in developing children's understanding of language.

She explained that one of her assessment techniques is asking children to describe familiar objects such as a box, a house or a cat. Many children can demonstrate understanding by making sounds or describing what they do with the object but struggle to explain what it actually is. These simple conversations provide valuable insight into a child's vocabulary, understanding and ability to express themselves.

Working with Schools

Fiona explained that when schools identify concerns, they should always involve parents in discussions about what is happening both at home and in school. Schools may introduce additional strategies and monitor progress before deciding whether further support is required. She reminded attendees that schools cannot place a child on the SEN Register without parental agreement. Once a child is on the register, they should have an SEN Support Plan, clearly identified priorities and regular review meetings with parents, following the graduated approach of assess, plan, do and review. If needs continue to persist despite appropriate interventions, a statutory assessment for an Education, Health and Care Plan may then be considered.

Progress Is Rarely Linear

Towards the end of the session, Fiona reminded everyone that progress is rarely linear. A child may not make significant improvements in reading immediately but may develop stronger social skills, emotional regulation or confidence during the same period. Every small step forward represents meaningful progress and should be celebrated.

She concluded with one of the most memorable messages of the afternoon:

“The words we use today become somebody's self-esteem tomorrow.”

Fiona encouraged parents and professionals alike to choose their words carefully, provide opportunities for children to experience success and remember that self-esteem underpins lifelong learning and wellbeing. She ended by reassuring parents that they know their children best, should never be afraid to ask questions or advocate for support, and that there is always a way forward.

Impact

The session prompted thoughtful discussion among attendees, many of whom shared personal experiences of supporting children with additional needs. Parents left with a greater understanding of how behaviour can communicate unmet needs, how the SEND system operates, and the importance of advocating for their children. Fiona's wealth of experience, practical examples and compassionate approach reassured attendees that every child deserves to be understood as an individual rather than being defined by a diagnosis, and that early support, strong communication and positive relationships remain the foundation of successful outcomes.

**Report created by the Tea & Chat participants
supported by the MWC Team**

