The transition from school to post-16 education, employment training and work for young people with a history of specific speech and language difficulties: The role of the Connexions service

Mairi-Ann Cullen[1]

Geoff Lindsay[1]

Julie E. Dockrell[2]

[1] Centre for Educational Development, Appraisal and Research, University of Warwick

[2] Psychology and Human Development, Institute of Education, University of London

INTRODUCTION

The transition from school to post-compulsory education is an important period in the life of any young person. It is particularly crucial for those young people with special educational needs (SEN) as this group has increased vulnerability. In England, compulsory education ceases at 16 years and is followed for most young people by one of four options: continuation within the school system, typically taking level 3 qualifications ('A' and A/S level courses); transfer to a College of Further Education (FE) where a range of courses may be available up to Level 3; a training placement, possibly linked to an apprenticeship, within a work environment, although typically also including part-time attendance at a FE college; or employment with no specifically linked education or training. However, some young people are not in education, employment or training (NEET) and are particularly vulnerable (Social Exclusion Unit, 2005). The present study reports on the transition from school to post-16 for a group of young people with specific speech and language difficulties (SSLD) whose development has been researched since they were 8 years old (Dockrell, Lindsay, Palikara & Cullen, 2007). The focus of the paper is the support offered by the Connexions service.

Transition from compulsory education must be considered relative to two main issues: the wider social, economic and political context as well as the nature of the group under consideration. The former may be characterized as being subject to various demands creating a series of tensions and a state of, apparently, constant change. Policies and practices regarding transition are shaped by government and societal concerns about education, employment, and the training/education necessary for specific types of employment. These are underpinned by more philosophical considerations of the relative importance of education in a broad sense versus training for specific types of employment, as well as the perceived demands of the economy (Williams, Hesketh & Brown, 2003).

The policy focus on 14-19 years reflects the concern about the importance of transition. The changes to the National Curriculum in England following the Dearing Report (Dearing, 1994) indicate the recognition of the need for and appropriate balance between academic and vocational education in terms of values attributed and resources allocated. A series of Government initiatives have sought to address the curriculum in schools and colleges (Dearing, 1994; Tomlinson, 1996) and have promoted the role of FE Colleges as important options for developing knowledge and expertise (Department for Education and Skills, 2006). Five new specialized Diplomas are planned to be available from 2008 with 14 Diplomas available nationwide by 2013.

Such initiatives are also driven by the view that the present education system is not appropriate for a significant proportion of young people. The group comprises both those whose interest and talents lay more in the vocational rather than academic domains as well as those who are subject to various disadvantages (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999). For example, the development in England of the Diplomas had its roots to a large extent in the concerns about the high proportion of young people not in education, employment and training (NEET), especially compared with other Western European countries and the need to provide innovative courses that will enhance motivation (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999). The Diploma is a 14 – 19 years qualification with a strong vocational element and the opportunity for young people to study a subject and see how knowledge is applied in the workplace (http://www.qca.org.uk/qca_5396.aspx accessed 17.4.08).

The young people likely to be disadvantaged at the age of 16 years include those with SEN (Social Exclusion Unit, 2005). For example, young people with a statement of SEN are three times more likely to be excluded than those without SEN; those with SEN but without a statement are 4.3 times more likely to be excluded than those without SEN (Wilkin, Archer, Ridley, Fletcher-Campbell, & Kinder, 2005). Those young people with SEN who have been excluded are less likely to stay on in full time education (Polat, Kalambouka, Boyle, & Nelson, 2001). The importance of addressing the needs of this group to aid their transition was highlighted in the early days of the New Labour government (Department for Education and Employment, 1997). However, in their large-scale study (Polat, et al., 2001) report that only half of schools, two thirds of which were special schools, had policies addressing transition to post-16. Annual reviews with a transition plan also varied with only three out of five pupils receiving these during Year 9. A follow-up study of this sample (supplemented by new participants because of attrition) found that about half were in education (school or college), a quarter in employment but a quarter were not employed or were inactive (NEET) (Dewson, Aston, Bates, Ritchie, & Dyson, 2004). Furthermore, those young people with SEN but without a statement of SEN were half as likely to have continued in education and twice as likely to be unemployed.

The proposal by the Social Exclusion Unit (1999) for a qualification referred to as 'Graduation', was considered a challenging but achievable goal that would motivate young people and lower the proportion of NEET then reported to be 9% between the ages of 16 to 19 years. The proposal included both academic and non-academic components. It was to require a minimum Level 2 standard of achievement in five subjects in the examinations typically taken by young people in England at 16 years (General Certificate of Education (GCSE) grades A*-C; evidence of competence in the key skills of communication, use of

numeracy and IT; plus a range of options for arts, sport and community activity, which would provide evidence of skills in meeting a personal challenge and in working with others for 'wider achievements'. However, Lindsay and Maguire (2002) found that the proposed system for Graduation was found to be *more likely* to disadvantage still further those in the NEET group. This group were in an inferior position at age 16 to achieve Graduation by the target 18 years; they were also more likely to be socially disadvantaged and to include young people with SEN (Lindsay, 2003; Lindsay and Maguire, 2002). This proposal, therefore, was flawed but the enhanced vulnerability at transition of socially disadvantaged young people and those young people with SEN has been subsequently addressed by several initiatives. Socioeconomic disadvantage (poverty) has been addressed by the introduction of Education Maintenance Allowances to support young people with limited family or personal finance (Allen et al., 2003). Changes to the 14 – 19 curriculum have taken place and a third major intervention has been the development of the Connexions service.

The Connexions service

In 2005 when the present study took place, the Connexions service was relatively new and also about to begin its own process of transition as government policy changed in the wake of *Every Child Matters* (G.B. House of Commons, 2003) and *Youth Matters* (G.B. House of Commons, 2005). Announced as part of the White Paper, *Learning to Succeed* (Department for Education and Skills, 1999), the new service was piloted (Department for Education and Employment, 2000a, b; Dickinson, 2001) and rolled out across in England in three batches during 2001, 2002 and 2003. Locally, the Connexions service was delivered through Connexions Partnerships, 47 in all. These were of two types: either 'direct delivery' (companies that transmuted from Careers companies) or 'sub-contracted' (a hub of central staff that sub-contracted to existing organisations) (York Consulting, 2003). These Partnerships employed Personal Advisers (PAs) to work with all young people aged 13 to 19 years (25 years for those with learning difficulties or disabilities), providing advice and guidance on education, training and employment opportunities, as well as on *'a wide range of topics which either limit the learning and progression of young people or can support their personal development'* (Department for Education and Skills, 2002, p2), making referrals to other organisations and advocating improvements in the provision available to young people.

The Connexions service represented a new vision for youth support in England offering, for the first time, a service that was both universal and holistic. There were, however, tensions from the start. Connexions was to be an *integrated* service for young people where they could access holistic support across the range of needs. To meet these holistic needs, Connexions personal advisers (PAs) were envisaged *as 'a new profession'* (Department for

Education and Employment, 2000b) that would draw in adults from a wide range of backgrounds (Connexions Service National Unit, 2002). In practice, the majority of PAs had formerly been Careers Advisers whose previous employers, careers companies, had become the Connexions service in their area (Hoggarth & Smith, 2004). Watts (2001a) has argued that this transference happened because the Careers Service was the only youth service whose budget was in the control of the Department for Education and Employment.

How the PA role could develop to deliver holistic support to young people was an issue from the pilot phase of the new service with early research identifying role boundaries as a tension (Dickinson, 2001). The Connexions Service National Unit included in its vision statement a commitment that, by 2006, there would be *'clarity about the role of personal adviser. Instead of 'intensive' and 'universal' personal advisers, all will have core skills.'* (Connexions Service National Unit, 2002, p17). This 'single PA' role, whereby all PAs would have *'core skills to support a mixed caseload of young people, alongside a specialism dependent on experience or background'* (York Consulting, 2003, p24) proved difficult to translate into practice (Rodger & Marwood, 2003).

Connexions was also to be a *universal* service open to all young people within its age range. It nevertheless had as its primary aim the reduction in numbers of 16-18-year-olds not in education, employment or training (NEET) (CSNU, 2002). In accordance with the New Labour principle of 'progressive universalism' (H.M. Treasury & DfES 2005), three priority levels operated - P1: Intensive (a specialist service), P2: Enhanced (a targeted service), P3: Minimal intervention (a universal service). These were an attempt to offer a service open to all whilst also offering more support to those who needed it. In practice, a more variegated pattern of service delivery has been found (Rodger & Marwood, 2003) – see Figure 1.

[Figure 1 here]

The difficulty of providing a specialist or targeted service for those at risk of becoming NEET, as well as a universal service to all young people was evident from the pilot phase of Connexions (Dickinson, 2001) and continued to be a tension after roll-out (Hoggarth & Smith, 2004). Analysing the early development of the Connexions service up to the end of 2000, Watts (2001b) argued that a primary focus on targeted support would prove a major challenge to the *'notion of careers guidance as an entitlement for all young people'* (p158), that is, that the universal aspect would fail. In a review of 30 years of policy initiatives around the school-to-work transition, Roberts (2004) was sceptical about the impact of Connexions targeted work aimed at reducing the NEET figures.

From 2005 onwards, Government policy on the Connexions Service changed. Following *Youth Matters* (G.B. House of Commons, 2005) and *Youth Matters: Next Steps* (Department for Education and Skills, 2006), integrated youth support services (IYSS) were expected to be in place by 2008 and were expected to include targeted youth support for the most vulnerable young people. By 2008, it was expected that resources for Connexions Services would have shifted from Connexions Partnerships to children's trusts in every local authority. Calling Connexions *'a valuable asset which we do not want to lose'*' the Department for Education and Skills stated that there is *'a strong basis for retaining the Connexions brand as the public face of children's trusts in action for all young people*' (Department for Education and Skills, 2006, p 29). Subsequent Government guidance continued to indicate that Connexions must be part of both IYSS and targeted youth support (Department for Education and Skills 2007).

The role of Connexions in supporting young people with SEN has received relatively little attention. Early findings suggested that the Connexions service should help to reduce poor post-16 transition planning (Polat et al., 2001). Studies of young people at risk (Hoggarth and Smith, 2004) and those with complex needs (Social Exclusion Unit, 2005) together with a smaller scale study of PA support of young people in two special schools during the pilot phase (Grove, 2001; Grove & Giraud-Saunders, 2003) indicated the potential of Connexions. The independent PA role was valued by the young people and their families but an issue reported throughout the pilot was the incompatibility of the PA having responsibilities for all young people and needing to allocate necessary time for the most vulnerable (Grove & Giraud-Saunders, 2003).

The present study reports on the transition of a group of young people with a history of specific speech and language difficulties (SSLD) and a comparison SEN group. Young people with SSLD continue to show vulnerability beyond early childhood. Although the oral language difficulties resolve to varying degrees as they mature, young people with SSLD are more likely to have literacy difficulties during their adolescence and consequently have impaired access to the secondary school curriculum (Dockrell et al, 2007). This group also have a higher likelihood of behavioural, emotional and social difficulties during this period (Dockrell, et al., 2007) and beyond, into adulthood (Clegg et al, 2005). A history of SSLD is associated with an increased risk of negative outcomes post-16. Nevertheless, external factors play an important role in reducing vulnerability to risk or enhancing protection against the likelihood of negative outcomes. A key issue is the support that young people with SSLD receive in their transition from school to post-16 education, employment and training. The

main focus of the study is the role of the Connexions service in supporting the transition of young people with a history of SSLD; to aid generisability a second sample of young people with SEN associated with general learning difficulties was included.

METHODS

Participants

The focus of this study is on the personal advisers (PAs) who supported a sample of young people with specific speech and language difficulties (SSLD) and a comparison SEN sample. These two samples of young people will be described first and then the PAs.

SSLD group

The present study is part of a longitudinal study that has followed a sample of 69 young people with specific speech and language difficulties (SSLD) through from Year 3 (mean age 8;3) to post-16. Initial identification of the SSLD group was made by speech and language therapists, educational psychologists and special educational needs coordinators in two local authorities (LAs). A total of 133 were identified from which a subsample from each LA was derived. Children with any additional complicating factors which would preclude the diagnosis of SSLD were excluded. In addition, children of the same age attending regional special schools for children with SSLD in England were included in the study (N = 10). Only the children who at age 8 were experiencing SSLD were included in the longitudinal study. To validate the clinical diagnoses of SSLD a series of repeated measures ANOVAs confirmed that vocabulary scores, grammar scores and expressive narrative scores were all significantly below a measure of nonverbal ability (British Ability Scales: Matrices); for example Test of Reception of Grammar (TROG), $F(1,63) = 35.68$, $p< .005$, $\eta^2 = .35$. Initial selection of the SSLD sample at 8 years is described in detail elsewhere (Dockrell and Lindsay 2000). Sixty four of the SSLD group were followed up at age 15-16 years Year 11 and 54 at post-16. (Palikara, Lindsay & Dockrell, 2008).

SEN group

The SEN comparison group were identified from those in the same classes as those in the SSLD group who were in mainstream schools in Year 6. The class teacher was asked to identify a child who had special educational needs and who was in the same stage of the SEN Code of Practice in force at that time (Department for Education 1994) as the child with SSLD but whose difficulties did not include speech and language needs (*n* = 32: not all

teachers were able to identify a comparison child). Twenty eight of these young people were followed up at 15-16 years and 21 post-16.

Connexions Personal Advisers

The Connexions personal advisers (PAs) for all 92 young people were invited to take part: 46 agreed and were able to provide information on 83 (90%) of the young people (59 SSLD, 24 SEN) as some acted as PA for more than one of the young people. The majority of the PAs were employed by the two Partnerships that provided services to the two local authorities (LAs) where the longitudinal study has been located. In addition, the sample included PAs employed by eight other Partnerships in cases where one of the young people lived in another authority, for example having moved away from one of the original two LAs. This represents a one in five sample of Connexions Services in England (10 of 47).

Measures

Interview Schedule

A semi-structured interview schedule was devised for interviews with all PAs (a copy is available from the corresponding author/ see Appendix [depending on editor's decision]). This method provides a balance between consistency of subjects addressed and the opportunity for a wider exploration of the Interviewees' views. The interview explored the PA's background and role; training for supporting young people with SEN in general and SSLD in particular; their support of the individual young person(s) in the study; their views on post-16 destinations, including supports and barriers to successful transition; and their reflections on what had worked well in their engagement with the young person and what could have been improved. Each main question were accompanied by a series of probes to be used depending on the comprehensiveness of the interviewee's initial response.

Procedure

E-mail letters were sent to all PAs in the sample informing them of the study and seeking their agreement to an interview. Interviews were conducted by telephone at a pre-arranged time. The telephone interviews covered the PAs' employment background and role, training around supporting young people with SEN and with SSLD, an overview of involvement with the young person, looking ahead to post-16 destinations (including the supports and barriers to successful transition) and finally reflection on any areas that could be improved as well as those aspects that had worked well. The interviews were recorded with the interviewee's

permission and extensive fieldnotes taken at the time. A thematic analysis was carried out to identify the major themes emerging from the interviews.

Results

Personal Advisers

Background of Personal Advisers

The majority of the 46 PAs interviewed came from Careers Service backgrounds and had become Connexions PAs when the Partnerships were created. In this sense, they had had little choice about the change in their role and few responded positively to the question about what had attracted them to the PA role. Typical comments included:

> 'We changed to Connexions in 2002. It seems a long time because it's been quite hard work, I have to say. In all honesty, I wasn't attracted to the role but I was working for [careers company] when Connexions took over and, because of my domestic circumstances and the location, but also the fact that I've got a term-time contract I was reluctant to lose, I [stayed]…… There isn't many places where you can work as a careers adviser so there's little escape [from Connexions] from that point of view'. (PA3 Connexions County)

> 'I've been with Connexions for 5 years and I've been in the Careers Service for 20 years. […] I became a PA rather than applying to become one'. (PA11 Connexions Other 2)

A minority of the PAs interviewed came from other backgrounds, including social work, primary and secondary teaching, teaching in further and higher education, voluntary work, education welfare service and training consultancy. These people had actively chosen to become PAs and were more positive about what had attracted them to the role:

> 'I've been doing my job for three years. […] I wanted to do a job where I was listening and counselling and helping young people, people of all ages really, but also being involved in business and commerce and education so this is just perfect'. (PA19 Connexions City)

The distinction between PAs who had previously been Careers Advisers and those who had actively chosen to join Connexions and train as PAs was important. For example, in some cases, it seemed to be associated with attitudes to aspects of the work, such as views about the APIR Framework (see section below). Also, PA practice was, in part, regulated by this distinction. For example, in Connexions County, only PAs trained in careers guidance attended Transition Reviews for young people with statements of SEN.

Deployment models

The deployment models differed across the 10 Partnerships, as exemplified by the two Partnerships where most of the PAs were employed. In Connexions City, one main deployment decision was to have a mainstream team and a special needs team. The SEN team (specialist service) was based in one location and mainly worked with young people in the special schools across the city but also supported colleagues in the mainstream team by working with young people in mainstream schools who required additional support because of their SEN. The mainstream team were all located in another building but divided according to geographic sectors of the City. They were deployed according to the 'Parallel' model with most PAs working in schools but some working in the community. Within mainstream schools, PAs operated the 'Mini-team' model of one working with more complex cases and another (or others) working with the bulk of young people. For example, PA7 and PA22 worked in the same school in City. PA7 described their 'Mini-team' as follows:

> 'My training is careers whereas [PA 22] is more the Generic PA but we do work very much as a team to help the young people.
> *What is the difference between [PA22]'s role and your role?*
> I do the careers side but [PA22] does have extra resource to give young people extra help if they need any support with going for interviews or confidence building. She works a bit more with the Learning Mentors [employed by the school] than I do. Although, before the onset of Connexions, I used to do that role, since we've had Connexions, the Careers people do the careers side and the Generic PA covers a wide range of extra support for the young people but not for all of them, it's mainly the vulnerable young people. I do still work with some of the special needs students at school. I attend their transition reviews and help them with the transition into post-16, although, again, with [PA22]'s help. We very much work together.' (PA7 Connexions City)

In Connexions County, no distinction between mainstream and SEN teams was made; instead, the Connexions Partnership was organised into teams based in area offices. Interviews with PAs from six of these area offices indicated that, across the areas, there was some variation in deployment but the 'Parallel' model, predominated, with some PAs working in schools and others in the community. In both Connexions City and Connexions County, only a small number of the young people in our sample were supported by Community PAs and, in all cases, only after the end of their compulsory education. The four PAs covering the residential special schools in which young people in the study were being educated, each reported that their Connexions Partnership had specialist PAs working with young people with significant special needs.

PA roles

The interviews revealed a close link between deployment model and PA role. For example, the role of a PA working in the community differed from that of one working in a school which differed again from one working in a specialist SEN team. Four examples from Connexion City illustrate this.

The *Link PA* was the main Connexions contact for a school, negotiated the annual service level agreement and decided how best to use the PAs working in the school; this PA also provided careers guidance to all from Y9 upwards. The *Careers PA* provided careers advice and guidance to all from Y9 upwards. The *Generic PA* worked with non-attenders, the disengaged and those needing additional support (the title of 'Generic' PA could be considered to be at odds with the role which was, in fact, a specialist role but it referred to the fact that this PA was responsible for the *generic needs* of the young person). The *SEN PA* worked with those with SEN who required in-depth support.

In Connexions City, the range of different PA roles meant that, in practice, young people in the sample were supported by various combinations of PA types. For example, Young Person (YP) 1 was supported by a *SEN PA* because of his level of SEN; YP2 was supported by a *Generic PA* because he was struggling in school and at risk of disengaging from education. YP75 was seen by *Careers PAs* regarding the universal service offered to all young people, by the *SEN PA* in relation to specialist advice regarding planning for transition to a post-16 placement and by the *Generic PA* regarding targeted support to enhance social and leisure activities. The PA interviewed was pleased about how this support had all "*connected*" and resulted in the young person having a successful transition to post-16.

In Connexions County, the predominant role type was called a *Generic PA*. In contrast to this role title in Connexions City (where the title referred to the generic *needs* of the young person), in County the title referred to the generic *range* of young people supported by the PAs who worked across the whole range of needs and in different settings. Their caseloads included young people at school, in college and those not in education, employment or training (NEETs). As part of the *Generic PA* role, some PAs had developed a specialism such as careers guidance, special needs, homelessness or behaviour management. This model of a Generic PA with an area of expertise seems closer to that envisaged in the CSNU's vision statement than the multiple PA role types in Connexions City.

Caseloads

One consequence of the variety of PA roles across the 46 PAs interviewed was a range of caseloads, both in terms of numbers of active cases and types of need presented by the young people with whom they worked. Caseload varied depending on the PA role, particularly the balance struck between universal service (P1) targeted (P2) work and intensive (P3), as the following examples illustrate. PA3 was a Generic PA in Connexions County providing support at universal and targeted levels:

> 'I work in a school. I have quite a lot of the school youngsters on my [targeted] caseload but, in reality, I'm answerable to – the school has 200 Y11 and there's only me in there, apart from a tiny little bit of help from another PA, and so you could argue that my caseload is all of Y9, Y10 and Y11 and all the extra that I have from other agencies that I get referred – which is quite a lot. […] I've got a little group that have been referred through the Adolescent Response Team that are threatened with …. (being) excluded; I've got quite a few on my caseload that are part of a special needs group within the school ….. and quite a bulk of those are statemented; we've got Hospital and Outreach, which are young people that may have had a serious accident and are in mainstream school but need extra tutoring and help. I've got quite a handful of mental health issues and then I've got a mix of young people who will be very quick, in-and-out careers guidance queries.' (PA3 Connexions County, Generic PA)

In contrast, PA22 was a Generic PA working in Connexions City. Her caseload was mainly pitched at the targeted, rather than universal, level:

'As school is only part of my role, I only have a limited time to spend in there. I work with about 10 young people in school at any one time…..
Over your whole caseload, how many would you be working with?
Intensively, around about 20 to 25 young people. But I also operate a drop-in so I have young people calling in just for general advice, things like that, who I probably wouldn't work with long term but who I work with on a one of, or on a couple of occasions, just to help them move on.' (PA22 Connexions City,Generic PA)

Also called a Generic PA, PA11 worked in Connexions Other 2. He described caseloads in his Partnership as varying with role:

'I go in to three schools. In [school attended by YP30], their cohort is about 160 and I see Years 9, 10 and 11. I also do two other schools that I share so I suppose, in total, the caseload is about 1000 or 1200. I mean, that's *potential*. But obviously we have target ones that we make sure that we cover, particular groups. Plus I also do three days a month duty in the office. That's my kind of PA. Some of the other PAs who work in a different way will have case loads of 30 or 40.' (PA11 Connexions Other 2, Generic PA)

In Connexions City, PA19 worked for the SEN team. Although her caseload consisted exclusively of targeted young people with SEN, it covered those in special school, in integrated resources within mainstream schools and those who had left school but fell into the NEET category:

'I'm working with two secondary special schools and two integrated resources. [..] At the moment, the number I support is between 250 and 300 [includes nominal as well as active cases]. You see, I support them from 13 up until their 20th birthday so they stay on my caseload for quite number of years […] They give me a ring whenever they need help. I aim to follow them up *at least* twice a year as a sort of courtesy call and I make sure they are all set up and they all have got something. If they need help with their benefits – I try and make sure that, whatever it is that they need help with, be it benefits or transition to college or training or employment or sheltered employment, I try and make sure that I've done that. […] The other half of my caseload, I work with young people with special needs, age 16-19, who are NEETS. So I help them to access college or training or it might be sheltered employment, supported employment, that they need.' (PA19 Connexions City, SEN team PA)

In Connexions Other 6, PA33 also worked as a SEN PA. He described having his own caseload in a special school and being deployed, in the peripatetic 'Specialist' model, to support other PAs working with young people with SEN in mainstream schools:

'I've got one school that is exclusively mine which is [Name] Special School. We primarily concentrate on Years 9 and 11 so Year 10 is a slightly dormant year. Each of those years has roughly 12 young people. But I also then act as a specialist consultant to [six] mainstream schools where other colleagues work...... so half a dozen max in each so there is probably another 36, shall we say, there. Then there is also the ones who left school or college a while back and are now in the labour market – there might be another 10 or so there.' (PA33 Connexions Other 33, SEN PA)

Awareness of caseload issues – the range of needs supported, the numbers of young people worked with, the tension between universal level of delivery and targeted support – is an important background to the findings about Connexions' involvement with the young people in the sample, given that these young people were, in effect, random cases from among many others dealt with by the PAs interviewed. PA16 (Connexions City) illustrated this point well as she described her caseload of universal and targeted support: *"I actively work with 300 Y11s at [Name] School and about 120 at [Name] College, as well. That doesn't cover the group work and other things we do with younger ones so it's huge.".*

Training in SEN

Formal training around supporting young people with SEN was very limited in both Connexions City and County. For example, PA14 (Connexions County) had a part-time role as one of four training officers within the Partnership. Her role mainly involved supporting staff to take work-based qualifications. This interviewee acknowledged that training to support young people with SEN was *"a gap"* and *"a service weakness"*. Those new to the service were given a basic introduction and each year the service manager planned in-service training on a range of topics; training related to SEN had related to procedures, such as the statementing process, the Transition Review and completing Section 140s; in-service training had taken place on Asperger's Syndrome and the autistic spectrum but no training had related to young people with speech language and communications difficulties.

This was very similar to the situation in Connexions City where SEN training was mainly around procedures, such as Section 140 assessments or the Code of Practice for SEN. The

'Careers PAs' explained that they mainly learned about how to support such young people from experience built up over time, from advice and support from the SEN PAs and from building up a relationship with the SENCos in the schools where they worked, although a "*useful*" handbook provided information about post-16 options for young people with SEN. PAs reported that supporting young people with SEN had been included in the Careers Guidance Diploma but was not included (to the same extent) in PA training. Even the PAs in the specialist SEN team had had very limited formal training – one course on child protection for disabled children and one course on autism. They, too, learned from each other, from experience and from the special schools and specialist FE colleges with which they worked. One said, accessing training was a case of *"find it yourself"* and several mentioned that opportunities for training had been reduced because of financial problems in the partnership following a merger with the Youth Service.

In some of the other Connexions services, training on supporting young people with SEN was more readily accessible. For example, the PA interviewed from Connexions Other 8 reported that all PAs on the SEN team had a background in special needs. In addition, all new PAs did a 0.5 day on SEN which covered the range of needs, provision in the local area, and what the Section 140 assessments were for. This ensured that*, "at least everyone is aware of the generalities, even if not specifically involved"*. For the SEN team and all SENCos, every year, Connexions Other 8 provided an inset day of workshops and lectures on SEN. In addition, the SEN team had a day each year when they focused on a specific type of special need. The PA interviewed from Other 10 Connexions was unique among the interviewees in his very positive experience of SEN training provided by his Connexions Partnership and of support at management level for work with young people with "*disability*":
In his view, the training, leadership and specialist team of PAs resulted in a high quality of support for young people with special educational needs and an increasingly integrated, multi-agency style of working, as well as improved strategic planning:

> 'We are working with the LEAs with developing transition and materials, plus also procedures, to look at 14-plus transition. […] Over the past several years, […] we've moved to a point where we are not just responding to need, we are hoping to go one step above that and predict what clients are coming through and what provision to meet those needs. We're certainly using the multi-agency approach. That's the way we've been working for a while now.' (PA8 Connexions Other 10)

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Personal adviser support for the sample

Level of support

Given the variety within the Connexions Partnerships described above, it is not surprising that levels and types of PA involvement with the young people also varied enormously. One key determinant was the priority category given to each young person. National guidance suggests that young people with learning difficulties or disabilities should be supported at Intensive (P1) or Enhanced (P2) levels. Practice in Connexions County was to categorise young people with a statement of special educational needs as P2 (Enhanced) whereas in Connexions City and the other Connexions Partnerships involved in the research, such young people were categorised as P1 (Intensive). Based on the frequencies given in Table 1, across the sample of 92 young people, it was found that about two-thirds were prioritised at a targeted, rather than universal support level. In practice, however, it was clear that statutory obligations were being met for young people in the sample who had a statement of special education needs, regardless of the difference in categorisation between Connexions City and Connexions County.

<Table 1 here>

In Connexions County, one third of the sample (12 out of 37) were supported at the universal level (P3), not because this was thought to be appropriate, but because an unpopular and unwieldy referral system had been instituted, requiring schools to complete a detailed form for each young person. Schools varied in their willingness to do this, resulting in many young people not being referred to Connexions, and by default becoming P3s. This was known locally as 'Keep in Touch' support (KIT) and involved nothing more individual than an annual check-up phone call from the KIT workers in the Connexions office. Such young people had no named PA. This system was later scrapped but as a result of this system a number of the young people in the study had received no one-to-one Connexions support.

The cases where priority categories were changed (n = 5 – see Table 1) provided indicators of Connexions being responsive to young people's changing circumstances. However, PAs were often reliant on schools to alert them to such issues and were aware that young people whose circumstances changed, making them more vulnerable and in greater need of Connexions support to ensure a positive post-16 transition, sometimes slipped through the net because schools did not communicate the information to the PA. For example, YP7 (City SSLD group) was excluded from school in the spring term of Y11 and so did not sit his

GSCEs. His PA was disappointed that the Learning Mentors in school had not involved her earlier:

> 'I haven't worked with him [YP7] very long, …... He was referred to me in school, well, actually at the point where he moved out of school. He had some problems in school and he moved out to a different unit as opposed to being in mainstream school. […] I would have liked to have tried to prevent him from moving out of school. If he could have stopped in school, he might have been able to take his exams which would have been beneficial to him. ' (PA22, Connexions City)

Similarly, PA23 (Connexions City) was not alerted by the school to the increased needs experienced by YP23 (City SSLD group) in Year 11. YP23 had been highlighted in Y9 as a P1 because of being *"a weak student"* and had received some PA support in Y9 and Y10 but had missed PA support in Y11 because of missed appointments. It was only because of the researcher enquiring about this young woman that her changed situation was discovered by the PA. Because of rapidly deteriorating eyesight, YP23 had been moved out of mainstream school into the integrated resource (hence her missed appointments) but neither fact had been communicated to the PA.

Section 140 assessments (Learning and Skills Act 2000)

Section 140 of the Learning and Skills Act 2000 set out the statutory requirement for all young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities who were likely to carry on into post-16 education or training to have their educational and training needs assessed from Year 11 onwards. The assessments resulted in a written report of the young person's education and training needs and the provision required to meet them. (These reports are known as 'Section 140s.') It was the responsibility of Connexions Partnerships to complete a Section 140 for all those with a statement of SEN. PAs confirmed that Section 140s were produced for each young person in the sample who had a statement of SEN but practice varied. Sometimes, the PAs filled in the Section 140 assessment with the young person, sometimes on the basis of information from the young person. Often, the PA would also speak to the SENCo and TA prior to completing it. A copy would be sent to the young person and their parents for checking and any amendments made before it was forwarded to anyone else.

Overall, PAs interviewed regarded these as *potentially* key documents that contained much information about the strengths, weaknesses and interests of the young person and of their support needs post-16. In Connexions City, they were sent directly to the post-16 provider

once that was confirmed. This direct route was seen as important as it addressed the previous complaints of colleges and training providers that they did not receive enough information about young peoples' individual needs. It was also seen as putting a statutory responsibility (under the Disability Discrimination Act) on the post-16 provider to ensure the young person's needs were appropriately addressed:

> 'We fill in the Section 140 and then they get passed on to whichever institution or organisation the young person goes to post-16. If they go to [City] College, the college gets a copy; if they're going to E2E, the training provider gets a copy [etc]. I have to say, I think they are extremely valuable and important.
> *Why do you say that?*
> Previously, there's been no formal documentation of someone who, say, has been statemented since age 4 all the way to 16, so 10 years of their life where they have a statement from their LEA with regards to their disability and their special educational needs and then they leave at 16 and there is absolutely nothing – no formal documentation. The Section 140 is really valuable because it informs the next organisation who has contact with this young person what their disability is, how it affects them and what support they need. It's very practical, very practically useful.'
> (PA19, Connexions City)

A number of Connexion City PAs in City, however, were sceptical about how much regard was given by the colleges and training providers to meeting the needs of young people with SEN that were identified in the Section 140s.

> 'More cynical colleagues feel that, to quote one colleague, 'They're shoved in a bottom drawer somewhere and nobody ever looks at them'. In fact, […], I've been asked information by tutors throughout the year and when I say, 'Well, haven't you looked at the 140 assessment?', they have looked gobsmacked – 'What's a 140?''
> (PA13, Connexions City)

PAs required the young person's agreement in order to forward Section 140s to the post-16 provider and in two cases this was not given despite the PAs believing that the young person would benefit from their post-16 provider knowing about their additional needs (hearing impairment in one case and learning difficulties in another). In both instances, the PAs kept the Section 140 on record and intended to try to persuade the young person to allow them to pass it on to the college or training provider.

The Connexions APIR Framework

The Connexions Assessment, Planning, Implementation and Review (APIR) (CSNU 2001) consists of three elements (LSC, 2001) – the process of assessment, planning, implementation and review, a profiling sheet covering 18 factors, and the assessment profile in visual format. The visual profile is then discussed with the young person and a personal action plan drawn up. Levels of need are categorised on a five-point scale. Patterns of use of the APIR Framework varied both across and within Connexions Partnerships. In Connexions County, written guidance to PAs differentiated its use with young people categorised as P2 (Enhanced) and P1 (Intensive):

> 'Although the process of APIR is central to work with all young people, the extent to which all elements of the framework are applied in practice will vary depending on the level of need of the young person and the amount of support required to identify and address those needs. […] [For Enhanced] young people who are at risk of disengaging […] [the PA] will need to conduct assessment across the full range of issues that might affect a young person (i.e. the 18 factors) and where it is helpful to the young person, to use the profiling kit to support their assessment and to produce some or all of an assessment profile. […] [For Intensive] young people, personal advisers must utilise all elements of the APIR Framework. […]' (From a Connexions County document provided to the researcher)

As County Connexions categorized young people with statements as P2s (unless there were additional issues), using the APIR in such cases was not compulsory. As one PA put it, *"We tend to use it more with Intensive young people. If you have an Intensive client, we tend to have to do it within six weeks of having them on our records."* However, PAs also talked about not finding it valuable: *"I'm not keen on the APIR. I don't see its value."*; as unnecessary because *"a lot of it is very linked to the careers guidance process anyway"*, and as unsuitable for the particular young person;

> 'I suppose of all the youngsters I've come across, he's one of the most intimidating. He can be quite difficult to work with on a 1:1 and so that's why I've used the vehicle of informal group sessions to try to get things over to him.' (PA3, Connexions County)

PA7 (Connexions County) went through the process because it was compulsory but did so without telling the young people concerned, gathering information from staff at school, the parents and conversations with the young person. This contrasted with the benefits gained by PA12 when the APIR was used with YP45:

'I did, with [YP45], yes. […] I reviewed it a few weeks ago and we can see, with the wheel, how it's moving in and out the circle. With [YP45], there has been a significant sort of up and down with her but they are more social issues than educational.' (PA12, Connexions County)

In Connexions City, statemented young people were categorised as P1 (Intensive). However, guidance to PAs stated that the APIR needed only to be used with complex cases, involving factors arising outside of the broad education and employment area. City PAs articulated this distinction in their interviews, often explaining that it was only the Generic PAs who were expected to use it but a number also expressed reservations about the APIR process, regarding it as duplicating other assessment processes:

'I have had APIR training. I haven't used them and I'm not sure if this is a national thing but certainly for the organisation that I work for, we've taken the view that, if a young person is going to have or has a Section 140 assessment, we don't do an APIR as well. Plus, I've actually found that virtually all the information you need to complete an APIR, you get in an Annual Review or in a Social Services Review. Some disabled young people aren't able to communicate their needs or their situation and they need other people to do it on their behalf. So it's not worth it and I think I am right in saying that the statement from the LEA takes precedence over an APIR.' (PA19, Connexions City)

As in Connexions County, when a PA had used APIR, it was found to be useful. For example, PA22 a Generic PA, used it to support her work with YP7 who had been excluded from school in Year 11:

'I have completed the APIR with [Name] and done an Individual Development Plan with him. Yes, the APIR was quite useful because, from my point of view, it helped me to build up a better picture of him. We started it on our first meeting as a way of me gathering information and building up a picture of him and it helped us to look at where he wanted to go and what might help him to get to that stage.' (PA22 Connexions City)

Another Generic PA had used the APIR with YP74 but had found he had to simplify the language to engage the young person in the process:

> '[YP74] has moderate to severe learning difficulties. He's quite a shy person. He does have a language and communication [difficulty] and poor inter-personal skills….. When you're working with vulnerable young people, people like [YP74], sometimes you have to prompt that person. He's often very shy and often he doesn't really understand the question. Often, it's a fact that we have to simplify the question so he has an understanding and also prompt him. Not prompt him with the answer we want to hear, but to prompt him into giving an answer […].' (PA6, Connexions City)

The PAs interviewed from other Connexions Partnerships also revealed a range of views and practice relating to the APIR Framework. For example, there was some evidence that negative attitudes towards the APIR were related to professional resistance to the whole philosophy underpinning Connexions. Other PAs explained that APIR was used at a basic level in conjunction with a Section 140 for young people with a statement of special educational needs. In other areas, there was also some indication that practice was changing: *"I do use [APIR] now but I didn't with* [YP30]" (PA11, Connexions Other 2).

Discussion

This study has explored the support offered to two groups of young people, those with SSLD and those with SEN, at the time up to their transition from school to the post-16 world of education, training and work. The focus has been on the Connexions service, which is charged with the primary role in this process. As set out by the government at its inception (Department for Education and Employment, 1999), the aim of Connexions was to ensure all young people had the chance to make a success of adult life by providing a coherent, integrated pathway to adult and working life for all young people, and accessible, targeted support for the most vulnerable. This was a major challenge: it could be argued it was a tall order.

There has been concern for many years about the high proportion of young people in England who are not in employment, training or work (NEET) post-16. Various government initiatives including new qualifications and training schemes designed in part to be seen as more attractive and relevant have had relatively little impact on improving these rates

(Roberts, 2004). One such approach, 'graduation' was proposed as a means to motivate this NEET group (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999). However, this was found to have potential benefit for more socially advantaged, educationally successful young people: those with lower levels of qualification at 16, the socially disadvantaged and those with SEN were *less* likely to benefit (Lindsay, 2003; Lindsay & Maguire, 2002).

The present study of the Connexions service in supporting transition was based on two cohorts of young people whose development had been monitored since primary education (Key Stage 2). These were vulnerable young people with a history of low attainment which continued to be the case up to Y11 (Dockrell et al, 2007). Focussing on subgroups of young people is important for the understanding of a process as complex of transition, including the tendency of young people to withdraw from education and training. A recent literature review identified 22 different factors which contribute to this process, leading the authors to argue that withdrawal from education and training is multi-causal, variable and co-constructed and hence requires careful examination of the different factors relevant for different groups and individuals (Stanley & Wahlberg, 2007).

The Department for Education and Skills (2007) argued that there should be targeted youth support in each area focusing on at-risk young people within a universal service. Connexions was one of the services highlighted as having a key role in this endeavour. However, an early concern about the Connexions service was its ability to provide both universal support for all and targeted support to those most needy or at risk, for example of becoming NEET post-16 (Grove & Giraud–Saunders, 2003). Young people in rural areas had an added disadvantage in having less contact with a PA than their peers in urban areas (Bradley & Barratt, 2003). In the present study these factors were found also to interact with patterns of deployment of personal advisers (PAs). Connexions City had decided to separate the universal and targeted roles which were carried out by different groups of PAs, a pattern repeated in the Connexions services supporting the young people in residential special schools. In Connexions County by contrast, PAs combined both roles.

The relationship between universal and specialist services is complex. In part, as demonstrated here, the issue is practical: how to deploy resources to meet the conflicting aims and requirements of each type of service. In addition, there is a conceptual issue. 'Universal' may mean open to all *and* provided to and taken up by all. However, it may mean open to all as an *option*. The resource implications differ with each interpretation. The concept of specialist is less about take up, more concerned with definition of the degree of specialist provision. This will influence both level of resources, for example by defining the

percentage of the population to be addressed, and also the nature of these resources, for example the numbers, types and level of expertise of different staff. Connexions is available and provided to all young people but the nature of the specialist service may vary between local authorities. In addition to any policy decision regarding relative resource allocation to different targeted groups the nature of a specialist service will also depend on the expertise of Connexions staff available.

The tensions between generic and specialist roles for PAs mirror those facing many other helping professions including educational psychologists and medical practitioners. Fundamental to the PA context was level of training. Connexions has largely developed out of the previous Careers Service and PAs in the present study were also characterised overall by having a Careers Service background. Some careers officers had specialist roles but the Connexions role was intended to be broader. Combining responsibilities to deliver a universal and targeted service presented substantial challenges, leading PAs in the newly formed service to recommend splitting the roles (Grove & Giraud–Saunders, 2003) although Rodger and Marwood (2003) reported that a combined 'single PA' role was expected to evolve and be in operation by 2005. This was not the case in one of the main Connexions services in this study. Furthermore, the decision by Connexions City to locate the mainstream and special teams in separate places was not best designed to engineer such a development.

A Connexions service that included specialist PAs might be expected to have staff available who had relevant experience and expertise to offer. However, training in SEN was very limited across the services. Some in-service professional development was arranged but this could not reasonably provide more than a limited awareness. Even specialist SEN PAs had had little formal training. Consequently, there was a limited knowledge and skill level for PAs working with the young people in the present sample. Learning from each other and 'find it yourself' is a limited basis on which to develop a profession providing advice to young people as they make this important transition from school to post-16.

In practice, there was evidence of a greater differentiation of PA roles: link, generic, careers and SEN PA roles were all identified. The benefits of such an approach are only achievable, however, if there is an appropriate match between the PA role and young person's needs. Failure to get this right may result in young people being misplaced with a less appropriate PA, or duplication of effort. We found evidence of young people receiving different PA support, not optimally matched to need, and also evidence of young people receiving support from more that one PA. Although there were instances where this appeared to be

working relatively satisfactorily, as evidenced by a successful transition to post-16, questions of efficiency and cost-effectiveness remain.

The Connexions service was designed to offer a wider range of support than a focus on careers guidance. The role includes both assessment and intervention and the Assessment Planning, Implementation and Review (APIR) framework was designed to assist PAs to optimize their service by assessment of needs followed by appropriate planning and implementation. The PAs in the present study varied in their judgement of the APIR's usefulness but it was more likely to be used with young people with more complex needs. Prior history of a statement of special educational needs was a trigger to viewing the young person as requiring the higher level of support (Intensive). There were, however, doubts whether this assessment added to that available from the statement of special educational needs or of a social services review. Furthermore, the expertise available to Connexions staff to identify, even diagnose, a young person's difficulties has been questioned (Stanley & Wahlberg, 2007) so undermining the claim that data held by Connexions is a good basis for planning, especially to tackle the NEET problem (SHM, 2006).

The completion of assessments under Section 140 of the Learning and Skills Act 2000 is a statutory requirement for all young people with statements of SEN. These were completed on all appropriate young people in the present study but practice differed and there were concerns about how much notice was taken by colleges and training providers; some PAs reported college staff not having heard of these documents. This lack of communication could be compounded by the requirement that the young person agreed to the information being passed on. This is an admirable principle and one element in a necessary process of empowering young people with SEN and disabilities (Shah, 2005). However, if the information is indeed helpful, it is important that it is communicated to those with a need to know. This requires young people to be supported to give this consent coupled with the requirement that the information itself is helpful.

Conclusions

Transition from school to post-compulsory education, training and work is a crucial time in the development of all young people. For young people with a history of SEN this is even more so as they typically have a history of educational difficulties and lower achievement often accompanied by problems in their behavioural, emotional and social development. Supporting transition is not only a question of planning for the first step post-school. Rather, it is important to consider this as part of a longer developmental process that supports each

young person on the next stage of their lives. Whatever the immediate post-16 activity, the young person will move on subsequently to either further education or training or work. Connexions was envisaged as a method to improve transition by providing more support over an extended period and avoid the lack of positive progression previously identified (Dyson, Meagher & Robson, 2002). The present study suggests that Connexions can make a positive contribution. There are structural and resource issues to address, not least the need for specialist PAs with appropriate training. However, it is important to recognize also the following aspects: education and training provided, that is the curricular dimension; the nature of the provision, including the support provided in an FE college or training setting; and the individual factors concerning each young person which enhance resilience or limit opportunities, including past educational achievement, family support and personal attitudes (Lindsay & Maguire, 2002; Newman & Blackburn, 2002).

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Figure 1   Rodger & Marwood's 'Models of PA deployment'

- *'parallel model'* - PAs worked in *either* education settings *or* in the community
- *'PA mini-team'* – two or three PAs, usually working in a school, divided the caseload with one taking complex cases and the other/s the more routine cases
- *'specialist teams'* – PA teams which either managed all the caseload where young people had a particular need *and/or* built the capacity of other PAs to work with all young people, including those with more complex needs
- *'multi-agency teams'* – PAs worked within existing multi-agency teams, such as a Youth Offending Team (YOT)
- *'absorption model'* – whereby PAs were integrated into the staff team of a partner organisation
- *'independent employment model'* – staff were recruited and independently funded and employed as PAs

Source: Rodger, J. and Marwood, K. (2003). *Formative Research into the Deployment, Role and Training of Connexions Personal Advisers*. Nottingham.: DfES Publications.

Table 1   **Priority categorisations of the sample young people (Total N=92)**

	City group N=46		County group N=37		Residential school group N=9
	SSLD (n=31)	SEN (n=15)	SSLD (n=24)	SEN (n=13)	SSLD (n=9)
Priority 1	22	9	4	3	7
Priority 2	1	0	10	5	0
Priority 3	4	2	8	4	0
Priority change	2	2	1	0	0
Priority level missing	1	0	0	0	0
Missing information	1	2	1	1	2