

Where Next? Transition Pathways for Young People With Learning Difficulties in U.K. Residential Schools and Colleges

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Abstract

Young people with learning difficulties who go to residential special schools and colleges are a highly vulnerable group, often living a long way from home. Transition towards adulthood requires careful planning and support for both young people and their families. Despite national policy and guidance in this area, this paper suggests that young people with learning difficulties in out of area placements are being failed at transition and face huge uncertainty. Drawing on empirical research with 15 young people, their families, and the professionals that support them, this paper outlines data on outcomes for the young people at one stage of their transition to adulthood and examines why so few were being supported to achieve goals of employment and independent living.

There is a developing body of literature and research around the topic of transition from childhood to adulthood for young persons with learning disabilities (LD), called intellectual disabilities or intellectual and developmental disabilities in other countries. 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, Mallet, Simons, & Ward, 2002; Morris, 1999; Hudson, 2006). A group who we know less about when it comes to transition consists of young persons with LD that go to residential schools or colleges in 'out of area' placements, often a long way away from home. These students live at residential school and colleges as boarders—some on a weekly basis, some for the duration of the school term, and some all year round.

According to U.K. Government figures (Pinney, 2005) there are about 6,100 pupils in residential special schools which attract government funding/support together with some 4,400 pupils in a further 99 independent residential special schools run by the private, educational sector. These schools are charged with carrying out legal duties at transition, and must convene transition planning meetings and draw up and keep under review a transition plan for young people from the age of 14. Key professionals from the young person's 'home area' (i.e. the place where their families live), are meant to attend these meetings and be actively involved in supporting the young person as he/she moves from school and on towards adulthood. 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 law. In addition, the distance from home (and from professionals in the local area that place them in school or college), mean that reviews and planning meetings around transition are of very variable quality. Finally, given the acrimonious nature in which many residential school placements are secured—often against the wishes of professionals—relationships between 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 LD who go to residential colleges. The Learning & Skills Council (LSC, 2005) suggests that, at the time of writing, there were approximately 3038 learners at specialist colleges in England.

Transition is a policy 'buzz-word' and there is no shortage of statute and policy guidance in the area of transition for young people, including those with LD (e.g., U.K. Department of Health, 2001, 2004, 2006; U.K. Department for Education and Skills, 2001, 2004). However it is not at all clear whether or not these policies are leading to better outcomes for families.

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. It looks at 'what happened next' for 15 young people with LD at transition, and discusses why their choices were so limited and their attempts to make a smooth transition so problematic.

Methods

The study was a partnership between HFT (a U.K. wide, independent provider of services to people with LD), the Norah Fry Research Centre (University of Bristol), the South West England Agency for Learning Disabilities, and Connexions West of England. Funded by the Health Foundation, the study ran from March 2004 to December 2006.

Five English regional areas (known as 'local authorities', which are the governmental and administrative bodies for a region) 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 LD for residential education, and an authority with a significant minority ethnic population.

At each of the five areas, young people with LD in their final or penultimate year at an out of area residential school or college, were invited to take part in the research. The research team then sent interested youngsters a DVD and written materials about the project which had been produced in conjunction with young people with LD.

The families of fifteen young people (7 males and 8 females) took part in the research (see Table 1 on page 54, for more details about the participants). The response rate across the five areas was 39% (range 11% – 57%). All of the young people and parents consented to talk to the research team about their experiences; the response rate

from parents was 100%. Each of the young people and their parents also nominated others who were helping them prepare for transition or who were supporting them through transition. Thirty-two 'supporters' were nominated (mean per youngster = 2; range 0 - 4). All worked with the young people in a professional capacity and are therefore referred to as 'professionals'. They held roles such as: social workers, teachers, community nurses, educational advisor/psychologists, occupational or speech and language therapists. Almost all (91%) of the nominated professionals agreed to take part in the research. Characteristics of the 15 young persons with LD who were recruited for this study are presented in Table 1.

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

- 13 young people with LD (one young person was too unwell to be interviewed, one was considered to be too upset),
- 16 parents (1 interview was a joint interview with a father and a mother),
- 27 professionals (two of whom were interviewed in relation to different young people).

The interviews with the 13 young people with LD were conducted over 2 consecutive days at their residential school or college and covered the following topics in a semi-structured interview format: the things you do now in the day time; thinking about growing up and how the school/college had worked with the young person around this; future thoughts/aspirations regarding housing (where and with whom to live), further education, employment, leisure, health, friendships and relationships, money, transport, and independence. Interviews with parents and professionals focused on similar themes and topics whilst including more detailed questions about the mechanics of what planning had gone on and how far legal requirements around transition had been fulfilled.

Table 1. The 15 young people who took part in the study

Mean age (SD) at 1st interview	18 yrs
Gender (%)	male 47%
	female 53%
<i>Impairments in addition to LD (%)</i>	
Asperger's syndrome	14%
Autism spectrum disorder	7%
Down syndrome	7%
Cardiac problems	7%
Epilepsy	14%
Mobility (e.g., uses wheelchair)	21%
Physical	35%
Prader-Willi syndrome	7%
Speech	35%
Vision	7%
Mean distance (in miles) from home to residential school/college (SD)	78.5

Discussions with young people able to communicate verbally, as well as with parents and professionals, were tape-recorded with consent. Other young people used pictures to indicate their likes and dislikes, hopes and concerns, and notes were kept of these. A third group of young people indicated through their gestures and activities about what they liked, or disliked, and what gave them pleasure. We did not exclude anyone from the research on the basis of the nature or level of their cognitive impairment or their mode of communication. Space does not permit a full discussion of our methods with non-verbal children, but we drew on existing expertise within our research centre which is described in an article by Watson, Abbott, and Townsley (2007).

All tape recordings were transcribed and, together with any notes, entered into MAXqda, a qualitative data software package. Using a constant comparative approach, emerging themes and issues were compared for similarities or differences then grouped into broader categories. Themes were cross checked between the two members of the research team and

particular attention was paid to themes which appeared to be unusual or counter-intuitive. Themes were then grouped into broader categories which formed the coding frame for analysis. This frame was verified by each member of the research team checking each other's transcripts for accuracy and consistency in coding. Drafts of emerging findings were also discussed with a multi-disciplinary Research Advisory Group and two Advisors with LD.

One year later, (Spring and Summer 2006), we returned to conduct a follow-up interview with the same 13 young persons with LD, and these interviews took place in the setting where the young people were at that time.

Results

The Struggle to Find Post-school/College Options

Finding appropriate placements and options for young people at transition can be an enormous undertaking. For two of the families, their social worker was taking the lead in finding a residential placement for the young person when they left their out-of-area school or college. For a third family, an educational advisor known as a 'Connexions Personal Advisor' 'pushed the right buttons' to get their daughter a place at their local college, after she had twice been turned down for a place in the course she wanted to take.

For the remaining parents, the responsibility of finding a potential placement for their youngster fell to them. Most reported significant difficulties in finding out about where placements might be located and which might be suitable:

Nobody really tells you anything. You have to find out for yourself...it's quite a daunting thing and its knowing where to start, who to go to and who to ask.

There was a range of approaches by the out-of-area schools and colleges with regard to their involvement in finding the next placement for their students. 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 would actively take young people out on visits 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 didn't think it was a good thing, but largely for practical reasons:

The logistics of taking every student who is leaving here to several different homes which might be dotted all over the place is just too big really.

The majority of colleges, however, would facilitate 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.

What did the Young People in our Study do Next?

The 15 young people who we collected information from or about in the 'Help to Move On' research project (include the thirteen that were interviewed) were potentially all in their final, or penultimate year, at an out-of-area residential school, or college, when the project started. One year later, we expected half of them to have already moved on from school or college and have spent the year settling into the next phase of their lives, and half of them to be at the point of leaving school or college.

Despite the transition planning process, four of the fifteen young people left their out-of-area residential school or college not knowing where they were going to move on to. All returned to the family home until

arrangements could be made or finalised, although for one young person this was likely to be for a few years. Another two young people returned home to live because of the breakdown of existing arrangements: in one case a residential placement, and in the other their place at the out-of-area residential college itself. It seems, therefore, that there was a continuing reliance on the family home to be the 'back-stop' when either the planning process or actual arrangements fell apart.

Within a year of leaving their out-of-area residential school or college, eight of the young people had moved on to a residential placement (i.e. either a residential college or a residential care home/setting), although one of these placements had broken down and another was on the verge of breaking down. None had moved into supported living arrangements, or any accommodation other than the family home or residential accommodation.

In terms of day-time activities, none of the young people had moved into work, or supported work, although one attended full-time mainstream college on a work-related course. At the time of the second interview, seven of the young people were attending, or had a place to attend, mainstream college on a full or part-time basis.

Discussion

Why Such Limited Choices and Pathways?

The overall assumption for the young people moving on from a residential school or college to somewhere other than another residential college during the period of the research project, was that they would remain in that placement for at least the foreseeable future. Five parents hoped that the next placement would be a 'home for life', and that the young person would not have to make any further moves in their lifetime. For one parent, this wasn't so much a hope as the reality as she saw it:

My main concern of Tammy going to a care home is that when she goes in at 19 she'll be there indefinitely. And when I said to the social worker, 'What happens if she doesn't like it?' she said, 'Well the situation is we have to make sure she likes it, because her needs are so complex and there's so many health issues as well, this is going to be it'.

In contrast, the fact that there were 'move on' options available for one young person moving into a residential service was influential in the decision for her to go there, as her social worker commented:

[It's] a place that has progression... through an organization that has different homes, different levels of independence and different settings so a young person could move from that initial setting somewhere less supportive, more independent. And that was ideal for Claire.

The young person herself was clear about how she saw herself progressing:

I'll be living there [at the residential home]. That's my first step. And then my second step is moving somewhere else, and then my third one is getting a house or a flat. So if I get a house or a flat there might be a person there who can help me, like checking if I'm okay, checking if I'm doing my laundry, if I can do ironing...and going shopping and getting my own food.

There was little or no sense of future progression into work for the majority of the young people, once the transition from the out-of-county residential school or college had been completed. One reference to work options arose through the difference of opinion between a young person's parent and their Connexions personal advisor: the parent felt that the young person should be, 'out and working now', whereas the Personal Advisor thought that was probably not realistic at the present time.

In terms of progression through education, there seemed to be two views. The first was that education should ultimately lead onto progression to employment; a view promoted by policy, but was not the reality for persons in this research study. The second was that education could be pursued as an activity in its own right, that a person could engage in education for as long as they liked and that it was a 'lifelong' process. This seemed to be the prevailing view amongst the 'Help to Move On' interviewees and those who had helped set up college places for the young people. On the whole, attendance of mainstream college courses seemed to be the 'norm' for the young people who had left their 'out of area' residential schools and colleges. Clearly this was 'something to do' for some of them; for others it was a chance for social engagement or for a change of scenery, as well as possibly being an interesting or pleasurable activity in its own right. As one mother commented:

As to the sort of merits of all the vocational skills course, I'm not entirely convinced that it's actually useful to her, because I think in some ways she's not really going to sort of progress any more... But then again, she is enjoying it, so I'll leave it be for the moment.

A small number of the young people expressed personal ambitions and dreams for their future. These did not always seem to be encouraged, and at times it appeared as though they were being overlooked, or dismissed. One young person had been visited by a disabled social worker who had explained a different understanding of the concept of 'independence' to him and his mother. This was that independence wasn't about, "struggling for an hour and a half trying to do something you're never going to achieve"; rather it was about choice and control, and, "having the confidence and the know-how to get somebody else to do it for you". This same young man later

spoke about his hopes for his future—of wanting to settle down with his girlfriend in their own home, supported by direct payments, and ultimately for them to have a child. However, this apparently ordinary ambition for a young person of his age was responded to with scepticism. A professional supporting him thought that this was, "unlikely" and that there may have to be a, "realisation in the future that he might not be able to live as independently as he liked". His father, "worried to death" about it, and his mother didn't want him to, "set his sights too high because you're always afraid they're going to get hurt". Another mother acknowledged that her daughter would, "love to have a family" but that the reality was that she wouldn't because, "she is too closeted where she is [in a residential home]. She is not leading a normal life".

Conclusions

This paper sets out data about transition pathways collected over a two year period relating to 15 young people with LD in out of area, residential, special schools and colleges. There is a lot of established literature and research in the field of transition for young disabled people, including people with LD, but one of the aims of this study was to explore the particular issues for young people living away from home in residential schools and colleges.

Transition planning and outcomes are not perfect for young people with LD in general, but the distance away from home for the young people in our study was additionally problematic. Lack of strong relationships with professionals from the placing authority coupled with a lack of choices for young people's next steps meant that too many transitions were hurried and subject to last minute decisions by funders and providers. Perhaps most importantly, the transitions were sources of immense

stress and emotional upheaval for young people and their families. In the absence of useful information or guideposts, these families often took the lead in having to find the next option for their child.

The young people with LD in our study had not made transitions to the labour market or to any kind of independent or semi-independent living, which is in contrast to general expectations for non-disabled young people of this age group. We did not find evidence of a great deal of aspiration for the young people from the professionals supporting them and their parents, and even from some young people themselves. However, a small number articulated hopes for the future around things most people would take for granted—work, relationships, independence.

Young disabled people in residential schools and colleges need to remain uppermost in the efforts of local authorities who place them away from home, especially at the turbulent time of transition. Better planning and more support and information to families may go some way to lessening the anxiety and uncertainty described by the young people with LD and families in our study and lead to smoother transition pathways. Further, the pathways themselves could reflect a wider range of life choices, including employment and greater autonomy, in common with non-disabled peers.

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