Transition issues for young people with special educational needs

Alan Dyson
Education in Urban Contexts Group
Centre for Equity in Education
University of Manchester

Paper presented to the BERA seminar, Disadvantaged and Disabled Learners and Social Justice, University of Edinburgh, 14 March 2005

Address for correspondence:
Alan Dyson
Professor of Education
Faculty of Education
University of Manchester
Oxford Road
Manchester M13 9PL
UK
Tel. +44 (0)161 275 8290
Email D.A.Dyson@man.ac.uk
Transition issues for young people with special educational needs

Abstract

This draft paper derives from a longitudinal study, funded by DfES, of transition processes for young people who were identified at school as having special educational needs (SEN). The study is tracking a sample of such young people through recurrent survey and case study work from just before they leave school into young adulthood. The evidence presented here relates to the second wave of the study, undertaken when the young people were aged 17/18. It presents data from 16 case studies of young people aimed at understanding their progression (or lack of progression) towards employment and independent living.

The case studies indicate that such young people tend not to follow a straightforwardly progressive trajectory. The young people’s intellectual and social difficulties interact with somewhat weak and fragmented support systems and structures to produce deferred and/or fractured transitions. The paper suggests that this may imply a need for more robust means of support for such young people. However, it may also imply that the social inclusion paradigm on which much national policy in this field is based is itself flawed.
Transition issues for young people with special educational needs

Alan Dyson

Introduction

This draft paper derives from a longitudinal study, funded by DfES, of transition processes for young people who were identified at school as having special educational needs (SEN). The study is tracking a sample of such young people through recurrent survey and case study work from just before they leave school (see Polat et al., 2001) into young adulthood. The young people are now aged 19/20 and the third report of the study is in preparation. However, the evidence presented here relates to the second wave of the study, undertaken when the young people were aged 17/18 (Dewson et al., 2004). The study was managed by the Institute for Employment Studies, in collaboration with MORI and a team from the University of Manchester (formerly at the University of Newcastle). This paper focuses on the case study work which the author directed.

The case study sample was selected from respondents to the main sample who had indicated that they would be willing to participate further. Sixteen young people were included in the case studies, living in socio-economically diverse areas in the South east and North East of England. The cases were selected so as to reflect the range of SEN types, but with a bias towards those young people with ‘moderate’ levels of particularly intellectual and behavioural difficulty. This was in order to explore issues where young people might realistically expect to progress to independent living but where proactive interventions were likely to be necessary to make this prospect a reality. As a consequence, however, this sample does not attempt to represent the range of SEN types fully and might be expected to present a slightly gloomier picture than the main sample.

Case studies proceeded through interviews with the young people, their parents/carers (separately where possible), the provider of their current activity, their present/former school SENCO and other key players in their transition process as appropriate. Interviews were largely narrative in form, but focused on key transition themes. The reporting of the case study data below is structured around these same themes.

For the purposes of the current draft, I have concentrated on making the case study data available in a similar form to that of the project report. There is clearly further work to do in focusing the material more precisely and in relating it to both the policy and the transitions literature. At this stage, however, suffice it to say that the promotion of ‘social inclusion’ by New Labour governments since 1997 has placed considerable emphasis on
interventions which will enable disadvantaged social groups to participate in mainstream social activities and access the social goods enjoyed by the majority of people. Access to employment, particularly via further education and training, have been seen as central to this strategy (Blunkett, 1999). In this context, the continued extension of support strategies for young people, of educational and training opportunities and, in particular, the establishment of the Connexions service have had a key role to play.

The cohort from which these case studies are drawn – young people who reached the end of their statutory schooling in 2001 – should, in principle, be the beneficiaries of these developments. However, this particular group of young people identified as having SEN also represent an important test of this overall approach. If the approach works, one might argue, they should make progress towards social inclusion in the form of independence and employment. If it fails, it is difficult to see what else is available for them.

**Findings**

**Transition planning at school**
The case studies provided an insight into the ways in which schools prepared young people for the future, and the extent to which transition planning was felt to have been effective. Zoe, for instance, is a young lady with moderate learning difficulties associated with a range of medical difficulties. She has been in public care since she was abused as a young girl. Her special school held all the appropriate review meetings and involved Connexions and Social Services in the planning process. In principle, Zoe could have left school for work-based training or the local FE College, but in practice, her need for security led to her staying on into the school’s sixth form. However, this is a decision with which Zoe is very comfortable and which the professionals involved all feel was the right one.

In cases such as these, transition at age 16 is largely meaningless, since there is only one option that meets the young person’s needs and wishes and that option is seen by all involved as the correct one. For these young people, the transition process is effectively deferred for two or three years and intensive planning for future options becomes part of their post-16 programme.

In other cases, transition is not deferred and appropriate levels of preparation and support are offered. However, there may be few real alternatives. Peter, for instance, is one of those young people whose difficulties were identified relatively late in his school career. Only towards the end of year eight of his comprehensive school did he receive a statement for Asperger’s Syndrome and for the first time began to receive support. The effect of the statement, however, was to trigger the formal processes of planning and review. Peter received input from Connexions - though from a mainstream rather than a SEN adviser on the grounds that the local service only had enough specialists to service special schools and units. Fortunately, his parents were proactive in planning for the

---

1 All names have been changed to protect the identities of the young people who took part in the case studies.
future and keen that he should stay on in education. His school identified an appropriate option in the form of a two-year work preparation course at an FE College. In principle, there were other options available for Peter, but in practice, none of them was appropriate. Although he began to enjoy school more once he received support, the school sixth form at the time was narrowly academic. As the SENCO put it: “We are a very open sixth form now but I think two or three years ago we weren’t quite as open and you had to get five A-C grades before you could start A level … We as a sixth form are very low on vocational qualifications. We tend to be an academic sixth form so really we offer academic subjects by and large and I think, I don’t think he got five A-C’s.”

Work-based training was also an option in principle, but in practice Peter’s social and organisational difficulties made this impractical. All those involved are agreed that his current placement worked out well. However, it is not clear that there were any viable alternatives. In his mother’s words: “If there hadn’t been that course available, I really don’t know what would have been appropriate.”

More generally, examples of relatively smooth transitions from the case studies seem to be the exception rather than the rule. Marcus, for instance, who has Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties, requires constant one-to-one assistance and is currently attending the sixth form unit of the special school which has provided all of his schooling. The unit is housed in a nearby Sixth Form College but is staffed by special school staff. In this way, it seeks to provide the best of both worlds in terms of specialist provision on the one hand and opportunities for wider social interactions and experiences on the other. In this situation, there were probably no other realistic options for Marcus and transition planning in the sense of scoping out choices has not really been necessary. Despite this, however, the move to the sixth form unit did not go well because of the unfamiliarity of some staff with Marcus’s needs and difficulties in making appropriate equipment available. Although the problems have now been sorted out and the placement is generally regarded as successful, it took over half a year for this to happen. Marcus’s mother is philosophical about the apparent lack of preparation, putting it down to the fact that he is breaking ground for young people with PMLD in this college. On the other hand, the difficulties of the transition process had taken a toll on her mental health and had left her with a negative view of how that process had been handled.

Where there has been turbulence in, or a complete breakdown of schooling pre-16, transition planning inevitably suffers. Li, for instance, is a young man with moderate learning difficulties, though these are compounded by his lack of confidence, by the fact that he does not speak English at home (he is of Chinese ethnic origin) and by some apparent social difficulties. He had no statement, but towards the end of his schooling, his comprehensive school placed him in a Pupil Referral Unit. He was not happy there, felt he was bullied by other pupils and did not get on with the teachers, so he effectively stopped attending. As a result he had little or no preparation for transition – or at least, none that had any impact on him. Since his parents spoke little English, they were in no position to advocate on his behalf and Li was thrown back on his own resources to sort
out his future. He eventually found his way onto a painting and decorating course at an FE College. His account of how this came about is illuminating:

“One of my friends showed me because he was at the college and he came to see me and he said there is a course going on and I ought to join and I thought I had to fill out all these forms, but I didn’t fill out any forms, I just jumped on the course and the teacher said it was alright.”

What is significant here is that the formal processes of preparation and planning for transition were of little significance for a young man who was progressively disassociating himself from schooling. His choice is determined not by professional support and rational decision-making, but by his own lack of confidence and the influence of his friends.

Making sense of the range of experiences is difficult, not least because families and professionals sometimes gave very different accounts of the same events while some young people were unable to give coherent accounts of what had happened to them. Nonetheless, some themes are clear. Above all, in this sample at least, the smooth, planned transition process is the exception rather than the rule. Although there is evidence of plans being made and schools doing all they had to do in terms of organising reviews, involving parents and co-ordinating the inputs of other agencies, the process worked best where least was at stake. In other words, if all were agreed that there was no real option beyond staying on at school, the transition process was effectively deferred for two or three years and the young person continued along a pre-ordained track.

Elsewhere, a range of factors disrupted the transition process. For some young people, there was no real choice and the single option on offer may or may not have been appropriate. For others, there were choices but young person and family had to identify these choices for themselves with greater or lesser degrees of support from professionals. In other cases, planning and choosing were undertaken, but there was inadequate preparation by the receiving provider. Some young people found schools or Careers/Connexions workers unsympathetic to their own view of their futures. In other cases, relationship with the school had broken down, there was no effective planning and preparation and they were cast back on their own resources.

**Current activity**

**Deferred transitions**

The case study data show how some people experience what may be called a ‘deferred transition’. There are young people, particularly those with severe and complex difficulties, for whom the end of Year 11 is a relatively insignificant milestone since they are deemed to be not yet ready to cope with major change and therefore they stay on in their pre-16 institution. Marcus is a case in point. In his special school sixth form this young man with profound and multiple learning difficulties follows a programme which emphasises social interaction and includes modules on independence, coping with people, accessing a self-service café and supervised shopping. Marcus also has opportunities for work in the local community and makes contacts with age-peers since his sixth form unit is sited in a sixth form college rather than on the main special school site. Despite the
problems which he experienced with this placement, the rationale for the programme is clear and common to many of its kind, allowing time for greater maturation whilst steadily expanding the range of experiences which are offered to the young person and relating them more closely to the adult world.

This rationale, however, is not restricted to the small group of young people with the most severe and complex difficulties. Zoe’s Connexions PA, for instance, was of the opinion that ‘children in special school are three years behind’ and therefore should access schooling for longer. Certainly, there is a relatively wide range of young people for whom transition at age 16 leads not so much to a progressive programme of education or work-related training, but to a ‘maturational’ programme. Typically, this is a ‘pre-vocational’ programme in an FE College. However, since this programme is seen as a necessary precursor to courses which lead more clearly to vocational or occupational qualifications (and certainly to any prospect of employment) these young people too are experiencing a ‘deferred transition’.

Devesh’s story is similar. He has learning difficulties associated with hydrocephalus and attended a special school for children with moderate learning difficulties. His SENCO described him in the following terms:

“His main problem is his reading comprehension. But his attitude is incredible, he is a very highly motivated pupil and this made him stand out from the other students. He completed an incredible portfolio for business studies. It was of such a standard that I contacted City and Guild to see if he would be eligible to one of their awards. They said that the portfolio was equal, if not better, than those received from mainstream education. But he could only ever hope to get a pass level because it was all copying other people’s ideas. He wasn’t able to come up with his own ideas or think in an abstract way.”

Despite his enthusiasm and (albeit skewed) talents, the view as he neared the end of schooling was that he was not ready for employment, and work-related training was not an option that was available. As his class teacher reported:

“I would like more apprenticeships to happen and have had contact with people involved with modern apprenticeships, but it has not happened.”

However, the school does have good links with the local FE College and places its pupils on link courses there. Not surprisingly, therefore, Devesh followed all but one or two of his school peers in transferring to an ‘Essential Skills’ course at the College. The course, the College told us, covers “Literacy, numeracy, socialisation” and is delivered by a separate Special educational needs Department. Once Devesh had completed this preparatory course, he was allowed to progress onto vocational education proper. As his college tutor explained:

“As far as [name] College is concerned this really was his only option. He had already been in full time education in Essential Skills and his progression from Essential Skills would be on to Level One, we don’t do a foundation course as such.”
However, he was finding this new course difficult and no additional support had been made available to him although Devesh had made his need for support clear prior to admission and support time was available for use. However, the course tutor said that they received little information about new students from the SEN Department and relied on their own in-course assessments. His mother explained that Devesh was struggling to keep up in a mainstream college without the support that they expected he would have. Devesh had already thought about dropping out of the course, but had decided to try to complete it, with a view to transferring later to another college where he could do a course that was very similar to the Essential Skills course with which he had started. Despite this apparently circular movement, there were prospects of real progression to employment for Devesh. Through college, he had already had contact with a Disability Employment Adviser and she was able to outline a number of employment opportunities in the long term. In her words:

“I think he will successfully gain employment. It may take a little longer than others may but I am confident that he will find a suitable job. We will make sure that we are there to provide support in times of change eg nature of work or staff, as we find that this can be disruptive. He may require further support or coaching at a later stage having got the job.”

The model is clear. While most young people (in principle at least) make a linear progression from school to further education, training and employment, for young people with special educational needs, these things “take a little longer”. The role of the post-16 phase, therefore, is to hold them out of the labour (and, initially, training) market until they are sufficiently mature and to stimulate that maturation by providing appropriate experiences and training.

**Unresolved issues**

As the examples above illustrate, the problems in the deferred transition model tend to come not so much during the course of the first activity post-16, which may be relatively unchallenging, but in the efforts that then have to be taken to make more decisive progress thereafter. This is true of young people with very different types and levels of difficulty. Carl, for instance, has severe autism and is in the sixth form of the same school for children with severe learning difficulties that he has attended since he was eight. His transition to the sixth form at age 16 was to all intents and purposes automatic. So is the next step which is planned for him; transition to one of two local FE Colleges to follow a Life Skills course. There has been some discussion as to which one would suit Carl best, but the decision is now virtually made and Carl’s parents have opted for the one which can offer a full-time, three-year placement. School and college have well-established links, they meet regularly to discuss individual students and Carl is already spending one day per week in the college. The consensus is that this second transition has been well prepared for and should go smoothly. The issues that both parents and professionals were concerned (though not, at this stage, worried) about were therefore not going to arise for a further three years. These were, of course, the issues of where Carl would live, how independent he would be able to become and whether he would find employment of any sort. In talking about his employment prospects, his mother once again articulated a ‘deferred transition’ model which was extremely long-term in its time horizon:
"We’re not sure really, we’re taking that as it comes. These courses I think will probably end up highlighting particular skills and preferences which could be built up. If he showed an interest in computers then maybe he could carry on and do more computer courses which could train him for some sort of sheltered employment using computers or maybe something...He is quite good actually, once he knows what he is doing he can get into a routine and just get on with it, so I think if it was something fairly simple, it is just finding out what suited him."

Maria’s situation is apparently very different. She was regarded at school as having EBD and dyslexia, but nonetheless attended an academically-oriented mainstream girls’ school. She has a turbulent home life, had a baby when she was aged 15 and her attendance and work record at school were erratic. Despite this, she received a high level of support from the school, and was consequently keen to stay on into the sixth form. Whether this more-or-less automatic transition proved to be the right one is debatable, however. Despite its willingness to offer support, the school has little experience in dealing with young people with similar problems and offers only a narrowly academic curriculum. Maria found the work challenging and dropped out of one of her A level subjects. She was uncertain where her next step lay and changeable about the future she wanted until she did work experience in a primary school and decided she wanted to be a teacher.

She had recently enrolled on a teacher training course at the time of our fieldwork and while this appears like a logical progression, there were real doubts about what would happen next. Her school teachers, while clear that she had much to offer, were dubious about her ability to stay the course and become a successful teacher. There were also unresolved tensions at home, since Maria was eager to set up home with herself and her daughter, whilst Maria’s mother (who had little positive to say about her) appeared keen to keep Maria dependent so that she could continue to play a key role in looking after the child. In other words, as with Carl, the post-16 transition had in fact resolved very little and the real challenges lay in the future.

The issue in these cases is not that wrong choices had necessarily been made at age 16 or that there were problems with the post-16 provision. Rather, it is that the often valuable provision made after this first transition was not enough in itself to ensure a successful progression towards the labour market or ‘open’ living. Post-16 provision appeared to be holding young people for a few more years, often in quite productive activities, whilst leaving unresolved some major issues about their next steps and long-term activities.

**Disrupted transitions**

For a few other young people, post-16 provision failed even in its basic task of holding them until they were able to enter more open activities successfully. A good example of this was Andrea, a bright young woman with EBD and/or autism who had effectively dropped out of school. Post-16, she had engaged in a wide range of activities, each one of which had proved unsatisfactory:

- She went to college to take A levels but was enrolled on GCSEs instead because her school results were poor. Once on the GCSE courses, her tutors realised that
she was capable of A levels, but the A level courses were full. Andrea left the college after two months, bored with her provision.

- She then enrolled on a NVQ level 1 course with a training provider, but again left quickly when she found the work too easy.
- She secured unskilled work but found it dull and left.
- She enrolled on a media course at another college, transferred to drama, enjoyed the course for a while but eventually decided that:
  - “It wasn’t my sort of course. I wasn’t getting on with the people there.”
- Finally, she joined a training scheme offered by an organisation specialising in young people who are out of work and offering a package of work experience, life skills, basic skills and personal development.

The difficulties which dogged Andrea’s school career are evident in her post-16 trajectory. It seems that she does not form clear and coherent long-term plans which she is then able to see through. However, it is also clear that there has been even less in the post-16 structures than there was in her school provision to offer her some sense of direction. She doubtless had support in each of her activities and at the time of our fieldwork had found a key worker who was optimistic about her capacity to stay with Andrea long-term to get her into university. She had also had support from Connexions, though according to her parents this has been no more than supplying information about possible courses when they have taken the initiative to contact them. However, to date, all of these forms of support had been insufficiently robust to keep Andrea on track. The prospect, Andrea’s mother believes, is bleak:

“In about five years time we’re gonna be in this situation, she’s still going to be here, unless of course she does get a job in the meantime. That is the only thing that’s going to make a difference. In about five years time if things go the way they have done she’s still going to be here still in the same sort of situation, not going out and just going to Dr Who conventions [one of Andrea’s main enthusiasms]. Maybe in about five years time she might be ready to start moving on but I think it’s gonna take at least that to get her to that point.”

This is, of course, another articulation of the notion of ‘deferred transition’, except that in this case the deferral is not fully planned and it is particularly difficult to see how that period of deferment is doing much to promote the maturation that is necessary.

Support
The patterns of support available for young people post-16 are complex. However, there is a sense that those who become involved in working directly with a young person do all that they can to offer support – sometimes with considerable success. As has been outlined above, Carl is a young man with severe autism who, after a period where his behavioural problems provoked something of a crisis, stayed on in his special school’s sixth form. At the time of the crisis, he was provided (through LEA funding) with a support worker who helped stabilise his behaviour and developed a strong relationship with him. In view of this, his first worker now supports the development of Carl’s social life in a friend-like role, while a new support worker assists Carl in the classroom. When he works off-site, he has an additional support worker to take into account the added risks
involved. Now that he is preparing to leave school, Connexions and Social Services are also becoming involved in planning his future. Meanwhile, as his teacher points out, the support through which his challenging behaviour is managed is formalised through a behaviour support plan which co-ordinates the input of both professionals and family: “So we do things like this here – this is a behaviour management plan that his parents have signed up to as well and everybody, but everybody associated with Carl has to follow this behaviour plan. It is very detailed about strategies to be used and works really well and of course I don’t know if the college does one but we will liaise with the college about these plans.”

Both professionals and parents agree that the level of support offered to Carl is appropriate. This may well be connected to a number of factors in Carl’s case: he is in a stable environment where his needs are well-known; he falls into a well-defined disability category where eligibility for support is not in doubt; and there is a clear system for providing support. All this, of course, is in addition to the quality and commitment of the individual support workers.

Other young people, however, are in somewhat different positions. Zoe, for instance, has also stayed on into her special school sixth form and, as a young person in public care and with a history of abuse, receives considerable support not only from her foster parents but also from Social Services and Connexions. However, there seemed to be distinct differences of opinion between professionals and between professionals and family as to what Zoe’s difficulties and capacities were. The nub of the issue seems to be that Zoe has moderate learning difficulties but has also had a turbulent childhood. It is not immediately obvious, therefore, how far she lacks cognitive abilities and how far her previous experiences have damaged her to the extent that she cannot use the abilities she has. Not surprisingly, she is extremely insecure and finds change difficult to tolerate. However, the way she sees herself, the way her foster parent see her and the way she is viewed by other professionals varied considerably.

These discrepancies about the ‘needs’ of young people are not uncommon where the difficulties experienced by young people do not fall into ‘standard’ disability categories or are complicated by other factors. A number of examples illustrate how young people are being allowed to embark on options that have proved for one reason or another to be inappropriate. In these cases, the issue is not simply lack of support as such. There are enough professionals involved with these young people to offer adequate levels of support and some at least of them are making strenuous efforts so to do. However, the nature of these young people’s difficulties means that the most appropriate form of placement and the level of support necessary are not immediately obvious. The providers of the young person’s current activity do what they can, but there seems to be no professional who both has an overview of the case and is actively involved in shaping provision to meet the young person’s needs.

Parents and carers
A striking feature of the case studies is the extent to which parents and carers continue to play a key role in supporting young people through the transition process. This is
certainly the case, for instance, for obviously dependent young people such as Marcus where his mother has had to battle to ensure that his needs are met by his special school sixth form, or Sophie, where the experience has been less troubled but where her parents play a key part in seeing her through to adulthood.

However, it is also true of other young people, who are less obviously dependent but are nonetheless not capable of making their own way without a good deal of guidance. For instance, Gareth’s mother played a key role in researching the options available to him and helping him to find an alternative to his special school’s sixth form unit. In fact, she continued to be actively involved in the decision-making process long after this initial placement. At the time of the case study interview she was trying to steer him away from a Performing Arts course, despite opposition from both Gareth and his tutors, on the grounds that the course is of limited utility and that the real attraction for Gareth may simply be that his girlfriend is in the same faculty. Nonetheless, she accepts, the college will be careful that it is the young person’s choice which prevails.

This example is typical both of the central role played by parents and carers and of the extent to which that role does not fit into stereotypes of ‘over-protection’. Gareth’s mother is certainly active on his behalf and has a clear view of where his best interests lie. However, her acceptance that Gareth will, in the end, decide for himself (and of the college’s right to protect his autonomy) speaks more of the tensions that can arise in any family than of over-protectiveness. Given that many of these young people have a history of genuine difficulties in planning their futures and making rational decisions and that the options available to them commonly do not lead in any obvious way to attractive outcomes such as employment or high-level qualifications, a degree of protectiveness on the part of their families seems entirely justified.

This high level of involvement, of course, does mean that parents and carers can easily come into conflict with professionals in the decision-making process. In such cases, the lack of certainty about the precise nature of these young people’s capacities and difficulties creates the potential for conflict as parents argue for options which professionals regard as inappropriate.

There is, in other words, a considerable resource here which could potentially be drawn upon for the benefit of young people, and the failure to manage that resource productively, however understandable, is a grave omission.

Matthew, for example, is currently unemployed and has relatively little support other than from his own family. The commitment of his mother in particular is considerable. Not only did she have to battle to get his difficulties recognised in school, but she had to face the dual pressures of being told by his school that he was badly behaved while Matthew himself was telling her that he was unhappy because he was being bullied. Since he became unemployed, she has played a major part in supporting his search for work. However, it is also clear that she has no real idea as to why Matthew cannot find work or what to do to improve his chances. Matthew has been rejected by employers for even the most low-paid jobs and neither he nor she understand why. Her only strategy is to widen
his search to the area where her sister lives. At the same time, she presents as being somewhat indulgent with Matthew, unable to prevent him getting into scrapes with friends of whom she disapproves and reluctant to see him ‘fly the nest’ in view of what she sees as her own mistake in marrying young. In this situation, there appears to be only the most minimal of professional intervention. Certainly, his mother appears to have no access to professional support which might make her efforts to help Matthew more productive.

The key role played by parents is evident in the contrast provided by the few cases where parents are less obviously, or at least less straightforwardly, supportive. For example, Andrea, who comes from somewhat fraught family circumstances, is churning between activities with no clear sense of direction. The issue here is not that Andrea’s parents are unsupportive in any simple way. On the contrary, they continue to offer her day to day support by helping her with transport, and looking after her in the family home. The problem is that they are not apparently able to offer her any very clear and productive guidance and support in the transition process itself and this seems to leave her somewhat rudderless.

For very different reasons, Li experiences a similar lack of effective family support. His parents speak little or no English and played almost no part in the transition process. In the absence of professional support (Li had ceased to attend school), he managed his own transition to college on the advice of friends. In the event, Li is happy with the painting and decorating course he has chosen and his tutors are highly supportive of him. However, there is no way of knowing whether there were better options for a young man who at one time was following GCSE courses and Li’s own ambitions, in the absence of any powerful stimulus to aim higher, remain modest:

“…I haven’t got any GCSE’s so I won’t get a good job but I will probably only get painting and decorating stuff or going round, but I have got a bit of bricklaying and a bit of carpentry so I will probably go round people’s houses and decorate them.”

The case study findings show that parents and carers can be a crucial source of support for young people during this transitionary period. This seems to be particularly so once young people are no longer within the school system. Parents and carers appear to be a willing and potentially pivotal, but currently under-utilised resource. A more cohesive and proactive system of support and information would assist parents and carers to assist their children more effectively.

**Outcomes**
Not surprisingly, the outcomes from the complex and very different transition routes seen in the case studies are themselves extremely varied. The deferred transition model, at its best, allows time for maturation and stimulates that maturation by a gradual widening of the young person’s experiences. For some, this model appears to work, at least to some extent. Gareth, for instance, though not loquacious in the interview situation, clearly felt that he had made real progress on his pre-vocational course. His mother elaborated:

“(He is) a bit more independent; a lot more friends because students come from a wider area…plus he is learning about computers a lot more — he did this at school — but he is
progressing all the time. Seems to be a bit more sensible as well. He is taking this certificate - a basic thing organised by the college. When he was at school he would never have talked like this about wanting to go out with his friends and wanting to do this and that so it’s really opened him up.”

Stuart, the visually impaired young man, has benefited considerably from his placement in a specialist college. Given that he was unhappy at his previous mainstream school, he describes a life at college which sounds ‘typically’ teenage. He talks extensively about friends and girlfriends, has a wide range of interests and is clearly developing a degree of independence which, while not total, does not seem unlike that of many young people of his age:

“I feel independent and grown up on a scale of one to ten about…five/six…I go out whenever and wherever I want to meet up with friends whenever I want to, and well, that’s basically it… In my house, the house I was in, there was set times when we had to be in our bedrooms like, for example, 11 o’clock weekdays and one o’clock weekends but, I mean, in the house I’m in we can go to bed whenever we want.”

His key worker confirmed the progress that Stuart is making:

“He has had a few setbacks, personal setbacks but I think he is managing to cope with them very, very well and he has matured a lot since he first came, you can definitely see that in him. He has taken on more responsibility for things that he does and he plans more, doesn’t he, he thinks things through before he does them far more. He used to go in feet first but he thinks ahead more. I suppose like anyone would, as you get older you plan a bit more don’t you? So yes, he has matured greatly.”

It is no coincidence that these examples of progress through post-16 activities focus primarily on personal development and maturation rather than on academic progress of vocational skills acquisition. Stuart is, in fact, a case in point. He has no major intellectual impairments as such, is likely to achieve NVQ level 2 and is amongst those in the sample with the greatest chance of moving into employment of some kind. However, his key worker explains his options when he leaves college in the following terms:

“… it would [mean] going back down to his local area and then social services finding him a placement or it might be that he can go out and find a job, which I think for Stuart isn’t unachievable, that is achievable for him. Some students, I don’t know if Stuart, he is probably not ready for it yet, but some students move on then to their own self-contained flats and move on and get jobs. In future Stuart could achieve that but I’m not entirely sure if you could say next September he would be living in his own flat, I wouldn’t - manage as he can, cleanliness and tidiness are probably the main, I mean, he can feed himself and he knows when to wash himself but his actual living area might not be the cleanest! But then he’s young, he’l learn.”

The implication is that, whatever Stuart’s academic strengths, his principal developmental needs lie in the social and personal domains. Indeed, his key worker believes he will have a continuing need for access to counselling to help him deal with the personally-troubling issues that are likely to arise even in a life which is now relatively stable.
In other cases, as we have seen, attempts at academic and vocational progression founder on the rock of the young person’s cognitive or personal difficulties. They fail as they attempt to progress to more difficult courses, or they churn between activities in an apparently aimless manner.

Peter is diagnosed as having Asperger’s Syndrome and a range of other difficulties which create real problems for him in handling social situations but mean that he had enough academic ability to pass a range of GCSEs (albeit with low grades) in his mainstream school. As with Simon, much has gone well on an FE College work-preparation course where he works on basic skills and vocational skills but also has some opportunities for extended work experience. However, the intended outcome of the course is that young people move into some form of employment (perhaps supported) and this has not happened for Peter. As his tutor comments:

“Peter has done the two year work preparation course and he’s come out of it with all the qualifications that we’d expect anybody to come out with…On his work experience placement Peter was able to do all of the tasks that they set, multi tasking, but I was just a little bit disappointed at the end of the day that the employers sort of inhibited him by not allowing him to carry on there and work as a paid person, and I think that’s where some of it might even fall down that the employers are quite happy to use them for a while and then, when it comes to the end of the time, say thank you very much, cheerio. That’s the disappointing side of it for us, with all of our students this year, although they have been taken on in part-time jobs but nobody is prepared to full time employment for them.”

The implication would seem to be that, for some young people, the modest academic and vocational successes of which they are capable are not able to open the door to a relatively unproblematic progression to employment. There may be positive outcomes for them both in academic/vocational and in personal development terms, but in a competitive labour market, these are not sufficient to outweigh the disadvantages which they experience.

For other young people, even these limited outcomes are difficult to discern. Zoe is experiencing a ‘deferred transition’ by remaining in her special school sixth form. Given her insecurity, her social immaturity and the fact that she is happy and settled at school, this is an entirely understandable option. However, the security of the sixth form means that issues such as her dislike of change, her inability to travel alone, handle money, take care of her personal hygiene or make decisions for herself have not yet been tackled effectively. When she leaves school, the options which are available to her will be precisely those which were available at age sixteen, and to this extent at least no progress will have been made. Her mother is, therefore, concerned that Zoe will ‘just vegetate’. Her Connexions PA hopes that the issues facing Zoe will be tackled in her remaining time at school, but adds:

“I can see Zoe just being Zoe in ten years time, but there can be a dramatic change in this final year of her schooling. Unless the issues (her fear of independence) can be addressed in a professional way she will stay in that comfort zone.”
In Devesh’s case, the concern is not one of stagnation but of actual regression. Devesh, like Zoe, attended a special school, where he was happy, highly motivated and successful. The prospects for his making a successful transition are, on the basis of his performance in school, very good. In five years’ time, his former teacher at school comments:

“I expect that he would be living independently, maybe with a wife. I shouldn’t think he’d want to stay living at home for longer than he had to. He is a very employable young man, within certain parameters. He is very good at getting on with other people, and very reliable. I think he would be a very popular member of staff.”

However, he is now in a mainstream college where, as his mother points out, he finds life difficult without adequate support. Her view is that he is failing to make progress at college. On the contrary, Devesh is going backwards from the point he had reached at school:

“It’s no use. He’s going to college but he’s not going to be learning anything. Instead of going forward, he’s going backwards. In fact, he’s not getting anywhere. He was better in school than he is college. I don’t know what they do in college, but he’s under stress, depression. He can’t reach anywhere any more.”

It may be, of course, that Devesh’s parents are expecting too much of him and his college. However, his college tutor points out that he has already tried to drop out of his course and is likely to transfer next year to a pre-vocational course at another college.

The case studies present a mixed picture of outcomes, with the most positive being in terms of social and personal development, and confidence, rather than academic and vocational achievement, although there were also examples of these. However, there were also young people in the case studies who seemed to have made little progress, or were floundering in the relatively unsupported environment in which they now found themselves.

**Social life**

For some young people, transition at 16 marks a progression into a fuller and more independent social life. Stuart for example, is very pleased with the social life he has established for himself at his specialist college. From being a somewhat friendless and bullied child at school, he has made friends at college and has had girlfriends. Holidays at home are more difficult for him (which may not be untypical of late teenagers who are beginning to establish their independence) but he has started doing voluntary work in a local special school, has joined two leisure clubs for people with disabilities and occasionally meets a friend from college who lives locally.

Carl too has begun to establish a social life independent of his family, albeit with the aid of his support worker:

“We’ve got a bit of a social life out of school, Carl and I have. We’re quite good mates now, more than one to one (ie support). We’ve got on well and have quite a laugh.”

This social life includes attending a MENCAP youth club, playing badminton and squash and going to the pub, as well as taking part in a school-run youth club and a school-organised holiday.
In the same way, Joshua has a group of friends at his sixth form college, some of whom he associates with outside college. He is learning to scuba dive at the local sports centre with one of these friends. He likes surfing and occasionally goes to play pool. He gets on well with his younger brother and sister and mentioned an aunt and his grandfather of whom he is fond. He has an active and independent social life but also a close and strong relationship with his father and mother and still takes part in family outings on occasion. No doubt Joshua is helped in his social life by the fact that he is widely regarded as highly sociable and very pleasant, with no significant problems in his family life and with academic difficulties rather than any evident cognitive, physical or sensory impairments.

Joshua is, however, an exception in the case study sample. The general pattern seems to be that these young people find social relations problematic for a range of reasons and are, in a number of cases, somewhat isolated. This is true even of those who appear to be developing a social life of their own. Carl, for instance, is highly dependent for his social life on his support worker and it seems unlikely, given his severe autism, that he is going to become genuinely independent in this respect. Indeed, as his support worker comments:

“Carl doesn’t make friends, but it is more, ‘I’ve seen a lot of you. I’m getting used to you. I’ll talk to you.’”

For some young people, the involvement and commitment of parents is central to their social life. This is most obvious in the case of young people with the most severe and complex difficulties (such as Marcus, and Sophie). Sophie, for instance, has a rich social life, largely because her parents are part of a network of families with disabled children which organises its own activities. However, young people with less severe difficulties are often similarly dependent. Gareth involves himself in a wide range of social activities, although, as with Stuart, these are almost exclusively with other people with disabilities. Moreover, they all depend on his parents’ willingness to transport him, to take him on family outings, to include his friends (and girlfriend) in these outings and to fund his somewhat expensive tastes. As his mother acknowledges, Gareth remains “frightened to death” of new social situations and refuses to stay away from home overnight. Gareth himself is adamant that he does not wish to learn how to use public transport on the grounds that he ‘would not know anyone on the bus’.

It is arguable that in some cases, parents are being ‘over-protective’. However, their actions have to be seen in the context of the difficulties which their children have in forming social relationships and hence in maintaining an independent social life. Even where the charge of over-protection cannot be levelled, the result seems to be not that young people achieve independence but that they become more isolated. Peter’s parents, for instance, both work full-time and have been busy in recent months building an extension to their house. As a result, although they are very supportive of Peter, they do somewhat less than they would ideally like with him. However, the consequence is not that Peter has branched out on his own. He has only one friend, who himself has special educational need(s). As Peter’s mother comments, they would like him to have non-disabled friends:
“…but a normal 18 year old is not going to want to spend time with Peter. (So) his social life is basically home… But there again, Peter doesn’t want to do a lot. He’s very happy to be in his room listening to his records. He does jigsaws and reads his books…He doesn’t want entertainment a lot of the time. You know, you can almost see his relief ‘Oh, I can go to my bedroom and play my records now’.”

Living arrangements
As has been apparent from the case study data in this and previous chapters, many of these young people experience a degree of social isolation and dependency. Hence it is no surprise that none of the young people in the sample is living in complete independence. Andrea is, in fact, the nearest, though the Foyer in which she has been placed is a sheltered environment and it remains to be seen whether she will persevere with this placement. Moreover, her move to the Foyer is as much to do with the tensions in the family home as with any progress towards maturity. Likewise, Stuart is living away from home, but his specialist college provides a heavily protected environment rather than a form of independent living.

For the other young people, a combination of factors makes independent living out of the question. Without predictable earnings, even those, like Maria, who would like to be independent, are unable to do so. Indeed, so eager has Maria been to set up home with her young daughter that for a while she lived in a caravan outside the family home but, as we have seen, she sees genuine independence as an unattainable dream. For Peter, the issue is his inability to look after himself and manage his own affairs. He wears the same clothes every day, is not competent at household chores, has a limited understanding of money and is lacking the social skills which would enable him to stand up for himself in everyday situations. His college tutors, therefore, feel he has no realistic chance of leaving the family home in the foreseeable future:

“It would be very traumatic for him certainly now. He has come on so much in lots of ways… [he might] but it’s how quickly he would get to that stage. If he could go somewhere where there was a group of people living together with a worker who was helping them, then I think would work but if you said there’s a flat going in [name] Street, no, no.”

For Li, who has found his own way onto vocational training, independent living is likewise not out of the question in principle and he has a role model in a sister who is about to go to university. Li feels himself to be independent, not least because he retains all of his EMA for himself. However, in practice he is dependent on his sister for anything which involves literacy skills, is lacking in confidence, has a very limited social life and shows no inclination to leave the family home. Li pictures his future five to ten years hence in the following terms:

“I do know I should have hopefully passed the course, get a job and try not to get fired that’s all…I will still be living here, I will still be doing everything I usually do.”

As for many of these young people, then, independent living is a distant dream rather than an imminent reality.

Future plans
The plans of the young people in the case studies ranged from the potentially unrealistic, to plans which are undoubtedly possible but may not be carried through. For those with significant cognitive impairments, the notion of planning is itself rather meaningless. This is not to say, of course, that they do not have clear wishes which can be taken into account when decisions are made about their futures. His mother reports how Marcus, for instance, makes these wishes clear when he visits an adult residential facility:

“When we took him to [name of facility], which is an adult provision, he came alive, so yes, he was maybe saying to us ‘this is where I want to be’. And why is this? Is it because they are all adults?”

However, this is a far cry from being able to formulate and act upon a rational plan to achieve these wishes. Moreover, even where young people can formulate plans, the extent to which they are realistic is often in doubt. Some young people, such as Andrea and Maria, have ambitions which are not entirely unrealistic, but those who work with them have real doubts about their capacity to see plans through to a successful conclusion. Others might in principle be able to formulate plans for their futures but for various reasons either do not do so at all, or do so only in the most limited way. Matthew is a case in point. He originally ‘had his heart set’ on finding work in the catering trade, but his lack of success has caused him to lower his sights. Asked whether he has thought about returning to college to improve his catering qualifications, he replies:

“Don’t know, just I’ve been set back. I’ve been to so many catering interviews and all that and they’ve always knocked me back I’ve just - willing to do anything now, not just got my heart set on catering.”

This is, however, not quite the realistic appraisal of his situation that it might seem, as his other comments about his future show:

“Don’t wanna be living in the UK, wanna be out in some hot country. I did about three months ago have my heart set on moving back to where I was born, back to Cornwall, but there’s so many stories about that now. Hopefully I wanna be living in a hot country, or somewhere decent round here with a full-time job, my own place and everything... I actually wanna own my own pub don’t I, at the moment…”

What is apparent through much of the case study evidence, is that planning for the future is a highly problematic notion.

**Making sense of transitions**

These case studies present a somewhat depressing picture of the transition process for young people who were identified during their school years as having special educational needs. To some extent, this is because of the skewed nature of the sample explained above. To some extent too, the depressing picture emerges because it is easy to lose sight of the very positive work that was being done with young people with significant difficulties. In almost every case, there is at least one provider, agency or individual making strenuous efforts to ensure that the young person progresses. In some cases, the efforts of these organisations and individuals are well co-ordinated with each other and address a wide range of the young person’s needs in both the academic and the social and
personal domains. The powerful commitment of parents and carers is also positive, even if it is a resource which is not always fully harnessed. Moreover, in many cases, there is evidence of progression in one or other domain and certainly of purposeful activity which might ultimately generate progression.

A further caveat is that, for young people who have had special educational needs, the period immediately after the end of statutory schooling seems not to be the point at which the major transition into the adult world is made. ‘Deferred’ transitions seem to be the norm, with the first two or three years operating as a holding period when development may or may not occur, but when a move into employment or an otherwise fully adult life is not really expected. This means that the real test of what happens in these post-16 years is left for the future and therefore judgements on what is on offer for these young people themselves need to be deferred.

Nonetheless, it is possible to see a pattern in the experiences we have reviewed – and a pattern which gives rise to concern. The ‘standard’ model of transition presupposes that young people are set on a linear journey towards adulthood. That journey will be marked by the acquisition of academic and (increasingly) vocational skills which will themselves open up employment opportunities, by a growing control of social life, an increasing personal maturity, by greater financial independence and eventually by fully independent living. Throughout, the process will be driven by the young person’s increasingly mature planning and decision-making, guided by professional and family support where necessary.

Unfortunately, this model simply does not apply to the young people in this sample. For some of them, the ‘standard’ markers of adulthood are simply out of reach. With the best will in the world, they are not going to access open employment or live independently. For young people with the most severe and complex difficulties, therefore, transition can at most be about approximating these markers of adulthood as nearly as those difficulties will allow. This might well involve new experiences and an acknowledgement that the young person is increasingly adult. However, transition is also, for these young people, a time when such positive arrangements as have been put in place in the childhood years are threatened by changes that have little meaning for the young people themselves. There may well be, therefore, more to lose in the transition process than there is to gain.

For others, a closer approximation to a ‘standard’ transition is theoretically possible, but that approximation is not a close one. In the context of difficulties with rational planning, or limitations in the young person’s capacity to act on plans effectively, of strictly limited skills acquisition, of delayed personal maturity and, in the final analysis, of limited resources to bring to a demanding labour market, the notion of linear progression comes to seem problematic. Young people are certainly active – and being kept active – in the post-16 years, but it is not entirely clear to what purpose. The activity is not in any clear way generating progression. In this situation, the efforts of individual professionals or organisations to support young people, valuable as they are, seem unlikely to help those people beat the odds which confront them.
In particular, what seems to be lacking is any strong framework within which young people might stand the best chance of progression. Although there are individual champions in particular cases, the overall impression is that no individual or organisation gives a strong lead to young people or ‘personalise’ (to use a term now being used widely in education policy) the provision that is available. The formal SEN transition planning process is undoubtedly important for some young people. However, not all young people are entitled to access the process or do in fact do so and it seems to be the strength of the pathways between pre- and post-16 provision that make the difference rather than the formal procedures themselves. Moreover, schools do not always provide the sorts of supportive environments for transition planning that might be expected. Relationships between young person and school may break down, or there might be disagreements between family and professionals, or there might be few real options. Equally worrying, young people may have their special needs ‘identified’ at a relatively late stage in their school careers when, presumably, significant levels of damage to their self-esteem have already been done.

What is particularly lacking is any sense of individual entitlement, of the sort that the statement of SEN, however imperfectly, provides. Young people may have a right to access provision of some sort, but the nature of that provision is not determined by the needs and wishes of the individual young person. On the contrary, it is offered on a ‘take it or leave it’ basis which may work well with most young people, but seems inadequate to generating progression for this particularly vulnerable group.

This, of course, begs the question with regard to the social inclusion paradigm which has informed government policy in this area and to which I alluded at the start of this paper. That approach, it seems, is based on the assumption that there is one – or at least one preferable – way of being ‘included’. This is based on participation in normal (i.e. majority) activities and processes in order to access social goods. In particular, it demands participation in a labour market which forms part of a globalised economy and within which, therefore, employability depends on relatively high levels of skill, accompanied by some flexibility and determination to work towards the best available opportunities. In turn this demands relatively high levels of educational attainment and, for those who cannot generate these whilst at school, the capacity to progress strategically and determinedly through a series of post-school development activities and the acquisition of at least a minimum of non-academic employability skills.

In this context, the problematic experience of many in our sample suggests two possible failures in this approach. The first is a failure of means. It may be that the current support strategies and opportunity structures are simply too weak to guide these young people towards social inclusion. In this case, all that is needed is to strengthen the support and structures to the point where they are effective. Indeed, it may even be that this is simply a matter of time and that young people later rather than sooner begin to make progress (though early indications from wave 3 of the study do not yet suggest this).

The second is that it is the underpinning paradigm that is the problem. Perhaps the notion of social inclusion, as defined by policy makers is flawed in the sense that it is
unattainable by a significant minority of young people. No amount of support, in this
case, will be adequate to generating anything other than a pale shadow of the social
participation and access which the majority of people enjoy. In this case, the question is
what other model of citizenship and social well-being would be more inclusive of these
young people. This is a fundamental question which appears to have no simple answers,
particularly not if we are realistic about the nature of international economic competition
and the enormous challenges of moving towards a more just society without at the same
time destabilising those elements of social justice which we have been successful in
establishing.

References
by the Rt. Hon David Blunkett MP (London, DfEE).