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# **Students with Special Needs: A Paradigm for the Transition From School to College in the United Kingdom**

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## **Abstract**

*During 1996, a research project to examine the transition for students from United Kingdom (U.K.) special schools to post school education was undertaken by Salford University and Oakwood "Special School" to (a) assess what Oakwood students felt about their change of circumstance and environment, (b) obtain the views of parents as to their optimal scenario for this change, and (c) suggest a mentoring model to facilitate transition from school to college for "special needs" students. The project resulted in the construct of a bi-institutional mentoring model and process that would enhance student progression and provide educational continuity for "special needs" students.*

Transition from school to post mandatory education is a matter for concern in the U.K. Contextually, the wide ranging nature of the educational legislation imposed by the Conservative government since 1979 has literally introduced an educational market place. The weakening of the city/regions power to control and coordinate education by the removal of schools and colleges from local financial management, direction and accountability has meant a breakdown of previous geographical planning, cooperation and educational coherence. The vacuum has been filled by free standing and financially autonomous educational institutions that compete for funds and students. Competition has replaced collaboration within and between educational phases with institutions being encouraged by the Conservative government "to think of themselves and to act as individual units" (Vincent & Evans, 1995).

The development of a conceptual framework that would allow educational transition to be regarded and acted upon as a unitary process is hence delayed. Each educational stakeholder meets and copes with issues in isolation. There is commonality in each separate thesis but little in terms of developing an antithesis or synthesis. In the interim, there is student drift and the nonoptimisation of scarce resources and expertise. Nowhere

is this laissez-faire scenario more evident than in the special school field. Structured and institutionally legitimised transition programmes are few and far between. Those that exist are the product of individual efforts by committed educators working at a micro level. Whole institutional involvement and legitimacy of transition and attendant progression is a rarity. This scarcity of planned and formalised programmes provided the rationale for the project.

Oakwood is a designated "special needs" school in the north west of England for students in the secondary phase of education (11 to 16-year-olds). It caters specifically to (a) students with moderate learning difficulties (MLD), these include learning difficulties faced by individuals who are assessed as operating below their actual chronological age; (b) students with specific learning difficulties (SLD), these include dyslexia, language disorders, global developmental disorders; (c) students with emotional or behavioural difficulties; (d) students with visual, speech or communication difficulties; and (e) students with physical disabilities (PD) such as spina bifida; spastic quadriplegic; hydrocephalus.

Oakwood has a student body of 152 drawn from the inner city areas/wards. The school has 18 teachers, 18 teaching assistants and 3 designated "helpers." A 1996 government inspection praised the school for its educational qualities, noting students exhibited good learning skills, attitudes and achieved appropriately in relation to their abilities. Special commendation was made by the Inspectors in regard to the schools commitment to obtaining external qualifications for the students at the age of 16 (year 11, the final year of mandatory education in the U.K.).

The destination points for the year 11 student leavers cohort of 1996 sample (n = 18, 50% of the 36 total) included (a) Further Education Colleges (FE) 50% n = 9, (b) privately run training schemes 16.7% n = 3, (c) employment 5.6% n = 1. However nearly 28%, a substantial number were lost or removed from the system. Given the interest in transition (Cunningham & Davis, 1985), this study attempts to explore the issue and possibility of establishing a model to optimise transition from school to post mandatory education. Government funds were obtained to examine the position of year 11 students and the potential role of special schools in supporting and encouraging special needs students onto the next phase of education via an institutionally based mentoring model.

The emphasis on developing a schools/FE mentoring model as a fulcrum for easing transition arose as (a) the majority of Oakwood leavers followed the FE route, and (b) the potential to explore a workable transition model to deliver quality post mandatory education for special needs students was enhanced by local FE interest.

Central to the research were the individual interviews held with Oakwood's 1995 and 1996 leavers and their parents. It was felt their opinions and judgements on education must provide the cornerstone for any recommendations. Arguably, successful planning of coherent access to local educational opportunities will only be valid if potential users have a recognised input in determining the construction of appropriate educational and transition models.

## **Methods**

An operational approach was agreed upon with Oakwood that combined a mix of qualitative and quantitative surveys, discussions with key stakeholders, discussions with other local special schools, meetings with FE college principals, and meetings with a random sample of Oakwood students and their parents. The overarching theme was to reflect on the present conditions for special needs students and to address the concerns of their parents regarding post mandatory education via (a) facilitating a model for school to FE transition, and (b) enabling, if possible, enhanced uptake of postmandatory education.

Underpinning these objectives was the belief that the national commitment to lifelong education must include and apply to students with special needs.

## **Subjects**

The starting point was the experiences of the Oakwood leavers cohorts of 1995 and 1996. A random sample (based on Bell's 1931 sampling methodology) of 50 % of the 28 1995 cohort and 50% of the 36 1996 leavers was undertaken. A subject base of (a) 14 from the 1995 cohort (7 male and 7 female), and (b) 18 from the 1996 cohort (9 male and 9 female) was established. Each selected student and one corresponding parent was interviewed. Parents were contacted and involved as arguably the situation of special needs students requires consideration in a familial context. The role of parents and their views are of heightened importance, especially in terms of the critical transition phase. As such it was determined that their opinions would be sought.

The students and parents forming this sample base were predominately from the inner city. A substantial number of both student cohorts come from one-parent low-income homes and/or families dependent on varied state and welfare benefits. Many of the parents are in relatively low-income employment and/or are unemployed. The educational backgrounds and qualifications held by the bulk of the parents involved is below the national average.

## **Instrumentation**

These interviews were conducted by two university staff with educational backgrounds that included teaching at school, FE college and university levels as well as educational inspection/ auditing experience. Both staff had previous involvement with transition issues in terms of the practicalities of overseeing the change over phases at institutional and at city/regional levels.

Both staff used standard and common questionnaires and agreed upon standard prompts for interviews to elicit student and parent response on experiences and expectations. The questionnaires and interview prompts were based on the format established by SKILL (Corbet, 1990) designed to obtain assessments of educational facilities from those most immediately involved and affected. Considerable care was taken not to deviate from a planned process and to this end interviews operated with one researcher consistently

being a silent presence at the other researchers sessions. Interviewee elaboration's were sifted out by both researchers after each individual session.

Over a six-month period in 1996, a total of 125 hours was spent gathering data from Oakwood students and parents. The 1995 cohort of students and parents proved hardest to contact. The 1995 parents were the most elusive but their reflection was, it was felt, critical as they were in a better position to reflect and judge from a broader base than the 1996 parents. Their children had left and hence had new points of reference that would help in their own reflective process. All 14 parents of the 1995 cohort were eventually contacted and collectively provided some interesting data.

Additionally some 23 hours were spent on less structured interviews involving (a) two special school principles, (b) the local Careers Advisory service, (c) the regional education officer responsible for special needs, and (d) four FE college principals. These sessions were hard to arrange given the respondents varied schedules. However, it was felt that the views of these "other" interested parties was essential to the study. Due to the respondents schedules, this cluster of interviews involved one researcher only. All data generated was subsequently discussed and refined by both researchers to ensure conformity to the previously agreed interview format.

## **Results**

The outcome of the interviews with the 1996 students revealed, among other things, a 94% satisfaction level with their school experiences and some 78% highlighted a satisfaction and attachment to the schools academic and pastoral staff. In relation to academic work, 38% noted a satisfaction with their curricular experiences. In terms of their leaving Oakwood, 72% expressed an anxiety in regard to this imminent event.

As a comparison, the 1995 leavers cohort of (n = 14) also regarded their Oakwood experience as worthwhile. Some 71% expressed a satisfaction with the schools academic and pastoral staff and 78% remembered their peer group interaction as being supportive and rewarding. Interestingly, 57% still remembered and expressed satisfaction with their curricular experiences. Notably also, a high 71% satisfaction level with their school experience was returned. The post school destinations of this 1995 cohort were varied with the FE college outlet dominant. Despite this and the potential for progressive development it entailed, 36% noted that their present environments were less than optimal in terms of self development, concrete or academic benefits.

Each parent of the 1996 cohort was contacted. In total, 16 out of 18 responded to the interview requests that were based on a standard questionnaire and discussion prompt. The results show that 100% were satisfied with Oakwood's physical facilities; 80% were satisfied with the pastoral and support systems, and 80% were satisfied with the curriculum and standard of teaching provided. On the issue of impending transition from school 68% claimed they left the next step choices up to their children. However, this laissez-faire spirit gave way to stronger feelings when the group were asked about the preparation for transition itself. Some 80% felt that this preparation was inadequate and

80% again strongly supported an extra transition preparation year to enhance the social and life skills of their children.

The views of the parents of the 14 ex-students from the 1995 cohort was also canvassed. The majority (85%), were satisfied with Oakwood's physical facilities, 78% were satisfied with the pastoral and support systems, and 71% were satisfied with the curriculum and standard of teaching their child received. In terms of their judgment on Oakwood's preparation of students for transition, 57% felt it was satisfactory. Of the 43% who did not share this view, the key factor identified was that their son/daughter still required academic and pastoral support at the post school phase. However, despite this anxiety, only 43% of this overall cohort favoured an extra school year as a preparation period for transition.

To cross reference the Oakwood data interviews were arranged with principals of two other special schools. The first school catered to 11 to 16-year-olds with physical and sensory learning difficulties. Its principal was in favor of an extra school year to prepare her students for transition. As an addendum, the use of specialist school staff as a physical support to work in and to underpin the transition to post mandatory FE college education was suggested by her. The second principal of a special school for 11 to 16-year-old students with behavioural problems covered similar ground. This principal endorsed the potential of using her staff as a physically supportive element to bridge and underpin the transition to post mandatory education. A suggestion of using her school to teach parts of the post school curriculum was strongly advocated as an enabling mechanism to facilitate this problematic period.

Other interested parties included the local careers advisory service. The view here was that, whatever the post school outlet of a student, there needed to be extra and flexible support provided by experienced practitioners familiar to the specific student. This thesis was endorsed by the regions specialist Education Advisor for special needs at a later interview.

Meetings were also held with the FE college sector. Colleges who took part included a (a) large inner city college with 12,000 students, (b) multi site college of 4,000 students drawn from an urban overspill area, (c) vocational college with 5,000 students, and (d) large (15,000 students) community college in Liverpool.

The Observations made by the respective principals were illuminating. Each welcomed the possibility of schools/college partnerships based on transition being viewed as a process. Working in tandem with special needs schools/staff was welcomed in terms of (a) an injection of additional expertise and specialist premises, (b) the potential to enhance the uptake of post school education by special needs students, and (c) the potential to enhance and maintain higher retention rates of special needs students in colleges.

All four principals felt that a partnership approach, predicated on transition as a process, would be beneficial as the specialist school and its staff could provide key "bridging"

elements to underpin the movement to post mandatory education. It was argued that the added value this would contribute would include (a) an active physical and underlying support to transition, (b) pastoral support for the special needs student through a direct schools/staff input on college premises, (c) academic core skills and development support for the school student prior to his/her move to the college, and (d) social and life skills development and support in the college to lessen the recourse to residential centres (largely removed from the students home community).

## **Discussion**

Analysis of the data suggest a possible future pathway. A caveat must, however, be entered in that finances made this a relatively narrow project and conclusions must be seen in this context.

Our findings suggests that the issue of transition for special needs school students is still largely regarded and dealt with as a one off event. Despite the exhalations of the HMI that "the pressing need at all levels are for far more carefully planned support to ensure smooth transition to the next phase of education" (HMI 24/91/NS/PI) and the recent and similar attempts by the DFEE (DFEE 1993; DFEE 1994) and the FEFC (FEFE, 1996) to create a supportive and unified process for transition, it is valid to contend that (a) transition has remained a dissociated occurrence, (b) this dissociation has meant a lost opportunity as valuable expertise (resources and staff) is not utilised to help special needs students onto the next phase, and (c) subsequently societal losses in terms of potential revenue generation and in terms of a "drift" producing a cadre of young people failing to access continual education is evident and will persist in the U.K.

Ironically, all the stakeholders interviewed shared our appreciation of the common issues and potential remedies. Most students and their parents welcomed the curricular/pastoral support the school had supplied and felt that an extra school year would further empower and prepare them for transition. Some felt that a carryover of an Oakwood input post school would be an optimal scenario by providing a "bridging" arrangement whereby familiar and experienced staff were present in the new context. Principals and staff of special schools also highlighted the benefits of extra time at school and the use of schools staff as the physical element to "bridge" the transition phase. Both the regions Educational Advisor and the Careers Advisory service revealed concerns that extra support was required in the post school context. Principals of the FE college sector were emphatic as to the benefits schools based staff/resources could bring. All four college principals expressed an interest in using school staff as a bridge to underpin the problematic transition period.

Each stakeholder identified common factors in the equation and it is possible to contend that what we have witnessed is a series of parallel but common cause paradigms. Each group because of historic and contemporary political circumstances which have created a competitive ethos in U.K. education (Haviland, 1988) related narrowly and only to its own paradigm.

We contend that what is required is a coalescing of the strands that have been expressed by these stakeholders. The data suggests a route towards a model predicated upon transition being regarded as a process. The model is based on three assumptions. First, transition must be seen as a phase in any persons life. The drift of special needs students away from post mandatory educational provision is liable to increase if transition is not carefully planned and supported. Second, transition must be regarded by stakeholders as a collaborative and unitary process rather than a dissociated event that separately effects schools and colleges. Third, we must have in the schools sector staff who are "skilled in the management of learning and the development of personal programmes" (HM1 24/ 9 I/NS, p. 5) and who can offer much to colleagues in the post mandatory educational phases.

What is proposed is that post school establishments that deal with special needs students enter an institutionally based mentoring relationship with special schools. Mentoring is an established process of constructive intervention. In its broadest sense, the concept involves encouraging those further advanced to lend advice and support to those with less experience. Historically, mentoring has been associated with individuals guiding other individuals in a nonjudgmental manner. As a concept, it is possible to use mentoring on an institution to institution basis: a move from the micro to the macro. There is an abundance of experienced and empathetic educators in special schools. It is conceivable that they can carry over this personal and institutional experience to the next educational phase. Their institution could act as the mentor and the school staff could bridge across into the post 16 arena via (a) working in the colleges premises, (b) the colleges contracting part of their curriculum and appropriate special needs students back to the school for limited periods of time or for specific modules of study (study skills; life/social skills), and (c) collaborative cross phase planning and construction of post 16 teaching modules with school-based staff bringing to bear their specific expertise (especially in terms of encouraging students to review and reflect on their own educational progress).

Essentially this bi-institutional mentoring model is a return to collaborative working. It is the crossover of ideas and good practice between institutions under the guidance of the more experienced school institution. The variant is that, unlike traditional mentoring, this bridging between educational phases will involve school staff and resources/premises when necessary. The model actively acknowledges that transition, as a process requires active collaboration. It acknowledges the transferable experience in the school sector which will, if carried over, benefit and encourage the take-up of post mandatory education by special needs students.

If this scenario is acceptable, there must be certain preconditions. As in all mentoring, participants should agree upon a contract containing three key elements. It is suggested that these key elements have the following three possible strands:

1. *Planning and constructing a mentoring model.* This should be guided by (a) the need to draft and publish statements of shared institutional values/principles, (b) the evolution of a shared understanding of potential outcomes, (c) a bi-institutional commitment to resource and implement the model, (d) bi-institutional commitment to joint training of

participating staff, (e) a lead from the hierarchy of each participating institution in terms of establishing, and involvement with a steering group, and (f) the construct of a bi-institutional model.

2. *Principles for delivery.* These should include (a) bi-institutional commitment to consultation and the empowerment of students and their parents, and (b) the bi-institutional commitment to transition as a process that will enable the successful progression of students.

3. *Principles for agreed practice.* These should include (a) detailed service specifications for each partner institution, (b) the acceptance and accreditation of students' prior learning achievement/experience, and (c) the identification of key stages in the transition process and each institution's responsibility at that stage.

This model and the contract to substantiate it, if effectively organised, will give an opportunity for transition to be seen and handled as a process. Potentially it could unify the presently separated but common-cause paradigms and hence afford an opportunity to extend post mandatory education for special needs students. If effectively organised, it can offer students in the system, and those who have drifted out of the system, the opportunity of familiar and experienced support. This added value, given our findings, will be attractive to special needs students and will enhance their participation in terms of the declared U.K. national objective of a life long educational culture.

There is a case for further exploration and work on this model. There is also a case for work on the whole issue of students at transition. Our study suggests that, at a minimum there is a case for dialogue and negotiations to begin to establish and implement the commonly agreed concept of transition as a process. There is need for this dialogue and supporting structural activity as society cannot afford to waste the resources and talent previously lost during this "period of floundering" (Bradley 1994) known as transition.

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*See DFEE Education Act 1993 (DFEE publication) and Code of Practice 9194 (DFEE publication)*

*See FEFC Students with Learning Difficulties and/or Disabilities FEFC Publications. 96101.*

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## **Glossary**

*DFEE* Department for Education and Employment. The National government department with oversight for educational issues nationally.

*FE* Further Education. Post school education provided in colleges that equate with the American community or junior colleges. It is an area distinct from and separate to the university sector.

*FEFC* Further Education Funding Council. The National body charged with oversight of financing FE colleges.

*FEU* Further Education Unit, now Further Education Development Unit (FEDA). FEDA acts as the research and curriculum development arm of the FE college system.

*HMI* Her Majesty's Inspector of Education. Responsible for the national inspection/auditing of educational provision and standards in the U.K.

*LEA* Local Education Authority. The local city/regional body with oversight for education in its area.

*NFER* National Foundation for Educational Research. A long established independent research body on educational matters.

*SKILL* The national association for students with disabilities that operates as a pressure group in the U.K.

*TEC* Training and Enterprise Council: A national government sponsored body charged with promoting vocational and commercial training in a given geographical area.

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The terminology "special school" and "special needs" student is used throughout as it is the official UK designation for students with learning difficulties and/or physical disabilities that require additional attention. Special schools are government designated educational establishments that provide this additional attention. Other terms specific to the UK are presented in the glossary at the end of this article.

### **About the Authors**

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