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Careers guidance in specialist settings in England—Moving towards career readiness? Findings from OFSTED research

Joseph Mintz[1] 🔘 | Richard Shiner[2]

[1]IOE, Faculty of Education and Society, University College London, London, UK

[2]Research and Evaluation, Office for Standards in Education, London, UK

Correspondence
Joseph Mintz, IOE, Faculty of Education and Society, University College London, 20 Bedford Way, London WC1H 0AL, UK.
Email: j.mintz@ucl.ac.uk

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Abstract

The aims of this study were to investigate careers guidance for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) in specialist provision in England. There has been growing interest internationally in ensuring effective careers guidance for secondary education promotes social mobility and gives all children and young people the best chance in life. Although there has been some limited consideration of how to tailor careers guidance to meet the needs of children and young people with SEND in mainstream settings, there have been no substantive studies to date that have considered this in specialist settings. This is the first such study globally to consider this question and was undertaken by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) in England. The study involved 12 research visits to special schools, pupil referral units, and specialist further education colleges in England in 2023. The results will be of interest to both specialist and mainstream settings internationally and suggest that a clear focus on careers guidance, distinct from a wider focus on transition, is needed to ensure high career expectations for children with SEND.

KEYWORDS
careers guidance, government research, inclusion, special educational needs and disabilities, special schools
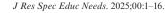
Key points

- We investigated the provision of careers guidance in specialist settings (special schools, pupil referral units, specialist further education colleges) in England.
- Twelve research visits were made in which we spoke to school leaders, teachers, careers leaders, career advisors, special educational needs coordinators, parents, and children.
- Findings indicate that the effective communication and liaison between the whole 'ecosystem' around the child are needed for careers guidance in specialist settings to be effective. This includes employers, local authorities, colleges, schools, families and parents.
- Schools and colleges need to have a specific focus on careers guidance as a distinct area of provision for children and young people with SEND, distinct from (albeit connected to) wider programmes for transition planning.

INTRODUCTION

There is growing interest internationally in how careers guidance in secondary education can best be designed and delivered so that it achieves its key aim of promoting social mobility (OECD, 2024), as well as contributing to wider economic and societal objectives (Mann et al., 2020; Pye Tait, 2021). Internationally, young people are facing a more dynamic and turbulent labour market, and more complex decisions about their futures (OECD, 2022). In this context, a range of evidence demonstrates the potential for careers guidance to drive social mobility by helping children and young people and their families understand the full range of options available to them, and the steps they need to take to achieve positive career outcomes (Hughes et al., 2016; European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (ECDVT), 2019; Jawahar, 2022; Kashefpakdel & Percy, 2017; Moote et al., 2024). High-quality careers guidance in school has also been associated with better outcomes (Hughes et al., 2016; Pye Tait, 2021), and an increased likelihood that children and young people will be in sustained education, employment, or training (Hughes et al., 2016; Kashefpakdel & Percy, 2017; Pye Tait, 2021; Zhang et al., 2018). These factors bolster the case for ensuring that education providers offer effective careers guidance that can help children and young people understand the options open to them and make decisions that will allow them to maximize their potential (Covacevich et al., 2021).

CAREERS GUIDANCE AND SEND

There is wider evidence in the literature that educational and social outcomes for children identified as having special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) are lower than for other children in terms of academic achievement, progression to employment and occupational salary levels, wellbeing and satisfaction (Wagner, 2014).

Evidence from national data sets in England suggests that children and young people with SEND are less likely than their peers to be in sustained employment fifteen years after completing key stage 4 (ages 14 to 16) (Department for Education, 2022a). Children and young people with SEND leaving mainstream schools are also less likely than their peers to have a sustained destination 1, 3, and 5 years after completing key stage 4 (Department for Education, 2021). National data in England from 2024 also shows that the overall employment rate for people with disabilities is 53% compared to 82% for the general population (Department for Work and Pensions, 2024).

Although there is no contemporary nationally available data in the US on school destination data, the overall post-16 employment rate for people with disabilities

in 2023 was 24% compared to 68% for the general population (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024).

There is also good evidence in England that children leaving alternative provision, that is provision for children and young people not in mainstream schools, due to exclusion, illness or other reasons such as Pupil Referral Units [PRUs], which in England in recent years has catered for a significant number of children with SEND (Department for Education, 2023a), are more likely to be classified as 'NEET' (not in education, employment and training), after leaving compulsory phase schooling (Tate & Greatbatch, 2017).

Careers guidance and transition for SEND

There has been some interest in how careers guidance can be tailored so that it contributes towards effective inclusion of children with SEND in mainstream settings, as we set out now. A key theme in this literature, in line with the wider literature on inclusive pedagogy (Mintz, 2007), is avoiding notions of fixed ability in the context of student's progression pathways, particularly in terms of not making assumptions about individual capabilities (The Gatsby Foundation, 2019). Linked to this, some of the policy literature (Careers and Enterprise Company, n.d.-a) makes the point that the wider approaches and principles for careers guidance that apply to 'typical' students, for example the wide agreement about the importance of work experience and other encounters with the workplace (Mann et al., 2018) apply just the same to students with SEND, albeit in some cases with relevant tailoring (The Gatsby Foundation, 2019). Also noted is the importance, particularly for children with SEND, in working closely with parents in coming to decisions about next steps (Hunt et al., 2021; Kemper, 2020). Further areas noted in the literature include the need for personalized career guidance based on a comprehensive assessment of needs (Hunt et al., 2021), the need for high quality targeted careers advice, especially in terms of the overlap with familial intergenerational social disadvantage (Tate & Greatbatch, 2017), and the importance of close liaison with colleges and employers to help students make the transition to less highly structured environments (Natspec, 2021; Tate & Greatbatch, 2017).

CAREERS GUIDANCE IN SPECIALIST SETTINGS

Although internationally most children classified as having SEND are taught in mainstream settings (National Centre for Education Statistics (USA), 2023; EASIE, 2024), specialist settings continue to have an important role particularly in meeting the needs of children and young people with more complex needs (see for example Farrell, 2017). There is some focus in

the academic and grey literature on how specialist settings can effectively support transition to next steps with training and employment (Careers and Enterprise Company, n.d.-a; The Gatsby Foundation, 2019). However, although careers guidance for children and young people with complex needs overlaps with transition planning and support, it is also distinct. For example, Hunt et al. (2021) argue that children with SEND, across settings, need to be provided with high-quality individual guidance on future career options. Thus, the contention is that, whilst recognizing that some children, particularly with complex needs, will not have the same trajectory as their peers, nevertheless if careers guidance is not considered as distinct, there is a risk of a notion of fixed and limited potential prevailing, which might not include the full range of possible employment and training opportunities open to each individual.

To date there has been virtually no attention in the academic literature internationally to careers guidance in specialist settings. A search on SCOPUS and PSYCINFO using search terms 'Special Schools', 'Alternative Provision', 'Specialist Settings', 'Pupil Referral Units' and 'Careers guidance', indicated no papers that had involved substantive consideration of this area. This study reports on a one-year qualitative evaluation of careers guidance in England in special schools, pupil referral units and specialist further education colleges, focusing on the 11–19 age range. As such, it represents one of the first empirical considerations of careers guidance in specialist settings.

THE CONTEXT: CAREERS GUIDANCE POLICY INITIATIVES IN ENGLAND

In the last ten years or so in England, there has been a broad move away from centrally supported and provided careers guidance services towards local responsibility for provision by schools (Long & Lewis, 2023). This has been bolstered by a range of central supporting functions, particularly the Careers and Enterprise (CEC) company, an arm's length, government-funded agency, which acts as a strategic coordinating partner for employers, schools, colleges, and other education/training providers. The CEC has worked with local enterprise partnerships and local authorities across England to build and co-fund a national enterprise adviser network which facilitates school – employer connections. As well, in 2018, careers hubs were launched across the country. These act as local forums to bring together secondary schools and further education colleges with partners in the business, public, education, and voluntary sectors (Long & Lewis, 2023). There have also been other significant policy changes, including the introduction of the Gatsby Benchmarks. The benchmarks were developed by the Gatsby Foundation

following a government review which involved a study of the international literature, visits to understand systems in other countries, and a consultation exercise in England (Holman, 2014). The eight benchmarks (The Careers and Enterprise Company, n.d.) have been incorporated into the statutory guidance on careers in England since 2018, and schools and colleges regularly report on their progress in achieving them, using the 'Compass' self-report system (Careers and Enterprise Company, n.d.-b).

Another relevant policy development has been the implementation of the role of careers leader (House of Commons Education Select Committee, 2023). This is distinct from the role of careers advisors, who provide direct careers guidance and counselling. The careers leader is a named member of the school or college, usually part of the senior leadership team, who is responsible for the organization, delivery, and monitoring of the overall careers programme (Department for Education, 2023b). The careers leader works closely with careers advisor(s), leads on the school or college programme for work placements and encounters with the workplace, and supports subject teachers in integrating careers into the curriculum. In England, a specific careers programme in schools is often delivered as part of the Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) curriculum, and the careers leader will usually liaise closely with the lead for PSHE (Collins & Barnes, 2017).

Careers guidance and SEND in England

There are also a series of ongoing policy initiatives around career guidance and SEND. For example, the Department for Education has also recently expanded its supported internships programme (HM Treasury, 2023). These are work-based study programmes for 16- to 24-year-olds with SEND which provide significant additional support to young people, families, and employers, to support transition into paid employment. They usually involve a substantial work placement, facilitated by the support of an expert job coach (Department for Education, 2022b).

THEORIZING THE TEAM AROUND THE CHILD

Transition from school has been considered from the perspective of Bronfenbrenner's (1977) seminal bioecological systems theory. He argued that human psychological development is mediated reciprocally through the constellation of environments (at different levels, such as school, broader community and national political systems) and associated relationships around the child. Later developments of Bronfenbrenner's original model, both by Bronfenbrenner himself (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) and others such as Rosa and Tudge (2013)

placed even more stress on personalization to individual characteristics in the unique system around the child, including the effects of parents' work experiences on family dynamics, and individual motivation and aspiration. Christensen (2010) and Neal & Neal (2013) emphasize the reciprocal nature of the model, and that particularly in terms of the school and family, the young person is not a passive receiver of experiences, but responds to and influences them via multiple daily interactions. Such a focus has been applied in studies of the transition of children with SEND. For example, Lindsay et al.'s (2018) study of transition to college from secondary school of young people with physical disabilities noted the need for greater emphasis on the development of self-advocacy skills, as well as the importance of both peer and family support. However, few studies have applied Bronfenbrenner's model to children and young people with SEND and careers guidance as opposed to transition, although there has been some consideration in relation to career guidance more broadly (Curry & Milsom, 2013).

CAREER READINESS

Gysbers (2013) defines career readiness as having the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for understanding what their future might and could be, and being able to take active steps to plan towards this. Career readiness can be considered a short- or medium-term outcome of career guidance interventions (Covacevich et al., 2021). There is some limited evidence from the literature that approaches to developing career readiness in secondary phase students with SEND can be effective. For example, Bernardo (2022), in a study focused on post-secondary transfer for young people with SEND in Hong Kong, indicated that a specific careers guidance package for this group has a measurable significant impact on measures of career readiness.

ANXIETY DURING TRANSITION

A common theme in the literature on transition from secondary school is that of anxiety. Gillan and Coughlan (2010) identified parental anxiety as a common occurrence, particularly in relation to concerns about continuity of local authority support services in the transition of young people with intellectual disabilities from school in Ireland. Herridge (2017) used Schlossberg's (2005) transition theory to focus on stress and anxiety factors such as worries about fitting in the new setting in an exploration of transition to college from high school for students with disabilities. Such anxieties have also been noted in a few studies in relation to career guidance and children and young people with SEND (e.g. Lesley, 2006).

THE STUDY

Context

This study was undertaken by Ofsted (Ofsted, n.d.-b) a non-ministerial government department which is the inspection body for compulsory phase educational settings in England. Ofsted undertakes research in areas related to its statutory inspection functions (Research at Ofsted, n.d.). This project formed part of a wider national evaluation of careers guidance in mainstream settings in England (Ofsted, 2023) although it was constituted as a separate stand-alone research project focusing on specialist settings. The term specialist settings in the project refers to special schools, alternative provision (specifically pupil referral units) and specialist further education colleges. In England, pupil referral units provide education for children who are not able to attend school for a number of reasons, sometimes after exclusion from mainstream settings (Danechi, 2019). Specialist further education colleges in England provide post-16 education to young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities whose needs are unable to be met at a general further education college (Natspec, 2021).

Research aims

The research aims of the study were to understand how careers guidance is tailored to meet the needs of individual students, barriers and enablers influencing that, how parents and families are involved in planning for next steps, and how careers guidance is both related to and distinct from wider transition planning. The fieldwork for the study was carried out between January and July 2023.

Data collection

The main data collection approach was a series of 12 mainly one-day research visits to providers, including five special schools, three pupil referral units, and four specialist further education colleges, in six local authorities across England. The characteristics of the providers are shown in Table 1.

Research model at Ofsted

Ofsted's research model involves inspectors acting in a research role, supported by a specialized research team. His Majesty's Inspectors (HMIs) are experienced educational inspectors with at least five years senior or middle educational leadership experience in schools or further education providers, and a track record of bringing about educational improvement. Before undertaking their

TABLE 1 Provider characteristics.

Provider	Number of learners (approx.)	Main areas of need	Age range	Deprivation index[a]
Specialist College A	More than 200	Speech language and communication, physical disability, moderate and severe learning difficulties	16 to 25	2 (E&T)
Specialist College B	50 to 100	Speech language and communication, physical disability, moderate and severe learning difficulties	16 to 25	1 (E&T)
Specialist College C	50 to 100	Autism, moderate and severe learning difficulties	13 to 18	2 (E&T)
Specialist College D	Fewer than 50	Autism, SEMH[b], moderate and severe learning difficulties, physical disability, speech language and communication	16 to 25	2 (E&T)
Pupil Referral Unit A	Fewer than 50	SEMH, autism	14 to 19	3
Pupil Referral Unit B	50 to 100	SEMH, speech language and communication	5 to 19	4
Pupil Referral Unit C	Less than 50	SEMH	12 to 16	3
Special School A	More than 200	Autism and SEMH	4 to 16	5
Special School B	150 to 200	Autism	8 to 19	4
Special School C	More than 200	Autism, physical disability, moderate and severe learning difficulties	2 to 19	4
Special School D	More than 200	Autism, SEMH, speech language and communication, moderate and severe learning difficulties	11 to 17	5
Special School E	More than 200	Autism, SEMH, speech, language and communication, physical disability, moderate and severe learning difficulties	3 to 19	5

[a]1 = most deprived, 5 = least deprived, as per the England Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) quintiles analysis (2019) from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. E&T refers to the deprivation quintile for student cohorts on 'education and training' programmes.

[b]Social, Emotional and Mental Health Needs.

research role, they also receive training in research methods, and are expected to differentiate clearly between the researcher and inspector roles. They also receive expert advice and dedicated support from a team of in-house researchers, in this case a team of six, who collaboratively develop the research design and data collection tools, and then undertake the data analysis and reporting. Researchers also accompany HMIs on a selection of research visits, to provide further expert support, and to ensure that the research team understands the context of the collected data. This model, although somewhat unique, primarily allows the significant educational expertise and knowledge of HMIs to be leveraged in the research context, particularly given that HMIs will have considerably more experience in working in and understanding educational settings and contexts than many educational and social science researchers.

All the HMIs in this project had experience of inspecting specialist settings. A researcher shadowed the HMI for three of the visits, one to each type of provider. Research visits took place over one day for special schools and PRUs, and one or two days for specialist colleges.

The research team recruited the settings, contacting them via phone or email. All visits were entirely voluntary, and the school headteacher made the decision whether or not to participate. Participating in the research was also voluntary for all participants. We asked providers to distribute an information sheet to all participants and parents before the visit. We also asked providers to explain the research to children and young people in a way that was most appropriate for them. Written consent was sought from parents for their child to participate in the research. Ethical approval for the project was sought and obtained from Ofsted's Research Ethics Committee, which includes external members.

The research visits

During the visits we interviewed senior staff such as the headteacher and the careers leader, staff with a specific careers guidance remit such as careers leaders, careers advisors, the special educational needs coordinator or skills development coordinator, the school lead for transition planning, and subject/class teachers including the

lead for PSHE. We also held focus groups (of 3–6 participants) with children and young people and separate focus groups with parents. Sometimes, several focus groups with different groups of children were held during each visit, depending on the numbers of students available to meet with the researchers. Interviews and focus groups were on average approximately 30 min in length. The specific schedule for each visit was arranged flexibly in conjunction with each school and college. Engagement with children and parents was mediated via the teaching staff, that is, adults who knew them well. Teachers introduced the research visits and the focus groups to children, on behalf of the research team, in advance of the visits.

The inspectors and research team also looked at publicly available documentation about careers guidance on the setting's website and asked, on a voluntary basis, to look at other internal documentation including their improvement plans, any specific career guidance plans, and their Compass reporting data. In some cases, settings also shared individual schemes of work related to careers guidance, particularly within the PSHE curriculum.

We also developed a specific suite of participatory tools for working with children with complex needs, such as diamond ranking (Hill et al., 2016). The research team introduced these tools to inspectors in separate half-day training sessions in advance of the research visits. Inspectors could make use of these tools flexibly during visits, as an additional resource for engaging children and young people and understanding their views during focus groups and interviews.

For each category of participant, we developed an interview guide based on the factors identified in our review of the literature and the overall research questions. A separate set of interview guides was developed for each type of provider.

Interviews with staff focused on: the overall approach to careers guidance including the role of school leaders; how careers guidance was linked to transition planning; how careers guidance and transition planning met the individual needs of children and young people, and the approach to evaluating and monitoring careers. Interviews also covered how providers engaged with stakeholders (employers, the local authority, careers networks, other providers, and parents); how careers were integrated into the curriculum; and how providers ensured that children and their families understood the range of academic and vocational options available to them.

Interviews and focus groups with children and young people, differentiated appropriately depending on the specific children and young people involved, focused on how the setting had helped them to think about next steps and career options, what they had learned about different careers, who had helped them in making decisions about next steps, and who had come into the setting to talk to them about career options.

Focus groups with parents focused on their views about how the setting supported them and their child with transition and next steps, specific information received about career options, how the setting communicates with parents, and their experiences of interactions with the local authority and employers.

Inspectors and/or researchers took detailed notes throughout each interview and focus group, which were then written up in depth as soon as was practical after the end of the visit. We did not audio record the interviews and focus groups.

During the research visits, we spoke to 110 children and young people, with categories of needs as shown in Table 2. We also spoke to 56 parents/carers in 10 of the 12 providers we visited. These were typically the parents of the children and young people we spoke to.

Local authority and expert inspector interviews

Local authorities in England play a role in children and young people's transitions into and out of specialist settings (Department for Education, 2014). They have broad duties to 'encourage, enable and assist' all children and young people (including those with SEND) to participate in education and training. This includes securing sufficient suitable education and training provision for all children and young people in their area over compulsory school age, but under 19 (or up to 25 with an education and health plan [EHCP][i]) (Department for Education, 2024). Local authority children's services departments are subject to inspection by Ofsted. Such inspections, known as 'Area SEND Inspections' are jointly carried out by Ofsted and the Care and Quality

TABLE 2 Children and young people we spoke to, by category of need[a].

Category of need	Number of children and young people
Autism spectrum disorder/autism spectrum condition	56
ADHD	7
Moderate learning difficulties	6
Severe learning difficulties	18
SEMH	21
Visual impairment	12
Speech, language and communication needs	10
Deaf/hearing impairment	6
Physical disabilities	2
Downs Syndrome	2

[a]It should be noted that some children had multiple needs, but settings were asked to identify the main or primary need in their view, for the purposes of this classification. All children and young people had an identified SEND according to the SEND Code of Practice for England (Department for Education, 2014) except for two in two different pupil referral units.

Commission (Care and Quality Commission, 2022) which is responsible for inspection and regulation of children's social services.

During our research visits, we asked each provider to give us contact details of a local authority officer with whom they worked concerning careers, who was invited to voluntarily take part in a 30-min interview to discuss how they supported specialist settings with their careers provision.

In total, we spoke with five local authority officers in four of the six local authorities we visited.

We also interviewed two inspectors not otherwise involved in the project, who had particular expertise in SEND as a subject area and who had led recent Area SEND inspections. We also read and analysed the most recent Area SEND inspection reports for the local areas we visited.

Focus groups with employers and key stakeholders

We also held two virtual focus groups, one for employers and one for key stakeholders in the SEND careers sector, including charity leaders, specialist enterprise coordinators, and careers hub leads. Each focus group lasted 90 minutes. We spoke to nine employers and four key stakeholders, five enterprise coordinators, and three careers hub leads. The aim of the focus groups was to understand how employers, key stakeholders, and careers hubs work with specialist providers around their careers provision and the challenges in this area.

Finally, the research team analysed a sample of Ofsted's electronic evidence gathering database. This is a repository of the evidence collected by inspectors during inspection visits. We do not report on the analysis of this data in this paper; however, it was included in the project report (Ofsted, 2024).

DATA ANALYSIS

We analysed all the collected data using thematic analysis (Boyzatis, 1998) on the MAXQDA qualitative data platform. An initial deductive coding frame with higher-order theme codes and initial sub-codes within each theme was developed from the review of literature and the research questions. A sample of data from one setting was then analysed by one researcher using this frame, and additional inductive codes were created. A coding guide was also developed which described the intended meaning of each code. The resultant coding frame, coding guide, and initial coding of data were then reviewed by three other research team members, the process of review leading to some codes being discarded and some amalgamated. The revised coding frame was then used to code the data from the other settings and then

the additional data sources. The coding was led by one researcher, but there was an ongoing process of iterative review. The lead researcher for coding kept regular annotations and memos on queries that arose, and these were reviewed in regular meetings with the other three team members.

FINDINGS

The analysis yielded a number of key themes, as well as sub-themes, which are summarised in Table 3.

Across the themes, there was an interplay between aspects of the system around the child – school, family, broader community and national policy, and the individual child at the centre of that system, with at times opportunities for the child to express their agency reciprocally in relation to processes occurring around them.

Theme 1: High expectations

Leaders in many of the settings said that maintaining high expectations and aspirations for their children and young people was one of the most important aspects of careers guidance. This was often triangulated positively with the content of school policies and other documentation. Almost all leaders across the sample said that the curriculum for careers should be ambitious and provide sufficient challenge. However, not all settings seemed to have high expectations for all children and young people. For example, in one specialist college, from discussions with participants and review of documentation, it seemed that opportunities for external work placements for young people with higher levels of independence and academic ability were lacking. As a result, these young

TABLE 3 Themes and Sub-Themes.

Main theme	Sub themes
High expectations	
The team around the child	The role of parents and parental expectations
	Parental engagement
	The importance of trusted adults
	Engaging with employers
	Engaging with local authorities
	Experiences of the workplace
	Supported internships
Developing agency and autonomy	
Personalisation is key	
Anxiety about leaving and approaches to deal with anxiety	
Careers in the context of transition	

people in some cases did not get the opportunity to practise and apply skills in a real-life setting, which may have prevented them from being as ready as they could have been for their next steps. Thus, it could be considered that, as developed in the next theme, the constellation of actors and processes around the child, at times, did not provide them with enough opportunity to fulfil their potential.

Theme 2: The team around the child

Sub theme: The role of parents and parental expectations

A number of parents across the sample told us that the specific focus of providers on careers guidance had helped them to both be ambitious for and think more widely about possible career goals for their children. For example, in one PRU, the parent of a child with SEMH needs said that, before their child came to the provider:

> [They]did not have an ambition. Now [they're] doing careers work, [they know] the different options, and there are a few things that they want to explore. [The provider staff] found out that they have an interest in cars and booked a visit. [The children and young people] told the career adviser about their interest and she looked into what they can do.

In this way, the team around the child – parents and staff at the PRU, worked interactively to respond to the ideas and perspectives of the young person, and to integrate these into the careers programme.

Parents across the sample said that they valued regular communication, visiting possible next destinations with staff from the current provider (for example, the transition lead) and talking about careers and next steps at parents' evening.

Some staff across the settings said that in their perception, the aspirations of families can vary greatly. In some cases, across many of the settings, school leaders felt that these were not high, and in their perception, this was sometimes linked with the level of need their child has, or due to their own socio-economic background.

Interviews with parents and school/college staff also indicated that some parents/carers could hold significant worries about their young person becoming more independent, and it may be that this could limit their opportunities as a result.

Staff across the settings told us about a range of strategies to try and ease these concerns. For example, in one specialist college, their transition lead did

transition visits and taster and transition days with parents and young people to make them feel more comfortable. In another college, leaders had conversations with parents and families about the learners' aspirations from the very first visit to the college. This college held most of their family meetings in the community café where the parents and families could see young people working there, either serving customers or making products. Staff said that they felt this helped some parents and families understand what their child could achieve and feel less anxious about transition. Generally, parents in the sample said that they were positive about the careers guidance and support for transitions and next steps. Overall, they thought their child or young person was being prepared well for their next steps and often said the work being done to increase their child or young person's independence and confidence was effective. However, there was variability. In one setting, when we spoke to children and young people, it seemed that they had very little knowledge of possible next steps, such as apprenticeships, supported internships, or higher education. Additionally, parents said that they did not receive any formal communication about what their child or young person had been doing outside of EHC plan review meetings.

Thus, in the team around the child, the element of careers guidance focused on the provision of information, particularly from the setting to young people and parents, seemed to be key in ensuring that young people were able to achieve independence and confidence, and thus autonomy in making decisions about next steps.

Sub-theme: Parental engagement

All the staff we spoke to across the settings said that they were committed to engaging with parents. However, in most providers, from what participants told us, it seemed that the actuality of such parental engagement was mixed. This was often because the needs and situations of some families were complex, and there were challenges with geographical distance. As well, parents sometimes had additional needs themselves.

Staff in settings across the sample said that a range of strategies were used to engage parents, such as careers fairs, parents' evenings, annual review meetings and parent workshops. Staff in many of the settings said that they often ensured there was individual, personalized support for children and young people and their families when attending open evenings and visiting colleges. For example, in one PRU, there was a family liaison officer who played an important role in building relationships with parents/carers. They knew the families well, and understood that many parents/carers have learning difficulties themselves. Particularly in Year 11 (age 15 to 16), staff in this setting helped

parents to understand the 'jargon' around next steps and transition. They took them on visits to colleges to ensure they were comfortable and arranged transport for this if necessary. Parents in this setting said how they felt they were 'kept in the loop' through regular phone calls, and that the provider helped them research what would be the most appropriate next step for their child or young person. Children and young people at the setting also spoke positively of being 'take[n] to college during the day so [we] can experience what it is like.'

Thus, thoughtful and indeed caring attention from staff at the setting, that is, collaborative working across the team around the child, which encompassed the views of the young person, helped ensure that both parents and young people felt supported to express their ideas about next steps.

In some providers, participants said that parents and families received regular newsletters. In one specialist college, staff said that when they knew parents had a learning need, they telephoned them and read out the newsletter to them. In other providers, leaders said that they had given thought as to how to sequence careers events with parents' evenings and annual review meetings. For instance, in one special school, participants said that the parents' evenings were linked with the careers fair, which included a range of stalls and providers. This was aimed at Years 9 and 10 (ages 14–16) and meant anything discovered during the fair could then be discussed in further detail at parents' evenings.

Sub-theme: The importance of trusted adults

Staff across the settings told us that it was important that careers staff (i.e. careers leaders and careers advisers) got to know children and young people well and developed close and trusting relationships with them. They said that this was because such relationships with trusted adults helped foster engagement with children who otherwise might have been unwilling to engage in meaningful and realistic conversations about their career aspirations, such as those with social, emotional, and mental health needs.

Sub theme: Engaging with employers

School leaders across the sample said that they were connecting with external support for employer engagement, such as enterprise coordinators and career hubs. For example, staff at one special school explained how working with their enterprise coordinator had helped increase the number of employer encounters and make connections for potential work experience opportunities.

However, based on what participants said across the sample, it seemed that there was variation in the extent to which, in addition to just work placement, other high-quality encounters with employers were being provided across the sample. Sometimes it seemed that the broad range of needs within the provider made it difficult to ensure that whole school or college events, such as careers days, were appropriate to the needs of all children and young people. In some cases, staff said that there was a well-sequenced range of encounters that were tailored to the career needs and aspirations of individual children. As one leader described:

> These [meaningful encounters] are all very individualised. [Learners] can see wealth of opportunity, and this is done to support pupils to choose their options for next steps… Doing an en masse approach is not helpful.

In the focus groups, three of the employers said that the CEC and local careers hubs helped them make connections with specialist settings. Two of these employers said they had been 'overwhelmed with how many SEND schools wanted to work with an employer' once contact had been made through the careers hub.

However, some of the employers we spoke to said they did not always get sufficient information or support from the settings they engage with. For example, a manager of one courier company said:

> As long as we agree to take them for a week, there doesn't appear to be a concern with what the student is actually doing. We ask the school how can we ensure they engage and they just say, "Do anything you can, it's fine." […] I know there is work being done on work experience to improve it, but that hasn't reached SEND schools yet. Not enough guidance for employers on what to do with work experience.

Some of the employers we spoke to were passionate about providing opportunities for children and young people with SEND to experience the workplace. For instance, one employer in the courier/postal industry we spoke to had introduced a 'world of work day' where young people with sensory needs could touch items, listen to the sounds they make, and try on the work uniforms. However, some other employers also indicated that they lacked confidence, knowledge or resource to offer placements to those with SEND. For instance, as one manager in a professional services company said:

> We've been asked by SEND schools to work together but we've never really had an offer

for it. That is why we are trying to work with schools to create that and become more comfortable with the terminology. It's around the knowledge from our side as to why we have never done it.

Concomitantly, some settings said they would like more help developing relationships with employers. For example, staff at one special school felt that some of their employers could be better educated to help understand the potential of their young people to contribute to the workplace. Although they said the CEC had been a good source of help, they felt this was an area that could be improved by having further support. However, it may be that the capacity of careers hubs to support with this could be limited. As one careers hub lead we spoke to said during the focus groups:

> We are trying hard in our area to promote the number of inclusive employers, but it is a marathon not a sprint. We only have a certain amount of resource; our enterprise coordinators only have a certain amount of time each day.

Thus, there is a complex web of system level interactions between employers, settings, career hubs, supported by flows of information and communication between the actors in the system. At the same time, a focus on individualized attention to the careers needs, and the aspirations of individual young people, could be achieved with careful coordination and collaboration across the team around the child.

Sub-theme: Engaging with local authorities

Across the sample, there was a great deal of regional variation in the extent to which school and college leaders and parents felt that they were effectively supported by the local authority around transition planning. Leaders frequently said that many families struggled to get the right level of support from the local authority and that they were not always supported to secure the right destination for their child or young person. Parents across the sample also told us that they could not always get hold of the right person in the local authority, and plans were not in place early enough. This was, in the focus groups, clearly often a source of frustration for parents.

Leaders also said that although they worked closely with parents and families to secure the right placements for their child or young person, in some instances the local authority did not confirm placements at selected and agreed settings, even when, for example, the young person had a successful college interview. Sometimes, the local authority sent out inaccurate or out-of-date paperwork, meaning the placement was delayed or could not be agreed.

Local authority officers said that when things were working well with settings, there was good communication, early planning, and close relationships with staff in the providers. This helped ensure that children and young people and their families got the right level of support.

As a parent of a child in a special school said, 'A clear pathway set out as early as possible helps everyone to work as a team to find the right setting.'

The local authority officers we spoke to cited system-wide issues, such as the sufficiency of specialist provision in their local area, as areas of challenge. For instance, they said it can be particularly challenging to find specialist provision, especially post-19.

Local authority officers acknowledged there were some instances where the wrong information was given to parents and providers, and there was sometimes a lack of joined-up working between education, health and social care, which often caused difficulties for children and young people and their families. These findings reflect issues also present in our review of Ofsted Area SEND inspection reports, which have noted strengths and weaknesses in transition planning across all ages and phases in education, health and social care. Looking across the reports, early planning, effective working with the careers hubs and good communication from education, health and social care professionals, along with close working with families and key partners are noted as important elements in effective planning for transition and careers guidance.

Thus, effective communication and liaison between the team around the child, as well as the effective planning for and provision of services at the system level by local authorities, allowing a "clear pathway" to be set out, can potentially support finding the right placement for individual young people.

Sub-theme: Experiences of the workplace

Leaders across the sample said that they considered experiences of the workplace to be an essential part of children and young people's careers guidance. In general, children and young people we spoke to were positive about the experiences they had and were able to recall examples of visits and work experience placements. For example, one young person with SEMH needs in a PRU said how 'work experience shows us how the jobs work.'

Settings in the sample said that they used a mix of internal and external work placements, depending on the individual needs of the young person and the availability of external placements. Parental involvement in facilitating workplace experiences was common among the providers we visited, either through supporting or organizing

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work experience placements, and/or working with school staff to help tailor placements to the individual needs and aspirations of the young person. However, some participants said that travel and access to placements proved more difficult where families lived some distance away. This was particularly the case in some special schools and specialist colleges where many children and young people might not be able to travel independently, often because they had more complex needs.

Sub-theme: Supported internships

The specialist colleges and special schools we visited were working with a range of external partners on supported internships. Leaders said that they considered them to be an important pathway into paid employment for some children and young people. During the focus groups, participants including charity leaders, enterprise coordinators, and careers hub leads highlighted the importance of quality supported internships. They also highlighted what they saw as some of the challenges and areas for development. For instance, some felt that to increase the number of young people actually going on to get permanent jobs, it would be helpful if there was more funding and help for young people post-internship, and more upskilling of the local community and businesses to take on young people once they finish a supported internship. One leader of a charity highlighted that their supported internship outcomes have been most successful when they managed to secure funding for a supported employment provider to deliver follow-on support.

Some participants in the focus groups also said that in their perception the attitudes of parents/carers can sometimes be a barrier. They said this is because, in some circumstances, young people can lose benefits payments when they take up a supported internship. There is no requirement for supported internships to be paid, so this may result in families losing out financially and parents/carers are able to withdraw their young person from the internship.

Theme 3: Developing agency and autonomy

The themes above indicated how the constellation of actors and system processes in the team around the child impacted the extent to which individual young people were able to express their ideas and preferences, and to move towards achieving their potential in respect of transitions and careers. This raises the issue of the autonomy and agency of the individual child in relation to the system, which is further developed in this theme.

One aspect of the development of individual agency is a focus within setting curricula on life skills. Many school leaders in the settings told us that in their view it was important that, across their whole provision, children

and young people developed independence and essential life skills to help them succeed in their careers. This was particularly the case in special schools and specialist settings, and there was an emphasis across these settings on providing travel training so that children learned how to travel independently. Experience of real-life situations, to promote the development of independence, was also regarded as important. For example, staff in one special school told us how young people had opportunities to exchange money in a café or do the washing up in a kitchen. A number of young people we spoke to noted how such experiences were helpful in preparing them for next steps. For example, when we asked a young person in a specialist college what the most useful thing was in helping them make decisions about what they will do next, they said:

> Independent living training. This has helped me see this as an option that I can move on to quickly in the future. Aim is to live semi independently or independently if I could.

Careful attention from careers staff that was based on an understanding of the individual needs of young people, and effective provision of relevant information, could also promote a feeling of confidence and agency. For example, in one specialist college, they made us of the services of a careers adviser with a background in visual impairment, which matched the intake the college. Feedback from learners was positive. For instance, as one learner with visual impairment said:

> Amazing meeting with careers adviser today. Inspiring, looked at goals, looked at steps to prepare for this. Very positive – made feel comfortable and understood what to do to make it work for example gap year and work experience and then move back into education

Theme 4: Personalisation is key

School leaders and other staff across the settings said that they placed an emphasis on personalisation when it came to next steps for children and young people. This often involved the use of initial assessments when they joined the setting, linked to consideration of possible (realistic) career goals. They also reported on personalisation of the curriculum and resources on an ongoing basis, to support children and young people in developing their ideas about next steps and careers. These staff reports were often triangulated positively with the views of children themselves. For example, staff at one special school reported that they used augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) aids and symbol-supported

text to ensure learners were able to feed into their annual reviews. During the focus groups, learners at this school shared their portfolios with the research team, using Makaton, key word communication, and AAC voice output to communicate the range of work experience placements they had attended. Such approaches were used by staff on an ongoing basis to engage with children and young people in the school on their views and ideas on transition and careers planning. In another example, at one of the specialist colleges, the careers adviser reported on the experiences of one young person who had left the setting and transitioned into social care. This young person wanted to become a Hollywood director or an actor. The careers adviser reported how, over the course of several meetings, they worked with them to understand why this interested them and to find an achievable way to fulfil their interest. The careers adviser further reported that they now volunteer at a local radio station and belong to a drama club, activities which could support, in a practical way, their interest in this sector.

This vignette illustrates that sometimes there is a need for the team around the child to balance between the young person's view of their potential and their aspirations in relation to this, and what might be in actuality realistic to achieve.

Theme 5: Anxiety about leaving and approaches to deal with anxiety

Across the sample, many children and young people and their families said that they were sometimes anxious about leaving their current provider and transitioning to a new setting. Many school staff and leaders across the sample also said that they were aware of this challenge and they used a range of personalized strategies to help reduce feelings of worry. For instance, staff at one special school said that they had a progressive sequence of transition-related activities that were adapted and personalized for young people. They created a personalized communication passport and supported young people with social stories about transition and their next steps. Staff had also organized a series of supported transition visits to college, which the young person and parent/carer attended along with the transition lead. There was also close communication with parents throughout the transition process, and the school also maintained contact with learners and parents until learners were settled in their new provider.

Theme 6: Careers in the context of transition

Many school staff and school leaders across the sample told us that the curriculum in their settings had been developed with both careers education and preparation for adulthood in mind. This, across the sample, triangulated with our analysis of school-specific policies and documentation. Thus, in most settings, it seemed that careers guidance had a distinct focus but was also integrated into transition planning and preparation for next steps. This usually included a cross-curricular focus on understanding future career pathways and developing confidence, independence, and employability skills.

Participants in some settings discussed how they created strong links between careers guidance and the wider curricular offer, especially on more vocational pathways. For example, in one PRU, children and young people received one lesson of careers per week that included topics such as the world of work, employability, jobs, and CV writing. In another PRU, the approach was slightly different. Careers guidance was built into the PSHE curriculum with off-timetable days, careers fairs, events, and assemblies being used to supplement other lessons. Staff said this approach was necessary as poor attendance from many learners meant they often missed what is covered in scheduled lessons. Key workers and the careers adviser gave further one-to-one help to children and young people who were absent so that they could catch up. School staff said that the additional one-to-ones also helped learners with attention, speech, and language difficulties gain a further understanding of their career options and next steps.

In one specialist college, staff said that all children and young people, whether on academic, vocational, or mixed pathways, completed work-related training. The college developed links with local businesses, for example, a hair salon, to provide external work placements. They also created in-house working environments, for instance, a café/restaurant, where young people could gain experience of the workplace.

DISCUSSION

The team around the child

The experiences of staff, children and young people, parents and employers in the study point towards the need for nuanced, careful, and well supported engagement between the different players in the constellation around the child. The insight of Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) is that human development and flourishing is not solely individual or solely social, rather it depends on a complex interplay between the individual child and the systems, in effect the adults in varying roles, and adult societal structures and processes around them. This complex interplay is at the heart of the multiple engagements, perspectives, motivations, and anxieties that is the context for careers guidance in specialist settings. The study also shows the importance of structures and processes, particularly for young people with SEND. To take one salient example,

the potential success of supported internships in allowing the individual young person to progress to permanent employment, is dependent, in Bronfenbrenner's terms, on the 'exosystem', i.e. support systems in place between settings, employers, and local authorities, such as extended support for employment integration after internships.

Reciprocity

Neal and Neal (2013) note the reciprocal nature of Bronfenbrenner's model and the multiple daily interaction between the child or young person and the systems and actors around them. In this study, these interactions involve the young person in expressing their ideas and opinions about their next steps in the short term and their wider aspirations for their future. In our analysis we have seen the importance of the constellation of the team around the child, the complex interplay between policy, systems, school and college priorities, parental expectations, motivations and anxieties, and importantly information provision and information flows. All of these elements of the ecosystem impact on the young person who is, or should be, at the centre of the system. Yet we have also seen how the young person does also have agency, that is the ability to express opinions and preferences that have an influence on what happens to them. This agency is closely linked, however, in many instances to the extent to which their autonomy, that is both their capacity to make such choices, and the freedom to do so, is supported by the team around the child. Often, for children and young people with SEND this requires a process of what might be termed negotiation (Mintz, 2025) between them and the actors in the system, where the young person requires support with (a) developing the life skills needed to be autonomous and indeed to express their agency, (b) effective provision of information, and (c) sometimes, messages about what is and is not realistic to achieve. Thus, the voice of the aspiring Hollywood director was heard, and through negotiation with and support from careers staff, their aspirations could to some extent be supported and realized.

Personalization

The study also illuminates the importance of personalization, a key element of later iterations of Bronfenbrenner's model (e.g. Rosa & Tudge, 2013) i.e. the need to take account of the individual characteristics – the needs and perceived needs, and the motivations both of the child and their family. One aspect of this which comes through in the data is the delicate balancing act that settings have to undertake between maintaining a

focus on high expectations, and at the same time ensuring that aims for career outcomes, from the perspective of both young people and parents, are realistic and achievable. However, the study also showed that settings were being successful in navigating this difficult balance. There were clearly concerns, on some occasions, as to whether parental expectations can be an important factor in whether a child achieves their potential. It is also important to recognize that perspectives of school staff (and of parents of course) are just that – perspectives, and whether it is truly the case that because parents come from socially disadvantaged groups or have learning disabilities themselves, that this means they automatically have low expectations for their children, is contested in the wider literature (see Love et al., 2023 for example). From another perspective, the wider literature on home-school collaboration suggests that rather than seeing differences in perspectives as a negative or a threat, where schools are able to develop strong relationships and collaborative working with families, this ultimately benefits children and young people (Adams & Forsyth, 2007; Addi-Raccah & Grinshtain, 2022). Again, across the sample, the study suggests that such an approach was often in place.

Anxiety

An interesting finding from the study, of which there is not significant consideration in the wider literature on careers guidance for children and young people with SEND, is the extent to which some children and young people and parents have anxiety about next steps. However, equally important are the accounts within the study of how settings and teachers were both aware of this and put in place strategies to lessen the fears, particularly of parents, thus supporting thinking about transition and career options.

Transition versus careers guidance

This study shows that settings were clearly differentiating between transition and careers guidance, at the same time as integrating careers guidance into a wider programme for transition planning. Further, particularly through the carefully planned and personalized integration of careers guidance into the wider curriculum, settings in the sample were providing opportunities to develop forward-looking knowledge, skills and attitudes about the future, and supporting young people in taking steps, albeit sometimes small steps, towards that future. As noted above, wider structural and process issues, the 'exosystem' in the ecological model, sometimes presented barriers, particularly in terms of employer understanding and knowledge, employer-to-school liaison and local authority support. However, the study also showed

that (a) the wider policy structures and developments to support careers guidance were having a significant positive impact for specialist settings, and (b) the actors in the system were committed to promoting the best outcomes that they could, in terms of progression to employment, for the children and young people they were working with.

Implications for mainstream?

This is a relatively small scale, qualitative study and as such we should be cautious in drawing conclusions about the sector as a whole in England. What it does do is paint a picture of the ways in which parents, teachers, employers and local authorities can work together to support children and young people with achieving a measure of career readiness in one policy context. The barriers, difficulties, as well as the successes of the settings in the sample are, we propose, likely to have some resonance both with other specialist settings in England, as well as internationally.

Other research on specialist settings (Farrell, 2017; Mintz et al., 2021) has shown the potential for special schools to share models of effective practice with mainstream schools. The concentration of experience and expertise that special schools develop can often be helpful for mainstream settings, which may have less experience, for example, with dealing with employers on developing work experience opportunities for autistic children. In particular, the settings in this study demonstrated how it is possible to effectively balance the tension between providing specialist input and support to meet individual needs, at the same time as maintaining high expectations for next steps, and supporting individual autonomy and agency of the young person at the centre of the team around the child. Maintaining a focus on careers guidance as a distinct sphere of learning and development, connected to but ultimately separate from the wider transition programme, was key to achieving this balance, and is likely to be key for effective careers guidance for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities in mainstream settings in England and internationally.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT
There are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Authors elect not to share data. Research data are not shared.

ETHICS STATEMENT
This research received ethical approval from an institutional ethical review board.

ORCID
Joseph Mintz https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7622-9248

Endnote
[i] An EHCP is a statutory document in England that sets out that outlines the specific needs of a child or young person with SEND. This plan details the support they require to achieve their goals in education, health, and social care.

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