Out of sight, out of mind? Transition for young people with learning difficulties in out-of-area residential special schools and colleges

David Abbott and Pauline Heslop

Young people with learning difficulties who go to residential special schools and colleges are highly vulnerable, often living a long way from home. Transition towards adulthood – from school to college, or college and beyond – requires careful planning and support for both young people and their families. Despite national policy and guidance in this area, this article suggests that young people with learning difficulties in out-of-area placements are being failed in terms of transition education and face huge uncertainty and very limited choices.

David Abbott and Pauline Heslop, both Senior Research Fellows at the Norah Fry Research Centre based at the University of Bristol, set out, in partnership with the Home Farm Trust, to examine transitions for young people with learning difficulties who attend out-of-county residential special schools and colleges. Drawing on empirical research with 15 young people, their families, and the professionals that support them, they outline in this article the main barriers to effective transition planning. They suggest that a lot more focus on planning and commitment to good outcomes is required to ensure that this group of young people have similar life chances to their non-disabled peers.

Key words: residential schools, colleges, learning difficulties, transition education.

Introduction

There is a developing body of literature and research around the topic of transition from childhood to adulthood for young disabled people. Recent studies have highlighted that this period in a young person’s life is characterised by uncertainty, inconsistent approaches to transition planning and a lack of meaningful choice around post-education options (Heslop, Mallett, Simons & Ward, 2002; Morris, 1999; Hudson, 2006). However, with regard to transition, we know less about those disabled children and young people that go to residential schools or colleges, in ‘out-of-area’ placements.

According to DfES figures (Pinney, 2005), there are about 6,100 pupils in maintained and non-maintained residential special schools, together with some 4,400 pupils in a further 99 independent residential special schools. Nearly all of these children have Statements of Special Education Need, but data are not collected about whether they are disabled or not. We know from previous research (Abbott, Morris & Ward, 2000, 2001) that young disabled people in residential schools are not routinely afforded all the protections of the Children Act (1989). In addition, the distance from home, and from professionals in the local authority that places them, means that reviews and planning meetings around transition are of very variable quality. Finally, given the acrimonious atmosphere in which many residential school placements are secured – often against the wishes of professionals – relationships among parents, carers and those responsible for planning transition arrangements are not always as good as they could be.

Similar issues arise for young people with learning difficulties who go to residential colleges. The Learning and Skills Council (LSC, 2005) suggests that, at the time of writing, there were approximately 3,038 learners at specialist colleges in England.

There is no shortage of statute and policy guidance on the subject of transition for young people, including those with learning difficulties (for example, DoH, 2001, 2004, 2006; DfES, 2001, 2004). The DfES (2001) Special Educational Needs Code of Practice charges Connexions staff (who provide young people with career-focused advice and information) with co-ordinating the Year 9 transition plan at transition review meetings. Thereafter, they are responsible for its implementation – mostly in conjunction with schools. Social services, who should be playing an active role in the lives of disabled children placed away at residential schools, should also be assessing whether young people will require further input from social services into adulthood, and, if so, should play an active role in transition planning and review.

For young people with learning difficulties post-school, a number of policies are relevant. The Learning and Skills Act (2000) charges the Connexions Service with carrying out assessments for young people with learning difficulties who plan to move on to further education, higher education or training. These assessments should form the basis of
transition planning and are supposed to be supported by subsequently published guidance (Connexions Service National Unit, 2002). Currently, local authorities’ responsibility ceases for young people with special educational needs who are over the age of 16 and are no longer registered at school. The Connexions Service is then responsible for developing an action plan which builds on the transition plan and any other available information. Section 140 of the Learning and Skills Act – Revised Guidance (Connexions Service National Unit/DfES, 2004) provides guidance for, and examples of good practice in, conducting assessments within the Connexions Service (known as S140 assessments). It sets S140 assessments in the context of transition planning, and stipulates that such assessments must be carried out for young people with special educational needs in their last year of compulsory schooling. More recently, the LSC (2006) launched a national strategy for improving education and training opportunities for people with learning difficulties.

This paper arises from empirical research which aimed to find out more about the nature of transition pathways for young disabled people in residential schools and colleges. The study was a partnership between HFT (Home Farm Trust, a UK-wide, independent provider of services to people with learning difficulties), the Norah Fry Research Centre (University of Bristol), the South West Agency for Learning Disabilities and Connexions West of England. Funded by the Health Foundation, the study ran from March 2004 to December 2006.

Methods

Five English local authorities took part in the research. Together, they represented a range of characteristics, including a mix of predominantly urban or rural communities; local authorities that were ‘importers’ or ‘exporters’ of young people with learning difficulties for residential education; and one local authority with a significant minority ethnic population.

At each of the five sites, the Connexions Service or social services invited young people with learning difficulties in their final or penultimate year at an out-of-area residential school or college to take part in the research (a total of 38 young people). The research team then sent those young people who were interested a DVD and written materials about the project which had been produced in conjunction with young people with learning difficulties.

Fifteen young people took part in the research (see Table 1 for further details). This represented a response rate across the five authorities of 39% (range: 11% to 57%). All of the young people consented to the research team talking to their parents about their experiences; 100% of parents responded favourably to taking part (note that the term ‘parents’, used throughout this paper, includes one grandparent). Each of the young people and their parents also nominated people who they thought helped them in preparing or supporting them through transition. Thirty-two ‘supporters’ were nominated (mean per young person = 2; range: 0 to 4). All worked with the young people in a professional capacity, and are therefore referred to as ‘professionals’. Almost all (91%) of the nominated professionals agreed to take part in the research.

During the first half of 2005, interviews were conducted with:

- 13 young people with learning difficulties (one young person was too unwell to be interviewed, and one was considered by their parent to be too upset);
- 16 parents;
- 27 professionals (two of whom were interviewed in relation to different young people).

We returned to our interviewees during the spring and summer of 2006, to find out what had happened to them in relation to transition. In this stage, interviews were conducted with:

- 14 young people with learning difficulties;
- 16 parents;
- 29 professionals.

The interviews with the young people were conducted at their residential school or college in the first stage, and in the second stage we went to the locations to which the young people had moved. Most took place over two consecutive days. Discussions with those young people who were able to communicate verbally were tape-recorded with consent. Other young people used pictures to indicate their likes, dislikes, hopes and concerns, and notes were kept of these. A third group of young people indicated through their gestures and activities what they liked or disliked and what gave them pleasure. Some of the young people had physical impairments in addition to learning difficulties; some had behaviour that was thought to ‘challenge’ services. None were excluded from the research, or not interviewed, because of their level of ability or means of communication. All of the young people were given a £10 gift voucher in recognition of their input.

Interviews with parents and professionals were held at a convenient time and place for them. The interviews were semi-structured, following a topic guide and covering particular aspects of the transition process. Each took approximately an hour and a half (ranging from half an hour to three hours). The interviews were tape-recorded with consent, and interviewees were given the opportunity to read the transcripts of the tapes and correct any factual inaccuracies. The parents were offered a £10 gift voucher in recognition of their help.

All tape recordings were transcribed and, together with any notes, entered into MAXqda, a qualitative data software package. Two researchers independently read all of the texts and coded selected text segments into main themes and sub-themes. A random sample of texts was crosschecked for accuracy and consistency.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age (summer 2006) and impairments</th>
<th>Out-of-area school/college</th>
<th>Transition planning</th>
<th>On leaving school/college</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18 Learning difficulties; physical impairment; wheelchair user</td>
<td>Post-16 unit attached to residential special school</td>
<td>Summer 2006: at the end of his second year at the post-16 unit. Will be staying on for a third year in 2006/2007. Had been to visit two specialist further education colleges and applied to one for a place in September 2007. Interview arranged for autumn 2006.</td>
<td>Remaining at college.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 Learning difficulties; physical impairment; wheelchair user; no speech; visual impairment</td>
<td>Further education unit of residential specialist school</td>
<td>Summer 2006: at the end of second year and due to leave. Funding applied for (half LSC, half social services) for another year at the school. To go to the Panel for a decision in July. Meanwhile, social worker had been looking for residential placements since October 2005 but none suitable had been found.</td>
<td>Uncertain at time of writing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 Learning difficulties</td>
<td>Specialist college</td>
<td>Summer 2006: due to leave college in July 2006, after three years there. Had three offers of residential placements to start in July. Deciding which to go to. Funding had provisionally been agreed in April 2006.</td>
<td>Deciding which placement to pick at time of writing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 Learning difficulties; autistic spectrum</td>
<td>Specialist college</td>
<td>Summer 2006: due to leave college in July 2006, after three years there. Social worker (allocated in March 2006) had not attended any transition planning meetings. Young person wanted to go to community-based residential setting but application made too late for placement in the coming year.</td>
<td>Left college in July 2006 to return home in the absence of any other plans. Social worker trying to arrange some daytime activities. Likely that young person will stay at home and re-apply to community organisation.</td>
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<td>21 Learning difficulties; Prader-Willi syndrome</td>
<td>Specialist college</td>
<td>Was partway through second year of course when parents withdrew her from college in spring 2006 because of their concerns for her welfare.</td>
<td>Had returned home to live (spring 2006) in the absence of any transition planning being undertaken. Summer 2006: plans were being made for her to have community support worker involvement over the summer, and to start part-time at local mainstream further education college in September 2006. She would remain living at home.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 Learning difficulties; physical impairment; wheelchair user</td>
<td>Specialist college</td>
<td>Left college in July 2005, after three years there. No placement arranged. Wanted to move into residential service and had attended an interview. Funding was provisionally agreed – but no vacancies.</td>
<td>Returned home to live for the summer, with community support workers helping in the mornings. Vacancy in residential service came up in September 2005 and moved in straight away. Summer 2006: still in residential placement. Attending local mainstream further education college part-time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 Learning difficulties; physical impairment; wheelchair user; visual impairment; limited speech</td>
<td>Specialist college</td>
<td>Left college in July 2005, after three years there. Arrangements in place to move into residential service where young person had been receiving ‘respite’ during college holidays for the last three years.</td>
<td>Moved straight into residential service in July 2005. Summer 2006: still in residential placement. Wanted to attend local mainstream college part-time, but college could not support his physical needs.</td>
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<td>Age (summer 2006) and impairments</td>
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<tr>
<td>21 Learning difficulties; epilepsy; limited speech</td>
<td>Post-16 unit attached to residential special school</td>
<td>Had been due to leave post-16 unit in summer 2004, after three years there, but funding decision was not made in time. Had stayed on for a fourth year, funded by social services. Visited specialist further education colleges in two areas and secured a place at one to start in September 2005. Funding in place by Easter 2005.</td>
<td>Summer 2006: had completed first year at specialist further education college and would be going back for the next year.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 Learning difficulties; Asperger syndrome</td>
<td>Specialist college</td>
<td>Left college in July 2005, after three years there. Returned home for the summer holidays with no confirmation of the next placement. Parents lodged official complaint about social services. Residential place secured in September 2005. Lodged temporarily with the owner of the residential service until her room was ready (it was in an annexe being built). Started full-time at local mainstream further education college. Withdrawn from residential service at Easter 2006 by parents because of concerns for her welfare. Returned to live at home. July 2006: still living at home and attending the same mainstream further education college.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 Learning difficulties; epilepsy; physical impairment; limited speech</td>
<td>Specialist college</td>
<td>Left college in July 2005, after three years there. Social worker had been allocated in November 2004. Huge pressure as no family home to return to. Residential place secured and funding agreed ‘a couple of weeks’ before he left college.</td>
<td>Summer 2006: still in residential placement and attending local mainstream further education college part-time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 Learning difficulties; Down’s syndrome; cardiac problems</td>
<td>Specialist college</td>
<td>Due to leave college in July 2006, after three years there. No placement had been identified so returned home for the summer.</td>
<td>Moved into residential service in September 2006. Placement breaking down in October 2006 and parents thinking of withdrawing him.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 Learning difficulties; limited speech; epilepsy</td>
<td>Specialist college</td>
<td>Originally due to leave college in July 2007. This was brought forward because of problems at home during college holidays. Phased introduction to residential placement and day centre during the holidays in 2005/2006. Plan to move there full-time from July 2006.</td>
<td>Summer 2006: moved in to residential placement and attending day centre full-time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 Learning difficulties; Asperger syndrome</td>
<td>Specialist college</td>
<td>Left college in July 2005, after three years. IQ ‘too high’ so considered ineligible for learning disability services. Returned home to live. Offered a place (two weeks before term started) at local mainstream further education college on a full-time work-related course.</td>
<td>Summer 2006: still living at home and attending mainstream further education college. Had applied to progress on to the next level course.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 Learning difficulties; severe epilepsy</td>
<td>Specialist college</td>
<td>Due to leave college in July 2006. Had been receiving local education authority funding. Applied for LSC funding for another three years at the same college. Left college for summer holidays not knowing if funding granted.</td>
<td>Heard in August 2006 that one year of funding had been granted by the LSC so he would be returning to same college.</td>
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Issues explored within the research interviews included the circumstances that led to out-of-area placements; problems with past, current and future transition plans; and discussion about what respondents thought would improve the process and outcome of transition (see Heslop, Abbott, Johnson & Mallett, 2007). This paper reports on the following particular themes:

• experiences of transition planning and transition processes;
• experiences of identifying provision post-school/college;
• problems associated with particular professional groups;
• issues pertaining specifically to the young person being out-of-area.

The research study was guided by a multi-disciplinary research advisory group and two advisers with learning difficulties. The study received ethical endorsement from the Association of Directors of Social Services Research Group.

Findings
Why out of area in the first place?
We know from previous research (Abbott et al., 2000, 2001) that residential school and college placements can be very difficult to secure and are sometimes, though not always, a last resort for families who feel that their child’s educational or social and health care/support needs are not, or cannot be, met by local provision.

Fourteen parents offered reflections on how their son or daughter came to be in a residential school or college placement. Of these, only one mentioned difficulties in the family home (or, ‘social/social support’ reasons) as part of the reason for seeking a residential placement. Two parents made a concerted, ‘positive’ choice to select a particular residential institution which they felt was ‘perfect’ for their child’s needs. All of the other parents said that they had looked at residential schools because there was no other suitable local educational provision. Most of these parents had tried or at least looked at local options but were, on the whole, very unhappy with their experiences. It was common for the decision-making process around securing a placement to be acrimonious and prolonged. Five families had instigated legal proceedings against their local authority in order to secure a residential placement.

Some professionals had a clearer understanding than others about the circumstances in which a residential placement had been made. This tended to depend upon how long they had been involved with a particular young person or their family. Their responses were broadly similar to those of parents about why and/or how a placement had been made. This is probably to be expected, as the professionals involved were selected by families as those who were most helpful to them. Given the difficulties that most parents experienced in securing a placement, it is likely that different professionals – not interviewed in this study – would have different opinions about why a placement was sought or made.

Troublesome transitions: process and planning
Different services have statutory roles to play in transition, and these include Connexions, and social, health and education services. A starting point for a disabled child in a residential school setting should be the Year 9 transition review meeting. This sets out information about the young person’s hopes and aims for the future, as well as the views and comments of parents, carers and other key professionals. This plan is then supposed to be reviewed and updated each year.

Fourteen professionals, ten parents/carers and four young people talked about the absence or problematic nature of ‘good’, ‘timely’ or sometimes any transition planning. Perhaps most worryingly, seven parents said that there was no transition plan at all. In addition, several other parents, when asked, simply did not know if transition planning was going on, or was due to begin; nor were they clear whose responsibility this was. Parents in this situation tended to assume that the school or college would ‘sort it out’, as these comments from two parents illustrate:

‘We just sort of had faith really that everything will work out, blind faith or idiocy, I don’t know . . .’

Interviewer: ‘Have you had any transition planning?’
Parent: ‘No.’
Interviewer: ‘Do you know if they are likely to start?’
Parent: ‘I’ve no idea.’
Interviewer: ‘Do any of them have specific transition planning?’
Parent: ‘Not that I know of. I presume that would happen in her final year but by that time it’s all too rushed and all too late.’
Interviewer: ‘Is there a specific transition worker do you know?’
Parent: ‘Not that I know of, no, I’ve no idea.’

Professionals conceded that proper transition planning was inconsistent, or ‘random’, in the words of one social worker. Reasons given for this included problems around the timing of transition. Many professionals said that planning too early for the next move was counter-productive, because it was only possible to approach providers quite close to the time when the young person was due to leave or move on. In addition, because it is not possible to apply for funding until a placement is actually secured, the application for funding is sent very late in the process, leaving little or no time for a back-up plan or alternative.

Another reason given for the lack of proper planning related to staff shortages and turnover, especially in relation to social workers. This meant that thinking about transition just was not dealt with until the situation was close to ‘crisis’. One young person finally had a social worker allocated to him in the months before he was due to leave residential
The social worker felt that she walked into a 'chaotic situation':

'I didn’t feel it was particularly well handled. I don’t think there was a lot of planning from our end. I think it was a case of a placement was made for [young person] and then the case was closed and we moved it to the review cabinet. Maybe social work contact should be maintained during those years of a person being at college, but it felt to me that it was just too little, too late when I got involved.'

The mechanics of planning meetings were regarded as problematic by many professionals. Transition planning rarely took place in its own right, but instead was often just a small part of other reviews, usually the annual review. One social worker felt that because the reviews were arranged and chaired by the school, she had very little opportunity, or authority, to intervene when she disagreed with what was being said at the meeting, including how the young people themselves were, or were not, involved:

'It bothers me hugely that many young people are not even present for their own transition meetings. And I have tried to tackle it and the headteachers just say, “Well I know the child better than you do, I know what’s best.” And what can you say when you’re on their premises, they’re in the chair; they’ve invited me as a guest on the site. I took a young person actually in to speak to a headteacher because the young person had said to me, “I want to be in my meeting.” And I said, “Fine, ask the headteacher” I took them to the door, they went inside, thirty seconds later they came out again and said, “The headteacher said, ‘no’.” And I said, “Well I’m really sorry but I can’t go over the headteacher’s head’.

Two professionals felt that planning meetings involved too many people making suggestions and not enough people who could authorise things – most crucially, for example, funding. One social worker felt that the people drawing up the plans were not the people who were going to have to find the funding:

‘Pathways and Connexions can draw up a great transition plan but then it just gets handed over to adult services – they don’t have to fund anything.’

Understandably this lack of good planning led to real anxiety for families and young people – and some professionals as well, as was apparent from an interview with a social worker:

Interviewer: ‘So she leaves college this July, so two months?’

Professional: ‘Don’t even go down that road, we know how long it is.’

Interviewer: ‘Right OK. Has there been a kind of transition plan drawn up?’

Professional: ‘I think there probably is but I don’t know to be honest if there is. I haven’t seen one. I mean it would be worth asking wouldn’t it? It’s a bit late now, as we’re almost at the end. We haven’t had a piece of paper saying this is what we need to do or anything else, or a transition plan.’

There was a range of approaches employed by the out-of-area schools and colleges with regard to their involvement in supporting students who were moving on. All ran some sort of sessions to help prepare the young people for moving on. In addition, two of the out-of-area residential colleges actively took young people out on visits to enable them to see a range of options that might be available to them. Other colleges clearly did not see this as part of their role – not necessarily because they did not think it was a good thing, but largely for practical reasons. The majority of colleges, however, facilitated visits to likely, or agreed, placements for individual young people, by giving them time off, discussing the placement with them or providing a member of staff to accompany the young person if requested. This work was carried out by college staff, including tutors, key workers and care workers, with some input from Connexions and occasionally social workers. However, their role was usually a minor one in comparison to the work done by families themselves in conjunction with staff at the college.

The road to nowhere? Real life choices for young people at transition

Fifteen professionals, 12 parents/carers and one young person spoke about the very significant lack of choice for post-school and post-college placements. Post-college choices were particularly limited. When speaking about lack of choice, respondents expressed the view that finding one suitable option was incredibly difficult; having a second or reserve option was described by several people as ‘gold dust’. Therefore they were not suggesting that there was the absence of a wide choice.

Parents said that there was an almost total lack of local options, especially in relation to jobs, housing and further education college places. One parent said:

‘Because there’s no funds and there’s nowhere in [area] for her to go to as a long-term thing . . . you just hear of everything closing down, but nothing seems to be taking its place.’

One particular problem was finding post-college options that were age-appropriate for young people. Several parents had been to visit residential and day services where they felt that the average age of the other people there was just too old. They were concerned that their son or daughter would not be sufficiently challenged, or would not have enough peers with whom to make friends. One parent expressed concern about a perceived lack of structure in a residential unit that had a connected sheltered employment service:

‘When we went into one of the residential units, although it was 11.30 in the morning it was a unit of perhaps nine or ten young adults, two of them were'}
Connexions adviser commented:

would be sufficient structure or purpose to their day, as a
lemmatic, but concern was expressed about whether there
live with their families. This was not always inherently prob-
people could have no other choice than to return home and
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own hopes for the future, much of what they would choose
input of young people with learning difficulties about their
While there was a shift towards actively encouraging the

Parents’ views about lack of choice were not contradicted by
the professionals in the study. There was an acknowledge-
ment that a lack of longer-term strategic planning to put
local services in place meant that, while there was a rhetoric
of ‘bringing people home’, there was in fact very little to
come home to. Professionals felt that it was a ‘private pro-
viders market’, and that although theoretically transition
planning could have been carried out well, the planning
would be rendered irrelevant if the actual places were not
available. A social worker reflected on this:

‘I’ve been talking about [young person] for the last
three years with our previous development officer and
my manager, so the people that need to know have
known that he will be moving on from college and so
there shouldn’t be this flurry, but unfortunately because
there aren’t the vacancies and because things change
so much as well, I think this is how things have come
out for [young person] in this way.’

A Connexions adviser agreed that the notion of ‘choice’ did
not always have a lot of meaning for some of the young
people with learning difficulties with whom they worked.
While there was a shift towards actively encouraging the
input of young people with learning difficulties about their
own hopes for the future, much of what they would choose
for themselves (especially in relation to post-college options) was simply not available, as one Connexions adviser explained:

Interviewer: ‘Is it a struggle to get a first place
option?’
Connexions adviser: ‘Well sometimes. In some areas
it’s difficult enough getting one, and we always
count it as a bonus if we’ve actually got a choice,
whether it’s accommodation, whether it’s colleges,
whether it’s courses.

This situation resulted in uncertainty for everyone involved,
and the possibility that post-school, or college, some young
people could have no other choice than to return home and
live with their families. This was not always inherently prob-
lematic, but concern was expressed about whether there
would be sufficient structure or purpose to their day, as a
Connexions adviser commented:

‘Yes, but then you’ve deskilled them, they’ve had an
awful lot of money because it’s a very expensive option
to come to a residential college and the idea is that
they go and they gain more independence and then
we’re sending them back home. It doesn’t make
economic sense. They might just as well have gone to
the local college down the road.’

One parent summed up her anxiety about what she felt
would be the inevitable outcome for her daughter:

‘Realistically, I think that it will all fall apart and she
will end up with me and I’ll have to give up my job and
look after her and then I’ll have a nervous breakdown
and we’ll both be poorly. That’s what I really think will
happen.’

Some particular issues about staff and services
There was evidence from our data that there were some
specific problems relating to joined-up working and clarity
about roles and responsibilities. These problems inhibited
good communication and planning.

In relation to social services, nine parents and five profes-
ionals discussed the late, or problematic, allocation of
social workers (including not being allocated one at all). Two
young people, two parents and three professionals said that
the social worker was not properly involved with transition
planning, and had little or no meaningful relationship with
the young person. One parent and two social workers said
that young people in out-of-area placements were not seen
as a priority, because social workers had competing priori-
ties and a heavy workload. One school tutor felt that social
services were simply over-stretched:

’If I’m honest, it’s very hit and miss. They are crisis
managing . . . fire fighting. And in the scheme of things,
our students are not seen as a priority. They’re not top
of the list.’

In relation to Connexions, six professionals and one parent
said that Connexions staff were either totally, or mostly,
absent from planning of any kind. The responsibility for
attending planning meetings rests with Connexions staff in
the area where the school or college is located. Despite this,
three Connexions staff conceded that they did not have
enough time, or resources, to give proper attention to out-
of-area young people at transition. Two professionals and
two parents said that Connexions was not sufficiently geared
up to meet the needs of, or offer appropriate services to,
young people with learning difficulties. One Connexions
adviser said of a forthcoming review meeting:

‘There’s one next Wednesday. And I was invited to that.
I wanted to check what was happening and spoke to
[young person’s] social worker to judge whether I
should attend or not, whether it was good use of time,
whether it was necessary or not. And, based on that
collection, I wrote: “Not necessary”.

Fourteen professionals, seven parents and two young people
commented on the problematic nature of the handover from
child to adult services – in both health and social services.
This related to a widespread uncertainty on the part of
parents about how a handover to adult services would work,
or when it would take place; reports from professionals and
some parents of very sudden and unannounced transfers;
accounts of poor communication and referrals between child
and adult teams; and a lack of awareness on the part of parents – acknowledged by professionals – of the change/disparity in what could be offered/expected from adult services in comparison to children’s services.

**Particular factors associated with transition from out-of-area placements**

Several (though by no means all) of the particular barriers to a good transition discussed above affect young disabled people, irrespective of whether they are living in their local communities or whether they are away at a residential school or college. However, 11 parents and 14 professionals commented on particular problems and barriers to transition and transition planning associated with out-of-area placements.

**Distance as an impediment to good planning**

Three parents/carers and eight supporters/professionals said that transition planning itself suffered a negative impact from the distance between the placing authority and the residential school or college. Difficulties in ongoing monitoring of the placement meant that professionals felt less ‘on top’ of what was going on. In addition, after all the hard work had been done in securing an initial placement, there was a tendency to breathe a sigh of relief and mentally file the young person away until last-minute panic about transition and the next move. One social worker said:

‘There’s a kind of separation from local community and family. And a temptation on our part to think that they are sorted once a placement has been made. A bit out of sight, out of mind really.’

Some professionals said that it was harder to write an assessment plan for a young person who was out-of-area than for a ‘local’ young person, as they were unable to just ‘pop over’ to see the person in order to check things out or talk things through. The distance to schools and colleges meant that reviews and planning meetings could be short, rushed and sometimes overly formal. On top of this, physical distance from meeting locations was also problematic. A social worker questioned whether they could really justify being involved when the young person was placed so far away:

‘...distance comes into it. You know, I’d have to feel that I was going to have a really positive contribution and something to do, to go all the way to [x]. Other, more local colleges, it’s easier to make a decision really.’

There was also a lack of clarity about professional roles when one set of professionals was local to the young person’s home and family, and another set was local to their school or college. A Connexions adviser said:

‘I find it complicated with these out-of-county young people. I’ve never got my head around the roles. I’m never quite sure which person to speak to.’

Finally, some professionals described a sometimes formulaic, as opposed to individual, approach to transition planning for young people in out-of-area placements (for example, ‘all the young people who go to x school go to y college’). A social worker remarked on this trend: ‘that’s a very nice comfortable, very successful track, so why look at anything else?’

**Young people’s friendships and social life**

A particular issue for young people in residential schools or colleges concerned the maintenance of important friendships when their friends and peers moved on to very different parts of the country. Also, relationships with people in their ‘home area’ can fall away as a result of their being so far away from home. There were very few examples of transition planning taking account of maintaining important friendships post-school or college. One young person said that his best friend at school was not going to the same residential college as him:

Interviewer: ‘How will you keep in touch with him?’
Young person: ‘Well I don’t really know. I think I shall write him a couple of letters, because he’s not going to the [same college] he’s going somewhere else.’
Interviewer: ‘And how does that make you feel?’
Young person: ‘A bit sad.’

Uncertainty about where people were actually going also exacerbated fears that friendships might be lost:

Interviewer: ‘How does it make you feel, not knowing where you’re going?’
Young person: ‘A bit annoyed but mum doesn’t know yet which one.’
Interviewer: ‘And how will you feel leaving here?’
Young person: ‘Sad. I meet nice friends.’
Interviewer: ‘How do you find it when you have to change schools and colleges?’
Young person: ‘We have to get used to it.’
Interviewer: ‘Is it good, thinking about the future, or is it upsetting?’
Young person: ‘It’s good, and upsetting. But you have to move on though, don’t you?’
Interviewer: ‘And what’s upsetting about thinking of moving on?’
Young person: ‘Leaving your friends that you made here.’

Seven parents, five professionals and three young people talked about the emotional difficulties and strains associated with ‘moving on’. Professionals’ comments about this subject mostly acknowledged the stress and anxiety faced by parents and young people (especially in relation to uncertainty about the nature and timing of the next move). However one professional discussed the impact on herself, saying that she was having ‘sleepless nights’ worrying about where the young man in question would go next. Young people talked about the emotional impact of moving on in relation to being sad at leaving friends and saying how much they would miss them – as well as certain members of staff.

Parents said that thinking about the future in general could be stressful and unsettling, mostly because of the very
uncertain nature of things. Some talked about 'blanking it out'. Two parents talked about the emotional impact of being the person with the main responsibility for seeking out the next placement/move, and how hard it was to be looking for options for their child’s life while knowing that, regardless of the choices they actually identified, the matter would probably be decided by issues of funding. Another two parents talked about how the transition raised old issues about whether or not the young person could, or should, be at home with the family. This made them feel guilty about the choices they were making.

Discussion and implications for practice

Our data paint a gloomy picture. There are patchy and inconsistent approaches to the mechanisms of transition planning, despite the fact that there is guidance and legislation that clearly set out duties and responsibilities. Nearly half of the families in the study said that there was no transition plan. Professionals say that planning is at the mercy of the providers’ market in which they find themselves. Strategic planning for long-term local options that meet the needs of ‘returning’ young people is not in evidence among the local authorities that took part in this study. In addition, young people in out-of-area placements seem to be rather low on the list of priorities of their placing authorities. After a long tussle to acquire a placement, many young people’s ‘cases’ are put away in filing cabinets, perhaps reviewed in a fairly cursory manner, and then come up again just as transition reaches a crisis point. Abbott et al.’s (2001) study suggested that professionals in placing authorities do not always see children placed away as their ‘own’ children/young people, and do not afford them the same degree of attention as looked-after children or children with special educational needs in their local areas. Interestingly, two parents said that they felt unsupported at transition because they were effectively being ‘punished’ by professionals for acquiring an out-of-area residential placement in the first place.

There is a reported ongoing lack of clarity about roles and responsibilities. It is easy to see why families and young people are confused when we consider professionals’ own uncertainty. As already stated, the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice sets out how transition planning should commence, who should take the lead and how it should be assessed and reviewed. In addition, regulations regarding looked-after children dictate that a named social worker should be actively involved in checking and reviewing the welfare of disabled children in residential schools and working with other relevant professionals.

The post-school situation is made problematic by the variable approach adopted by Connexions personal advisers, and by the lack of specific, statutory responsibilities placed upon further education colleges to facilitate the post-college transition process.

The main issue arising from this study is that disabled young people placed away from home in residential schools and colleges are, it seems, experiencing additional barriers around transition when perversely, given their arguably more vulnerable position, they ought to be getting more (if not at least as much) attention and support in comparison to young people living at home with their parents and families. Our study revealed that parents and young people had quite clear and uncomplicated ideas about what would improve the process (Heslop & Abbott, 2007). Parents wanted better information; earlier decisions about what would and would not be funded; a back-up plan if things went wrong; and help from professionals who knew what they were doing. Young people identified relationships and continuity as the key things that could make a difference; in other words, already knowing people at the ‘next place’ (staff or students) and being prepared for the next step by visiting and getting to know the new environment.

However, improvement of the process of transition planning should not take place outside the wider context of choices for young disabled people. Our data reveal an absence of meaningful choice, with employment options barely being considered, and sometimes with fixed pathways that take young people from school to college and then on and on in further education settings. Dee (2006) notes that, arguably, this movement from one education and training opportunity to another may not be aimed at a transition to employment at all, ‘but simply because there is nothing else for them to do’.

While continuance in education and training is increasing for the non-disabled population as well (OECD, 2004), unemployment rates for adults with learning difficulties remain disproportionately high (Unity-Sale, 2006), even after training (Cabinet Office, 2005). In spite of this, employment continues to be a widely accepted marker of status and transition to adulthood. Heslop et al.’s (2002) study found that getting a job was one of the most frequently mentioned aspects of what constituted being ‘grown up’ in the opinion of the young people with learning difficulties who took part in the study. Planning needs to take account of young people’s hopes for themselves. Unfortunately, some professionals in our study seemed reluctant to find out too much about young people’s hopes, for fear that they would have no chance of realising them. (It was interesting to note, given that services are not the only option, that there was little or no mention of direct payments. Perhaps this is sadly unsurprising, given the low take-up among eligible 16- to 18-year-olds in their own right, and given the barriers faced by people with learning difficulties in general in accessing direct payments (Department of Health, 2001).)

For children and young people, placed sometimes a long way away from home, the impact of all of this uncertainty (on themselves and their families) cannot be underestimated. If anything, plans for transition should be most effective for the most vulnerable groups who may already face additional barriers to ensuring happy and fulfilling futures. Much greater commitment to effective transition planning and meaningful outcomes is required, in order to ensure that this group of young people is offered the life chances that all young people deserve.
References

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