Leaving Special School: the next step and future aspirations

WENDY MITCHELL
Department of Social Policy, University of York, York YO10 5DD, UK

ABSTRACT One of the most important changes within the life-course is the movement from ‘childhood’ to ‘adulthood’. This takes place through many different dimensions of experience, for example, biological, legal, social, cultural, emotional and attitudinal. It is also important to recognise that the concepts, ‘childhood’ and ‘adulthood’ are ambiguous and hard to define [Jones, G. & Wallace, C. (1992) Youth, Family and Citizenship (Buckingham, Open University Press); Coles, B. (1995) Youth and Social Policy: youth, citizenship and young carers (London, UCL Press)]. This is partly due to the fact that they are not static concepts, but are historically and culturally fluid, open to interpretation and change [Ward et al. (1991) The Transition to Adulthood of Young People with Recorded Special Education Needs, final report to The Scottish Office Education Department (Department of Education at the Universities of Edinburgh and Stirling); France, A. (1996) Youth and citizenship in the 1990s, Youth and Policy, 53, pp. 28–43]. Despite this conceptual ambiguity, the transition from ‘child’ to ‘adult’ status is viewed as an important achievement within society. However, it is a complex, involved process, which evolves over a period of time. Of course, not all-young people undertake the transition in a similar manner or at the same pace. Social ideas and prejudices, whether these are class, gender, race or disability based, can and do effect the transition experiences of different groups of young people. This paper focuses upon the transition experiences of disabled young people, a group frequently forgotten or hidden within discussions of ‘youth’. In particular, it explores and evaluates traditional models of transition with the aid of data drawn from a study of disabled young people leaving special schools [Mitchell, W. (1998) Leaving School—transition experiences and routes taken by disabled young people, D.Phil. thesis, University of York]. The paper initially focuses upon young people’s next educational/vocational step after school leaving in relation to the traditional ideal of a school to work transition. Taking a broader approach the paper then explores and begin to unpack the complex concept of a more independent ‘adult’ status from the perspective of the study’s young people and their parents/carers. Have the young people taken steps towards a more ‘adult’ independent life and, if so, in ‘what’ areas and ‘how’?

The Study

The data within this paper is drawn from a study of 17 families leaving five special schools over a period of two calendar years. Whilst it is acknowledged that many
disabled young people attend mainstream schools, this study focuses upon special schools as they are frequently a peripheral and somewhat ignored sphere within the education system, both in terms of interest fostered and research undertaken.

This study examined and evaluated professional processes and procedures preparing young people for the transition from school, and progression towards ‘adulthood’, it also explored family experiences of these preparations and future ‘adult’ aspirations. These aims and concerns can be seen, as Coles has suggested, as ‘two sides of a “careers equation” ’ (Craine & Coles, 1995, pp. 6–7; Coles, 1997, p. 71). Within this study the equation encompassed both the social and economic ‘opportunity structure’, i.e. the institutional policy context that professionals both worked within and helped to create, and also the decision making role of disabled young people and their parents/carers, as they approached school leaving and transition towards ‘adulthood’.

Two contrasting authorities were initially chosen for the fieldwork in 1994 (Authority 1 and Authority 2), but as a result of local government changes (April 1996) the city within Authority 2 became a unitary authority (henceforth known as Authority 3). Five special schools were selected from the authorities, 4-day schools and one residential (Monday to Friday). They were chosen for their diversity, and because they provided education to a broad and varied population of pupils. However, they all served young people with learning disabilities. Leavers were identified (potentially 37) and invited to participate. Seventeen families agreed (15 young people and 17 sets of parents/carers)—a small, but diverse sample. The study was multi-dimensional drawing upon a range of methods and participant perspectives. Individual semi-structured interviews formed the main body of fieldwork. Interviews with focus school professionals (total of 22) and other relevant professionals, i.e. careers advisers, education officials, health workers and social services (total of 19) were initially conducted. Family interviews took place pre-and post-school leaving. Pre-school leaving, all the young people and their parents were interviewed in-depth (young people and parents as far as possible separately). Post-school leaving, of the 17 families, eight were re-interviewed in-depth and eight were followed-up by telephone. Fieldwork also included observations of three schools’ college-link courses, a small number of annual review meetings and an analysis of post-school destination statistics.

**Theorising the Transition to ‘Adulthood’**

Past literature has focused upon different models of and approaches to conceptualising the transition to ‘adulthood’. For example, models premised upon phases (child to adult) and models focused upon institutional status transitions. Coles (1995, p. 8), drawing upon past analyses (see Wallace, 1988; Jones & Wallace, 1992; Jones, 1995) highlights three transitions: school to work, housing (movement out of the family home) and domestic (movement from ‘family of origin’ to ‘family of destination’). The importance of exploring both public and private institutions has been documented (Jones & Wallace, 1992, p. 141). However, the transition to adulthood is frequently perceived as more than institutional status transitions. Jones
& Wallace (1992) introduce and discuss the importance of ‘citizenship’ (see Marshall, 1963 for a discussion of the concept) in particular, young people becoming full and active ‘citizens’. Furthermore, they recognise inequity. Citizenship rights are not equally bestowed upon all young people or at the same time (Jones & Wallace, 1992, p. 18). Hence, it is important to explore both the ‘processes’ that young people can pass through and wider social and structural inequalities, which can influence these processes (Jones & Wallace, 1992, pp. 141–142).

Within their analysis, Jones & Wallace do not specifically discuss ‘disability’ as a form of inequality. However, this is obviously extremely important in considering disabled young people’s experiences and position within a society, which is frequently disabling and imposes able-bodied norms and perceptions of ‘independent adulthood’ upon them. From a social model perspective, independence is a complex phenomena, much more than the usual taken-for-granted images of active and physically independent individuals. In contrast, independence involves the individual feeling in control of their own life rather than being controlled by others (see Vasey, 1996, for a personal account). Hence, it is important to understand that social relationships, attitudes and the physical environment that disabled young people face in their everyday lives, guides their personal experiences of dependence/independence. In light of this, one must recognise that past ‘youth’ transition models may not always be the most appropriate means to explore disabled young people’s transition towards adulthood. Their presentation of transition is very precise and linear and thus over-simplistic. The transition to adulthood for young people in general and disabled young people in particular is a much more complex and complicated process than traditional models would suggest, especially in a disabling society (Hirst & Baldwin, 1994; Thomson & Ward, 1994). Furthermore, transition is clearly a process over time, as such, transition preparations within the school years are important to recognise and explore (McGinty & Fish, 1992). However, traditional school to work models frequently ignore the important role that pre-school leaving transition preparations can and do play within the transition years.

**Disabled Young People’s Transitions**

In contrast, when unpacking the idea of ‘transition’ Fish (1986, p. 9) acknowledges the importance of school preparations. He divides the concept into three key stages: preparations at school; the transition phase (encompassing further education (FE) and vocational preparations); and finally, the early years of adult independence. Furthermore, he suggests that ‘transition’ must be perceived as both a ‘phase’—service focused and a ‘process’—of social and psychological development, [Fish, 1986, p. 15; see also Centre for Educational Research and Education (CERI), 1983; McGinty & Fish, 1992]. Within the literature it is clear that past studies exploring disabled young people have prioritised and debated a range of indicators surrounding ‘adulthood’ and ‘adult’ status. However, many of these ‘indicators’ have mirrored the perceived outcomes within the three institutional transitions outlined by Wallace (1988), Jones & Wallace (1992) and Coles (1995).
One early analysis was Fish’s 1986 (p. 7) categorisation of four areas: ‘employment, useful work and valued activity’; ‘personal autonomy, independent living’; ‘social interaction, community participation’, and finally, ‘adult roles within the family’. In contrast, Ward et al. (1991, p. 130) initially focused upon three slightly different areas: ‘legal aspects’; ‘the role of employment’; and ‘living independently’. This is, as Tisdall (1994, 1996/97) has noted, a more direct and less abstract list than Fish’s. However, in a more recent assessment of the surrounding literature, Thomson & Ward (1994, p. 17) have extended their analysis to a five-fold classification, re-emphasising both direct and abstract themes, whilst also introducing the concept of ‘post-secondary education’.

An alternative interpretation and approach to the search for ‘successful’ transition goals has been advocated by Tisdall (1994, 1996/97). Whilst acknowledging the potential benefits of Fish’s more ‘psycho-social’ approach, Tisdall is also critical of this, and other models which present young people as ‘adolescents’. This is a concept, which she feels is frequently individualistic and negatively perceived by society as a time of ‘crisis’ (Tisdall, 1994, p. 9). Moving away from ‘adolescence’, Tisdall follows Jones & Wallace (1992) drawing upon the concept of ‘citizenship’. However, for Tisdall, ‘citizenship’ is perceived as a means ‘to redefine the “transition” problem’ (Tisdall, 1994, p. 16). Ideally, disabled young people would be perceived as active and participating citizens, working towards identifying and defining ‘their own goals’ (p. 15). Hence, Tisdall has sought to move the transition debate beyond a search for the ‘correct’ ‘adult’ goals to a model premised upon respecting and listening to disabled young people.

Within the literature it is clear that theorising the transition from childhood remains the focus of conceptual ambiguity and debate. However, both ‘adulthood’ and ‘citizenship’ refer to culturally valued markers and symbols of social respect and status. There is thus an important element of autonomy and power within both concepts. One must also appreciate that they both raise many questions surrounding social expectations and presumptions, especially for disabled young people within a disabbling society. This paper seeks to explore the multi-dimensional nature of transition for disabled young people, drawing upon socially valued markers of ‘adulthood’ and also subjective evaluations and perceptions of ‘adulthood’, as experienced or aspired to by disabled young people.

**Leaving School: the Next Step**

The direct school to work transition at the age of 16 is now frequently acknowledged as rather outdated. It has been prolonged for many young people through policies which have expanded FE provision and programmes of youth training as youth unemployment grew. Very few young people move straight from school into work (Jones & Wallace, 1992; Coles, 1995). In addition, it is also important to recognise that when a young person does move into work, employment is by no means continuous and periods of unemployment may be experienced. Similarly, employment is no longer static, workers are expected to be flexible, re-skilling as and when necessary (Roberts, 1995; Furlong & Cartmel, 1997). Thus, the traditional idea of
Leaving Special School

757

"job for life" is somewhat idealistic within the late twentieth century, and this must be reflected in transition models and their perception of employment: a more flexible and broader approach is required.

The expansion of FE has also had an important impact upon the transition experiences of disabled young people, especially those with learning disabilities. This is partly the result of legal recognition within acts such as, the Education Reform Act (1988) and the Further and Higher Education Act (1992; Stowell, 1987; Bradley et al., 1994). Increasing numbers of disabled young people are moving from school into FE. For example, in 1996, Meager et al. estimated that approximately 131,000 students with learning disabilities were attending college, roughly 5% of the total student population (FEFC, Tomlinson Report, 1996, p. 6). Post-school education and/or training have thus become a significant part of many disabled young people's experiences.

Within this study, experiences of the FE sector and/or the world of work were integrated into school leavers' programmes at one point or another. In effect, the 'opportunity structure' had been expanded for disabled young people preparing to leave special school. Amongst the focus schools it was clear that college link courses and work experience programmes were welcomed as a positive learning experience by both school professionals and the young people who had undertaken them. Regular attendance at a mainstream college was also valued as an important means to ease the transition from special school. Educational professionals within Authority 1 welcomed the policy of special schools joining together to share college courses. This provided an opportunity for students to extend their social network, to meet and mix with new peers. However, although this was a positive experience for some of the young people, there were still important issues surrounding social interaction and inclusion (see also Todd, 1995). Whilst the young people were moving out of special schools into a more 'adult' mainstream environment, their experiences of college were still separately organised and managed. College link courses were indeed undertaken with little non-disabled peer interaction. Thus, there may have been a degree of social 'integration', but this does not equate to Oliver's (1996) notion of social 'inclusion'. The young people frequently remained a 'special' group, socialising within a very specific and segregated population similarly labelled 'special educational needs' (SEN).

In terms of work experience programmes, amongst the focus schools the world of work was not an experience open to everyone, especially those with pronounced disabilities. Hence, the expanded opportunity structure does not always apply to all disabled young people; inequalities and differences exist. Wider socio-economic factors, such as work placements available and the support that employers offered to schools were important excluding mechanisms. However, there were also attitudinal factors. Professional assessments of student appropriateness or inappropriateness for certain placements were frequently expressed in a taken for granted and commonsensical manner. Indeed, the 'opportunity structure' that disabled young people faced was frequently mediated and interpreted by professional assessments and judgements of what was regarded as feasible or just 'being realistic'. Consequently, these perceptions, including taken for granted ideas about appropriateness helped to
stratify and differentiate the ‘opportunity structure’ to which leavers were orientated.

College link courses are clearly an important way for students to experience a mainstream educational environment. However, this experience does not occur for many young people until the end of their school career. On a more positive note, if the Government’s recent green paper (*Excellence for all Children: meeting special educational needs*) advocating ‘increasing inclusion’ and a strengthening of ‘links between special and mainstream schools’ (Department of Education 1997, 4:2, p. 44) is adopted, then more young people may experience a mainstream educational setting before this. Although welcoming increasing opportunities for more young people to be included within or to experience a mainstream setting, it is important to recognise that this is not easy to achieve. As noted above, mainstream college link courses frequently remained largely segregated and ‘special’ amongst the observed focus schools.

In contrast to past legislation (Education Acts, 1981 and 1993), the green paper advocates ‘inclusion’, rather than ‘integration’. This is a subtle but important conceptual difference in terms of the degree of change envisaged (Ainscow, 1998; Johnston & Warwick, 1999; Knight, 1999); however, the green paper simultaneously glosses over many important questions and concerns. For example, Johnston & Warwick (1999, pp. 9–10) regard the green paper as a return to the Warnock Report (Department of Education and Science, 1978) with the special school as a ‘resource centre’. Whilst recognised as useful, this option is felt to be limited and not able to fully appreciate that many special school practices are not easily adaptable or practical within a mainstream setting.

Similarly, even though the green paper recognises that mainstream teachers will require additional training and support, it does not really consider how to change school structures, policies and attitudes. As educational commentators have noted, many staff members may not welcome such changes (Florian, 1998). One must also consider ideological barriers, such as those surrounding standards and school league tables. Once again, the green paper acknowledges concerns, but simultaneously dismisses them as relatively easy to overcome. However, as O’Brien (1998, p. 151) has noted, league tables represent a powerful and pervasive ‘market-force ideology’ which perpetuates ‘an image of disability and learning difficulty as pitiful and hopeless’. Hence, the very real challenge beyond the green paper is to try and move past the rhetoric of ‘inclusion’ to actual and effective implementation within a socio-economic context of potentially competing ideologies.

*Further Education and Training*

Within this study, teachers and educational professionals recognised that within the last 10–15 years there had been an expansion of FE courses for young people with learning disabilities and generally welcomed this. Post-16 education as a ‘right’ for young people was raised by two of the study schools. Amongst parents there was also an initial sense of relief that there was something after school for their son or daughter to move onto. Three sets of parents expressed a wish for their son or daughter to stay in education for as long as possible, thus postponing the transition
from education. Hence, it is not surprising that post-school leaving, 94% of young people within the sample remained in some form of education (school, college or continuing education) either full or part-time.

Although an expansion of college places was acknowledged there were still a number of professional concerns and reservations. Most importantly, it was felt that in some colleges access for disabled young people was still ‘conditional’ upon two factors: first, environmental considerations and questions of disability severity; and secondly, perceptions of ‘acceptable’ students. This was interwoven by one Head with a consideration of colleges as independent institutions and, as Fish & Evans (1995, p. 72) note, the creation of a ‘post-16 market’. It was clear that, although the young people and their parents often felt that they were making a choice, it was a choice from a very narrow and specific set of ‘special’ options. Furthermore, this question of ‘acceptable’ students relates to the wider issue of accreditation, especially the separation within FE of schedule-2 and non-schedule-2 courses as defined under the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act. Concerns have recently been raised in relation to disabled people, especially those with pronounced learning disabilities and exclusion (see National Institute of Continuing Education, 1996; Tomlinson Report, 1996). Within this study, three professionals were extremely concerned about the possibility of this occurring.

In terms of ‘training’, the study revealed a low take-up of training at both 16 and 18/19 years (1996–10% at 16 and 13% at 18/19). Within the study sample, only one young man went into youth training. However, despite this, the issue of ‘training’ raised a number of important questions surrounding ‘provision’ for young people with learning disabilities. Some professionals within Authority 1 noted the emphasis upon vocational qualifications within training schemes. There were fears that the new variant of youth training (‘Opportunities and Experience’) was not ‘appropriate’ to meet the needs of young people with learning disabilities. There was a concern that young people leaving special schools would be disadvantaged and potentially excluded in the future, if vocational criteria and the provision of ‘appropriate’ schemes was not recognised and addressed as an issue. ‘Accreditation’ was thus raised as an area of concern in a similar manner to Tomlinson & Colquhoun’s (1995) discussion of vocational qualifications and the danger of exclusion for young people with SEN.

‘Work’ and ‘Employment’

Amongst the study’s sample of young people no one had yet moved into paid employment (although two had part-time jobs). However, this follows the wider social trend for an extended period of education and training (Coles, 1995). Pre-school leaving, almost half of the young people interviewed wanted to get a job in the future, a similar picture to that presented in previous studies (Anderson & Clarke, 1982; McConkey, 1989; Flynn & Hirst, 1992; Davies & Jenkins, 1993; Riddell et al., 1993; Gallivan-Fenlon, 1994; Ward et al., 1994). Indeed, the idea of becoming a ‘worker’ was recognised and valued by them as part and parcel of ‘adult’ life. Whether they will eventually achieve this is, of course, open to question. If past
studies are anything to go by many will be disappointed (Hirst & Baldwin, 1994; Thomson & Ward, 1994). Certainly, focus school professionals were often sceptical about employment prospects for their students. Furthermore, parents may have valued the idea of young people gaining a job but they were often more apprehensive and guarder about the possibility of this than their son or daughter (see also Conliffe, 1989; McConkey, 1989; Ward et al., 1991; Gallivan-Fenlon, 1994). Parents wanted to be ‘realistic’; hence, their concern over the wider economic context and the danger of raised expectations. Parents could thus experience conflicting emotions—wanting to encourage aspirations, but also fearing undue disappointment for their son or daughter.

For the young people with the most pronounced learning disabilities, school professionals and parents felt that post-education, opportunities were limited. Day centres were seen as the ‘usual’ destination following a college course. Indeed, staff at one school saw their students’ long-term future as mainly focused around day centres. This re-emphasises Todd et al.’s (1991, p. 14) and Swain & Thirlaway’s (1994, p. 166) comments that college is often no more than a stopgap for young people with learning disabilities. Similarly, a significant number of parents did not view work or employment as ‘realistic’ for their son or daughter. Pre-school leaving, parents’ attitudes to day-centres varied, amongst those who discussed them, over half expressed a sense of fear at future prospects with concern focusing upon a belief that day centres would be unstimulating. This fear frequently appeared to be based upon social evaluations and presumptions rather than personal experiences. Pre-school leaving there was thus a lack of accurate knowledge and information about day centres. This situation demonstrates two significance themes within the study: first, the importance of accurate information and also thinking beyond the next step, and secondly, the strength of social presumptions and shared fears. Providing more information about day centres may have allayed some of these parents’ fears.

Overall, this study has highlighted the significance of not only ‘work’ and ‘employment’, but also the importance of alternative daytime occupations. Within the latter, stimulation and social recognition are two important factors; parents wanted their son’s or daughter’s activities to be both ‘purposeful’ and ‘meaningful’. Consequently, this calls into question the relevance and applicability of the traditional school to work transition for young people, especially disabled young people. It is also apparent that ‘work’ and ‘employment’ are still valued aspirations and symbols of an ‘adult’ status for a significant number of young people and their parents (see also McConkey, 1989; Flynn & Hirst, 1992; Davies & Jenkins, 1993; Riddell et al., 1993; Ward et al., 1994). However, on a practical level, the future in terms of employment opportunities is not very promising for disabled young people. On one hand, disabled people’s rights have recently gained greater political credence and prominence, more specifically, disabled people and employment has been raised within the Disability Discrimination Act (1995). However, concerns have been voiced that the Act does not address or challenge disabling working environments and social prejudices. Thornton & Lunt (1995a,b) have argued that the onus is still upon the individual, it is the individual disabled worker who has to instigate a complaint against a specific company rather than addressing wider structural issues.
Furthermore, supported employment schemes within the UK remain relatively few and far between, and available only to a minority (Bass & Drewett, 1996; Beyer & Kilsby, 1996, 1997). It is thus unsurprising that disabled people are up to three times more likely to be unemployed than non-disabled people (Thornton & Lunt, 1995a, p. 2). Indeed, the Labour Force Survey (Office for National Statistics, 1999, p. 100) recently demonstrated that 10.8% of the ‘long-term’ disabled (i.e. people with ‘work limiting’ disabilities and/or defined as ‘disabled’ according to the Disability Discrimination Act, 1995) are classified as ‘unemployed’. However, it is well known that official definitions of ‘unemployment’ can and do exclude many disabled people from national statistics.

The Government is currently piloting and promoting their ‘welfare to work’ programme for young people (predominately 18–24 years). Yet there has been relatively little discussion of how the programme could help disabled young people (or young people with SEN, especially those not legally defined as ‘disabled’). General assessments of past training schemes have noted that employers are often reluctant ‘to take on’ unemployed young people (Keegan, 1998, p. 6). If it is generally difficult to motivate employers then the future does not look very positive for disabled young people (or young people with SEN). Social prejudice towards disabled people, especially the idea of disabled people as ‘productive’ workers, remains an ever-present factor as Thornton & Lunt (1995a,b) and Barnes (1996) have noted. It may be difficult to quantify the level of unemployment that disabled young people generally face, as national figures are not routinely differentiated by age. It is clear, however, that opportunities for disabled young people, especially those with pronounced learning disabilities to gain a ‘real’, long-term job, have not significantly improved in recent years.

This study has demonstrated that the transition from school is much more complex than the traditional school to work transition acknowledges. Indeed, we face the challenge of how to foster and aid a transition towards socially valued, ‘adult’ and stimulating activities for disabled young people, especially for young people with pronounced learning disabilities. This challenge is by no means new. As Ward et al. have reported in a series of studies based in Scotland, young people with a Record of Needs (Statement of SEN within England and Wales) and their families often desire employment, but it is frequently delayed or even unattainable (Ward et al., 1991; Thomson & Ward, 1994; Ward et al., 1994). This study has also highlighted the need to look beyond narrow interpretations of ‘employment’ to broader ideas about ‘meaningful’ daytime occupations or as Thomson & Ward suggest ‘productive daytime activity’ (1994, p. 89). Some parents in the study recognised this and focused upon ‘alternatives’ to employment, especially stimulating, socially recognised and valued daytime occupations.

Moving Towards ‘Adult’ Status

The young people within this study were also beginning to embark upon the transition to ‘adulthood’. Within Fish’s (1986, p. 9) three stages of ‘transition’, they had only just entered the second stage. In terms of ‘adult’ markers many of the
young people clearly valued and aspired to one or more of the traditional institutional status transitions, especially, the idea of 'having a job', but this remained an aspiration yet to be achieved. However, important though this was, there were also other 'markers'.

Two Case Studies

Within this study it was clear that different young people could and did take different transition steps, this was clearly demonstrated by two young people, Ian and Laura, both of whom were 18 years at the time of our initial meeting. During the course of the research they 'progressed' further than their sample peers. In fact, they made significant steps towards greater personal independence. In terms of institutional status transitions both Ian and Laura had embarked upon a 'housing' transition and thus a 'housing career' moving out of the family home (Wallace, 1988; Coles, 1995; Jones, 1995). However, they had very different personal circumstances, Ian had attended a weekly residential school and had thus already experienced living away from home. In contrast, Laura had attended a local day school and so did not have this experience to draw upon. Despite this, the decision to leave home brought significant life changes and future hopes for both. Ian viewed moving in with a landlady as a prelude to having his own flat:

Ian: I've got my name down for a council house. (Post-school leaving.)

For Laura, setting up home with her boyfriend signified the beginning of not only a 'housing', but also a 'domestic' transition, with future aspirations towards marriage:

Laura: I'd like to get married and that but we have to wait you see until we've got the money and that ... (Post-school leaving.)

Here, it is important to note the gendered nature of their transitions towards 'adulthood'. For Laura, greater 'adult' independence, and an 'adult' status had been sought and gained from traditional female roles of domesticity and caring, rather than through the school to work transition. Conversely, Ian looked towards and prioritised a labour market career, especially the acquisition of 'worker' status.

The two case studies, whilst not typical of the sample as a whole, are important for two reasons. Firstly, they provide a positive picture of significant steps towards 'adulthood' for young people who have attended 'special' schools. This is a social status, frequently presented in a very negative light. Highlighting two 'positive' case studies helps to present a more balanced study, one, which is not wholly negative or pessimistic about the transition to 'adulthood' for young people with learning disabilities. The use of case studies within past literature, especially the series of studies within Scotland (Ward et al., 1991, 1994; Thomson & Ward, 1994) has similarly provided some positive examples. Secondly, important insights can be gleaned from the young people's biographies expressed in their own terms. Of course, one must be wary of making wider generalisations but it is important to appreciate the contribution that personal, in-depth insights can and do make into an
Leaving Special School

extremely complex period within the life-course, especially for young people with learning disabilities. Ian and Laura highlighted a number of important factors and signifiers of ‘adulthood’ which were important to them. For example, Ian valued having his own front door key:

Researcher: What’s been really good about living by yourself?
Ian: Got my own house keys and that, (Post-school leaving.)

Hirst & Baldwin (1994) and Davies & Jenkins (1993) have also noted door keys as a symbol of autonomy. For Laura, ‘caring’ for her disabled boyfriend provided an important sense of self-worth and a recognised social role:

Laura: Yeah, and look after me boyfriend ... I do cleaning up in here and do washing up and wash clothes and that, ‘cos me Mum used to wash clothes for me but now I can do it for myself'. (Post-school leaving.)

The insights Ian and Laura have provided help to unravel a more informed understanding of the complexities surrounding the concept of ‘adulthood’ and also ‘some’, but by no means all of the factors underlying transition. Within Ian and Laura’s biographies, the multi-layered nature of transition to ‘adulthood’ was apparent. Their steps were not dependent upon one factor, but as Chadsey-Rusch et al. (1991, p. 31) have similarly noted, many inter-related and interacting variables. Furthermore, it was clear that some variables were shared, especially their aspirations and a desire for independence. The material context, both economic and educational, particularly, local opportunities and structures was also important, as was family support and parental approaches to, and experiences of ‘letting go’ (see Richardson & Ritchie, 1989; Richardson & Ritchie, 1989; Swain & Thirlaway, 1994; for a discussion of letting go). Of course, there were also individual and different factors, especially the importance and level of professional support received. Ian’s father and, to a lesser degree, Ian himself emphasised the importance of active professional input, particularly from the school and their social worker. This highlighted the benefits of good inter-agency working (see also Fielder & Johns, 1997, pp. 3 and 29). Furthermore, this also re-emphasises the many policy objectives for early, well planned professional collaboration and transition support, which current legislation seeks to promote and achieve (Disabled Persons Act, 1986; Children Act, 1989; NHS and Community Care Act, 1990; and Education Act, 1993). In contrast, Laura’s housing and domestic transitions appeared to have evolved independently, rather than being professionally planned and organised. This reminds us that one cannot always plan a future. Events can and do ‘just occur’. This illustrates that within young people’s transitions there is always an element of ‘chance’, but as Laura and Ian have demonstrated, transitions also occur within traditional gendered social roles and expectations.

The Role of Residential College

Within this study, residential college was highly valued by a significant number of professionals, parents and young people. In fact, for the majority of parents and
young people who had experienced or were experiencing residential options (school or college) they were viewed positively. This was especially true for four young people with pronounced learning disabilities and their parents within Authorities 2/3. Moving away to residential college was viewed as an important step on the road to ‘adulthood’. It was a tangible symbol of change; a son or daughter was progressing beyond ‘childhood’ dependence to a more independent status. Amongst the four young people who moved onto residential college there were three areas within which status changes were recognised and valued. First, moving away from the parental home and the acquisition of a more independent status. Parents welcomed residential college as an opportunity gradually to loosen familial bonds. Residential college was thus regarded as an important, but controlled catalyst within the process of ‘letting go’ and limited risk taking. Amongst the young people, living away from home and a chance to do more things independently was similarly valued.

Researcher: Will you like the idea of staying overnight?
Janet: It’s more grown-up to go. (Pre-school leaving.)

Secondly, there was a marked development of social independence. Parents welcomed an opportunity for their son or daughter to foster a more independent and ‘adult’ social life without family input. Furthermore, the four young people clearly valued their residential college activities and a chance to do things with peers. These two benefits were succinctly summarised by Janet’s Father:

Janet’s father: She needs friends, peer group, to mix with and to establish herself as a person in her own right, not as our daughter, which she will always be when she’s with us ... ’ (Pre-school leaving.)

Third and finally, parents welcomed the chance for their son or daughter to develop educational and/or vocational skills, particularly life-skills and practical preparations for a more independent future. Two of the four young people also highlighted this, as Charisa explained:

Researcher: Why do you like them [independence skills] best at college?
Charisa: Cos its getting me ready for moving into me own home. (Post-school leaving.)

Residential college obviously does not signify the acquisition of ‘adult’ status. It is a transitional or intermediary stage within the move from ‘childhood’ dependence to ‘adult’ independence. However, for these parents and young people it was a very important stage. Furthermore, for young people with pronounced disabilities, especially learning disabilities, an idealised picture of sharp institutional status transitions, such as establishing one’s own home or the school to work transition as traditional models tend to suggest are often viewed as inappropriate. Within this study, these transitions were not yet possible and in the longer-term were regarded as ‘inappropriate’ by some parents. Hence, residential college, especially for those with pronounced disabilities was viewed as a sort of surrogate mode of transition, providing a gradual break with past ‘childhood’ dependence. Viewing residential college as a surrogate helps us to begin to appreciate and formulate an approach to transition, which is both more flexible and sensitive to the transition years. Further-
more, it once again reiterates the limitations and over-simplistic nature of traditional institutional status transition models for young people with learning disabilities who do not fit into society’s stereotypical norms and patterns of progression.

However, the very transitional nature of residential college raises important questions about students’ longer-term future. On one hand, it marks a significant break with the past, but post-college there is the question of returning home. Within this study, parents regarded returning home as a retrograde step yet it was also recognised as frequently the only real option. Their fear was that, on returning back to the family home, their son or daughter would resume family dependency and/or a limited social life.

*Janet’s mother:* I do not want to bring her back here, to go to [local day] college, to come back here, coming back right where she’s left, if you know what I mean. Not that I don’t want her home but she’s going to be back in the same situation she was before she went to [residential] College, no social life, no friends as such. (Post-school leaving.)

This fear appears well grounded as Sinson’s (1995) study of ex-residential college students has demonstrated. The study revealed two key areas of concern: appropriate future housing/accommodation and community participation. Frequently, the former is regarded as problematic (see Morris, 1993; Thomson & Ward, 1994). Within this study, parental concern evolved from a fear of the unknown and a lack of information about future housing opportunities. Once again, the importance of *more* and *earlier* information was highlighted. Within the latter area, Anderson & Clarke (1982), Fish & Evans (1995) and Sinson (1995) have also discussed the issue of community re-integration and a danger of social isolation from local peers. Here, some of the young people attending residential options seemed socially to be isolated from local peers, and during holidays/weekends reverted back to a family orientated social life.

Residential college remains a controversial issue (Anderson & Clarke, 1982; CERI, 1985; Fish & Evans, 1995). Practically, it is often a more expensive option than a local day college (an important consideration for local authorities, especially health and social services if they are jointly funding a young person with the Further Education Funding Council). Furthermore, there are also important philosophical concerns—social model theorists critique residential college as a continuation of ‘separate’ and ‘specialist’ provision. Thus, it is important to recognise that in its role as a *surrogate mode of transition*, residential college re-emphasises ‘able-bodied’ society, and that young people with learning disabilities and their parents once again have to turn to ‘separate’ and ‘special’ provision. In addition, as the study indicated problems and fears surrounding young people’s personal independence and their social life do not disappear, post-college. Going to residential college may change the young person but society usually remains the same. Thus, there is a danger, as Sinson (1995, p. 150) has noted, that residential college can be a positive but brief period of independence and social participation within the lives of some young people. Recognising the hopes that a significant number of parents and young people attached to residential college within this study, it is important to try and
ensure that residential college is more than a brief interregnum of independence and stimulation. Ian’s case study presented a positive example of a young person building upon residually acquired independence skills. Working towards independence is, of course, a complex and an individual process. However, as the two case studies illustrated, wider factors impinge, not only material provisions, but also social attitudes. In this way, although recognising the potential importance of residential college as a surrogate mode of transition, its limitations and philosophical presumptions cannot, and should not, be ignored.

Conclusions

Exploring transition experiences and unpacking the personal ‘adult’ aspirations of both young people and their parents has demonstrated the complex and multi-dimensional nature of disabled young people’s transitions towards ‘adulthood’. Of course, it is important to recognise that very few young people simply leave school and get a job or become ‘adult’ or full citizens overnight as traditional institutional status transition models tend to suggest. Transitions are experienced differently by different groups of young people and different individuals, this has previously been noted in relation to disabled young people and care leavers by Baldwin et al. (1997). Furthermore, transitions are not always ordered or pre-planned they are less predictable. It is also important to recognise that they are frequently guided by the wider ‘opportunity structure’ (Craine & Coles, 1995; Coles, 1997) that disabled young people face, particularly in terms of work experience, training opportunities and the availability of certain further education courses. Indeed, as this study demonstrated, this is often mediated by professionals taken for granted assumptions of appropriateness.

The school-leaving experiences of families within this study have illustrated the need for a radical revision of traditional transition models, especially the school to work transition. This paper has demonstrated that issues surrounding work and employment are indeed complex. It has re-emphasised the findings of the series of studies within Scotland (Ward et al., 1991; Riddell et al., 1993; Thomson & Ward, 1994; Ward et al., 1994) that many young people and their parents/carers, value and aspire to ‘having a job’. However, ‘real’ employment opportunities remain few and far between. It is important to recognise that there is a need to think beyond narrow interpretations of work and employment as well as being imperative to create more employment opportunities for disabled young people, especially young people with learning disabilities. Work clearly has a very important social role and status within our society. In terms of theorising the transition towards ‘adulthood’ this paper has advocated a more flexible perception of transition, one which acknowledges gradual changes within the life-course and as Tisdall (1994) has emphasised, respects the ideas and aspirations of families, especially disabled young people. For example, within this study residential college although recognised as a controversial issue, cannot and has not been ignored. The importance attached to residential college and its role within the transition towards greater independence for a significant number of young people and their parents highlights the flexibility and gradual steps
that transition models need to recognise. Ultimately, transition models must incorporate and be able to appreciate lengthy transition processes, the importance of transition preparations within school, FE or training and the diversity that exists within post-16 transition experiences.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the help and support of my supervisor, Bob Coles, who read and commented on chapters of my thesis and this paper. The research is, of course, indebted to all the young people, their parents and professionals who participated within the study.

REFERENCES


FRANCE, A. (1996) Youth and citizenship in the 1990s, Youth and Policy, Summer (53), pp. 28–43.


