

Panel Discussion: SEND and Inclusive Education (Part 1)

[Panel discussion begins]

Nina Hinton (Moderator):

This session focuses on Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). It naturally overlaps with many of the themes we've discussed already today because SEND, mental health and wellbeing are not separate conversations. Increasingly, the support needed in these areas is becoming closely connected.

My own background is in adult social care and alternative education. I've been involved in setting up and running supported internships, independent travel training and alternative curriculum programmes. Inclusive practice is embedded in everything we do at Open Awards, and we know it's becoming an increasingly important priority across education.

There is a lot happening at the moment, including the Curriculum and Assessment Review, the Children's Commissioner's work and the anticipated SEND White Paper. Whether those developments result in significant change or very little change remains to be seen, but we'll explore some of those issues throughout today's discussion.

To begin, I'd like each member of the panel to introduce themselves, explain where they're from and what they do, and tell us what they believe is the biggest opportunity for SEND provision over the next five years.

Michelle, let's start with you.

Michelle Blake (Wonder Neurodiversity):

Before I answer, you'll notice I'm writing the question down. I have ADHD, and writing it helps me remember the question and stay focused.

I'm Michelle Blake from Wonder Neurodiversity. I'm a former teacher, having worked in both mainstream and SEND education, before moving into initial teacher education and continuing professional development.

I'm also the parent of four neurodivergent children, and I have ADHD myself.

I founded Wonder Neurodiversity because I felt much of the available training about neurodiversity was outdated, expensive and, most importantly, often failed to benefit neurodivergent people themselves.

Instead, we provide practical training, and the profits from that work are reinvested into wellbeing projects that directly support neurodivergent people.

When I think about opportunities for SEND over the next five years, I actually feel optimistic.

Recent reports, including *Solve the SEND Crisis*, highlight the increasing number of neurodivergent learners entering education. Much of the discussion focuses on cost, but I think we're missing something important.

Many of the improvements we need are actually about increasing teachers' knowledge and understanding. Helping staff understand neurodivergent learners better doesn't always require huge financial investment. Often it's about awareness, confidence and practical strategies.

As diagnosis becomes more accurate, more young people become entitled to appropriate support. That understandably raises concerns about funding, but the majority of the changes many learners need are relatively low-cost.

For me, one of the biggest opportunities is changing perceptions. Instead of viewing SEND purely as a financial challenge, we should recognise how much can be achieved through better understanding and better practice.

Nina Hinton (Moderator):

Thank you, Michelle.

That's a very different narrative from the one we often hear, which focuses almost entirely on funding pressures

Michelle Blake:

Funding is still important. People need training, resources and appropriate support. But many of the improvements we're talking about are genuinely achievable.

Nina Hinton (Moderator):

Thank you.

Tom, over to you.

Tom Reynolds (EdenFiftyOne):

Thank you, Nina.

I started my career in youth work around 23 years ago in Wolverhampton, where I'm from. I then spent more than two decades working in state secondary education.

Interestingly, I wasn't diagnosed with dyslexia until after completing my English Language and Literature degree. In reality, I'm probably more dysgraphic than dyslexic. I often describe my difficulty as a fear of the blank page.

Throughout my career I've held several Head of English positions across the West Midlands, South East London and Merseyside. I've also worked nationally as a Specialist Leader of Education and educational adviser, supporting schools across England.

A couple of years ago I founded the education technology company EdenFiftyOne.

My experience in schools led me to believe that we spend too much time talking about grades instead of learning.

Grades should simply represent the finish line. Instead, they dominate every stage of the educational journey.

Our platform breaks English down into 51 individual skills covering reading, writing, speaking and listening. Rather than simply giving pupils a grade, learners can clearly see their strengths and areas for development through formative assessment.

Instead of constantly being judged by a single number or letter grade, they receive meaningful feedback about what they can already do and what they need to improve.

When it comes to opportunities in SEND, I'm probably more cautious than optimistic.

The continuing rise in Education, Health and Care Plans reflects the reality that mainstream education is often struggling to meet learners' needs. Families understandably seek statutory support when mainstream provision cannot provide appropriate help.

My concern is that simply expecting mainstream schools to become more inclusive without fundamentally addressing the pressures they're already under is unlikely to solve the problem.

If inclusion simply becomes another accountability measure within inspection frameworks, schools risk being judged against expectations without receiving the resources they need to deliver them.

So while I recognise there are opportunities ahead, I also think we need to be realistic about the challenges.

Nina Hinton (Moderator):

Thank you, Tom. We'll come back to many of those points later in the discussion.

Bhumika, would you introduce yourself?

Bhumika Palni (Liverpool City Council):

Hello everyone.

I'm Bhumika Palni, a SEND Employment Support Coach with Liverpool City Council.

My role is to help young people with learning disabilities and neurodivergent conditions move into paid employment.

That means helping young people develop employability skills, while also supporting employers to become more inclusive by providing training around neurodiversity and different learning disabilities.

The aim is to create more meaningful employment opportunities.

This work is also very personal to me. My younger brother, Saransh, has Down syndrome, and he inspires me every day to help create a more inclusive society.

I also completed a Master's degree at the University of Edinburgh, where my dissertation explored how organisations can become more inclusive throughout recruitment, induction and employee retention.

I'm very fortunate that this work is now my career, and I genuinely love what I do.

Nina Hinton (Moderator):

Thank you, Bhumika.

Elly?

Elly Jackson (Liverpool City Council):

Hello everyone.

I'm Elly Jackson and I work alongside Bhumika as Project Coordinator for Intern to Work at Liverpool City Council.

We deliver supported internships for young people aged 16 to 24 with SEND.

We've actually got three of our supported interns helping us here today, and they've done a fantastic job.

I originally trained as a primary school teacher, but after two years I decided to leave the profession. I found the pressures on teachers, particularly around supporting children with additional needs, extremely challenging.

Limited funding and a lack of specialist support made it difficult to give young people everything they needed.

I wanted to make a greater difference by helping young people overcome barriers to employment.

That's why I'm passionate about supported internships. We want more employers to become involved so more young people can access meaningful work opportunities.

Open Awards has been a fantastic employer to work alongside, and we're excited to continue building those partnerships to achieve the best possible outcomes for young people across Liverpool.

Annette Edmondson (Open Awards):

Hello everyone.

I'm Annette, a Business Development Officer at Open Awards. I've only been with the organisation since January, so I'm still fairly new and learning every day.

Today I'm bringing a parent's perspective to the discussion.

My son is neurodivergent. He has Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA), Tourette syndrome and dyslexia, amongst other diagnoses. He's now 19 years old and doing well, but getting to this point has been a real journey.

He attended mainstream education until the end of Year 8, after which I made the decision to move him into a specialist school. That transition happened just before the COVID-19 pandemic, which brought its own additional challenges.

Alongside my own experiences as a parent, I've spent eight years volunteering with my local Parent Carer Forum. During that time I've worked closely with local authorities, education providers, health services and social care teams. I've also

personally been through two Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) tribunals, so I've experienced the system from several different perspectives.

When I think about opportunities for SEND over the coming years, I would really like to see stronger collaboration between schools, local authorities, parent groups and families.

Michelle made an important point earlier about how some improvements don't necessarily require significant financial investment. From my perspective, communication is often the biggest issue.

Misunderstandings happen on all sides. Sometimes neurodivergent young people are assumed to communicate differently or less effectively, but communication works both ways.

When schools and parents work together openly and collaboratively, it can have an enormous impact on how well a young person is supported.

For me, improving communication and partnership working presents one of the biggest opportunities for improving outcomes.

Nina Hinton (Moderator):

Thank you, Annette.

Nick, over to you.

Nick Hurst (Running Deer CIC):

Hello everyone.

I'm Nick Hurst, Director of Education at Running Deer CIC. I probably win the award for travelling the furthest today. I drove up from Devon yesterday.

Running Deer operates an independent specialist school for around 15 young people who have mental health needs, are neurodivergent or have experienced trauma.

The school is based within sixteen acres of native woodland, so much of our provision takes place outdoors. We often describe it as a school in the forest rather than a forest school, because the environment forms part of a broader therapeutic educational approach.

Alongside the school, we deliver intervention services across Devon, Cornwall, Plymouth, Torbay, Dorset and, hopefully soon, Somerset.

Our work supports young people who are struggling in mainstream education by providing alternative education packages, therapeutic interventions and pathways back into education where appropriate. Sometimes our role is helping learners reintegrate into mainstream settings, while in other cases we help them move into provision that better meets their needs.

Looking ahead, I think one of the biggest opportunities lies in genuinely integrating the support that's already available.

We need to think much more holistically about young people.

Too often education focuses on moving learners from one key stage to the next, or from one qualification to another, without asking what success looks like when they're 19, 25, 30 or even 50 years old.

Education can become very short-term.

We celebrate phonics results, SATs and examination outcomes, but we're often measuring success against relatively narrow milestones.

Instead, we should be asking what skills and experiences young people need to thrive throughout their adult lives.

That longer-term perspective should shape the curriculum and the support we provide.

Nina Hinton (Moderator):

Thank you, Nick.

That leads nicely into my next question.

One of the opportunities emerging through the Curriculum and Assessment Review is the possibility of approaching curriculum differently, particularly for learners with SEND.

How do you think curriculum needs to change if we're going to achieve better outcomes?

Nick, perhaps we'll stay with you.

Nick Hurst:

One of my biggest frustrations is that curriculum outcomes often come before learner outcomes.

Too often we begin with qualifications or curriculum objectives and then build teaching around them.

I'd like to see us reverse that process.

Instead, we should begin with the individual learner.

What does this young person actually need?

What skills will help them succeed in life?

Once we've answered those questions, we can build an appropriate curriculum around those needs.

That also means bringing together learning that isn't traditionally connected.

For example, a work placement might provide evidence for Functional Skills, employability skills, travel training and vocational qualifications all at once.

From the learner's perspective, they've simply had a meaningful day in the workplace.

Behind the scenes, teachers can map that experience against curriculum objectives and qualification requirements.

The learner doesn't necessarily need to see all of that administration.

Their experience should feel purposeful and authentic.

Of course, I appreciate that many schools are already under enormous pressure.

My wife is a mainstream SENCO, and her first question would probably be, "Where do we find the time and resources to do this?"

That's a completely fair challenge.

But I still think there's an opportunity for a genuine shift in educational philosophy.

Curriculum should become truly learner-led, built around future aspirations rather than simply around the qualifications we happen to offer.

Nina Hinton (Moderator):

I really like the distinction you've made between what learners experience and the administrative work that happens behind the scenes.

The learner should experience meaningful education, while teachers manage the evidence and accreditation in the background.

Tom, what are your thoughts?

How does the curriculum itself need to change?

Tom Reynolds (EdenFiftyOne):

I think we need to begin by questioning the destination.

As long as our education system continues to judge success primarily through final examination results, it's incredibly difficult to change the journey.

In mainstream education, everything builds towards GCSE results at the end of Year 11.

Those outcomes are monitored, measured and scrutinised in extraordinary detail.

Because that final destination dominates the system, every decision made along the way is influenced by it.

Schools understandably teach towards those outcomes because that's how they're held accountable.

For me, that's one of the fundamental problems within education.

Until we rethink what success actually looks like, any changes we make to curriculum delivery risk becoming little more than temporary fixes.

The wider conversation shouldn't simply be about how we teach differently.

It should also ask what we actually want education to achieve.

What kind of young people do we hope to develop?

How should success be measured?

Those are much bigger questions than curriculum design alone.

Tom Reynolds (EdenFiftyOne):

When we talk about changing education, I think we also have to look honestly at the assessment system itself.

At the moment, mainstream education is designed around examinations and grades. Schools are judged by those outcomes, teachers are judged by those outcomes and, ultimately, learners are judged by those outcomes.

SEND education, by contrast, is fundamentally about personalisation.

Mainstream education, by its very nature, isn't personalised. A typical secondary school might have a thousand pupils. Specialist settings often have fewer than a hundred learners, with much higher staffing levels and far greater flexibility.

Those two environments are working under completely different conditions.

We're asking mainstream schools to become more personalised while continuing to judge them through a system that rewards standardisation.

When I started teaching in 2003, it was common to have teaching assistants supporting lessons. Today I regularly visit schools with more than a thousand pupils that don't have a single teaching assistant available in the classroom.

So when we talk about shifting more responsibility back into mainstream education, we also have to acknowledge the pressures those schools are already facing.

Ultimately, I think we need to ask a much bigger question.

What do we actually want our education system to produce?

Do we want young people who have simply achieved a set of examination grades, or do we want confident, capable human beings who understand themselves and know how to contribute to society?

Sometimes those two goals don't align as well as they should.

Nina Hinton (Moderator):

That's an important point.

There can sometimes be a mismatch between how schools are judged and what genuinely represents success for young people.

Tom Reynolds:

If I can add one more point...

One of the issues with our current examination system is that grades are awarded using national grade boundaries and statistical distributions.

That means a proportion of learners will always receive lower grades, regardless of the absolute standard achieved.

My concern is that we continue measuring success against relative performance rather than individual achievement.

Instead of asking whether a learner has developed the knowledge and skills they need, we're comparing them against everyone else.

Until assessment becomes more focused on demonstrating competence rather than ranking learners, I think it will be difficult to create genuinely personalised education.

Nina Hinton (Moderator):

That links to something we've already discussed this morning.

Michelle, what are your thoughts?

Michelle Blake (Wonder Neurodiversity):

One issue that particularly affects many young people with SEND is the requirement to continually resit GCSE English and Maths.

For many learners, especially those who have already struggled through school, repeatedly sitting the same examinations can be incredibly demoralising.

It can leave young people feeling that they're constantly failing, even when they've developed many valuable skills in other areas.

That's one of the recommendations highlighted in *Solve the SEND Crisis* report.

Hopefully we'll see some progress on that.

More generally, we need to think differently about how we recognise achievement.

There are many ways to demonstrate knowledge and capability that don't rely solely on traditional examinations.

Nina Hinton (Moderator):

We've all seen examples where learners develop excellent practical English and maths skills without necessarily achieving a GCSE grade.

That brings us neatly to supported internships.

Elly, I'd like to ask about what happens before young people arrive on your programme.

What would you like schools to embed into education so that learners arrive with higher aspirations and greater confidence about employment?

Elly Jackson (Liverpool City Council):

The first thing is simply awareness.

Many young people and many schools still don't know supported internships exist.

They don't realise there's another pathway available after education that focuses directly on employment.

The more schools understand supported internships, the more young people can begin planning towards them earlier.

Another really important part of our work is vocational profiling.

We spend time getting to know each young person, understanding what they enjoy, what motivates them and what kind of work they'd genuinely like to do.

I'd love to see schools begin that process much earlier.

Imagine starting those conversations in Year 7 rather than waiting until the final year before leaving school.

Young people would have much more time to explore different careers, build confidence and make informed choices about their future.

Nina Hinton (Moderator):

That's a really interesting point.

Your approach is incredibly personalised.

You're beginning with the individual young person rather than asking them to fit into an existing programme.

What lessons from supported internships do you think mainstream and specialist schools could adopt?

Elly Jackson:

One of the biggest things is making learning much more practical.

Many of the young people we work with tell us they struggle sitting in classrooms all day completing worksheets.

They learn far more effectively through practical experiences.

Developing employability skills, communication skills and confidence in real workplaces gives learning much greater meaning.

Some of our young people may not have passed English or Maths GCSEs, but that doesn't mean they aren't capable of succeeding in employment.

Many of them thrive once they're given the right environment and appropriate support.

Nina Hinton (Moderator):

Thank you.

Annette, you've heard the discussion so far both as a parent and someone who's worked closely with families.

How does what you've heard resonate with your own experiences?

Annette Edmondson (Open Awards):

Very strongly.

One thing I'd really like to see is much greater emphasis on helping young people explore different careers before they're expected to make major decisions.

Many young people with SEND simply haven't had enough opportunities to experience different workplaces.

They're often expected to decide what they want to do after leaving school without ever having had the chance to try different environments.

I'd love to see much more work experience, even if it's only a day at a time.

For many young people, particularly those experiencing anxiety, committing to an entire college course or career pathway can feel overwhelming.

Trying something for a short period allows them to build confidence and discover what suits them.

The other point that really stands out for me is the pressure placed on young people within mainstream education.

The constant emphasis on examination success inevitably affects mental health.

When young people repeatedly feel they aren't achieving, it impacts their confidence, their wellbeing and often their willingness to continue learning.

That creates additional pressure on mental health services later on.

If we could personalise education earlier and reduce some of those pressures, I think we'd prevent many of those difficulties developing in the first place.

Nina Hinton (Moderator):

That leads perfectly into the next topic because one of the biggest changes many organisations are seeing is the increasing overlap between SEND and social, emotional and mental health needs.

Nina Hinton (Moderator):

One trend we're increasingly seeing is that the barriers preventing young people from moving into employment aren't always their learning disabilities themselves.

Often it's the social, emotional and mental health challenges that develop alongside those learning needs.

I'd be interested to hear whether that reflects your own experiences and how your organisations are adapting to support young people more effectively.

Tom, perhaps we'll start with you.

Tom Reynolds (EdenFiftyOne):

One issue that doesn't receive enough attention is communication.

Back in 2013, speaking and listening was removed from contributing to GCSE English Language grades.

As a result, generations of young people have been assessed almost entirely through reading and writing.

Yet communication is built on four equally important skills: reading, writing, speaking and listening.

Schools understandably prioritise what is measured.

If speaking and listening no longer contribute to qualifications, they inevitably receive less classroom time.

At the same time, we've seen the impact of social media, the pandemic and increasing isolation.

Many young people simply haven't had enough opportunities to develop confidence through conversation, discussion and presentation.

That's particularly significant for learners with SEND.

Communication is fundamental to confidence, relationships, employment and wellbeing.

If we genuinely want to improve outcomes, we need to rebuild opportunities for young people to speak, listen, debate, collaborate and express themselves.

Those aren't optional extras.

They're essential life skills.

Nina Hinton (Moderator):

That's a really important observation.

Interestingly, qualifications such as Functional Skills still place much greater emphasis on speaking, listening and communication.

In Wales, there are also developments that separate speaking and listening into distinct assessed skills.

Perhaps there are lessons we can learn from those approaches.

Nick, what are your thoughts?

Nick Hurst (Running Deer CIC):

I think this comes back to curriculum breadth.

I'm fortunate to work in an independent specialist setting where we have more flexibility than many mainstream schools.

That allows us to prioritise experiences that aren't always possible elsewhere.

One of the biggest opportunities is giving young people access to a wide range of practical experiences from an early age.

Vocational education often begins far too late.

Many young people would benefit from spending time in workplaces, trying different environments and discovering what genuinely interests them while they're still in the earlier years of secondary school.

Instead of expecting learners to commit to a career pathway at sixteen, why not let them experience a broad range of opportunities throughout their education?

Those experiences help young people discover their interests gradually.

They also allow learners to build confidence in manageable stages.

For some young people, half an hour in a workplace is a significant achievement.

That success can then become the foundation for something much bigger.

The challenge is making sure these opportunities are recognised and valued across the education system, not viewed as something separate from learning.

Annette (Open Awards):

The difficulty is that schools are still judged primarily through academic performance measures.

As long as that's the case, it's understandable that many schools feel they have limited flexibility.

They're trying to meet accountability requirements while also supporting increasingly diverse learners.

It's a difficult balance.

Nick Hurst:

Exactly.

No headteacher is going to ignore the measures they're inspected against.

But perhaps we need to broaden our understanding of what success looks like.

Academic achievement matters.

However, confidence, independence, communication, resilience and employability matter too.

If we genuinely value those outcomes, we need to recognise them properly within the education system.

Nina Hinton (Moderator):

As we begin to draw the discussion together, I'd like to ask each of you one final question.

How can organisations across education work together more effectively to improve outcomes for learners with SEND?

Michelle, would you like to begin?

Michelle Blake (Wonder Neurodiversity):

Partnership is essential.

Teachers shouldn't feel they're expected to know everything.

Education is constantly evolving, and it's perfectly acceptable to say, "I need to learn more."

Creating a culture where professionals feel comfortable sharing knowledge, asking questions and learning from one another is incredibly important.

There are already many organisations working towards the same goal.

By collaborating more openly and sharing expertise, we can support learners much more effectively than if everyone works independently.

Ultimately, we're all trying to create a more inclusive society where every young person has the opportunity to succeed.

Nina Hinton (Moderator):

Thank you.

Tom?

Tom Reynolds (EdenFiftyOne):

For me, it comes back to communication.

Regardless of how qualifications are assessed, we have a responsibility to prioritise speaking and listening.

Young people need opportunities to express themselves, discuss ideas, solve problems together and develop confidence in using their voices.

Listening is just as important.

Listening isn't simply waiting for your turn to speak.

It's understanding another person's perspective.

Those communication skills benefit every learner, but they're particularly important for young people with SEND and those experiencing mental health challenges.

Whenever we have the opportunity to build those skills, whether inside or outside the classroom, we should take it.

Nina Hinton (Moderator):

Thank you.

Elly and Bhumika?

Elly Jackson (Liverpool City Council):

Our message is simple.

We need more employers to become involved.

Offering work experience or supported internship placements can have a life-changing impact on young people.

The benefits extend far beyond employment skills.

Young people develop confidence, independence, routine and a greater sense of purpose.

If any employers are interested in supporting young people through placements or supported internships, we'd love to speak with you after today's session.

Bhumika Palni (Liverpool City Council):

I'd also encourage employers to recognise the benefits for their own organisations.

Young people with SEND bring valuable skills, commitment and loyalty.

Creating inclusive workplaces benefits existing staff too.

When organisations demonstrate genuine inclusion, employees often feel more comfortable discussing their own disabilities or additional needs.

Customers also recognise and value organisations that actively support inclusion.

Giving young people an opportunity isn't simply the right thing to do socially.

It creates stronger organisations and more inclusive communities.

Nina Hinton (Moderator):

Thank you.

Annette, your final thoughts from a parent's perspective?

Annette Edmondson (Open Awards):

Everything comes back to communication and collaboration.

I'd encourage organisations to connect with their local Parent Carer Forums.

Spend time listening to parents.

Attend coffee mornings, speak with families and understand the challenges they're facing every day.

Parents have invaluable knowledge about what works and where barriers still exist.

The more we listen to families and work alongside them, the better we'll be able to support young people.

Nina Hinton (Moderator):

Thank you.

Nick, would you like the final word?

Nick Hurst (Running Deer CIC):

I think we need to recognise that no single organisation can meet every young person's needs.

That's not failure.

It's reality.

The important thing is understanding where your own expertise ends and where another organisation may be better placed to help.

If services collaborate effectively, young people experience smoother transitions and receive support that's better suited to their individual needs.

Too often organisations feel they have to solve every problem themselves.

Instead, we should build strong partnerships that allow learners to move between services confidently and without unnecessary barriers.

Ultimately, success comes from working together.

If we keep the young person at the centre of every decision and remain willing to collaborate, we'll achieve far better outcomes than any organisation could achieve alone.

Nina Hinton (Moderator):

Thank you to all of our panel members for sharing your experiences and insights today.

There's clearly no single solution to the challenges facing SEND education, but today's discussion has highlighted some common themes: the importance of personalisation, meaningful collaboration, communication, practical learning and listening to young people and their families.

Thank you all for joining us.

[Applause]

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