

in on the planning?

PROFESSIONALS' APPROACHES
TO INVOLVING YOUNG PEOPLE
WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS
IN TRANSITION PLANNING

Chris Derrington

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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CONTENTS

	Acknowledgements	i
1	Introduction	1
	1.1 The centrality of the young person and the Code	1
2	Providing information	3
	2.1 What are the options?	3
	2.2 Sources of information	4
	2.2.1 The careers service	4
	2.2.2 Careers education in school	5
	2.2.3 Work experience	5
	2.2.4 The 14+ review	7
3	Developing skills	12
	3.1 Strategies for developing and extending skills	12
	3.2 Self-advocacy and personal autonomy	14
4	Reviewing and reflecting	16
5	Fostering links with FE	18
6	Summary points	25
7	Conclusion	27
	References	28

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs (GB. DFE, 1994) makes it clear that professionals have a responsibility to provide support for young people with special educational needs throughout the transition process. However, as Wilenius (1996) points out, the guidelines on transition are such a small part of the Code, that they could easily be ignored. Recent NFER research which examined the wider impact of the Code of Practice on schools and local education authorities two years after its introduction (Derrington *et al.*, 1996) confirmed that, unlike many other aspects of the guidance, transition planning was still at a very early stage of development.

A small-scale research project, undertaken by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) and funded through the Foundation's Research Development Programme, aimed:

- ◆ to identify ways in which professionals encouraged young people with special educational needs to be involved in decision-making during transition;
- ◆ to examine the context within which such development had taken place and investigate professional responses to some of the challenges experienced in following the Code's prescriptions on transitional arrangements;
- ◆ to highlight features of effective practice.

Three local education authorities participated in the study: a metropolitan and two shire authorities situated in the north, midlands and south of England respectively. Interviews were conducted between November 1996 and February 1997 with a range of professionals including LEA transition officers, advisers, careers officers, head teachers, SENCOs, class teachers, lecturers and social services personnel. The interviews explored a number of issues in relation to the impact of the Code of Practice on transition but a key question was: how can professionals ensure that young people with special educational needs are given a voice in the decision-making process and take an active role in their transition as described in the Code?

1.1 The centrality of the young person and the Code

The Code of Practice emphasises that children have a right to be heard and should be encouraged to participate in decision-making (2:35). It adds that positive pupil involvement is unlikely to happen spontaneously. Careful

attention, coordinated guidance and encouragement will be required to help pupils make a meaningful contribution (2:36). According to the Code:

- ◆ schools and LEAs should consider ways of ensuring that students' views are incorporated in planning for transition (6:60);
- ◆ students will be most effectively involved in decision-making when supported by information, careers guidance, counselling, work experience and the opportunity to consider a wide range of options during the transition phase (6:60);
- ◆ curriculum planning should focus on activities which encourage students to review and reflect upon their own experiences and wishes and to formulate and articulate their views (6:60);
- ◆ schools should foster links with local further education colleges to help young people in the decision-making process (6:58);
- ◆ effective arrangements for transition will involve young people themselves addressing issues of personal development, self-advocacy, a positive self-image and the growth of personal autonomy (6:59).

This report describes some of the responses and approaches adopted by professionals to address these issues.

2. PROVIDING INFORMATION

Students will be most effectively involved in decision-making when supported by information, careers guidance, counselling, work experience and the opportunity to consider a wide range of options during the transition phase (6:60).

According to an NFER survey commissioned by the DfEE in 1995 (Morris, 1996) only 5% of Y9 and Y10 students across the ability range were able to demonstrate a high level of factual knowledge about the range of options open to them, even though 18% thought that they were well-informed. How do teachers and other professionals ensure that young people with special educational needs and their parents are kept informed about the options available to them post-16?

2.1 What are the options?

Good intentions about keeping all options open can bring the danger of promoting unrealistic expectations (Hughes and May, 1985). In practice, the range of options for young people with special educational needs is largely determined by local circumstances. As Armstrong and Davies (1995) found, destinations depended as much upon local opportunities as they did upon careers advice and personal aspirations. Generally speaking, the contraction of opportunities for employment and the move towards output-related training schemes have closed some doors for pupils with special needs whilst the option of further education has been pushed higher up the agenda. Until the mid '70s such provision was scarce (Bradley and Hegarty, 1981). A comprehensive survey by Stowell (1987) reported a rapid increase in provision albeit largely in the form of discrete courses and within a limited range of course options. It is now estimated that there are some 126,500 students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities in the FE sector in England, representing around 5.5% of the overall student population (Institute for Employment Studies, 1997). Further, expectations for young people with more severe or profound learning difficulties are also changing as the parents of such young people are now demanding more choice in terms of post-16 destinations. As one careers officer participating in the research reported here observed:

The day care option is no longer the usual expectation. They are setting their sights beyond that and most are aware that they have a greater choice now.

As yet, FE colleges have not kept pace with this pressure and pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties are less likely than young people with less severe needs to be able to access further education (Tomlinson, 1996).

2.2 Sources of information

Interviewees were asked how young people and their parents were given access to information about the range of options available to them. The main sources were given as:

- ◆ the careers service;
- ◆ careers education in school;
- ◆ the 14+ review meeting.

Less frequently mentioned were social services, voluntary organisations, parent partnership groups and educational psychologists.

2.2.1 The careers service

Generally, interviewees in this study gave a positive account of careers service involvement, in line with previous research which found a greater level of professional understanding and liaison between LEAs and careers services than with other agencies, owing to the long-standing links which existed and a tendency for careers services to initiate a collaborative approach (Derrington *et al.*, 1996). In one area, the careers service wrote to the LEA each year requesting a list of Y9 pupils with statements so that everyone on the list could be sent written guidance and information. Elsewhere, careers officers relied upon individual schools to send copies of their special needs registers. A minority of interviewees described the move of careers services out of LEA control as having a negative impact on overall provision, whilst others reported that their initial concerns had been unfounded and that they could not fault the careers services' response in terms of transition planning. The overview of school and college provision and continuity of input that careers officers maintained were helpful to all parties and placed careers officers in a better position to advise. Whatever interviewees felt about the wider organisational structure, the work of individual careers officers at ground level was valued and appreciated. An LEA officer felt that as an independent service, careers performed the pivotal role.

*It [the careers service] has become one of the key players, if not **the** key player in transition planning. It is the bridge between agencies and educational establishments. The transition plan has really formalised the role of careers officers – they are the linchpin of good transition planning.*

Careers officers in the three case study LEAs were described by interviewees as 'consultants', 'mediators' and 'honest brokers'. Information booklets or packs aimed specifically at parents of pupils with special educational needs were published and issued by the careers services. These contained

lists of relevant contacts as well as setting out options and support systems. Careers officers perceived fairs and conventions as a good way of making direct and informal contact with students and their parents. The requirement for careers officers to attend review meetings, however, created some difficulties, as described below. Although careers officers commented on the increased workload that the Code of Practice had generated, they perceived it to be useful and valuable work: it gave them earlier contact and improved their data systems.

2.2.2 Careers education in school

In special schools, there is often greater flexibility for careers education to be built into the curriculum and for options to be explored over a longer period of time. As one teacher put it, 'the real leg-work for transition takes place in the classroom'. In addition, special schools may have links with and support from a specialist careers officer. There is some evidence, however, to suggest that pupils with special educational needs in mainstream schools receive a less than satisfactory level of careers guidance (OFSTED, 1995).

In this study, both special and mainstream schools used a variety of approaches to inform young people and their parents during transition, including:

- ◆ providing written guides;
- ◆ inviting employers, union representatives, employees, students (ex-pupils) and lecturers into the school;
- ◆ organising a 'What's my line?' event;
- ◆ arranging visits for groups of pupils to colleges and work-places;
- ◆ holding careers fairs or conventions;
- ◆ allocating key workers to pupils and their families.

2.2.3 Work experience

A recent NFER study confirmed that opportunities to experience the world of work contributed significantly to a student's decision-making ability (Morris, *op cit*). But work experience placements are a useful means of raising awareness amongst employers as well as for young people. This is even more crucial in the case of young people with special educational needs who may be excluded from a range of work activities which are presumed to be unsuitable. Johnstone (1995) observes:

The tendency of employers to have a homogenous view of disability means that people with learning difficulties in particular are placed in low regard.

Too often, they are thought capable of undertaking only repetitive and 'simple' tasks and if such work does not exist then such a person will not be considered as employable. (p.68)

The importance of raising employers' awareness and expectations cannot be over-stated. Attitudes are likely to be influenced by positive experiences. According to one careers officer, it was not uncommon for students with moderate learning difficulties to gain employment as a direct result of their work experience placements.

At one secondary school, students on the special needs register were given priority when it came to work experience arrangements. Their placements were carefully selected and it was recognised that some students would achieve greater success in a small company or work place where there could be closer supervision and monitoring. This kind of consideration would be stipulated in their transition plan. Another school found it helpful to set up a database of employers which detailed previous placements and included additional notes under 'considerations for pupils with special needs'.

Following work placements, the reports written by employers to evaluate the student's performance were not always perceived to be sufficiently focused and this devalued them. One college lecturer mentioned that where such reports were included in a young person's Record of Achievement, they might be interesting but not particularly helpful because:

Work experience at special schools tends to stem from a different philosophy. At school, the pupils will go out for a few hours and employers will comment on what a nice, cheerful boy he is! What we need to know is what actual skills he has acquired and what skills require further development. The report needs to be much more objective to be of value as a learning tool. The focus on punctuality and productivity is what it's all about in the real world. In order to help students make appropriate choices, we need to have specific information of that nature.

One LEA officer described how the local curriculum industry partnership (a result of the Compact work between the TEC and the LEA) had funded a work skills challenge day which involved a total of ninety Y10 pupils with learning difficulties across six schools. Twelve large companies agreed to participate in the event, which was held at a theatre complex. Each company or organisation designed a workshop activity using actual work skills and equipment. For example, the Post Office brought a van of mail and set up shelving units to make the exercise as realistic as possible. The pupils experienced four different activities during the course of the day and evaluated each experience in terms of what they had learned about themselves as well as the vocation. The inclusion of the word 'challenge' in the title of the project was deliberate. Students were exposed to 'little stress points' in that they were expected to work with adults and contemporaries they did

not know, find their way from one workshop to the next, and to arrive on time. The message being given to students was:

Look, there is quite a range of work-related opportunities out there! Here are some of them and you can do them. Over the next two years in school you will be involved in a variety of work-related tasks and you can be successful in them.

2.2.4 The 14+ review

The value placed on the 14+ review as a source of information gathering for the young person and his/her parents varied according to the way in which such meetings were organised; the availability of effective providers or contributors; the level of their background knowledge; and the presence of the student and his/her parents at the review meeting. Schools and LEAs adopted different approaches to the organisation of meetings and some placed more emphasis on formality than others. Regulation 16, (Education (Special Educational Needs) Regulations, 1994), which requires local education authorities to organise and convene the transition review, was interpreted differently in each of the case study LEAs.

- ◆ LEA 1 responded by creating a new administrative post to manage and coordinate the paperwork generated by this requirement. Everything was organised centrally from county hall. Standardised letters and proformas were universally applied and LEA administrative staff were usually the representatives who took minutes and drew up the transition plan, although it was someone from the school who chaired the review meetings.
- ◆ LEA 2 responded initially by taking on full responsibility for convening and organising the reviews but harboured doubts about the appropriateness of this. Educational psychologists were assigned the role of reviewing officers but not all accepted that this was the most effective use of their time. Subsequently, the LEA was considering delegating this duty to schools and at the time of the research it was undertaking a small feasibility study.
- ◆ LEA 3 considered this requirement to be unmanageable from the outset and arranged a conference to which head teachers, careers officers and social services personnel were invited. At this event, LEA officers proposed that the most sensible solution would be for responsibility to be delegated to schools. Reactions were mixed but, at the time of the research, most schools appeared to accept the move. The LEA fully accepted that it did not adhere strictly to the Code in this respect.

The timing of the transition review

There were also mixed feelings about the timing of the transition review.

Some officers would have preferred a more flexible approach to the timing or had noted an element of resistance in schools where it was felt that Year 9 was rather too early to be determining futures. In the case of schools for pupils with severe learning difficulties which had FE units attached, there was a feeling that a later review would be more meaningful since the majority of pupils stayed on at school anyway. Other interviewees supported the existing timing of the transition review, interpreting it as an opportunity to see how ideas could be taken forward rather than attempting to make decisions at that point. One teacher summed it up this way:

Aspirations will change. They will change as opportunities present themselves or are denied and they will change as an outcome of self-realisation, as strengths and weaknesses are recognised. The review meeting is an opportunity to sow the seeds - not pick the flowers!

Other agencies

Whilst the Code of Practice in general and the transition plan in particular provide a clear focus for collaboration it would seem that inter-agency work is still developing in the aftermath of the fragmentation and breakdown of former statutory links. Those who were interviewed expressed support for the revival of inter-agency activity and often mentioned that this was a feature of wider, strategic planning. In some cases, the practical need for collaboration had led to more workable solutions based on different constellations, as predicted by Bradley *et al.*, (1994). The emphasis placed on different agencies, and the scale of each network inevitably varied according to local circumstances. In one authority it had been the careers service which took the lead in coordinating inter-agency planning. In another authority, where there was no established forum for inter-agency transition planning yet in place, a special school head teacher had produced a joint policy with social services.

Special schools in particular had a large number of annual reviews to arrange in the course of the academic year but difficulties associated with timetabling were also reported in mainstream schools. For, while day-time meetings attracted a wider range of professionals, they effectively excluded some working parents and vice versa. In some cases, linked professionals attended reviews in their own time. As one careers officer explained:

I actually prefer the evening meetings because I don't have enough space during the normal working day. In fact I've been to some meetings until ten o'clock at night but then so have the teachers and the parents. It's got to be a united effort to make it work.

On the whole, careers officers welcomed the opportunity, presented by the 14+ review, of meeting parents earlier. Some officers said that parents contacted them directly to request their attendance at review meetings and every effort was made to comply with such requests. Despite this however, actual attendance by careers officers at the transition review was observed

actual attendance by careers officers at the transition review was observed by some other professionals to be somewhat unsystematic and, in the case of schools for pupils with severe learning difficulties, 'rare'. The perception of some teachers and LEA personnel was that the careers service worked to different schedules and carried out their programme of interviews independently of the Code of Practice. Careers officers themselves felt it was sometimes difficult to coordinate their work when LEAs did not give them adequate notice. The practice of interviewing young people on an individual basis before the review meeting was given a higher priority than attendance at the review. Typically, the careers officer's contribution would be the report written as an outcome of that interview.

Invitations to attend annual reviews were not always automatically sent out to social services departments. One head teacher thought that some parents would be suspicious of social services involvement, another assumed that it would be a waste of the case worker's time. Where social services personnel were invited as a matter of course, a response to the question 'Would you regard this child as disabled within the terms of the Disabled Persons Act 1986?' was requested at the same time. If social services had no prior knowledge of the family, efforts were made by some case workers to pay a home visit even though this sometimes resulted in an administrative delay. In one of the LEAs, it was the social services department, as opposed to the careers service, which had been the driving force behind inter-agency collaboration in transition matters. A key objective within its Children's Plan was to improve inter-agency assessment and provision of services and extend the scope of the 14+ review.

Attendance by college staff at the transition review and subsequent annual reviews was uncommon in the three authorities visited (apart from areas where there was tertiary college provision) although tutors were aware of the 'push towards greater involvement in transition planning'. College staff were a little concerned about the feasibility of attending large numbers of review meetings but this had not become an issue because they were not receiving the invitations. The requirement to attend also had cost implications for colleges. Unless the young person subsequently enrolled at the college, the advantages and disadvantages of investing resources in attending reviews had to be weighed up. As Tomlinson (1996, p.1) observed, 'the sudden lifting of further education colleges out of the local government system had left jagged edges'. When asked how information about FE provision was made available, one tutor said that the college relied heavily on the presence of the careers officer at reviews to give a fair and balanced picture of what the college was able to offer young people. The tutor was happy with this arrangement and believed that it gave young people more freedom of choice and placed them under less pressure than if she had been at the meeting personally. This view was reinforced at another FE college where the faculty head felt it would be 'pre-emptive' to attend review meetings unless a clear

preference for the college had been expressed; and by a head teacher who thought it would be more appropriate to invite the FE staff 'if it is clear we are considering a college place'. Where link provision was a feature, the need to attend reviews was considered even less important as the students would already be known to the college staff.

Parents

Careers officers and LEA staff found transition reviews more worthwhile when parents attended as it meant that choices could be discussed earlier. However, it was emphasised by a number of interviewees that the formal 14+ review was not the only opportunity to meet and discuss options with parents and pupils. One head teacher reported that it was not uncommon for a pupil to have three meetings in his/her final year of school at which transitional issues were the focus of discussion. This ensured constant reviewing and monitoring of the situation and made parents less anxious about the future.

One SENCO stressed the importance of preparing parents well for their role in transition planning. Asking for written comments prior to review meetings was not always found to be the most appropriate method. It was sometimes more effective to telephone the parents at the time that the request for comments was circulated to ask whether they would like to talk things over informally first. This provided parents with the opportunity to air their feelings to a 'safe' audience before the review.

In one school for pupils with severe learning difficulties, where the transition review was effectively pushed back a year or two because students typically stayed on until the age of eighteen, the head teacher reported that there was some debate beginning to emerge around the issue of entitlement. The realisation that parents might not necessarily receive the same opportunity to discuss options with a range of invited professionals until their son or daughter was sixteen or seventeen was forcing staff and governors at this school to review their practice.

We are now asking ourselves whether we are denying parents their entitlement and limiting their vision at a crucial stage.

Pupils

Interviewees were asked about pupil attendance at review meetings and, in particular, the 14+ review. There was some variation even within LEAs. In one authority only a minority of pupils were reported to attend as a matter of course. Although there was an 'uncomfortable feeling' about this issue, the practice was defended by explaining that meetings could be a daunting and alienating experience for young people and that even if the individual was not present, every effort was made to elicit and record his/her views beforehand. Another strategy used was to invite the pupil into the last part

of the meeting and treat this as a sort of summarised feedback session with fewer adults present. A careers officer remarked that in one of her schools, the pupils did not attend transition reviews at all although most would have been able to make a valuable contribution. Aware that the pupils might not be examining a wide enough range of options, she encouraged them to discuss this at their individual interviews. However, in this school the pattern of destination was so established, the pupils had difficulty in accepting that other options might also be appropriate. Another careers officer believed that it was beneficial for young people to attend even if they could not contribute very much because it gave them the realisation that people were taking an interest in them and were working together on their behalf.

In another area, the LEA made it clear to head teachers that pupils were to be invited and was planning to introduce a standardised comment form which would be sent out to pupils at the same time as other information was requested. One school, which placed great value on pupil attendance, sent out a personal invitation to the young person and a separate one to his/her parents. This was a small but important gesture which underlined the centrality of the young person in the process. The SENCO confirmed that students were well accustomed to reviews by the time they reached Y9 and that they participated throughout:

It's no good just allowing them in at the end when everything has been discussed, just to inform them what's been agreed in their absence.

In the case of pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties, teachers and other professionals were aware of the need to consider ways in which these young people could be involved. As one head teacher explained:

Realistically, some pupils make no choices - they rely on adults to act on their behalf. But although they may not make the decisions, they can and do inform them. Their experiences can be used as an indicator to preferences. All you can do is be as sensitive as possible.

3. DEVELOPING SKILLS

Effective arrangements for transition will involve young people themselves addressing issues of personal development, self-advocacy, the growth of personal autonomy and the acquisition of independent living skills (6:59).

Interviews with members of staff in schools and colleges highlighted a combination of skills and abilities associated with both self and interpersonal awareness which were considered important in empowering young people to cope more effectively during their period of transition and in determining the rate at which personal autonomy and ultimate 'employability' for young people with learning difficulties was accelerated and enhanced. This section focuses on the practical strategies described by schools, colleges and other institutions involved in the research project, to develop and extend those skills.

3.1 Strategies for developing and extending skills

Residential experience

This was reported to promote good opportunities for team-building and the development of cooperation and independent living skills. One secondary school SENCO reported that a small group of pupils were identified (often at the point of the 14+ review) and selected to take part in an annual residential experience if it was felt that their self-esteem was low or if their interpersonal skills needed to be developed before being involved in a work experience placement.

Self Presentation

Teachers who were interviewed reported a repertoire of strategies for enabling pupils to improve their communication skills and build their confidence in the course of regular school activities. In one mainstream school with designated provision (where all students were expected to participate in discussions at their annual review meetings), students with learning and behavioural difficulties who had participated in an award scheme were encouraged to organise a parents' evening at which they welcomed the visitors, showed videos, organised a display of work and read extracts from a diary.

Role play

The use of role play to raise awareness amongst young people with learning or emotional and behavioural difficulties about their responses in different social situations was a common strategy. In one establishment for example,

role play was used to help the students learn how to argue a point and how to apologise for a misdemeanour. For some schools, there were added benefits in the shape of technical aids such as video cameras and three way telephone systems.

Simulation activities

In developing role play a stage further, there were a number of examples where teachers had created opportunities for young people to practise their skills in a realistic but simulated setting. For many, work experience placements provided the safe opportunity to taste the world of employment but, for others, an additional bridge was required. Typically, considerable time, effort and resources had been invested to ensure that the artificial environment was as close to the real thing as possible. Some examples were:

- ◆ A 'cafe' which was furnished to a high standard where students served invited members of the public.
- ◆ An 'industrial/commercial' kitchen, which was fitted with heavy duty equipment and utensils and where health and safety was taught.
- ◆ An open-plan 'office' where students performed simple word processing tasks and administrative duties such as photocopying and collation for teaching staff.

Personal organisation

The development of good personal organisational skills was seen as essential. The head teacher at one residential school reported that although there was no practical necessity for them to do so, pupils were expected to pack a school bag each day with the necessary books and equipment, and carry it around with them from room to room. Homework was also cited as a strategy for improving personal organisation in special as well as in mainstream schools.

Using privileges

As pupils moved up through the school, it was not uncommon for them to earn various privileges as a marker of their enhanced status and progression towards adulthood. This was felt to be important for all students in coming to terms with their impending transition. The range of privileges used by special schools in this study included the following:

- ◆ pupils in Y10 were permitted to call their teachers by their forenames;
- ◆ the leavers' class had an adjoining common room or an independent study area with word processors;

- ◆ older pupils were allowed to leave the school premises during the lunch hour (providing parents agreed);
- ◆ older pupils were not required to wear school uniform.

Award schemes

Teachers described the use of nationally recognised and accredited schemes such as the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme or the ASDAN Youth Award as 'far-reaching' in terms of personal achievement. Participation was considered by teachers to challenge, motivate and educate pupils in a wide range of areas that offered good preparation for work, social life and leisure. It promoted opportunities for supported risk-taking and adventure as well as heightening awareness of social issues.

Role modelling

For pupils with special educational needs who were taught in discrete settings, the lack of positive role models often triggered concerted efforts by teachers to forge links with other groups and organisations and provide the opportunity to mix with and learn from a wider peer-group. But even where there was provision for integrated or inclusive learning, there was sometimes a need for a more structured approach to role-modelling.

In one college of further education which provided for Y10 pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties, some students needed additional support in learning how to relate effectively with their fellow students and tutors. The students were assigned carefully-appointed support workers to give advice and guidance on a social level, and to help the students to interact more positively with peers in lectures, the student centre and the refectory. Often, these supporters were young and barely distinguishable from the student body.

3.2 Self-advocacy and personal autonomy

The development of self-advocacy can have implications for parents and carers as it may be perceived as a 'challenge to their control over both their own and their son's or daughter's pattern of life' (Johnstone, 1995, p136) and may lead to feelings of vulnerability, even suspicion. It can be difficult for parents to come to terms with 'letting go'. There may be challenges to established routines and expectations which have developed as coping mechanisms and provide an element of security. Care needs to be taken to ensure that these anxieties do not limit further the range of options available and restrict choices. Aspirations need to be based on a thorough understanding of what each type of provision offers and demands and a realistic interpretation of how the young person copes outside the family circle and home environment. Careers officers mentioned that they sometimes saw pupils without their parents after the transition review if they felt that

parents had given a very strong input and their expectations were dominating the discussion and narrowing the range of options. A SENCO emphasised the need to keep parents fully informed about pupils' levels of independence at school and college lecturers spoke about the need to support parents as their sons/daughters gained personal autonomy.

4. REVIEWING AND REFLECTING

Curriculum planning should focus on activities which encourage students to review and reflect upon their own experiences and wishes and to formulate and articulate their views (6:60).

In recognising the importance of the curriculum in preparing pupils for their transition, the Code of Practice recommends that planning should allow for pupils to review and reflect on their experiences, and endorses the use of Records of Achievement to help pupils recognise and value their achievements.

According to an evaluation study undertaken in Scotland (Somekh *et al.*, 1996), the main difficulties with the National Record of Achievement (NRA), which was officially launched in 1991, were the amount of time it demanded of teachers, a lack of awareness by employers which limited its value as a currency and the difficulty pupils had in saying positive things about themselves which went against peer-group culture.

In this study, some pupils took their NRAs with them to annual reviews or at the review meeting there would be some discussion about what could be included in the Record of Achievement to help inform other stakeholders. Generally, colleges were supportive and encouraging, and either continued with the record or gave students the choice of starting a new one. One college tutor mentioned how valuable the record was throughout the pre-vocational choices programme as it helped students and tutors with the decision-making process. Colleges expected students to bring their NRAs to the interview to use as an ice-breaker or starting point for discussion and a vehicle for demonstrating communication skills.

The system of recording achievement using criterion-referenced profiling 'fits well with the concepts of self-advocacy and equal opportunities' (Johnstone, 1995). Profiling in schools and colleges tended to be characterised by comment banks or grids and evaluation was done either through self-assessment or negotiation. Discussion was considered to be a vital part of the process but had implications for staff time. The City and Guilds General Abilities Profile (based on 'can do' statements) was used successfully in one mainstream school with Y10 and 11 pupils who had statements. These pupils sat down with their key worker over a two week period to look at and select descriptors which reflected their achievements across the curriculum.

Self-assessment by students with special needs was also considered important in preparing for transition as it required pupils to focus on strengths as well as weaknesses. As a regular exercise it could help to develop decision-

making skills as well as raising self-esteem. In one school for pupils with moderate learning difficulties, Y11 pupils were encouraged to consider their personal qualities and skills when selecting work experience placements. At a different school, which used personal target-setting in each subject as part of annual reports, pupils were required to consider and record their strengths and weaknesses throughout this process. In another establishment, a lecturer used assertiveness training to help students feel more comfortable in saying positive things about themselves. A number of teachers stressed the importance of encouraging pupils to evaluate their experiences at every level, articulating how they felt about lessons or writing diaries during work experience placements. One interviewee felt that pupils should begin to examine and consider their aspirations well before the 14 + review so that, by Y9, they were well used to talking about themselves without feeling inhibited.

5. FOSTERING LINKS WITH FE

Schools should foster links with local further education colleges to help young people in the decision-making process (6:58).

Opportunities for formal dialogue between LEAs and colleges had declined since incorporation. According to one officer, the LEA was in danger of losing touch with what colleges could offer and this created a negative impact on his ability to provide meaningful advice. Individual establishments however, were working to maintain links and raise mutual awareness. In some cases, careers officers were relied upon to help facilitate this.

The extent to which links between schools and colleges can help young people with special educational needs to make decisions will depend on a number of factors. One is the availability of alternative options for young people to consider. For pupils at one special school for example, the expectation that they would enrol at the local FE college upon leaving school was so established that link courses were essentially for induction purposes. Other considerations relate to the nature, range and quality of link courses and the way in which they are funded and targeted. Helping young people with special educational needs to make decisions about their future is just one of the potential benefits that link provision has to offer. For the FE sector, it can be perceived as an effective marketing strategy. Following the apparent decline in link provision, as indicated by interviewees, there appeared to be something of a revival now that market forces had come into effect and colleges were expected to at least maintain their proportion of students with special needs and to stimulate demand within their local populations. The Tomlinson Report (1996, 5.33) emphasises the value of link course provision, describing it as too important to fall victim to short-term funding disputes.

The issue of funding stems from the Education Reform Act 1988 which prevents students under the age of sixteen being included in college numbers for budgetary purposes and therefore requires schools to buy such provision. Interviewees were asked to describe past and current opportunities which existed for young people with special needs to experience a taste of college during their last years at school. In each of the three authorities there had been a negative impact on link provision since the incorporation of colleges. Links which had been established over many years had not always survived the reorganisation. Despite this, the desire to maintain or recover link provision was shared by LEA officers, teachers and college staff. A key issue was the funding mechanism. In each of the three LEAs, there had been a different response:

Authority A

Before incorporation, there were said to be many link courses in this authority but when payment became an issue, most of these disappeared. Only a few survived where schools were able to use a surplus in their budgets to fund them. The LEA officer observed that link provision *'went right downhill but there has recently been an effort on both sides to recover it'*. Provision was said to be increasing once more for pupils with moderate and severe learning difficulties and the LEA suspected that some colleges were offering free provision.

Authority B

Soon after incorporation of the colleges, discussions were held between head teachers and principals, who feared that a valuable resource might be lost. The solution for one college was to place link course provision under the auspices of the schools' liaison department instead of the learning support faculty. The outcome of this was something akin to work experience, except that it took place in an FE college. The advantage was that there was no charge to schools; the disadvantage was that students received only a limited taste of the college - 'a glorified visit' amounting to no more than six hours per student in total. More intensive link courses were available if schools could afford to buy them.

Authority C

Money was provided in the schools' budget to buy in link provision. The amount earmarked was set on the basis of provision prior to LMS. Any shortfall was subsidised either by schools or by colleges. The rates charged by colleges were said to vary quite significantly. Some fixed charges deliberately low to encourage enrolment. The LEA was aware that one or two schools were beginning to struggle to maintain the level of provision, claiming that the colleges were increasing charges out of their reach but the LEA was unable to commit further funding in this area and accepted that if schools could not make savings elsewhere then provision might be reduced or lost. In this authority there were four colleges which provided link courses and some of the 6th form colleges were considering developing them.

Where link courses were provided free of charge, teachers described them with mixed feelings. There was a perception that schools were being disadvantaged in one way by having to accept what was on offer despite its inadequacy. One head teacher believed that the arrangement was essentially a marketing exercise for the college and expressed anxiety that his students were not being offered a meaningful taster upon which decisions could be based. Where schools had become the paying customer, they were in a better position to influence and shape the provision.

Effective arrangements had been developed between one special school and a local college in order to keep link provision under review, raise mutual awareness and place the college in a better position to respond to local

needs. This had led to:

- ◆ regular meetings between the KS4 coordinator and the head of the Learning Support faculty to examine destinations of students, evaluate course suitability and discuss future needs in planning courses; and
- ◆ the development of a staffing links programme by which staff would spend a week shadowing one another in each institution. This took place in the summer term when the college had broken up and tutors would go into school. Then, whilst pupils were out on work experience, the teachers would go into the college. It was considered essential to understand what went on from the other perspective. The college ran 12 full-time and 36 part-time courses. The aim was that teachers would observe and experience both the breadth of provision and opportunities for progression. As the college tutor explained:

It's easy for a teacher to say to a pupil 'You could go on and do such and such a course and do NVQ Level 1' without fully realising what that would entail. They can't help the student make realistic choices unless they are aware of the demands those courses make. You can't get the required level of awareness by reading a piece of paper.

The same college was in the process of developing provision for pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties. The impetus had come partly from schools in the area who had been asking 'what can you offer our pupils?' Members of staff had been identified for training and were planning to spend a week working alongside teachers in a school for pupils with complex needs to get hands-on experience. In other areas, the lack of suitable link provision for pupils with the greatest needs continued to concern staff in schools. One head teacher gave this example:

I feel as though I'm banging my head against a brick wall. They [the college staff] give the appearance of being very receptive but when you try to move forward, the logistics defeat you. It's either funding restrictions or the fact that tutors wouldn't know how to deal with the students. We would be willing to pay for link provision and we would provide the support because that is what we do anyway when students go out on their experiences. All we want is the access. The whole thing about entitlement has gone right out of the window because link provision is so limited. Without a shadow of a doubt, kids are being denied opportunities that should be open to them.

College staff across all three authorities were aware of gaps in FE provision for students with emotional and behavioural difficulties and of the growing number of young, disaffected pupils who may, or may not, have been excluded from schools. It was recognised that this latter group did not necessarily share the same needs but they faced a similarly uncertain future and an

equally limited range of options. Acceptance of the need for development and progression in this area of FE provision had been heightened by the Tomlinson report (1996) but it was pointed out that this group of potential clients might first need to be convinced that further education was a feasible option for them. As one tutor put it:

Choice is limited for these kids but college is not a traditional option for them. They still believe that only clever kids can go there. They associate it with school and that means failure so they reject the idea out of hand even though their parents are keen. They tend to opt for careerships (youth training) or open employment (if they're lucky) and fail because they're just not ready for it. They think it's going to be easy and it isn't.

This suggests that such young people are likely to need more than just a taster of further education to convince them that it might be a suitable option. The following case study describes how an FE college and a school for pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties set up a project in partnership.

Case study

Links between this college and a local residential school for pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties had been established over a number of years. The overriding policy of the school, which catered for pupils from the ages of seven to sixteen, was to re-integrate its pupils back into the mainstream sector but, in practice, this was difficult for some pupils beyond Y8.

One year, the school found itself in the unusual position of having a very small group of five Y9 students. Discussions between the staff and governors about the cost effectiveness of this situation triggered a decision to pilot a project which would be overseen by the LEA and would be carried out in partnership with the college. The five students would be given access to existing college courses. Two part-time lecturers were interviewed and appointed jointly by the head teacher and college head of department. As part of the agreement, it was recognised that the head teacher would maintain oversight of the project by spending half a day each week in the college; the cost of cover to take account of this was made available by the LEA. Initially, the time in college was used to meet with tutors and discuss how the students were coping in a variety of situations. Informal contact was

maintained with the students but the level and nature of the interaction were largely determined by the students themselves. It was important that they decided when to become more independent and when the time was right to weaken links with the school. The pilot was given a two year schedule which would take the students up to statutory school leaving age.

What followed was a significant expansion of the project. Moreover, a pattern was beginning to emerge in which students who reached the end of the project were opting to enrol at the college once they reached the age of sixteen. Demand for places grew and, because at this time the FE sector was in local authority control, provision for these pupils was simply transferred from one institution to another. With the introduction of the Funding Councils, it became more appropriate for the college to take ownership of the project. It was at this point that other schools and even other LEAs became interested in the project and what started as a focus project on one school for pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties suddenly became something much wider. The potential implications in terms of organisation and management were considerable. The solution was for the original school to become the formal host school for all 'project' pupils who would be taken onto the roll. The LEA funded provision although it was met in the FE sector. The criteria was that pupils must have a statement for emotional and/or behavioural difficulties and be between the ages of 14 and 16 years.

At the same time, the project became part of the Learning Support School and a team of specialist teaching and non-teaching staff was recruited. At the time of the research, demand was continuing to grow. There was no discrete grouping and the staff worked very hard to ensure that this did not happen. The aim was that the students felt like individuals and not part of a 'difficult' faction within the college.

Important considerations

The success of the initiative was perceived by both project partners to be attributed to the following factors:

1. *'Partnership' was viewed as an active responsibility not a passive description*

- ◆ Each institution recognised it had something to contribute and that it could learn from the other. It was accepted that the ethos of each institution was very different but this was not perceived as a problem. Joint INSET sessions were held.
- ◆ Parents were given the opportunity to be supported by both the school and the college during the transition period.
- ◆ Links with the school were kept open to students but not forced upon them.
- ◆ Advantage was taken of the partnership status to gain access to the services of education welfare officers, educational psychologists, opportunities for professional development and so on. Students did not lose their entitlement in this respect.
- ◆ The college used the school's experience and expertise when arranging annual reviews.

2. *Students' particular needs were recognised*

- ◆ It was made clear to young students that they were entering an adult environment and they were expected to respond in a mature way, but it was remembered that they were only fourteen and needed to be supported in a way that took account of their age and maturity.
- ◆ Students were given freedom and the opportunity to 'grow' but their welfare needs were given special attention. For example, college staff sometimes needed to help with budgeting to ensure that the students ate lunch.
- ◆ It was important that students developed a sense of personal organisation. This started whilst they were still at school but students were also supported in this way at college so that they did not miss out on valuable and positive experiences.

3. *Home links were essential*

- ◆ Parents/carers were given the full facts whilst the student was still at school. Parents needed to understand that the college provision was not necessarily on a nine to five basis from Monday to Friday.
- ◆ Parents/carers were supported throughout the duration of the course and were prepared for possible outcomes such as the rapid development of their son/daughter's independence skills.

- ◆ Home visits were organised by the school, the college or both. The decision was negotiated and depended on individual circumstances and needs.

4. *A broad and flexible curriculum was offered*

- ◆ Students started off with a taster of the available options. They were given real choices and were allowed to exercise the right to choose on a regular basis. Eventually, students realised that they had some measure of control and did not need to put it to the test quite so often.
- ◆ Basic numeracy and literacy skills were taught on an individual basis to minimise negative behaviour associated with low self-esteem and low achievement.
- ◆ All parties understood that the provision represented essentially a pre-vocational route and that students would not have access to the full range of the national curriculum.
- ◆ Other routes were explored if the college could not provide for particular needs and sometimes arrangements were made to buy into a course at another college.
- ◆ Time was used to enable students to work towards accreditation and move them higher up the ladder for entry onto post-16 courses. Self-esteem could be given a tremendous boost if students went on to enrol having gained some prior accreditation.
- ◆ Enrolment was possible part-way through the academic year so that excluded pupils could gain immediate access if appropriate.

5. *The project needed the support of all staff*

- ◆ Achievement and skills were mapped across the whole curriculum.
- ◆ All college staff (including non-teaching) were made aware of the special needs this group was likely to have.
- ◆ Investment was made in appointing and training a team of high calibre support staff which supported both the deliverers and the recipients of the courses.
- ◆ It was accepted that the nature of the project required a high level of coordination and the day to day manager was skilled in crisis management.

6. SUMMARY POINTS

Providing information

- ◆ Careers officers were considered to be 'key players' in transition planning. They acted as mediators and consultants. Not all attended transition meetings. Teachers felt that careers services tended to work to their own schedule of interviews whereas careers officers reported that planning was difficult when insufficient notice of reviews was given.
- ◆ Schools used a wide range of strategies to inform young people about the variety of options available.
- ◆ Work experience was valuable in raising mutual awareness but reports from employers were not always considered to be objective enough to help students make appropriate choices.
- ◆ The 14+ transition review was convened in different ways and there were mixed feelings about the timing of it. Some felt that Year 9 was too soon to be making decisions, others argued that the purpose of the meeting was to explore ideas at an early stage.
- ◆ Inter-agency collaboration was still developing in the aftermath of fragmentation. In one authority it was the careers service which took the lead, in another it was social services. FE staff were rarely invited to transition reviews but there was a feeling that unless such involvement resulted in a definite enrolment, it could be a 'loss leader'.
- ◆ Not all pupils attended their transition reviews. Some professionals felt it would be a daunting experience and invited pupils in at the end of the meeting instead for a summarised feedback. Others placed great value on their attendance at reviews.

Developing skills

Teachers described a range of strategies aimed at developing personal and interpersonal skills, personal autonomy and independence skills. These included:

- ◆ Residential experience
- ◆ Self presentation

- ◆ Role play
- ◆ Personal organisation
- ◆ Use of privilege
- ◆ Award schemes
- ◆ Role modelling.

Self Assessment

- ◆ Colleges valued and supported the use of Records of Achievement.
- ◆ As a regular activity, self assessment helped to develop decision-making skills.
- ◆ Profiling was considered to be an effective exercise but was time-consuming and made heavy demands on staff.

Links with FE

- ◆ Following a reported decline in link course provision, the trend was now reversing but funding was a key issue. Where colleges provided link courses free of charge, schools were not always happy with the facilities on offer. Funding restrictions and the incentive for colleges to provide link provision as a marketing exercise sometimes provided pupils with little more than a glorified visit upon which real choices could not be based. Schools which were able to buy in provision were better placed to influence the providers.
- ◆ Some schools and colleges were developing close links and staff spent time shadowing colleagues in order to heighten their awareness of local needs and available provision.
- ◆ Opportunities to experience college life were not available to all pupils. One college had developed provision for young people across the spectrum of needs, others were still considering how to achieve this.

7. CONCLUSION

This report has been concerned with the centrality of the young person with special educational needs in the process of transition planning as set out in the *Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs* (GB. DFE, 1994). It has highlighted some of the strategies and approaches which were felt to reflect the principles of the Code in relation to the young person's involvement. It has been suggested that in order to help pupils become more fully involved in their own transition planning, professionals need to consider:

- ◆ the way in which information is gathered and disseminated;
- ◆ the development of pupils' personal, interpersonal and self-advocacy skills; and
- ◆ opportunities to extend the range of experiences available to young people.

The extent to which professionals are able to facilitate this, however, needs to be considered against a background of legislation in which responsibilities may overlap and boundaries are sometimes obscure. The Code of Practice came at a time when careers services and FE colleges were moving out of LEA control. Some established systems and effective networking arrangements were weakened or disappeared altogether. Three years on, there appears to be a shared commitment amongst relevant professionals to rebuild a framework for effective collaboration, with different agencies taking the lead according to local circumstances but in order for professionals to ensure that young people are involved more fully in their transition, some issues may require particular attention:

- ◆ The function and purpose of the transition review may need to be revisited and clarified. Those who perceived it as an opportunity to draw together information and explore a range of options informally and at an early stage were more likely to value the process and ensure that young people attended and contributed. Others, who interpreted it as a decision-making exercise expressed more reservations about the procedure. The duty placed upon LEAs to convene transition reviews, however, was generally perceived by those interviewed to be inexpedient and in need of review by policy makers.
- ◆ LEAs, schools and colleges need to consider whether current arrangements for link course provision are offering young people a range of experiences upon which meaningful choices can be made. On-going dialogue is essential if colleges are to plan effectively for unmet, local needs. Whilst attendance by college staff at transition reviews may not guarantee immediate future enrolment, it may well prove to be a useful vehicle for raising awareness amongst all parties.

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in on the planning?

The Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs (1994) sets out a number of new responsibilities and procedures for teachers and other professionals in supporting young people with special needs throughout the period of their transition and in planning effectively for post-16 life. The principle of placing the young person at the centre of the process is of paramount importance. This small study reports some of the ways in which professionals from three LEAs have considered the centrality of the young person during transition and suggests that in order for there to be real involvement, young people with special needs should have:

- access to a wide range of information about their entitlements and options;
- the opportunity to develop personal and interpersonal skills which will equip them for transition;
- the opportunity to experience a taste of different options as part of the decision-making process.

Various strategies and approaches designed to ensure a greater contribution by pupils with special educational needs are described by practitioners in this report and may be useful for others in considering the extent to which their pupils are being involved.

Finally, previous NFER research (*The Code in Practice*, 1996) found that transition planning was at an early stage of development compared with other aspects of the Code and this research identifies some possible explanations for the delay. It suggests that some of the Code's guidance on transition planning requires further clarification or amendment, the incorporation of FE colleges may well have offset some of the benefits of the Code of Practice and that inter-agency collaboration, so essential for effective planning, is undergoing a process of redevelopment in the aftermath of structural changes.

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