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In August 2019 I finished my Masters dissertation entitled 'Strategies for Supporting Young People with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) into employment: a case study of a SEND college in Surrey' at Goldsmiths, University of London.

**My inspiration for the research came to me through my passion of working with young people with SEN, struggling to get into employment.**

The issues around SEN and employment were also highlighted by the Gatsby Charitable Foundation which, in 2014, published Good Career Guidance to offer English schools a practical definition of what good careers provision should look like. The results of the recent State of the Nation Report (The Careers & Enterprise Company, 2018) shows engagement with the career guidance obtained via the SEND Gatsby Benchmarks has increased in the past two years. However, for the 14% of young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) the reality is that only 6% of them are in paid occupation (ibid). There seems to be a lack of research focusing on investigating the reasons behind this low percentage.

My mixed methods-based study focused on meeting this gap in research. It was carried out on a one case study basis involving a male Y15 student training for a paid position starting after his college studies. The key themes emerged through interviewing and observing the student, discussing students' work experiences with them, interviewing professionals and examining the relevant college documentation. I chose this college because it does not

follow the Gatsby Benchmarks and yet it has won awards for its outstanding practice. Study findings imply the students are well-supported, have regular opportunities to express their views and have numerous meaningful work experiences. The Y15 student has secured a paid job due to his independence and professional skills. Despite the successful support provided by the

college some professionals view too much support for students as potentially detrimental to their future prospects.

## The research process

I am an educator for children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). When deciding on the focus of my MA dissertation in 2018, I was influenced by my belief in social justice with regards to SEND young people having the same opportunities for employment as others do. My study examined the opportunities given to young people with SEND to succeed in their transition to adulthood. It was carried out in a SEN college based in Surrey which has students with cognitive and speech impairments. Previous research on this topic is not vast at all and one of the biggest gaps

in research is concerning the attitudes of employers and recruiters dealing with people with disabilities. Without extending SEND-friendly approaches to recruitment and selection, the government is unlikely to meet the revised target of getting a million people with disabilities into employment in the next decade.

The Y15 student called Archie, on whom I based my study, was at the time of my research going through a vocational type of work experience (WEX). This involved training in a nursery whilst studying with the idea of securing paid employment at the end of the WEX. Despite the fact the college limited me

to one student case study, I realised the importance of drawing on the voices and participation of people with disabilities during my study. Therefore, I made sure I held conversations with the peers of my one case study student whilst visiting the college and I took regular notes of their comments to me and to each other when talking about their work experiences. In addition, my work was assessed as having a good range of data via documentary analysis and teacher interviews. This has resulted in a far-reaching body of evidence which was acknowledged by my tutors from Goldsmiths, University of London.

I structured my dissertation on the key concepts around Amartya Sen's (1999) capabilities approach and four of the eight SEND Gatsby Benchmark (The Careers & Enterprise Company, 2018) which outline the best careers provision in schools and colleges: personal guidance, addressing the needs of pupils with SEND, linking of curriculum learning to careers, encounters with employers and employees.

My theory was based on the capability approach of Amartya Sen, an Indian economist, who believes that personal freedom in all aspects of life is an important way to enhance economic development. In his view, 'capabilities must be sensitive to geographic region, social history, and cultural values' (Jacobson, 2016: p.794). Capabilities are a dominant feature of Sen's approach to development with development being viewed as an emphasis on the ability citizens have to make choices about things that they may value (Jacobson, 2016). Sen regularly compares capability with income and wealth and claims that whilst income is essential it is not the only freedom humans need in order to develop and become the best they can be (Beckley, 2002).

For instance, in a working setting if someone cannot read well they will struggle to use their money optimally – i.e. to build a business. Therefore, if they were able to develop the required skills through an increase in constructing their freedom it would result in them being able to do more, in general (ibid).

According to Sen (1999), increasing freedom as opposed to productivity in the long term would be more advantageous to the individual as well as the society around him or her. He sees a deep complementarity between individual agency and social arrangements and recognises the centrality of individual freedom and 'the force of social influences on the extent and reach of individual freedom' (Sen, 1999: p. xii). Sen describes 'capability as the "what" that societies should seek to equalise' (Beckley, 2002: p.108). Sen contrasts his idea of capability with various conceptions of equal opportunity and observes that a person's capability to achieve does stand for opportunity to pursue his or her goals (ibid). Sen (1999) recognises the importance of

focusing on individual voice, but he also cautions that if we value individual voice too much we could lose collective action as a consequence of concentrating on individual voice alone. Instead he suggests we focus on using both - individual voice and collective action – as

this way no one gets left behind and everyone benefits. Sen claims this can be accomplished via the model of a corporation that focuses on freedom beyond income. According to this model, an organisation would always look after its workers by ensuring any protests from employees are debated and solutions are agreed and this would lead to a happier workforce. Sen states that ‘there is strong evidence that economic and political freedoms help to reinforce one another’ (1999, p. xii). Sen believes inclusive and open management structure to be the more successful model for improving the lives of everyone because if staff are looked after by their bosses they become more driven and productive at work as a result. Inclusive managers should be aware of the importance of reasonable adjustments and acknowledge that complications arise as a consequence of systemic barriers rather than seeing the difficulty as being found within the individual (Hewlett et al., 2019).

## The research findings

My study findings show that the strategies used to help Archie get into employment were successful for a number of reasons. One of the main reasons was the fact he and the students felt ‘heard’ and supported and that the inclusive and open management style of the educators was motivating enough for students to want to succeed. Furthermore, the students’ work experiences were meaningful to them and linked with their interests. These strategies also agree with Sen’s (1999) ideas about the success of a society depending on the freedoms its members are able to enjoy.

The importance of listening to students’ voices is also linked to the effectiveness of the Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs). I can certainly see the useful potential of EHCPs in the career futures of people with learning difficulties. However, I am also aware that their potential is very much undermined by the funding issues linked to local authorities’ budgets. According to my findings, parents’ fear of losing out on future funding opportunities motivates them to opt for more generic targets as a result. Lowering of ‘real’ options for their children could affect the quality of their lives as acknowledged by Sen (1999), who perceives the quality of life in terms of the options and resources one has available.

My findings show that it is also the college educators who have lower ambitions for the students but for an entirely different reason. They fear providing lots of support to students combined with the students’ freedom in choice- making could result in limiting their actual, real potential. According to them, this could lead to their potential failure in the future. However, despite their lower ambitions for their students, the educators still remain supportive and professional enough to not be too directive in influencing students’ views. This strategy is also applauded by Hooley and Dodd (2015) who see less directive approach to providing individuals with understanding of their true potential as the key to good career-related moves.

With regards to employers, my study highlighted the importance of the close link between employers' understanding of SEN and higher recruitment rate of young people with disabilities. For example, Archie's boss's knowledge of SEN has influenced her decision to opt for more alternative recruitment approaches, such as vocational training with the possibility of an offer of paid employment. This approach to training and recruitment allows disabled applicants, such as Archie, to adjust accordingly to the job role and most importantly - gradually.

The study shows the Gatsby Benchmarks have a certain resemblance to the college's career provision practices which could explain the success rate of the college's leavers. The resemblances include the following practices: supporting vocational trainees via joint efforts involving educators being in communications with the employers about appropriate levels of support relevant to the needs

of the WEX trainees; paying close attention to students' goals for the future; building/strengthening joint efforts with regards to students' families being more involved in the practice of setting future targets.

This research could impact the views of educators and employers looking for ways of creating joint efforts to reduce the current barriers for all involved in the career provision process. This shared effort should start with motivating young people to advance in life by offering them meaningful work opportunities as early as possible. Future research must include negotiations with parents and how their ideas about their children's future could be more in agreement with the choices made by their offspring. To help mitigate the power dynamic, a mixture of anonymous survey data and interviews could be used with a variety of parents of children/young people with different levels of disabilities. Reproducing this study across other colleges/schools with different career provision and schemes of work would be of interest. Further research about the strategies for young people with SEND in terms of their employment prospects will hopefully allow stigma around disabilities to dissipate.

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### Useful links:

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GOV.UK (2014). Children and Families Act 2014, accessed 18 February 2019:

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**<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/send-code-of-practice-0-to-25>**

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