THE EXPERIENCES AND SUPPORT OF SCHOOL-LEAVERS WITH SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIOURAL DIFFICULTIES

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Abstract

The transitional experiences and support of school-leavers with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties

Zoe O’Riordan, PhD, University of Manchester, 2011

Times of transition offer the greatest potential for changing direction, for better or worse in young people’s lives. Yet it seems that many young people with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD) fail to make the most of this window of opportunity as they make the transition out of school into adult life. Existing research into the transitional experiences and outcomes of school-leavers with SEBD reveal that they experience high levels of unemployment, drug and alcohol abuse, mental health problems and involvement in criminal activity, with the consequent costs, social and economic, to the individual and society being too great to ignore. However, whilst there is evidence on the outcomes of this group (predominantly from the US) there is little research into the processes which influence their success or failure in transition.

Therefore, this study aimed to develop an in-depth understanding of the transitions of a small group of school leavers with SEBD, by following them for the first 15 months out of school. I collected interview data from the participants, their parents and those working with them, which was subjected to thematic and narrative analysis and used to develop individual case studies. The case studies were subjected to within- and cross-case analysis, which facilitated understanding of the individual’s influences and pathways, and extraction of common themes.

The school-leavers took widely varying paths, and were subject to a range of influences on an individual, family, and institutional level. These influences operated in complex and interactive ways, and each participant’s experience was unique. However, there were common themes which emerged from the cross case analysis. On a practical level, the main influences of the participants’ transitions were:

- their personal drive, goal motivation, perseverance and likeability;
- the capacity of their families to provide all forms of support (emotional, esteem practical and informational), or for professional supporters to fill any gaps;
- the quality of the communication channels between all those working with them;
- the capacity of their post-16 provision to fulfil their social and emotional as well as educational needs;
- the formation of productive relationships with their workers, and the extent to which the institutions they attended supported their development.

The study also had a theoretical dimension being underpinned by bioecological understandings of development and rooted in the concept of resilience. The presence of supportive relationships in the participants’ lives was a key influence on their resilience in coping with transition. The application of identity theory to the data helped to explain how these relationships developed and how supportive relationships in one context helped the young person to cope in a situation in which they were unsupported.
Declaration

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

Over eight million pupils were attending school in 2008, of which about 158,000 (just under 2%) were identified as having social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD), with just 30,220 (0.4% of the total school population) having difficulties severe enough to warrant a statement (Department of Education, 2011). Yet this very small proportion of pupils present a huge problem for schools: they can make teaching impossible, disrupt the education of other pupils and absorb highly disproportionate amounts of time and resources. Of those who are Statemented, over 13,000 (42%) are educated in special schools (Department of Education, 2011) at vast expense. The average cost of educating a child in mainstream secondary school is around £5,200 a year. A day pupil place at one of the schools involved in this study costs £60,000 a year, whilst a residential place costs £90,000, according to their Ofsted report (reference withheld to preserve anonymity).

This would be a worthwhile investment if it resulted in the children becoming well-adjusted, productive members of society. However, having absorbed greatly disproportionate resources throughout their education, pupils with SEBD leave school with fewer qualifications on average than other pupils, both with and without SEN. 66% of pupils with no identified SEN leave school with 5 A*-C grade GCSEs (including maths and English). But whilst 20.2% of all pupils with SEN achieve this, it is only managed by 14.1% of pupils with SEBD (Department of Education, 2010).

And they do not leave their problems at the school gate. Once they leave school, research suggests that they experience high levels of under- and unemployment, drug and alcohol abuse, criminality, homelessness and mental health problems. These findings come from studies in the UK, US and New Zealand, among others over more than two decades (Bradley, Doolittle, & Bartolotta, 2008; Casey, Davies, Kalambouka, Nelson, & Boyle, 2006; Hornby & Witte, 2008; Polat & Farrell, 2002; Polat,
Kalambouka, Boyle, & Nelson, 2001; Wagner, 1995; Wood & Cronin, 1999). Therefore, for many young people with SEBD, the huge amount of money and other resources put into their education seem to be wasted, and the consequences for the individuals, their families and wider society are severe.

Times of transition offer the greatest potential for changing direction, for good as well as bad in young people’s lives (Dearden, 2004; Smokowski, Reynolds, & Bezruczko, 1999). Yet it seems that many young people with SEBD fail to make the most of this window of opportunity as they make the transition out of school and into adult life. Instead, this group of young people often seem to leave school ill-prepared to make the move to further education, training or employment (Casey et al., 2006; Polat & Farrell, 2002; Polat, et al., 2001), and their long-term outcomes are ‘dismal’ (Bradley, et al., 2008).

However, in every study conducted into the outcomes of this group school-leavers there are some young people who successfully adapt to adult life. By understanding these people’s transitions we may be able to find better ways of supporting their peers. At the moment it seems we are missing a vital opportunity to enhance the life chances of these young people, and failing to benefit from the huge investment made in their school-based education. There is therefore a need for research to increase our understanding of what happens to these young people when they leave school, and how they can be better supported to make the most of this transition.

1.2 The Researcher

The statistics and outcomes described above provide an academic and practical argument for the value of this research, but I also have personal reasons for conducting it, and for my perspective on the issues. I was a disruptive pupil at school. I was not aggressive or disturbed as many young people with SEBD are, and I do not believe I had any social or emotional difficulties, but school did not suit me. I was lonely and bored throughout my secondary school years, and in my final years I truanted whenever I could to avoid being somewhere that made me unhappy. This
gives me a natural sympathy for children and young people with SEBD, many of whom have difficult home lives, as well as learning, social and emotional difficulties, which make school a very uncomfortable place for them to be.

As an adult I worked in a residential school for pupils with SEBD. At weekends we would take the boys on outings, and would often see ex-pupils begging in the streets of nearby cities, or hear of them going to prison, or committing suicide. After I had left my job I bumped into an ex-pupil at the beach. It was lunch-time, he was drunk, he had few teeth left in his head and, although he was only 17, he looked older than me. The last time I had seen him he had been a bright eyed 13 year-old; full of mischief, and a nightmare in the classroom, but also full of life, and great fun to be with outside of school. I was shocked by the change in him.

These ‘real life’ experiences have directed my choice of topic, and influenced my understandings of SEBD and the importance of support through the transition out of compulsory education. They have had a direct bearing on my research, thinking, and writing, and I will be returning to them throughout this thesis.

1.3 The Study

This study aimed to gain an understanding of why young people with SEBD find the transition out of school so difficult, and why some are successful, whilst others struggle. To achieve this aim I conducted an in-depth analysis of the experiences of a group of young people with SEBD leaving special school (residential and day) and mainstream school. I intended to gain an understanding of the transitional support given to them, and the way they engaged with it, and to identify more promising approaches to helping them.

The research was framed within bio-ecological understandings of development (Bronfonbrenner, 1979; Bronfonbrenner & Morris, 1998) which require a holistic approach to considering the development of an individual, and focussed on the
concept of resilience, and its core question: why do some young people cope better with adversity (in this case the transition out of school) than others?

The research addressed the following questions:

- What happens to young people with SEBD when they make the transition out of compulsory education?
- What helps them in making this transition?
- What hinders them in making this transition?
- Does the type of school they attended (mainstream, day special or residential special) affect their experience of this transition?

I conducted a qualitative longitudinal study, in which I followed a group of 15 school-leavers with SEBD for the first 15 months after they left school. While they were still at school I collected data from them on their histories (using a life grid) and their support networks. I then interviewed them up to three times in their first post-school year. I also interviewed their parents (where possible), and many of the people who worked with them. This gave me a full and rounded view of the participants as individuals, their families and social worlds, and the way professionals supported them.

The data was developed into case studies for each participant, detailing their difficulties, history and post-school experiences. The facts of the young person’s life were supplemented with information gained through a thematic and narrative analysis of the data, through which I identified influences on their transitions, classified as individual, family, service/education and other support. Once complete the case studies were subjected to within and cross-case analysis, to gain a holistic understanding of each young person’s transition and to shed light on shared issues and experiences.

At this point I realised that the formation or failure to develop productive relationships with professional supporters was a key influence on the participant’s transitions.
However, all the school-leavers had access to potential supporters, and yet many did not form relationships with them, and the analysis I had conducted so far did not fully explain this phenomena. Therefore, I returned to the data, and analysed the narratives through the theoretical lens of identity theory.

This theory proposes that we are driven to seek verification for the identities that we claim: that is, we need to feel that others see us as we see ourselves. Verification boosts self-esteem, which Burke and Stets (2009) conceptualise as a reservoir of energy. The energy contained in this reservoir gives us the resources to persevere in non-verifying situations until they become verifying. However, non-verifying situations drain the reservoir, and if it is not topped up we do not have the resources to persevere, and need to withdraw from the non-verifying situation.

1.4 The Results

What happened to the young people when they left compulsory education?
The participants’ post-school experiences varied widely. They engaged in a range of academic and vocational courses, with differing levels of success. One worked throughout most of the year. Some disengaged from education and work altogether, and spent their first post-school year Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET). There was also considerable variation in the amount of support they were given, and its effectiveness in maintaining their engagement in education, training or work.

Five of the fifteen participants were generally successful in their first year out of school (although one was still attending his residential special school on an extended placement). I define success as completing their courses with minimal problems or being engaged in work for most of the year, and working towards long term goals. Three participants completed their courses, but did not achieve their potential (as perceived by those working with them). Four school-leavers were engaged in educational activities through the year, but changed course one or more times. Two participants were NEET throughout the year. The activity of the final participant is
unknown, as he had left his grandparents home and ‘gone to social services’ before I was able to interview him.

A significant proportion of the participants faced problems at home. Four left home during the year: two moved into hostels for homeless young people, and two others were cared for by social services. Another participant found the move from residential school back into home so difficult that he threatened suicide on a number of occasions (though he did eventually settle back into life at home).

**What helps them in making this transition?**
The following factors supported smooth transitions for the participants who had a generally successful year:

- personal drive, goal-motivation and perseverance, and being perceived as likeable by those working with them;

- families who were able to provide them with all forms of support (esteem, emotional, practical and informational), or access to this support from other sources;

- strong communication channels between the professionals working with them;

- post-school placements which met their emotional and social as well as educational needs;

- productive relationships with the people working with them, which were supported by the institutions they attended and in which their identity was verified by their workers.

**What hinders them in making this transition?**
Broadly speaking barriers to smooth transitions were the absence of the facilitators described above. The participants who were less successful:

- were not motivated, and had no long-term goals, or were unable to see how they could achieve them;

- had families with limited resources, and strained relationships, who were unable to fulfil all their support needs, and no-one stepped in to fill the gaps;
were placed on courses which did not meet their non-educational needs, were sometimes not chosen by them, and lacked flexibility;

- suffered from the lack of communication between the people working with them;

- had relationships with their professional helpers that were sometimes warm, but not productive, and did not verify the identities the young people claimed;

- attended institutions which did not support the development of the sort of relationships they needed with their workers.

Thus, the individual characteristics of the participant, the relationships and resources contained with their family, the nature of their placement and their relationships with their workers worked in a transactional way to support smooth transition, or limit the possibilities for success.

**Does the type of school they attended (mainstream, day special or residential special) affect their experience of this transition?**

The sample was too small and biased (only one residential school-leaver was traceable throughout the study period) for any firm answer to this question to be developed. However, there was evidence of the type of school influencing individual transitions. The residential school-leaver was not integrated into home-based services when he left school, and he and his family struggled to adjust to him living at home full time. The mainstream pupils received no special support once they left school, as their post-school placements had no information about their difficulties. Day school pupils experiences varied, but those living further from their schools (10+ miles) seemed to have less connection with services in their home area.

### 1.5 Thesis Outline

In Chapter Two (SEBD: theory, definitions and contributing factors) I outline the theories underpinning this project: a bioecological understanding of development and the concept of resilience. I then attempt to define SEBD, and explore the controversies surrounding existing definitions, before describing what is known about the causes of SEBD.
Chapter three (Transition) begins by looking at the transition to adulthood as a developmental phase, before focussing on the institutional transition out of compulsory education that is the main focus of this study. I then look at why this transition may be more difficult for young people with SEBD than for their peers, and review the literature relating to the transitional outcomes of young people with SEBD. This is followed by exploration of what is known about effective support for school-leavers with SEBD, and how transitional support is currently provided in England.

Chapter 4 (Methodological Approach) describes how the research design was developed with consideration for the theoretical framework described in Chapter 2. It also describes how the approach was influenced by my ethical stance, and outlines the research processes and results of the pilot study and their implications for this project.

Chapter 5 (Methods and Procedure) explains how data was collected and analysed, and how the ethical principles described in Chapter 4 were put into practice in the research process.

Chapter 6 (Explication and exploration: what happened and why) takes a holistic view of the participants post-school experiences, describing what happened to each individual, and the factors that influenced their transitions.

Chapter 7 (Exploration: the influence of Person-Process-Context-Time on transition) presents the common themes which emerged from cross-case analysis, using Bronfenbrenner’s Person-Process-Context-Time model (Tudge, Mokrova, Hatfield, & Karnik, 2009) as a framework for analysis and presentation. The chapter concludes by responding to the research questions. This reveals that a major influence on the participants’ transitions was the relationships they built with their professional supporters, but does not explain why some built constructive relationships whilst others did not, creating a new question to apply to the data.
**Chapter 8** (Further ‘exploration’: the role of identity in building constructive relationships) responds to the unanswered question: what supports the development of constructive relationships between school-leavers with SEBD and their professional helpers? To answer this question the chapter first describes the key elements of identity theory as expounded by Burke and Stets (2009), before applying it to the data. This process provides insight into how identity processes (verification, non-verification, continuity and conflicting identities) influenced the relationships the participants built with their professional supporters.

**Chapter 9** (Summary & Conclusions) summarises the findings in relation to the research questions and previous research, before evaluating the research process, and describing the implications for practice, theory and further research.
2 SEBD: theory, definitions and contributing factors

2.1 Introduction

This study explores the transitional experiences of a group of young people with SEBD in their first year out of compulsory education, and aims to increase understanding of why so many young people with SEBD struggle to make the transition from school to further education, training or employment. The literature which forms the background to this research will be reviewed in two chapters. In this chapter I outline the theories (Bronfonbrenner’s bioecological theory of development and the concept of resilience) which underpin my understandings of SEBD, the transition process and the research methodology. I also explore the way SEBD are defined, and the factors that contribute to their development. The next chapter will review the literature related to the transitional outcomes and experiences of school-leavers with SEBD, the support that is currently provided to them, and wider issues in transition.

Throughout these two chapters I will be drawing not only on relevant literature, but also my own experience as a disruptive pupil in school who did not succeed in further education, and as a care worker in a residential school for boys with emotional and behavioural difficulties. I do this because these experiences have influenced my understanding of the issues affecting young people with SEBD as much, if not more, than my ‘book learning’.

2.2 Theoretical underpinnings

The theories outlined in this section underpin the whole of this project: my understanding of SEBD, the issues faced by school leavers with SEBD in transition, their ways of coping with them, and the methodology of this study. The first theory to be considered is Bronfonbrenner’s bioecological model of development, which seeks to explain the way that multiple factors, on various levels influence the developing child. The second theory, which sits comfortably within this model, is that of resilience, through which researchers have sought to understand the ways in which different
elements in an individual’s life act (and interact) to support positive adaptation in spite of the difficult circumstances in which they live.

2.2.1 The bioecological model of development.

Over a number of decades Bronfonbrenner expounded, revised and refined his bioecological model of development (Tudge et al., 2009). Within this model a child develops within multiple, overlapping micro-systems. Microsystems include factors with which the child has direct contact: their family, school, peer groups, and the immediate social and physical neighbourhood. As a child spends time in multiple microsystems (home, school, friendship groups) the interrelations between them form another system, the mesosystem. These two systems with which the child directly interacts, are located within exo- and macro-systems: the wider social, economic and political world, with which the child has no direct contact, but which nevertheless affects the world they grow up in (Bronfonbrenner, 1979) (see Figure 1). A further system to be considered is the chronosystem (time): both the historical period the child is growing up in, and time within the child’s life.

Four key concepts are contained within Bronfonbrenner’s model: process, person, context and time (Tudge et al., 2009). Context is illustrated by Figure 1, and includes a range of direct and indirect influences on the child’s life. ‘Process’ relates to proximal processes (the primary mechanism of development) occurring within the microsystem. These are ‘processes of progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between an active, evolving bio-psychological human organism and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate environment’ (Bronfonbrenner & Morris, 1998, p.996) These processes, enacted over time, effect development. Proximal processes do not occur in isolation, nor are they uni-directional (environment to child). Their effect on the child’s development is influenced by the characteristics of the developing child (person), the environment (immediate and more distant) (context) and the ‘social continuities over time through the life course and the historical period during which the person has lived’ (time) (Bronfonbrenner & Morris, 1998, p. 996).
Bronfonbrenner divided person characteristics into three types: demand, resource and force (Tudge et al., 2009). Demand characteristics are those that are evident to others (personal appearance, age, gender) and are often the basis of initial expectations (these are sometimes misplaced, for example in the child who looks markedly older or younger than their age). Resource characteristics are not immediately apparent, and include internal resources (e.g. skills, intelligence and the internalised consequences of past experiences), as well as the external (housing, parenting, family socio-economic status). Force characteristics are internal, and are related to temperament, perseverance, motivation, and so on (Tudge et al., 2009). Resource characteristics could be described as the capital, both internal and external, which the child has to
draw on, whilst force characteristics are within-child attributes that influence the child’s ability to utilise their capital to maximum effect. Demand, resource and force characteristics all influence the developmental trajectory of the child.

The interactions between the developing person and their context over time influence the proximal processes which support development in highly complex ways. In an ideal environment the child’s inner qualities are nurtured by their family, who are supported by the systems which surround them, resulting in adaptive development in the child. However, when a child grows up within an inadequate environment, in which some or all of the systems they engage with contain risk factors such as poverty, inadequate parenting, or social isolation, the resulting developmental outcomes may be maladaptive. However, there is no direct causal link between the presence of risk factors and maladaptive development. And within the multiple systems which contain the developing child there can be protective factors, which mitigate against negative outcomes. The relationship between the individual and the different elements of their lives (home environment, parenting style, socio-economic status, etc.) and developmental outcomes have been explored using the concept of resilience.

### 2.2.2 Resilience

The concept of resilience, as it is now most commonly understood, sits comfortably within Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model of development, and is a useful means of understanding some of the processes which guide adaptive/maladaptive development. Early research into resilience focussed on individual factors within the child, and centred on the idea of the ‘invulnerable’ child, who developed normally in adverse conditions because they possessed certain qualities (resilience as a personal characteristic). However, researchers quickly moved on from this stance to focus on factors within the child’s environment alongside their personal characteristics (resilience as an asset bestowed by possession of defined environmental and personal attributes) (O’Dougherty Wright & Masten, 2004). As more sophisticated understandings of resilience have developed, attention has shifted to the way factors
in the child’s life interact, to increase, or reduce negative responses to adversity (resilience as a process) (Smokowski et al., 1999).

Resilience has been defined as a ‘dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity’ (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000, p.543), and as ‘good outcomes in spite of serious threats to adaptation or development’ (Masten, 2001, p.228). These definitions make clear that resilience is not a characteristic, it is a process, and it cannot exist without adversity. Conversely, resilience-related research has found that maladaptive development without exposure to adversity was so rare that the term ‘empty cell phenomena’ was coined to describe the absence of this group in charts and graphs (see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: The empty cell phenomena</th>
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<tr>
<td>Exposure to adversity</td>
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<td>Normal development</td>
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<td>Maladaptive development</td>
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(Masten, Hubbard, Gest, Tellegen, Garmezy & Ramirez, 1999).

A single study counters this claim, stating that the most violent and aggressive members of their sample could be placed in the ‘empty cell’ (maladaptive development without adversity). However, as the author acknowledges, the assessment of adversity was by self-report, and this group may have understated (or underestimated) the adversity they faced (Hamill, 2003). Had verification of adversity been sought from other sources these participants may have moved out of the empty cell. Furthermore, the measure of adversity used by Hamill did not allow the participants to express the range of difficulties they may have been facing.

They were asked whether the following events had happened: never, in the previous year, or more than a year ago.
• Your parents divorced
• A family member got into an accident or experienced an illness
• There was a death in the family
• One or both of your parents changed jobs
• You changed schools
• Your family has experienced money problems
• Your parents argue or fight a lot
• Your family moved
• One or both of your parents remarried
• You were in a serious accident or had a serious illness
• One or both of your parents abuse alcohol

These statements focus almost entirely on the family, with none of them addressing the wider environment the child is growing up in (poor housing, a violent neighbourhood, a community with few resources). Furthermore, the questions are highly specific. For example, alcohol abuse is mentioned, but abuse of other substances (illegal or prescription drugs) is not. At the same time they are open to interpretation: is the child living with a parent who is suffering from depression going to identify their problem as an illness, for example?

There seems to be an assumption that married parents who do not fight in front of their children make for a happy home. However, a child may be living with parents who abuse them, mentally, physically or emotionally; their parenting may be cold, erratic, highly controlling, or totally laissez-faire. Any of these possibilities could be considered to constitute living with adversity, but this checklist is not geared to revealing any issues around parenting. Death/illness of a family member is covered, but many young people rely on those outside of their families for support, and the death of a friend is a highly traumatic event that this survey would not reveal. Of course, many potentially adverse circumstances are covered by this survey, but it is questionable whether a young person would reveal their parent’s alcohol abuse or fighting in a study conducted within their school. There are too many flaws within this measure of adversity for this study to challenge the much stronger evidence that exists for the ‘empty cell phenomena’.
Whilst the evidence suggests that maladaptive development very rarely occurs without adversity, normal development often occurs in spite of adversity: for example, not all children who grow up in poverty, with parents who are unable to offer effective support develop SEBD, although these are key risk factors. Many manage to function adequately in spite of the problems they face. Resilience research has focussed on identifying risk and protective factors, and the interactions between them, to explain the diversity of outcomes amongst groups facing similar levels of adversity.

Protective factors facilitate normal development under adverse circumstances, and fall into three main categories: individual attributes, family ties and external support systems (Werner, 1989). Smokowski et al draw on a range of research to present a list of individual attributes associated with resilience:

- Easy temperament, optimism and sense of humour
- Responsiveness, flexibility and adaptability
- Internal locus of control
- Social competence
- Good intellectual and problem solving skills
- Religious faith
- Strong sense of purpose and future (Smokowski et al., 1999, p.427).

Within the family good relationships between family members are strong predictors of resilience in relation to behavioural outcomes. Forming a strong bond with a parent in the first year of life, and living in an environment which is high on warmth and low on criticism, in which the child has access to support and affection throughout their lives strongly buffers the child against the effects of risks in their environment (Smokowski et al., 1999).

External support systems, those outside the family, can also act as buffers against risk. Teachers, religious ministers, peers and older friends can all provide support to children, within trusting relationships. Children who demonstrate resilience tend to form bonds with a wide range of potential supporters. Favourite teachers can be both
positive role models and confidants, and in one study were the most frequently cited source of support outside of the family (Werner, 1990).

Luthar et al (2000) offer a similar range of protective factors in their review of resilience-related research, citing ‘close relations with supportive adults, effective schools and connections with competent prosocial adults in the wider community’ (Luthar et al., 2000, p.545). The mention of effective schools raises the question, what constitutes an effective school? I am not going to review the literature in relation to this question, it is beyond the scope of this study, but (as with parenting style) a range of factors will determine whether a school is ‘effective’ for a child, including the individual (their nature, their experiences and expectations), and educational and organisational factors.

The bulk of the research into resilience has been quantitative, and has largely focussed on shared protective and vulnerability factors within and between groups, and used normative developmental measures to determine resilience. The qualitative view sees resilience as a more individual process: ‘less an enduring characteristic than a process determined by the impact of particular life experiences among persons with particular conceptions of their own life history or personal narrative’ (Cohler, 1989, p.406). From this perspective, positive adaptation is seen as ‘unique to individual functioning and highly subjective’ (Smokowski et al., 1999, p.428), and determined by personal, rather than normative evaluation. Qualitative research also provides insight into the processes which underlie resilience. For example, quantitative research has determined that ‘close relations with supportive adults’ are associated with positive outcomes, but qualitative researchers are going beyond associations, to explore *how* this and other factors influence resilience.

Smokowski et al’s (1999) research into resilience and protective factors in the lives of disadvantaged, inner-city adolescents took a biographical approach. The 86 participants were interviewed about their lives, and then asked to write an essay, outlining what would be included in a movie of their lives. The essays were analysed
using the broad categories of individual attributes, family ties and external support, which were interconnected. On an individual level, resilience was associated with optimism, motivation, aspirations, and actively seeking out positive relationships. Being part of a supportive family was also important, with the participants particularly valuing the motivational support given to them by their parents: offering guidance on how to manage the dangers inherent in their environment, monitoring their activities in an effort to protect them, and encouraging them to achieve. Not all role models in the home were positive, but the participants who demonstrated resilience saw the negative pathways taken by family members as warnings not to go the same way.

External motivational support and positive role modelling came from teachers. The adolescents valued teachers who believed in them; who liked and were interested in them; who encouraged them to achieve and supported them when they were struggling. In the cases of many of the adolescents exhibiting resilience, the motivational messages from teachers reinforced those coming from parents, but where parents were unable to provide that support, teachers filled the gap. External support could also come from friends, although, as with the family they provided many negative models, of how not to behave, as well as positive models and support. Adolescents with positive relations with friends were more likely to get on well with their siblings and the rest of their families, so that positive relationships arise in clusters.

It is easy to see, from the evidence in this study, the connections between the different areas of the adolescents’ lives. Positive input from the family supports the development of the individual characteristics of optimism, motivation and aspiration. Good relationships within the family lead to an expectation that others will respond positively to the adolescent and so they seek out other supportive relationships. Their expectation that others will help them, and openness to that help enhances relationships with teachers, who reinforce what has gone before, and so on. This study of resilience in adolescents reveals Bronfenbrenner’s proximal processes in action.
Thus, the concept of resilience can be seen as nested within Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model of development, providing information on the interactions between factors that facilitate adaptive development in difficult circumstances, as well as more detailed insight into the proximal processes that support the development of resilience.

2.3 SEBD: definitions and contributing factors

This section will address two questions: how are SEBD defined and how do they develop? Definition is challenging, because the label covers a wide range of difficulties, and the behaviours that are used to identify SEBD are context-specific and can only be judged subjectively. The causes of SEBD are best understood within the bioecological model outlined above, since there are a range of contributing factors, on multiple levels, which interact in complex ways.

2.3.1 How are SEBD defined?

Young people with SEBD have been given a wide range of labels over the decades: maladjusted, disturbed, disruptive, psychiatrically ill and delinquent, to name but a few (Cooper, Smith, & Upton, 1994). More recently came the label emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD), later modified to acknowledge the social nature of many children’s difficulties to SEBD, or BESD (behavioural, social and emotional difficulties). BESD seems to be the acronym used in current government policy, but the two terms are interchangeable. I have chosen to use SEBD because it prioritises the social and emotional aspects of these young people’s problems, which many believe underpin the manifested behaviour issues, and because it was the term used by the teachers, schools and other workers who were involved in this study.

Official definitions.

The label SEBD is applied to children demonstrating a wide range of difficulties, from those who cannot, or will not comply with school rules, to those with serious mental health problems (Farrell, 1995). Current guidance suggests that the umbrella term of SEBD should cover children with emotional disorders, conduct disorders, hyperkinetic
disorders, including attention deficit disorder (ADD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD); those with anxiety, depression, or school phobia and those who self harm (DSCF, 2008). The diversity of problems covered by the label SEBD makes the term itself difficult to define.

An oft-cited definition of SEBD is ‘children who set up barriers between themselves and their learning environment through inappropriate, aggressive, bizarre or withdrawn behaviour’. They ‘have developed a range of strategies for dealing with day-to-day experiences that are inappropriate and impede normal personal and social development and make it difficult for them to learn’ (Circular 23/89, DES, 1989 cited by Cooper et al., 1994, p. 20). This definition is problematic since inappropriate, bizarre, and normal are all subjective, situation-dependent terms (this issue is discussed later in this section). Furthermore, describing children with SEBD in this way locates the problem firmly within the child, since it is the child who is making it difficult for themselves to learn. This belies current understandings of the causes of SEBD, which are most constructively analysed using the bioecological developmental framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) outlined earlier in this chapter, since it can incorporate the influence of the child, their family, their schools and wider social and economical factors. These factors are discussed later in this chapter (see p.34).

Whilst the definition of SEBD used in the 1987 Circular (above) has been superseded by that presented in the 2001 Special Educational Needs (SEN) Code of Practice (see below) it is still used. For example, in a reader used in the training of Connexions/youth workers it is cited as the official definition of SEBD (Connexions, 2003), and although it is placed within a discussion of the difficulties in defining SEBD, and the many contributing factors to young people’s behaviour problems, its ‘official’ status gives it power. Thus, this definition, although deeply flawed, is continuing to influence perceptions and practice.

The more recent SEN Code of Practice (DfES, 2001) defines children with SEBD as those who:
‘demonstrate features of emotional and behavioural difficulties, who are withdrawn or isolated, disruptive and disturbing, hyperactive and lack concentration; those with immature social skills; and those presenting challenging behaviours arising from other complex special needs.’ (DfES, 2001, 7:60)

And that significant social, emotional or behavioural difficulties which require interventions are exhibited through:

‘withdrawn or disruptive behaviour; a marked and persistent inability to concentrate; signs that the child experiences considerable frustration or distress in relation to their learning difficulties; difficulties in establishing and maintaining balanced relationships with their fellow pupils or with adults; and any other evidence of a significant delay in the development of life and social skills’ (DfES, 2001, 7:43)

These definitions are relatively neutral, in terms of their attribution of responsibility for the emotional or behavioural difficulties. However, the application of the definition still requires the making of subjective judgements. For example, how much distress should a child display to be showing ‘considerable’ distress, and how can that be measured? And ‘disturbing’ or ‘challenging’ behaviour can only exist in the eyes of others, and what is disturbing or challenging to one individual may not be to another. This leads some to argue that SEBD is ‘a subjective reality that is constructed on the basis of a judgement as to what is tolerable, appropriate and desirable’ which only exists within a social context (Winzer, 2004, p.23).

**SEBD in context.**

Belief in the contextual nature of SEBD seems to be supported by the wide variation at local authority level in the number of statements issued, and proportion of pupils with SEBD placed in special schools (Education and Skills Select Committee, 2006), and at the school level where experiences of problematic behaviour vary widely (Clough, Garner, Pardeck, & Yuen, 2004). Furthermore, it has been argued that pupils with SEBD will demonstrate their behaviour difficulties in one context, but not in another. This extends not only to whether or not they are in school, but which school they attend and even which class they are in (Farrell, 1995). And when they leave school many cease to have a recognised need at all (Thomas & Glenny, 2000).
This aspect of SEBD distinguishes it from other forms of SEN. For example, the child with Down’s Syndrome may achieve more or less at school, depending on how well their needs are accommodated, but their underlying condition (on a physiological level) remains the same. The child with SEBD, on the other hand, may warrant their label whilst in school, but then be indistinguishable from other children at their local youth club, for example. This leads some to argue that SEBD, as a category of need, does not exist, and is the product of ‘inhumane’ school environments (Thomas & Glenny2000).

The neglected ‘E’.
In discussing the contextual nature of SEBD we need to be clear about what we are describing: different situations may provoke different behaviours, but does that mean that the underlying emotional or social problem has disappeared?

“Zoe would do very well in school, were it not for her rebellious attitude” (quote from my year 9 school report).

I was a disruptive pupil at school. I moved from a small village school to a 1000+ pupil secondary school, and was placed in a class where I knew nobody. I struggled to find a place in my class and to make new friends. I was unhappy, at times even depressed. I was also very bright, often bored and rarely did homework, which I saw as pointless. I was frequently on placed on report for challenging teacher’s authority.

Some teachers found me impossible to manage, and I spent more of their classes in the head of year or deputy head teacher’s office than I did in the classroom. But there were others for whom I was never a problem. In some cases this was because they treated me as an individual, a person worth talking to, not just another pupil, in others because they had high expectations of me academically, and pushed me. My emotional state remained the same, but my behaviour was completely different.

This story highlights a number of relevant issues. Firstly, that emotional problems do not attract the attention of teachers – my teacher was concerned with my rebellious attitude and the problems it caused in the classroom, not the loneliness and boredom that under-pinned it. Secondly, that disruptive behaviour often has multiple causes, in this case unhappiness and resentment at being separated from all my primary school
friends, and an inappropriate curriculum. The change of social context (the teacher) alleviated one of these problems and so improved my behaviour, in spite of my emotional state remaining the same.

Indeed, although the 2001 code of practice includes anxiety and depression in their list of conditions warranting the label SEBD, these are unlikely to provoke interventions unless they are accompanied by behaviours which challenge teachers and disrupt classes (Bowers, 2004; Farrell, 1995). On the whole, busy schools, with league table positions to guard and targets to reach, do not have time to worry about pupils who are quietly troubled, it is only those who, through their behaviour, disrupt the education of others who will be singled out for extra help. This may go some way to explaining why the vast majority of pupils labelled as having SEBD are boys (Farrell, 1995), since they are more likely than girls to express their emotional problems, or frustration arising from their learning difficulties through anger and aggression (Nicholson, 2004)

Bowers’ (2004) study of 16 SEBD related statements found that whilst they contained a wide range of descriptors of behaviours, and some named diagnoses (mostly ADHD), only nine mentioned emotional states. Two cited anxiety and one mood swings, but anger was named in all nine. Easily recognised, and associated with the most challenging behaviours schools have to deal with (aggression, threatening or abusive behaviour and violence) ‘anger’ is a catch-all emotion. But does it really describe the emotional difficulties the child is experiencing, or does it describe the problem the school is facing?

Anger is an emotional response to a wide range of thoughts and feelings. For example, the child who shows anger may be experiencing feelings of anxiety or depression (Rutter, Giller, & Hagell, 1998), which in turn could be caused by any number of factors in their life. By focussing on anger and its behavioural manifestations, professionals often neglect the underlying emotions and thoughts causing it. Other emotions are not mentioned, perhaps because they cannot be so easily recognised or measured. If a child has six angry outbursts in the course of a day, which result in expressions of
aggression in some form, they are easily counted and recorded. How can the classroom teacher measure or record sadness or withdrawal?

The SEN code of practice (DfES, 2001) suggests that statutory assessments should be based on evidence collected on a range of behaviours including being withdrawn, unable to concentrate and struggling to form and maintain relationships with peers and adults, as well as the more easily observed and documented ‘disruptive behaviour’. This suggests concern for a range of emotional and social difficulties. However, a repeated phrase throughout the document is ‘difficulties which substantially and regularly interfere with their own learning or that of the class group’. This interference is most likely to be recognised in relation to the behaviour, the ‘B’ in SEBD, whilst the ‘E’ continues unacknowledged or addressed.

Therefore, children who gain the label SEBD are those with social or emotional problems, which, when they come into contact with certain social contexts, such as schools, cause them to behave in ways that disrupt classrooms, and challenge teachers and schools. There are likely to be a considerable number of children in any school who could be diagnosed as having SEBD and would benefit from interventions, but as they do not disrupt the education of others they go unnoticed and unsupported.

2.3.2 Contributing factors in SEBD.

In 2008 the government issued guidance on ‘The education of children and young people with behavioural, emotional and social difficulties as a special need' (DSCF, 2008), which aimed to explain teachers’ and local authorities’ duties and powers, and offer advice on good practice with children with SEBD. The guidance emphasises the role of parents in their children’s problems, citing lack of a positive attachment, parental conflict and separation, neglect, indifference, or erratic discipline as risk factors in the development of SEBD (DCSF, 2008). Responsibility for a child’s SEBD seems, therefore, to have moved from the child in the 1987 circular (see p.19) to the parents, with school and other social factors only being mentioned in relation to certain ethnic groups.
However, as has been made clear earlier in this chapter, viewed through the lens of a bioecological theory of development, the social and emotional development of all children is influenced by a range of factors in their lives: their individual characteristics, their family and home lives, and the social and educational experiences they have outside their home. Each of these elements can be seen influencing the development of children with SEBD, and although they are all inter-linked I shall address each in turn, beginning with the individual, before moving on to the home environment and school.

**Individual factors.**
There are a range of within-child factors associated with SEBD, including poor physical development, low IQ, minimal brain dysfunction and hyperactivity (Cooper et al., 1994). However, it is important to make clear that within-child does not necessarily mean originating solely within the child. There are those who present arguments which emphasise the biological, genetic origins of some forms of SEBD (notably ADHD), however, the evidence is inconclusive (Furman, 2009). Even those who are convinced that genetics play a key role in the development of some types of SEBD acknowledge that problems develop through interactions between the environment and the biological entity, and genetics alone do not ‘cause’ SEBD (Cooper, 2004).

Biological factors which have been linked to behaviour disorders include frontal lobe dysfunction, low serotonin levels, and physiological under-arousal. Psychological influences include ‘temperament, attachment, neuropsychological functioning, intelligence, academic performance and social cognition’ (Goldstein & Rider, 2004, p.215). However, the extent to which these factors are a consequence of genetics or result from interactions with the environment is debateable. To take the example of temperament: Olson, Sandy & Schilling (2002) claim that the child with a ‘difficult’ temperament is subject to increased coercive transactions within their social environment, and that these transactions initiate and ultimately stabilise antisocial behaviour in the child. The temperament is innate, but its consequences are exacerbated by environmental factors.
The exchange between the biological organism and their social, psychological and physical environment is highly complex, and although symptoms of SEBD (low self esteem, poor social skills) may be seen as contained within the child, the development of their difficulties must take into account the environment in which they grow up. In some cases, the environment has proved highly hostile, and many children with SEBD have been subject to physical, psychological or sexual abuse and neglect, which is on its own sufficient to cause their difficulties. But in others it is the interaction between the child and environmental risk factors which causes them to develop SEBD.

**The Home Environment and SEBD.**
The homes of the majority of children with SEBD are characterised by disadvantage. Cooper (1993) draws on wide-ranging research to claim that the adversities faced by these children include economic and material deprivation, severe discord within the home, ‘delinquent’ parental activity and ‘unsatisfactory’ parenting (Cooper, 1993, p.9). Drawing on the same body of research Cooper goes on to claim that the parenting given to many of these children is lacking in overt affection, indifferent, or even hostile, with some parents being rejecting and violent. The children are more likely to experience frequent parental absences. Discipline in the home is often inconsistent and ineffective, and includes use of corporal punishment. Children are more likely to be exposed to violent displays of temper by their parents, and to suffer from cruelty or neglect. Parents of children with SEBD are often ‘disinterested’ in their children’s schooling (Cooper, 1993, p.12).

Whilst ‘dysfunctional’ families are frequently cited as the dominant influence in the lives of children with SEBD the problems these families face need to be understood within their wider social and economic context. The social and economic disadvantage that Cooper identifies as a factor in the lives of many children with SEBD has an impact not only on the opportunities and environment the child grows up with, but also affects their parent’s ability to care for them. To apply the bioecological model to this issue: parents are at the centre of multiple systems, just as their children are, subject to a similar set of environmental and cultural influences.
There is considerable evidence that poverty, lack of social support and stressful experiences outside the home all put pressure on parents’ relationships with each other, as well as affecting their ability to parent effectively and to maintain warm and supportive relationships with their children (Vandewater & Lansford, 2005). And whilst positive parenting can mitigate the negative effects of poverty and deprivation on children’s development, it is within the poorest families that this type of parenting is least likely to occur (Kiernan & Mensah, 2011).

Failure to provide adequate parenting to one’s children, because of one’s own difficult circumstances, attracts harsh judgement, but little support. In my work at a residential school for boys with SEBD I met many of their parents: I never met a parent who did not love their child and want the best for them, although they were clearly failing to provide the sort of parenting their child needed. Some were unable to show their love effectively. These parents were labelled by the professionals working with their child as cold and/or rejecting. This is an accurate description of their behaviour, which undoubtedly had an impact on their child(ren). However, all of them were trying to cope with extremely difficult life-situations, many had experienced trauma and/or abuse, and they were given little or no support to deal with their problems. Other parents (usually single mothers) were affectionate with their children, but unable to help them with their problems. These parents were labelled ineffective, at best; other terms used to describe them by social workers, teachers and care staff were ‘useless’ or ‘pathetic’. These parents were all too aware that they were failing their children, and that they were being judged for it. Thus, it is unsurprising that they wanted little contact with those making the judgements: the people working with their child.

SEBD attracts blame like no other form of SEN (Clough et al., 2004). Both the parents and the children are often condemned, and this affects the way they are treated by both professionals and other members of their communities. This, in turn, influences their ability/inclination to engage with potential helpers and further exacerbates their problems, creating a viscous circle.
**SEBD and school.**

Current guidance (DSCF, 2008) acknowledges that the over-representation of some ethnic groups is associated with racism and bullying, negative teacher attitudes and a curriculum perceived as irrelevant. It also recognises the high rates of SEBD identification in socially deprived areas. However, the guidance does not mention the possibility that bullying, negative teacher attitudes and an irrelevant curriculum may play a part in *all* deprived children’s SEBD.

When children have been asked about the role school has played in their behavioural difficulties there is a high level of consistency in what they have to say, across different studies and even different countries. In the US, children report feeling overwhelmed by large schools and classes, experiencing a lack of appropriate help, unfair treatment and bullying, and complain about the uncaring and inflexible attitudes of teachers (Wise, 1999). In Libya, children express remarkably similar views about teachers, adding that there is a conflict between the culture at home and at school (Gadour, 2006). Here in the UK, Cooper (1993) and De Pear (1995) among others identify the same school factors as contributing to children’s problems, with De Pear also claiming that some teachers view the school as a system which ‘produces disaffected, excluded youngsters as part of its waste’ (De Pear, 1995, p.50).

Unlike pupils labelled as having any other category of special need, students with SEBD are likely to be disciplined for manifestations of their difficulties. A child with dyslexia will not be excluded for their lack of skills in literacy. Should they fail to respond to an intervention, and even have a tantrum in response to their frustration, they are unlikely to have all interventions removed. However when interventions fail with pupils with SEBD, and they express their difficulties through their behaviour, they are likely to be removed from school altogether, all help effectively withdrawn (Jull, 2008).

Teachers in mainstream schools tend to have ‘negative perceptions of, and limited tolerance for, problem behaviour in the classroom’ (Farrell & Polat, 2003, p.280). The behaviour of pupils with SEBD directly challenges the competence of their teachers.
Inability to control them in the classroom can compromise the teacher’s confidence in their own abilities, and give rise to the concern that other teachers and parents are judging them accordingly. This can make them unwilling to look beyond the child’s behaviour, and help them with their problems. Whilst there is tolerance towards conditions over which the child (and by extension the teacher) is seen as having no control (such as dyslexia), responsibility for poor behaviour is often placed firmly in the lap of the child (Cooper et al., 1994).

Of course, children with SEBD are a problem for schools, and unlike other categories of SEN, because their difficulties not only affect their education, but that of those who have to share a classroom with them. The presence of one disruptive pupil in a class can make it impossible for the teacher to teach and for the other pupils in the room to learn. However, the classroom itself may be contributing to the disruptive pupils problems. Maag suggests that ‘unfair competition, inappropriate or irrelevant academic requirements, autocratic or permissive teaching style, excessive structuring or lack of structure, and over-stimulation or under-stimulation’ (Maag, 2004, p. 61) all contribute to the development or maintenance of disruptive behaviour.

This leads Thomas & Glenny (2000) to argue that the special need being ‘treated’ in interventions with children with SEBD is not the child’s, but the school’s. They contend that ‘being unpunctual, rude or untidy were...never qualifications for madness, or even emotional difficulty’, and ‘diagnosing’ children who behave in this way in school as having SEBD helps the school to maintain order, but does little to help the child. In school, teachers are vastly outnumbered by pupils and are aware that their control is only maintained through the children’s willingness to accept it. The labelling of children as having a special need when they do not share this willingness allows them to be ‘treated’ in ways which would not otherwise be acceptable (excluded from school, educated separately from their peer group, subject to extra control measures such as behaviour contracts, even medicated) (Thomas2004). Because these actions are not punishments, but ‘treatments’ for the child’s benefit, delivered by caring, ‘helping’ professionals, parents and children who would perhaps be unwilling to accept
them under normal circumstances, find them difficult to refuse. Through this needs-based approach the problem that children with SEBD pose to schools is framed as a difficulty inherent to the child, who is unlike other children. If a child is removed from mainstream school and performs well in an alternative setting, then it is because their needs are better met within this setting, not because the school they left was contributing to their problems.

The labelling and educational marginalisation of this group of children serves to free schools from the problems involved in educating them alongside their peers. It has been argued that not only does this solve a practical problem (the teacher can now teach the rest of the group without disruption) it also acts to reinforce practices and cultures within the school. By defining the problem as within-child schools can differentiate between these children, and the rest: this group have something wrong with them, that’s why they will not submit to our rules; the rest of you are not like that (O’Brien & Guiney, 2004). Thus, the school’s rules and practices are validated on two levels:

- the problem is located within the child, not the school. The school’s practices are validated, and the school does not have to examine itself;
- the problem child is differentiated from all the others, which provides validation for the conformity of the rest of the group.

However, whilst there may be these dimensions to the labelling of children with SEBD, they are not a conscious aspect of decisions about individual pupils. Interventions are made to attempt to improve a difficult situation. It cannot be denied that children with SEBD present a challenge to teachers working within the current system; they disrupt the education of others and many are unhappy at school. And whilst it is essential that the education system as it stands is challenged and improved, it is also important to understand the perspective of the people trying to educate these and other children.

Those who work with children with SEBD are in no doubt that, no matter what set of complex interactions, from however many factors influenced the development of their
difficulties, these children’s problems do exist. Most would not recognise the
unpunctual, rude and untidy pupil, described by Thomas and Glenny, as having SEBD.
In discussing the children they work with they are more likely to talk of aggression,
destruction, violence and confrontation. It is possible that Thomas’ ‘humane schools’,
or O’Brien & Guiney’s postmodernist institutions would ameliorate these children’s
difficulties, but until and unless they do, we will continue to have a group of school
leavers with complex difficulties entering the wider world.

2.4 Linking back to the theory

As the preceding section makes clear, children are not born with SEBD: they are born
with a genetic make-up which, in interaction with a range of social influences on
multiple levels, causes them to develop a range of behaviours and coping strategies
that warrant the label SEBD. The bioecological model of development is the only
framework which takes sufficient account of all the factors involved, from the
individual to the societal, to form a secure base from which to develop an
understanding of SEBD, and develop interventions to help these children.

This model supports understanding and intervention on all levels. Behaviour is
understood as the product of personal attributes and internalised past experiences,
being acted out in a social context, which is in turn influenced by wider social forces. It
is placed at the intersection between psychological, social psychological, sociological,
political and economic understandings of the individual’s relationship with the world.
Other theories which have been used to understand and develop interventions for
children with SEBD, such as behaviourism, social learning theories and psychoanalysis
do not conflict with Bronfonbrenner’s model; they can be seen as operating within it,
but in a partial way. For example, behaviourism, within which behaviour is seen as the
result of positive or negative reinforcements in the child’s environment, can be
described as one of the proximal processes which facilitate development. It is not,
however, the whole story. Bronfonbrenner’s theory therefore acts as a unifying theory,
able to accommodate many theoretical perspectives within its overarching framework.
This does not mean that the theory is a ‘non-theory’, able to encompass everything, because in itself it means nothing. It provides a framework for analysing children’s development on multiple levels, leading us to consider the many factors influencing their lives. It is a way of viewing children which is not tied to any disciplinary perspective, and so allows the child, rather than the ‘-ology’, to be the focus. Interventions (or research) developed from this stance must, at the very least, take account of the multilayered influences on a child’s life, and at best, use a holistic framework, and work in multiple areas to counter (or understand) the psychological, social and economic risk factors they face.

2.5 Summary

In this chapter I have outlined the theories that underpin this research. Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model of development offers a framework for understanding the way in which multiple factors, on a range of levels interact with an individual to influence their development. The concept of resilience offers insight into the processes which occur within this framework, which enhance or inhibit a child’s ability to overcome adversity. These complex interactions are seen in action in the development of SEBD.

SEBD are presented here as an ill-defined set of difficulties which develop as a result of interactions between the child, their family and school, which are set within a wider social, economic, political and cultural background. Each piece of the puzzle which makes up the life of a child with SEBD is influenced by all the others. For example, a mother fails to provide good enough parenting because she is struggling to deal with problems that are partly induced by her social and economic situation. Professionals judge her as a bad mother, but fail to help to make her a better one. Her child has always been ‘difficult’ at home and at school, and so is often punished, but rarely praised. The child’s teacher blames both the child and the mother to explain (to themselves and anyone else who may judge them) their inability to cope with the pupil’s behaviour. The child’s school, which needs to maintain order, and to ensure that other children can be taught without disruption, permanently excludes the
'difficult’ pupil, and passes them on to another institution. The child feels they are a problem to everyone, a hopeless case they would all be better off without, who, with nothing to lose, engages in risk-taking behaviours which further endanger their physical and emotional well-being. And so on.

In each individual case the set of factors differ, but the interconnected way they operate to compound the child’s difficulties and lead to their being labelled as SEBD remains the same. The mix of biological, psychological and social problems which combine to create SEBD in young people do not cease to influence their development, life-paths and choices when they leave school. Indeed, they have profound implications for these school leavers’ ability to manage the transition out of compulsory education: to cope with the demands of transition and to gain the help and support they need.

The next chapter will explore the implications for, and effects of SEBD on the transition out of school, by:

- identifying the developmental, social and educational consequences of having SEBD;
- looking at the transitional outcomes and experiences of young people with SEBD;
- outlining the support services available to them.
3 Transition

The previous chapter explored the nature of SEBD, the problems with defining them, and their causes. This chapter outlines what is known about the difficulties faced by school-leavers with SEBD as they make the move into adult life. To do this I:

- outline the controversy surrounding the concept of the transition to young/emerging adulthood, as a life stage, before focussing on the institutional transition from school to post-compulsory education or training;
- explore why school-leavers with SEBD are more likely to struggle with the transition into further education, training or work than their peers;
- review relevant international and national literature on the transitional outcomes of school leavers with SEBD;
- describe what is known about the transitional experiences of this group of school-leavers in the UK;
- identify key elements of effective transitional support programmes.

3.1 Transitions

Transition has been described as: ‘A passage from one life phase, condition or status to another...transition refers to both the process and the outcome of complex person-environment interactions’ (Chick & Meleis, 1986, pp.239-240). It is seen not as an event, but as a process of ‘inner reorientation and self-redefinition’ through which people go in response to changes in their lives (Bridges, 2004, p.xii). In other words, change is the external event, but transition is the internal process (Rogers & Reynolds, 2003). This quite wide definition of transition allows people to experience more than one transition at a given time. The young people in this study were experiencing two transitions, one developmental, the other institutional.

The participants were in transition in the developmental sense, as they moved towards independence from their families and the responsibilities of adulthood, but also institutionally, as they moved from school into new educational placements, work
and/or adult-oriented services. This section will look at each of these forms of transition in turn, beginning with developmental transition.

3.1.1 Transition as a developmental stage.

Erikson (1950, in Arnett, 2007) proposed that adolescence lasted from puberty until the late teens, when young adulthood began. This stage would then last until around the age of 40. At the time the theory was proposed the transition from adolescence to young adulthood was relatively rapid for the majority, with people marrying and entering stable full-time employment by the time age of 20 (Arnett, 2007). However, times have changed and it is argued that extended periods of education, later marriage and childbirth, delayed entry into the employment market and the longer time taken to settle into a career have increased the period of transition to the point where it becomes a life-stage in itself. The concept of emerging adulthood has been put forward as an alternative to transition to accommodate these changes (Arnett, 2007).

Emerging adulthood overlaps with both adolescence and young adulthood, but is a distinct stage in itself. This is the time of youth experimentation, when individuals will try out lifestyles, occupations and partners before settling into stable roles and relationships and entering young adulthood. However, Arnett’s (2007) new developmental stage is underpinned by some strong assumptions about what it is to be an adult. It could be seen as being as rooted in middle class realities, rather than reflecting the developmental path of all, or even most, of the population. He describes a world in which young people engage in extended study, move jobs until they find one that suits them, and delay taking on the responsibilities of marriage and parenthood until their thirties. The emphasis is on individual agency and choice: for example, from Arnett’s perspective, young people change jobs to fulfil their needs for satisfying, well-remunerated work, not because they are fired, or their job is temporary and ends, or because the low pay and poor conditions become unbearable.

Extended periods of under- and post-graduate study are not a luxury available to the majority of the population. The traditional middle class view of a career in which you
gain qualifications and begin climbing the career ladder towards stable, satisfying, profitable and secure employment is all but irrelevant to the majority of working class people. Many adults in the UK do not work (those with disabilities which prevent them working, those in high unemployment areas where work is scarce, those who are caring for others). Their dependence on the State for their income does not make them less ‘adult’ than those who have the good fortune to be able to earn their living through paid employment. Furthermore, the concept places great emphasis on marriage and the production of children as markers of young adulthood. The assumption underlying this, that those who (by choice or circumstance) do not marry or have families never attain full adult status, could be viewed as offensive.

Challengers to the concept of emerging adulthood, reporting research in severely deprived areas of England, claim that instability of employment is not exclusive to young people, and similar patterns of work are seen amongst their parents (Shildrick & MacDonald, 2007), suggesting that this is not an element of transition, but a consequence of their socio-economic environment. They also point out that the markers of young adulthood (setting up an independent home, moving in with a partner, having a baby, gaining employment) are not necessarily co-dependent. It is possible for young people to leave home and become a parent without gaining employment or having a long-term partner, for example. They argue that if transitions are to be understood they must be seen in a holistic, individual way, which can incorporate the multiple influences on the young person’s life. They also draw particular attention to the socio-economic and cultural forces which limit the choices available to disadvantaged young people.

The environment in which youth transitions take place has changed over the last 30 years. The UK’s manufacturing base has declined, to be replaced by the retail, financial and service industries (Anoop, 2006). Whilst the educated middle classes have benefited from expanded opportunities, traditional transitional pathways for a large portion of the male, working class population have been severely eroded (Bottrell & Armstrong, 2007). School leavers with few or no qualifications were previously able to
find work as unskilled labourers, with the potential to progress through apprenticeships, and the possibility of a job for life. Now they are faced with part-time, low paid, short term employment with little chance of training or progression, and the possibility of lifetime unemployment (Mizen, 2004).

The consequence of this is that, in our increasingly socially, educationally and economically divided society, there is a polarisation of those who experience ‘fast-track’ or ‘slow-track’ transitions to adulthood (Shildrick & MacDonald, 2007, p.599), with working class youth being the most likely to experience ‘long’, ‘broken’, ‘extended’, ‘protracted’, ‘uneasy’ and ‘fractured’ transitions. This presents the most fundamental challenge to Arnett’s concept of emerging adulthood: the goals of emerging adulthood are framed in conventional middle class terms, yet the protracted transitions which lead him to suggest a new stage is required are experienced most severely and damagingly by those who are working class.

Shildrick & MacDonald conclude that whilst the concept of transition is challenged by the societal and economic changes which extend young people’s transitions today, it is still a relevant concept, which can accommodate differences in individuals’ experiences, including fast-track and slow-track transitions. Youth is a life stage, but it is ‘neither the first nor the last, and as such is inherently transitional’ (Roberts, 2000, cited in Shildrick & MacDonald, 2007, p.601).

For the purposes of this study it is not necessary to go deeper into this debate, nor to subscribe to one view. Whichever perspective is taken, in real life young people are making the same moves towards independence during this time in their lives, over longer or shorter periods of time. What is important to draw from this discussion is that the choices and opportunities available to young people are constrained by the circumstances in which they grow up, and for some the goal of a traditional adult life (financial independence, leaving home, secure employment) is more distant and difficult to attain than it is for others. Most young people with SEBD come from
working class backgrounds, and are subject to the same constraints as their non-SEBD peers, but they have the added disadvantage of their difficulties.

3.1.2 Institutional transition.

The institutional transition out of compulsory education is the second transition that school leavers have to deal with, and is the main focus of this research. However it is important to be aware of the developmental transition that school leavers are undergoing, since their development will influence their capacity to cope with the demands made of them through the institutional transition.

Unlike the developmental transition which is an internal process, this is an external change which requires internal adjustment. Whilst the young person may have some choice in their destination after school, they rarely have a say in when it will take place. ‘Institutional transitions are mediated by bureaucratic and legal, rather than cultural or natural, guidelines’ (Davis, 2003 p.496). Educational and associated support systems end at a designated age, regardless of the needs of the individual, or their integration into adult services (Davis & Vander Stoep, 1997). The move from the supportive school environment to the post-compulsory sector need not coincide with the young person having the developmental capacity meet the demands of this new situation, in which young people are expected to be able to:

- take care of themselves;
- develop and act to reach their own goals;
- understand and plan for the future;
- engage in productive relationships which come with different sets of rules (work, romantic relationships and friendships);
- reform or maintain their identities (Davis & Vander Stoep, 1997).

The young person enters an educational and service provision environment that assumes they can fulfil at least some of these tasks. Education is optional, course and employment choices belong to the individual, and services are provided on request (and assume the young person is aware of their needs and able to identify appropriate
sources of support) (Davis, 2003; Sloper, Beecham, Clarke, Franklin, Moran & Cusworth, 2010).

The institutional transition out of compulsory education brings with it a number of changes that young people with SEBD have to cope with. Usually, young people with SEBD (particularly those who have attended special schools) will have to change school, as post-16 specialist provision is extremely limited. Since education is compulsory until the age of 16, up until that point schools are obliged to make considerable effort to ensure their pupils attend, and parents who fail to ensure their children go to school face legal sanctions. Post-16, it is up to the individual whether or not they continue in education. There is a far greater expectation that they will take responsibility for themselves, and their learning, and if they do not like their course, or college, they can leave: no-one can make them go back.

Of course, all young people have to cope with this transition, so we must ask: why would school-leavers with SEBD find this transition more difficult than their peers?

3.2 Implications of SEBD for the transition out of compulsory education

The young person with SEBD is often immature and lacking in organisational skills and their families do not usually have access to high levels of resources (personal, financial, knowledge-based or cultural). Their (and their family’s) previous experiences can make them reluctant to seek help from professionals and they often feel ill-prepared to make the transition out of school (Casey et al., 2006; Davis, 2003; Davis & Vander Stoep, 1997; Farrell & Polat, 2003). Each of these issues will be considered in turn in relation to their impact on transition.

3.2.1 Immaturity.

Many young people with SEBD have a history of abuse, neglect and failure. A history of abuse leads to feelings of unworthiness, which can in turn lead to acts of violence and promiscuity, and other risk-taking behaviour. They may also have mental health problems, and substance abuse and addiction is not uncommon (Davis & Vander
Stoep, 1997). They are aware of the social and cultural significance of leaving school, and most want to make that move just as everyone else does. However, their on-going problems, combined with a lack of qualifications make them ill-equipped to compete with their non-SEBD peers. Whilst in theory they have access to same courses and jobs as everyone else, in reality they have far less cultural capital to trade (Davis & Vander Stoep, 1997).

As a group, adolescents with SEBD are developmentally delayed in all areas of psychosocial development (Davis, 2003; Davis & Vander Stoep, 1997). They are often still operating on a concrete operational level (Davis & Vander Stoep, 1997; Goldschmid, 1968; Lister, Leach, & Hill, 1990), tend to have a low IQ and there are high levels of comorbidity with learning difficulties (Cooper et al., 1994; Nicholson, 2004). This delay in their cognitive development affects their ability to make effective plans, and to achieve academically, vocationally or socially (Davis & Vander Stoep, 1997). Their moral development is often also delayed: their moral reasoning is immature and this leads to them making different moral judgements (viewed by others as inappropriate behaviours) (Blair, Monson, & Frederickson, 2001; Davis & Vander Stoep, 1997). They also tend to be socially immature, with poor social problem-solving skills, immature egocentric perceptions, less social skills and more social problems (fewer friends, shorter friendships) than their peers (Walterbos & Van Engeland, 1995 in Davis & Vander Stoep, 1997). This affects their ability to build supportive networks, and to maintain educational placements, housing or employment (Davis & Vander Stoep, 1997).

As well as being an educational and social challenge, the move into further education, training or work presents practical problems. Pupils who attend special schools are usually transported from home to school in taxis (those in residential schools do not have to travel at all), but this service does not usually continue once they leave school. They are suddenly required to make their own way to their educational or work placement, which often involves the use of public transport. The cognitive and social delay described above means that many are disorganised, and whilst the special school
system allows for this aspect of their natures, once they leave that support is gone. There is no-one to ensure that they have the right bus fare, have breakfast, have done their homework, and so on, unless their families and others can step into this breach.

3.2.2 Access to supportive relationships.

Support networks ‘have influence and can reach out to help in ways that other forms of intervention find hard to match’ (Gilligan, 1999, p.87). Parents, siblings, grandparents, non-parental adults and peers all play a part in the support of young people. However, their simple presence in the individual’s life is not sufficient for them to be effective supporters; they also need to be able to provide a range of types of support. Researchers have given these a range of different names, however, they can be summarised as:

- **Practical support**: relating to finances, housing, transport, and so on;
- **Emotional support**: a source of intimacy, someone who listens and empathises with their problems;
- **Informational support**: advice on sources of help, available pathways,;
- **Esteem support**: unconditional regard for the young person, and belief in their potential.

(Armstrong, Birnie-Lefcovitch, & Ungar, 2005; Crosnoe & Elder, 2004; Frydenberg, 1997; Pinkerton & Dolan, 2007)

Not only do there need to be people surrounding the young person who have the potential to provide these forms of support, but they need to have a relationship with them which is close, reciprocal and durable to ensure that the individual will turn to them in times of need (Pinkerton & Dolan, 2007). Young people with SEBD have a number of obstacles between themselves and productive support networks, both within their families, and outside of them.

**Family support.**

For those school-leavers who have been in residential school the move back into the family home can be extremely difficult (Davis, 2003). Their families are unused to
having full responsibility for them, are challenged by behaviour, and are often struggling to deal with their own problems. Frequent separations (death, divorce, out of home placement, parental imprisonment) ‘stretch family ties, weakening the potential of the family to serve as a basis for support’ (Davis & Vander Stoep, 1997, p.404). Even for those who have been in non-residential placements, the support they have been given through school removes some of the responsibility from parents. Adjusting to being the main, and possibly only source of guidance, motivation and information requires that parents change the role they play in their children’s lives, and relearn parenting skills they may have lost (Davis & Vander Stoep, 1997).

The support of the family through transition is vital (Aston, Dewson, Lukas, & Dyson, 2005), but providing that support can be difficult. Parents need to strike a balance between giving their child freedom and providing a safety net for them in times of difficulty. Young people with SEBD have families who are struggling to cope as it is: they are surviving. Managing the complex balance between freedom and support may be beyond them, and they are likely to need help themselves.

The resources contained within a family are crucial to the amount and effectiveness of the support they are able to provide. Bourdieu (1986) identifies three forms of resources (capital, in his terms), economic, social and cultural, and argues that the social and cultural work to boost or limit access to economic capital. Families of young people with SEBD usually have limited economic capital, low levels of academic achievement (qualifications being one form of cultural capital) and are often part of communities with similar levels of resources, limiting access to more advantageous social capital. Bourdieu claims that:

*The volume of the social capital possessed by a given agent...depends on the size of the network of connections he can effectively mobilize and on the volume of the capital (economic, cultural or symbolic) possessed in his own right by each of those to whom he is connected’ (Bourdieu, 1986, p.249).*
Young people with SEBD are likely to experience a compounding, rather than alleviation of their disadvantage as the family they turn to for support has little in the way of capital for them to draw on.

A family’s culture and values will also affect the type of support and guidance they offer their children. Whilst the government is currently directing young people towards further education after school (not least by raising the school-leaving age), Shildrick & MacDonald (2007) suggest that in the working class households they studied the principle goal after school was employment. In other families education and employment are dismissed altogether as a valid pathway, and the young person is more likely to be supported in beginning a ‘serious’ criminal career (Anoop, 2006).

The environment in which young people with SEBD must manage the transition out of school, therefore, often consists of strained family relationships, set in circumstances of social and economic disadvantage, within which the individuals are struggling to cope with their own difficulties, and with limited resources available. There is also the possibility that families may steer their children towards less productive or even criminal activities after school. This makes sources of support outside the immediate family all the more important, yet here again, school leavers with SEBD are disadvantaged.

**Other sources of support.**

Peers and non-parental adults are important additional sources of support, and have the potential to fill the gaps in support unfilled by the immediate family. As young people move through adolescence peer relationships increasingly take centre stage in their social lives. The development of peer support networks is an important element in developing independence from the family, and can be a valuable source of esteem support and identity development. However, for many young people (especially those with SEBD) the influence of friends can be negative as well as positive.
School is where most young people find their friends. But as many pupils with SEBD are educated separately (in special needs classes, or special schools) they are likely to build most of their friendships with children with similar difficulties to themselves. This can lead to increased poor behaviour, as peer groups support each other, and offer approval for disruptive behaviour (Müllar, 2010). This is particularly applicable to boys (who make up the vast majority of the SEBD population) (Frydenberg, 1997). Many children with SEBD struggle to be accepted by their mainstream peers, and where they feel unable to make positive choices in their lives, young people will find friends who will support them in making negative ones (Thomas, Bell, Holland, Henderson, McGrellis & Sharpe, 2002).

Non-parental adults provide useful support to some young people, through formal mentoring schemes, or informal relationships (extended family, sports coaches, youth workers) (Frydenberg, 1997; Spencer, 2006). Formal arrangements can develop into useful sources of support, providing access to resources beyond the reach of the family. Some school-based mentoring schemes have been so successful in developing productive relationships that are valued by the young people that they continue to be drawn on for support after the pupil has left school (Rogers, 2009). Unfortunately, it is more likely that relationships will break down before becoming productive (Spencer, 2006).

Mentoring relationships are most productive when they involve the adult teaching the young person, through shared activity, rather than just spending time with them (Gilligan, 1999). It could be argued that it is those that are formed informally, in which the young person has chosen their supporter for themselves that are most likely to succeed. However, young people with SEBD lack social skills, have difficulty building productive relationships and struggle to trust people, making it more difficult for them to find and relate to potential mentors.

Thus, young people with SEBD are disadvantaged in terms of the peers they are likely to associate with, and the mentors they are likely to have access to.
3.2.3 Service use.

The high likelihood that their peer associations will be negative, and the difficulties young people with SEBD face in finding and maintaining relationships with mentors, combined with the limitations to the support available through the family, make access to formal support services all the more important to school leavers with SEBD, and their families. Unfortunately, there are problems in finding and gaining access to appropriate services.

Many parents of children with SEBD, as well as the children themselves, mistrust service providers and are reluctant to seek help (Davis, 2003). As was mentioned in the previous chapter, many parents feel that they have been judged by professionals in the past, and this alongside the failure to provide acceptable and appropriate support leads families to reject the idea of turning to services for help. If they do seek help they are likely to enter a world where they struggle to find appropriate helpers, and if they do there will be considerable bureaucracy surrounding access to that help, and then endless arguments over who funds it (Davis, 2003; Sloper et al., 2010). Funding for support may come for a number of sources (Local Education Authorities, the Learning and Skills Executive, the health service, or social services) but no-one wants to foot the bill, so cases can be passed from one organisation to another. There is considerable variation in the level of support provided in different areas of the country (Sloper et al., 2010)

Given the difficulties families with SEBD are already facing and their reluctance to contact support services directly, an ideal solution would be a formal handover process, involving the child’s school, their family and any appropriate agencies. However, the blurred status of SEBD means formal handover structures are lacking. SEBD are a special educational need, and once a young person is out of school a special educational need does not give rights to services, in the way a disability does. SEBD may or may not be a disability, depending on the nature of the ‘diagnosis’, and the policy of the agency providing the service. For example, in my experience, ADHD is sometimes (but not always) classed as disability for benefit purposes. However, other,
less specific labels, which are not supported by a medical diagnosis often do not attract the same support, even if they are more debilitating to the individual.

Thus, families and school-leavers face multiple difficulties in getting the help they need. They must overcome their own reluctance to engage with services, locate an appropriate provider, and then persuade someone to pay for the service. If they can convince a provider that the young person is disabled (and the young person is willing to accept the label) they will have access to greater provision by right, but this is a complex process, likely to be beyond most people, especially those who are already struggling with life.

School-leavers with SEBD face many barriers to successful transition into post-compulsory education or employment. They are less prepared as individuals than their non-SEBD peers, as they are more immature, and do not possess many of the social and emotional skills needed to adapt to the post-school environment. Their families are less likely to be able to provide the support they need, and to fill the gap left by their departure from the supportive school environment. They are less well equipped to build supportive relationships with mentors outside the family, and (alongside their families) many have negative views of support services, and are not able to find their way through the complex process of accessing them. It is, therefore, unsurprising that many young people with SEBD struggle with life after school.

3.3 The transitional outcomes of young people with SEBD

As the previous section makes clear, the social and psychological issues young people with SEBD face do not evaporate when they leave school. A recent report on the findings of three UK national birth cohort studies, of children born in 1946, 1958 and 1970, indicates that those identified as having a conduct disorder (CD) in childhood or adolescence are likely to experience problems in a number of areas throughout their lifetimes (Richards & Abbott, 2010). The odds of them under-achieving educationally, having trouble in their relationships, being involved in criminal activity, substance and alcohol abuse, and having health problems are far greater than for those without a CD.
The evidence for these claims was not based on a clinical diagnosis of CD, but on parent and teacher reports of a range of behaviours. These included fighting, disobedience, bullying, lying, unpunctuality, restlessness, indiscipline and truancy, and cases were rated as mild or severe using global measures derived from factor analyses. Even mild levels of CD are associated with an increased risk of a range of negative effects in the long term, and for those with a severe CD (who, we can assume based on the behaviours used in this study to indicate CD, include many of those with SEBD) these risks are greatly magnified.

Whilst there is an increased risk of negative outcomes associated with CD, they are by no means inevitable. Many young people with CD and other SEBD go on to lead ‘normal’ lives. The transition from school to further education, training or work is a moment when young people get to redefine themselves. This is a time of danger, when the chances of falling between the gaps in services and becoming further marginalised are increased, but it is also a time of potential, a ‘window of opportunity for changing the life course’ (Masten, Burt, Roisman, Obradovic, Lang & Tellegen, 2004, p.1091). Unfortunately, it seems a worryingly high number of young people with SEBD do not manage to make the most of this opportunity, as is seen in studies from around the developed world, which give a highly consistent picture of their transitional outcomes.

3.3.1 International research on SEBD transitions.

Most of the research done in this area comes from the United States, where a number of large scale longitudinal projects (the National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS), and its successor the NLTS-2, and the National Adolescent and Child Treatment Study (NACT)) have been conducted. NLTS and NLTS2 each involved data collection from a sample of more than 11,000 young people (aged 13+) with disabilities, including those with SEBD, over a five year period, whilst the NACT followed 800 students with SEBD, aged 9-16, for seven years. Evidence from these three major studies has led researchers to describe outcomes for young people with SEBD as ‘dismal’ and ‘appalling’ (Bradley et al., 2008, p. 4; Davis, 2003, p. 495).
A review of the findings of the studies mentioned above states that around half of the students involved failed to complete their high school education. Participation in post-secondary education was extremely low (around 20%), and those who were in education were almost all engaged in some form of vocational training, rather than following an academic path. Unfortunately, their training rarely led to related employment. Unemployment levels were high at the time of the NLTS (conducted between 1987 and 1993), but NLTS2 revealed still lower employment rates. Those young people who were in work were most likely to be employed in poorly paid, part-time work with little or no chance of progression. Their opportunities for progression were further diminished by the frequency with which they changed jobs. There was a strong likelihood of involvement with the criminal justice system, with around half of the samples having been arrested at some point (Bradley et al., 2008). The outcomes of young people with SEBD were poor, not just in relation to their peers without any special needs, but also in comparison to other categories of need.

Zigmond’s (2006) longitudinal study, which followed a group of school leavers with SEBD for two years, presents similarly depressing data on outcomes. 40 of her initial sample of 97 finished high school by dropping out, rather than graduating. Most of her final sample were graduates (6 dropouts and 27 graduates), but even amongst this group outcomes were poor. Whilst most were in employment, at some stage or throughout the 24 month period of the study, the majority of these were in work which was part-time, low paid and unskilled.

Whilst snapshots of their activities over the course of the study revealed that almost all were engaged in either work, study or a combination of both, their working and educational lives were characterised by instability. They were rarely in the same job, or on the same course, from one three-monthly data collection point to the next. Whilst some showed commitment to continuing education, of those who were not in school at three months, only one completed a course over the two year period. The rest of this group dropped in and out of courses and work, with periods of total disengagement, throughout the time of the study.
Hornby and Witte (2008) conducted a retrospective study of pupils who had left a residential school for students with SEBD in New Zealand, in which they were surveyed 10-14 years after leaving school. Their findings mirrored those from the US in many ways. They found that levels of engagement in further education and training were similar for their sample of 29 ex-pupils from a residential school, and for other young people, but on other measures of educational achievement, employment and community adjustment their participants did not fare so well. All but two left school with no qualifications and 17 left school before the leaving age of 16; 15 were in employment, but six only worked part-time; all but two were working for around the minimum wage, and ten had criminal records (four in prison at the time of the survey).

Whilst the findings of this survey are consistent with those in other countries there are limits on how relevant they are to a study of school-leavers with SEBD in the UK. In New Zealand attendance at a residential SEBD school is only available to pupils of average or above average intelligence (Hornby & Witte, 2008), whilst most pupils identified as having SEBD in the UK are of below average intelligence (Cooper et al., 1994). This makes the academic failure of the participants in Hornby and Witte’s study all the more worrying, but means that the sample is not really comparable to UK-based school-leavers with SEBD.

Furthermore, there is an expectation in New Zealand that a pupil will spend limited time in the residential school, where they will receive help with their problems before returning to mainstream school. The ex-pupils of the school involved in the Hornby and Witte’s study attended the school for between three and thirty months. In contrast, in England it is rare for a child to move from a residential school, back into mainstream school. In three years of working at a residential school I saw only one pupil successfully reintegrated into a mainstream school, and he had been at my school for three years before he did so. This difference in experience whilst at school could have a major impact on young people’s experience of leaving school.
The themes identified in the studies above are reiterated in a study from Finland. There are six state-run residential schools for ‘high risk’ children in Finland, in which around 300 children are placed. The majority of those placed in the schools come from foster homes, with only a third placed directly from their own home. Of the 52 young people involved in Jahnukainen’s (2007) study of residential school leavers only 15 had previously been placed in special education for emotionally and/or behaviourally disordered children, although there may have been more of the group who could have been described as having SEBD. There were a range of reasons why the participants had been placed in residential school:

- 18 for school issues (including truancy)
- 18 for drug-related issues
- 12 for criminal activity.

Jahnukainen attempted to interview all the students who had left state-run residential institutions, in 1996 and 2000, but was only able collect data relating to 35 ex-pupils (40%) (including three who had died) of the 1996 cohort, and 20 (22.5%) of the 2000 cohort (plus one who had died). Girls made up 34% of the older cohort (representative of the 32% of leavers in that year) but 60% of the younger group (compared to 36% of leavers). The over-representation of women in the sample is significant because their outcomes, as measured by Jahnukainen, are more positive than those of their male counterparts.

Jahnukainen measured the school-leavers outcomes based on their integration into society (taking account of their educational achievements, work history, income and relationship status), and their accumulation of risk behaviours (post-school crime, alcohol abuse and illegal drug use). Based on these measures he placed them in one of three groups: the ‘making it’ pathway (subdivided into stabilised and coping) the ‘mixed career’, and ‘living on the edge’ (subdivided into ‘drug career’ and ‘criminal career’).
Overall, he classed 26 of his 52 living participants as ‘making it’ (50%) of which only seven were ‘stabilised’, whilst 19 were ‘coping’. Of the 16 ‘copers’, 14 were female, and 11 (who we can assume were at least mostly female) were engaged in the full time care of their own children and this creates a major difference in the outcomes of males and females. Whilst two thirds of the female participants were placed in the ‘making it’ group, only just over a third (36.7%) of males achieved the same level of success. 

Whilst the ‘mixed career’ group contained roughly the same proportion of males and females, almost 42.9% of males, compared to just 12.5% of females were classed as ‘living on the edge’. Roughly equal numbers of males and females were engaged in a ‘drug career’, but those who were occupied in a ‘criminal career’ (8 participants) were all male.

Jahnukainen seems to be assuming that entering motherhood at a young age (the average age of the ‘coping’ group into which these young women were placed was 20.4) is a positive outcome (based on the social integration and status that can come with becoming a parent). If we accept this, then it seems that being male was a dominant risk factor in these school-leavers transitional outcomes, and outcomes for male ex-pupils of residential schools in Finland are particularly poor.

However, in an earlier follow-up study of ‘maladjusted’ pupils who had been in special classes in Finland, Jahnukainen found that their outcomes were no worse than other young people, once disadvantage was taken into account (Jahnukainen, 1999). Whilst even the ‘winners’ in this study had some problems in the first years after leaving school, those who were marginalised throughout the study period were the young people who had multiple risk factors in their lives before and during the study period. The majority of participants in the study had post-school life-paths which are considered ordinary. This makes Jahnukainen conclude that it is these factors, rather than the placement in special classes that influence transitional outcomes.

The relationship between disadvantage and poor transitional outcomes identified by Jahnukainen (1999) is supported by UK based research into the transitions of
disadvantaged school-leavers (Craine, 1997; MacDonald & Marsh, 2005; Shildrick & MacDonald, 2007). The experiences of young people living in severely deprived areas that they describe closely mirror those of young people with SEBD. The majority of the people studied left school with few or no qualifications, moved in and out of short-term, poorly paid employment, dropped into and out of courses and training schemes, and lacked direction and long term goals. Many, unable to access mainstream avenues to gainful employment, lived on the margins of society, making their living through crime or by working on the black market. This could easily be a description of the transitional experiences of young people with SEBD.

The finding that disadvantage, rather than educational difficulties is the main determinant of some young people’s lives helps to explain the disparity in outcomes between Jahnukainen’s two studies. The participants from the residential school make up a very small proportion of school pupils in Finland, and are placed for reasons above and beyond school-based, educational issues. The ex-pupils from special classes, on the other hand, would be more comparable to British students with SEBD, with the wide-ranging problems and needs referred to earlier in the previous chapter. However young people with SEBD as a group are disadvantaged, in terms of problems in the home and social and economic hardship, and one of the purposes of special educational interventions is to help them overcome their disadvantage.

There have been other studies/reviews of research conducted related to the post-school outcomes of young people with SEBD, (e.g. Armstrong & Davies, 1995; Armstrong, Dedrick, & Greenbaum, 2003; Wagner, 1995; Wood & Cronin, 1999), and the findings are broadly similar over time and across national boundaries. Young people with SEBD experience high levels of un- and under-employment, under-achieve academically, and have a high risk of abusing illegal drugs and alcohol and of criminality. However, whilst there is some degree of consistency in all these studies it is not possible to make direct comparisons between them.
The terms used to describe those with SEBD differ from one country to the next (maladjusted, Greece; mentally disturbed, Israel; social or emotional disorder, Scandinavia; defective behaviour, Slovakia) (Winzer, 2004) and they do not necessarily describe the same people. There can be a huge variation from one country to another in who is identified as having SEBD (by whichever term it is known) because diagnosis is inevitably subjective and context-bound. Cultural norms will make behaviour of one form or another acceptable in one country, but completely unacceptable in another.

Additionally, the studies cited here include those concerned only with school-leavers from residential special schools (under widely varying treatment regimes), those who have remained in mainstream school, in normal classes and specialist units, and those who have been in special day schools. It is reasonable to assume that their placement in some way reflects the degree of their difficulties, and that the education and support they receive, before and after leaving school will vary between the different types of schools, and in different countries. All of these variations, in difficulties and in experience, are likely to affect their post-school outcomes and make international, cross-cultural comparisons very difficult, particularly given the relatively small body of research that exists to draw upon (Winzer, 2004). However, these variations also make the similarities in outcomes across studies from nations all the more striking.

### 3.3.2 Transitional outcomes in the UK.

There is little evidence from the UK on the transitional outcomes or experiences of school leavers with SEBD. Having searched multiple databases, using a range of key words (see Appendix 1) I have been able to locate only two studies that are directly related to this topic, only one of which post-dates the creation of the Connexions Service. Connexions was developed to support young people through the transition out of compulsory education, and it has statutory responsibilities in relation to school leavers with SEN. It could therefore have a major impact on the transitions of young people with SEBD.

In many areas young people with SEBD fared badly in comparison to young people within other categories of SEN. They were the least likely to gain qualifications from school, and around a quarter were NEET at waves two and three of the study, compared to around one in ten of participants with SEN. They were the most likely to be employed (35% at wave 2; 55% at wave 3). This may be seen as a positive outcome, however, the jobs they were doing were usually low paid and part time, without access to training, and with little chance of progression.

Evidence from the sixteen case studies, conducted alongside the quantitative surveys from which the statistics above were collated, suggests that the statistics hide a more complicated story (Aston et al., 2005; Dewson et al., 2004; Polat et al., 2001). As in Zigmond’s (2006) research in the US, the subjects of the case studies (many of whom had SEBD as a primary or secondary special need) dropped in and out of courses and jobs. This means that although they may be in employment or training, they are not necessarily moving towards long term goals, but are instead ‘churning’ without progressing.

A small scale study has been conducted with the leavers of a single residential school for pupils with SEBD, involving just 26 participants (Farrell & Polat, 2003; Polat & Farrell, 2002). The researchers attempted to contact all the 172 ex-pupils who had left in the preceding 10 years, and whilst the resulting sample of 26 (aged 17-25) may be unrepresentative, it is perhaps indicative of the unstable lives many young people with SEBD live.
At the time they were interviewed 16 of the 26 former pupils were working, although three were only in part time employment. The work of the others was, for the most part, unskilled and low paid, and their aspirations for the future were generally low. Sixteen of the former students had attended/were attending further education courses, but they did not intend to take their education any further. A minority of the group (four) had been involved in criminal activity resulting in custodial sentences, three of which were the result of drug-related crime (Polat & Farrell, 2000).

The outcomes described in these two studies are consistent with those in other countries, which paint a depressing picture of the potential futures of young people with SEBD. All the studies cited here highlight the link between SEBD and poor post-school outcomes, but that link is by no means an inevitability. Within every study there have been some young people who have succeeded in integrating into mainstream life, in spite of their SEBD; some who struggle in the early years out of school, but settle into a ‘normal’ life later, and some who at the point of the study’s conclusion are still having problems. There is no way of knowing whether this last group will resolve their problems at a later point in their lives, or whether the ‘success’ cases will experience a resurgence of their issues later in life. Therefore, although outcome-based studies allow for comparison between groups (SEN, non-SEN, SEBD) and tell us that young people with SEBD in general struggle more at a given point, the true ‘outcome’ is difficult to determine.

### 3.3.3 Design issues in outcome-based studies.

Outcome-based studies randomly assign an endpoint (the end of the study period, age 18 or 25) at which the story is finished and the conclusion about the success or failure of the participant is reached. However, life does not work in that way. To use my own post-school experiences as an example:

*Aged 16: I began going to a further education college in Sheffield. After two terms I was asked to leave because I lacked commitment. I went to work in a fish and chip shop.*

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Aged 18: I was attending (occasionally) a second sixth form college, doing ‘A’ levels, which I failed.

Aged 20: I was travelling in Europe and India from the age of 19 to 21, working as and when (and where) I needed to, to keep going.

Aged 25: I was working as barmaid/assistant manager in a pub.

Aged 30: I was on maternity leave from my job working in a school for boys with emotional and behavioural difficulties. By the end of that year I had left my job and begun studying, by distance learning, for a degree.

Aged 40: I had two children, and was happily married to their father. We lived in a home that we owned, and I was near to completing my PhD.

The outsider’s view of my ‘outcomes’ depends entirely on the point in my life that is determined as the end, and these snapshots hide as much as they reveal, in terms of the life I have led, the problems faced and the opportunities I have had.

Importantly, in relation to this discussion of ‘outcomes’, the judgement of my success or failure at any point depends of the values imposed by the observer. I failed my ‘A’ levels because I did not value them, and I was working three part-time jobs to save up money so I could go travelling. I felt successful when I was travelling: I was doing what I wanted to do. However, I had dropped out of one college and failed at another; I was living hand to mouth; I had no home: I was certainly not fulfilling my academic potential, and was my life not ‘progressing’ in a conventional sense. This may lead an outside observer to describe my outcome at that point as poor.

My life-chances and family background do not compare to the experiences and opportunities of most young people with SEBD (I have a supportive family who have been able to bail me out when I have found myself in trouble). But this example demonstrates the problems with outcome-based studies, in the judgements they require, and the arbitrary way that an endpoint is allocated. Individual life-paths take unpredictable twists, and what may seem to be a determining event and outcome at one point may be completely irrelevant at another, or vice versa.
However, whilst there are problems in determining the ‘outcome’ in an individual’s life, outcome-based studies are valuable in that they allow for comparison between groups at the same age/stage of life. The level of consensus, at international and national level, from these studies is remarkable, and the picture they paint is a depressing one of failure, in most cases. However, every study reveals some school-leavers who manage the transition out of compulsory education as well as their non-SEBD peers.

### 3.4 Factors promoting successful transition

This section draws on the limited UK-based research that is available to explain the factors, processes and services which seem to support or hinder smooth transitions for young people with SEBD in this country. There is very little evaluative research into post-16 transition support in the UK, and none directly focussed on school leavers with SEBD. The majority of the research in this area has been conducted in the U.S., where the studies have concerned the transition out of high school at age 18, rather than 16. This difference means that the evidence reported, as well as having been gathered in a different culture, concerns young people at a different stage of development (this may be particularly relevant to late-maturing individuals, such as young people with SEBD). However, research from the U.S. is included in this review because it echoes and supports the extremely limited evidence from the UK.

#### 3.4.1 Transitional experiences in the UK.

A longitudinal study of the transitional experiences of school leavers with SEN (Aston et al., 2005) found that the young people who received the best formal support through transition were those who were most dependent on their families and other support services, and who had supportive, well-informed and assertive parents. In other words, the young people had the most obvious needs, and their families were knowledgeable about their entitlements, and willing and able to fight to get them. The more ‘mainstream’ the young people were, the less likely it was that the family would get help.
There is limited evidence on the transitional experiences of young people with SEBD in this study. However, the case studies provide some suggestions as to what some of the factors influencing transition may be. These fall into two categories, those relating to the young person and their family, and those arising from the services they received. The factors cited which relate to the young person and their family were:

- social skills and personal qualities;
- intelligence;
- perseverance;
- family support;
- realistic ambitions.

Factors relating to educational and service provision were:

- effectiveness of transition planning;
- courses which made appropriate academic demands of students;
- education and employment which interested the young person, and were seen as relevant to their future goals;
- support outside the family;
- financial difficulties;
- quality of work placements;

A key problem identified was that many young people with SEBD do not have high enough levels of need to trigger supportive interventions, and it was luck, rather than judgement, that led them to the right placements and the right supporters.

A review of transition services in different parts of the country revealed wide variation in provision (Sloper et al., 2010). The emphasis of these services was the transition to adult medical and mental health services for people with disabilities (including learning disabilities), rather than on the direct provision of support. There was a focus on putting together care packages, whereas young people with SEBD are likely to require help with coping with the academic and social demands of their courses, filling in forms, getting to interviews on time, talking through problems with peers, or managing
money. These services were generally over-stretched and struggling to provide for the neediest, so that young people with SEBD were outside of their client group.

The Connexions Service is supposed to support young people with special needs through transition, beginning transition planning at the age of 14, and continuing to monitor their activities and provide support when needed, up until the age of 25. Yet Aston et al (2005) described it as a ‘fitful presence’ in participants lives (p.119). In some cases Connexions workers were heavily involved in the young person’s life, in others they operated in the background, and in some they were completely absent. However, when this study was conducted the service was in its infancy (having been established in 2000, when the participants were in their final year of school), and it is, perhaps, unreasonable to expect it to have operated without some teething difficulties.

Unfortunately a recent study of the service provided by the Connexions Service in northern England found that variation in provision may be the norm (Colley, Lewin, & Chadderton, 2010). This report claims that changes to the way careers guidance is provided, with the assimilation of the careers service into the generic Connexions service, has reduced the both the quality and quantity of advice given. At the same time, the service is unable to fulfil demands to provide a generic support service for young people, as it is under-resourced, and caseloads are totally unmanageable (school-based workers managing caseloads into the 1000s, and community workers who are expected to provide more intensive support working with 60-80 young people rather than the 10-20 initially envisaged). Other services (social services, education and health) have unrealistic expectations of what Connexions can and should do, and there is confusion over whether the workers are ‘brokers’, directing clients to appropriate services, or direct providers of support. The focus on meeting targets, particularly in relation to the NEET population reduces the ability of workers to provide preventative services (particularly careers guidance).
Careers guidance can play a vital role in supporting young people through the transition out of school. Smith, Lilley, Marris & Krechowieka’s (2005) systematic review of the literature on careers guidance published between 1988 and 2004 identified careers education and guidance and parental support as influences on the post-16 transition. Individualised guidance, provided by people (rather than through literature) and career-skills development were each identified as important in supporting smooth transitions. However, the review also highlighted the different needs of different populations in regard to careers guidance, in terms of quantity and timing. Unfortunately there is no research into careers guidance for school leavers with SEBD, who may have different needs to young people in general.

Many of the service-related factors in transition identified through analysis of Aston et al’s (2005) findings could be related to the provision of high quality careers guidance (effective transition planning, academically appropriate, relevant and interesting courses, moving towards defined goals). This suggests that the way careers guidance is provided to young people with SEBD may have a significant influence on their post-16 choices and outcomes. Given the problems with the Connexions service (excessive caseloads, reduction in career education provision) identified by Colley et al (2010) it may be that this group are not receiving the level of support or guidance they need.

At the time of writing, the future of careers guidance in the UK is in a state of flux. Connexions Services across the country have had their budgets slashed, and their survival is in doubt. The Education Bill currently working its way through parliament changes the way careers guidance is funded and provided (particularly by placing responsibility for securing the provision of independent careers advice with schools). It is unclear how these changes will affect the career guidance provided to school-leavers generally, or those with SEBD particularly.

3.4.2 Evidence on ‘best practice’ in transitional support.

Wagner & Davis (2006) claim that there are five key aspects of successful transition support programmes for young people with SEBD: relationships, rigour, relevance,
addressing the needs of the whole child and involving students and families in transition planning. The five elements were developed from analysis of a wide range of research that evaluated transition support programmes. The five aspects were then tested against the full range of data collected through NLTS-2, a large-scale longitudinal study of the transitions of young people with disabilities (for full details on the NLTS-2 research project see www.nlts2.org). The following sections explain each element in turn, as described by Wagner & Davis (2006), with reference to other research where relevant.

**Relationships.**
Wagner & Davis consider relationships with peers, family members, professionals and others to be vital in supporting young people through transition, and keeping them engaged in education, training or work. Transition programmes need to provide support in the development of relationships through targeted approaches (social skills training, conflict resolution, peer mentoring, support for families) as well as creating positive environments for all young people, which support good relations. Relationships and social skills have also been identified by others as significant in successful transitions (Armstrong et al., 2003; Landmark, Ju, & Zhang, 2010).

It is not just the relationships between the young person and their contacts that influence the transition process. Good relationships between educational establishments and agencies involved in the young person’s life, between teachers and social workers, Connexions PAs and employment workers are essential in providing effective support to school-leavers. It is within these relationships that good communication will take place (information sharing between school and college, development of comprehensive multi-agency support packages), which is vital for successful transitions to take place (Evans, George, White, & Sharp, 2010).

**Rigour.**
Rigour describes the provision of suitably demanding courses, with appropriate support, so that young people with SEBD gain the qualifications they need to allow
them to compete with their non-SEBD peers (Mary Wagner & Davis, 2006). Landmark et al (2010) in their review of transition practices place educational inclusion (engaging in the same curriculum, with the same opportunities as their peers) third on their list of most substantiated practices (though the most substantiated practices are not necessarily the most important or the most effective, just the most researched).

**Relevance.**
Many school leavers with SEBD aspire to employment, and any preparation or training before they leave, or in the early years after they leave, must include vocational elements to be relevant to their goals. Work experience, paid or unpaid is the most substantiated transition practice, according to Landmark et al (2010), closely followed by employment preparation programme participation. This includes vocational and employment training, job search skills, career education and work/study programmes. Wagner & Davis also advocate training in workplace skills and behaviours, career awareness, and the opportunity to try ‘tasters’ of different forms of employment.

**Addressing the needs of the whole child.**
Research suggests that there is the need for awareness of the multiple factors influencing the young person, and the willingness to address them all Evans et al., 2010; Wagner & Davis, 2006). This means tackling not just the individual’s education or employment issues, but also being prepared to help them deal with practical, social, emotional and family-related difficulties. This may include dealing with drug and alcohol addictions, mental health problems, support with daily living skills and the development of self-determination. The last two items appear on Landmark et al’s list of substantiated practices. ‘Self-determination’ covers a range of social, personal and cognitive skills: decision making, problem-solving, goal setting and attainment skills, self-instruction, risk-taking and safety evaluation, self advocacy and leadership, self awareness and feelings of self-efficacy (Landmark et al., 2010).

One way of providing holistic support to young people in transition is through the provision of a ‘wraparound’ service (Lehmann, Clark, Bullis, Rinkin, & Castellanos,
The central feature of this service is the resource co-ordinator, who works with the young person and their family, providing direct support and co-ordinating support from other agencies. The aim is to:

‘develop and implement a systematic process that empowers youth to make informed choices, based upon their individual strengths, life circumstances, and resources and opportunities available within their communities and...ensure youth receive the support that will assist them to accomplish this goal’ (Lehmann et al., 2002, p.136).

This, in theory, is the model on which the Connexions Personal Adviser (PA) role has been built. However, this system only works if there is flexible funding to go with it (not available to the Connexions PA). Flexible funding allows swift response to the needs of young people and their families, and the ability to buy services, or anything else they need. Should there be changes to the lives of the young person or their family, the service has to change to fit around them, not the other way round. In this way, the young person is provided with a flexible, individualised service and support plan, which can be highly effective (Lehmann et al., 2002).

**Involve students and families in transition planning.**

It is generally accepted that a transition plan is only of use if the school leaver and their parents/carers are involved in its development (Davis, 2003; Landmark et al., 2010; Lehmann et al., 2002). Unfortunately, young people with SEBD and their families are the least likely of any group of SEN to recall the development of a transition plan (Dewson et al., 2004). This does not mean that they were not present when the plan was made, but it does suggest that they did not have ownership of the process: it was not of sufficient importance or relevance to remember.

Parental involvement in transition planning is claimed to improve the process of transition, but it is debateable whether the improvement is truly related to the plan. It is equally possible, even likely, that the parents who engage in transition planning are the parents who have engaged with the school the child is leaving, and who will continue to actively support their child as they move on. In contrast, it is reasonable to assume that the parents who do not engage with the transition process have not had
the motivation or skills to promote their child’s needs through school, and will continue to struggle once they leave. Thus, parental involvement in transition planning may be a symptom of the parent’s role in their child’s life, rather than a distinct factor in the transition process. Nevertheless, parents are a primary support to school leavers (Aston et al., 2005), and the more they can be engaged with all aspects of their child’s life, the better their transitional experiences are likely to be.

3.5 Conclusion

Effective transitional support focuses on relationships, provides rigorous educational support, is relevant to the young person’s aspirations, attends to the whole child and involves them and their families in transition planning. Unfortunately, it seems likely that young people with SEBD are not given this level of support, guidance and involvement within the system in this country, given the problems with the provision of transitional support outlined in this chapter. Young people with SEBD are disadvantaged in many ways, in comparison to their peers, and are likely to struggle with the transition process without effective support. This may explain the poor outcomes experienced by school leavers with SEBD.

The studies cited here all contribute to our understanding of the transitions of school leavers with SEBD. However, the fact that I have only been able to locate two UK-based studies in this area indicates that there is a need for further research in this country. The large-scale longitudinal study into post-16 transitions for school leavers with SEN (Aston et al., 2005; Dewson et al., 2004; Polat et al., 2001) offers a wealth of statistical data, not only on young people’s post-school destinations, but also their feelings about the way they have been supported through transition. However, whilst the supporting case studies shed light on some of the issues faced by young people with SEBD, most of them focus on young people for whom it is not their primary need.

Research in this area is extremely sparse, and has tended to focus on outcomes. It is, perhaps, easy to see why so many young people with SEBD struggle with the transition out of school, but some succeed. In all the outcome studies there have been some
school-leavers who have coped, some have even thrived. There is little in the literature to explain the processes involved in the successful or unsuccessful transitions of this group. This study, therefore, focuses not just on what happens to school leavers with SEBD, but how and why some seem to do as well as their mainstream peers, whilst others travel down less productive roads.

A further aspect of the transitions of school-leavers that has yet to be explored is the impact of school placement on outcomes. The only UK-based study exclusively focussed on the post-school lives of young people with SEBD was conducted in a residential special school. However, these pupils are also educated in day special schools, pupil referral units and in mainstream schools. Each of these types of placement is at a different remove from the young person’s home community, but we know nothing about the influence this might have on their transitions, and their integration into their home communities.

Therefore, this research addressed the following questions:

- What happens to young people with SEBD when they make the transition out of compulsory education?
- What helps them in making this transition?
- What hinders them in making this transition?
- Does the type of school they attended (mainstream, day special or residential special) affect their experience of this transition?

In seeking to answer these questions I followed a group of young people leaving three different schools (residential, mainstream and day special) through their first year out of school, collecting data from the school leavers, their families and those who worked with them in an effort to understand the range of influences on them, from a number of perspectives. The next chapter describes the approach I took to undertaking this research.
Chapter 4  Approach to the Research

4.1  Introduction

In this chapter, I explain how the research design developed in relation to my ethical stance and the conceptual framework (outlined in Chapter 2), whilst being restricted by the practicalities of being a single researcher working within a prescribed time-frame. These factors led to the development of a longitudinal study conducted over eighteen months, in which I followed a small group of school-leavers identified as having SEBD, who had left different types of school, for a year. I collected interview data from them, their parents and the people who worked with them. This data was used to develop a case study for each young person, detailing their history, their post-school experiences and the individual, social and some of the structural influences on them. The cases allowed for within-case analysis, through which I came to understand the contextualised experience of each young person, as well as cross-case analysis, which allowed me to extract commonalities from the data.

In this chapter I outline the ethical principles which guided this project, and the way the conceptual framework steered the research design. I then show how these principles and ideas informed key aspects of the design. This is followed by an explanation of the pilot study, conducted to trial certain methods and to begin to identify areas of young people’s lives that seem significant in their transitions. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the ways in which the pilot study influenced the choice of methods and scope of the current project.

4.2  Ethics and values

The way that particular ethical dilemmas were managed in this study is covered in Chapter 5; here, I describe the principles that underlie the decisions I made. Current ethical research guidelines (BERA, 2004) have been followed in relation to all aspects of this project. However, I feel these guidelines only offer a minimum standard for
researchers, and beyond this, my personal ethical stance has guided this research from conception to conclusion, and in the presentation of this thesis.

There is an inherent inequality between me, the middle class, educated and relatively privileged researcher and my participants and their families. Whilst life has not always been easy for me, I have always had the personal (if not financial) resources to cope. My participants and their families were, for the most part, working class, with little education and extremely limited resources. Perhaps I am not the best person to conduct this research: I could be seen as yet another outsider coming in to tell others how they should be living their lives, whilst having no real understanding of their circumstances. However, my reality is not as far from theirs as it is for many researchers and academics investigating this field. I live on a low income, in a working class area, on a council estate. Whilst my opportunities and resources are undoubtedly greater than the families I met in the course of conducting this study (and many of my neighbours), I am not entirely an outsider in their worlds. Being realistic, we live in a world where only some voices are heard and I am better equipped than many to ensure mine is: if I can use it to tell their stories, the endeavour can be justified.

This justification is only valid if I truly address the concerns of my participants and their families (rather than mine) and if I ensure their right to be heard is balanced by their need to be protected from exposure. Therefore, in planning, executing and reporting this research I have attempted to ensure that all informants experience some degree of power over the research process, that they gain something from it (however small) and that there is no possibility of them being harmed through their involvement.

4.3 Conceptual underpinnings

There were essentially two aims of this study:

- to find out what happened to the young people when they left school, what paths they took, and how successful they were as they began moving towards adult life;
- to understand what helped or hindered them in making this move.
My methods in achieving the second aim were rooted in the conceptual framework, outlined in Chapter 2, particularly the bioecological model of development.

Therefore, the research design had to allow a focus on the four key elements in the model (person, process, context and time) (Tudge et al., 2009). Taking each element in turn:

- **Person:**
The methods used needed to allow understanding of the individual, including their difficulties, strengths, motivations, personalities and histories.

- **Process:**
I needed to be able to develop an insight into the way the young person’s problems had developed, and the ways in which they were ameliorated or exacerbated through the transition process.

- **Context:**
Data needed to be collected which placed the young person’s experience in context, taking into account those working with them, the systems within which they were operating, the role of their families and wider influences on the transition process.

- **Time:**
The research design needed to accommodate the influence of time in a number of ways. Firstly, I needed to take account of the cultural and political context of the moment, in schools and post-16 educational provision, and the economic climate (at the start of this study this country was entering a deep economic recession, which was likely to have an impact on the employment possibilities for the participants). Secondly, it was necessary to develop a historical picture of how the participants had become the people they were when they left school. Finally, there was the need to observe the influences acting on them over time as they made the move out of school and into further education, training, work, or unemployment. Thus, a longitudinal study was required.

4.4 **How long does a study need to be to be longitudinal?**
Can a study that only covers an eighteen-month period of the participants’ lives be described as longitudinal? Quantitative longitudinal studies usually last longer, some such as the birth cohort studies cited in Chapter 3 continue for decades. However, qualitative studies do not usually cover such long periods. Saldana (2003) describes three key attributes of qualitative longitudinal studies: duration, time and change, but qualifies these in saying that ‘longitudinal means a looooong time’ (p.1). However, Thomson, Plumridge & Holland (2003) claim that the defining feature of qualitative longitudinal research (QLR) is the ‘deliberate way in which temporality is designed into the research process making change a central focus of analytic attention’ (p.185). They include within their selection of qualifying studies one lasting just eighteen months. This study therefore, is QLR, since it concerns the processes involved in transition, observed over time. Change (the move out of compulsory education) and temporality are firmly built into the research design.

4.5 Why a qualitative study?

There is little research into the transitional experiences of school leavers with SEBD, making a qualitative, exploratory study the most appropriate. The lives of young people with SEBD are complex; their experiences, actions, difficulties and decisions influenced by a range of interacting elements, which have varying levels of effect on each other, and the individual. There are clues in the literature as to which factors may be significant, but there is increasing evidence that it is the way they interact, rather than their individual presence, which is important in determining the paths young people take (Riley & Masten, 2005). Therefore, any theories about influences on these young people’s transitions developed through this research needed to grow out of the data collected, and any presupposition of the key influences had the potential to create a biased and incomplete picture. There is simply not enough evidence on what influences the transitions of young people with SEBD to be able to design a quantitative study measuring the effect of prescribed factors on their experiences.
Mixed methods may have been appropriate to this study, particularly in the first stages before the participants left school, to determine the level of adversity the participants were exposed to, analyse their support networks, and assess their coping abilities. Smokowski et al (1999) used quantitative measures to assess the degree of risk children were exposed to (poverty, single parent families, etc) before using qualitative data to see how the risks manifested themselves in children’s lives. The coping abilities of young people have also been measured using quantitative methods (e.g. Frydenberg, 1997). Building on these studies, I could have taken a quantitative approach to assessing the young people’s support networks as described by Cauce, Felner & Primavera (1982) and related these to measured risk factors and coping ability before collecting qualitative data to see how these factors influenced the young people’s experiences.

However, quantitative methods of analysing support networks tend to reveal the size of the network, rather than its use. It is possible that two young people could have access to similar sized networks, but one network holds greater resources, or one individual is better at using their network’s resources than the other. Quantitative measures may not provide data on these factors, and so may not improve understanding of the role of the support network in the young person’s transition.

There are a number of problems with measuring risk or adversity through quantitative means. As was demonstrated in Chapter 2, through the critique of Hamill’s (2003) study of resilience and self-efficacy, the way risk is conceptualised, the aspects of a child’s life that the researcher considers to constitute risk, can have a profound effect on the results of a study. Both risk and adversity are complex concepts, and it is difficult to see how measuring them in ‘objective’ quantitative terms could take account not only of the many interactions between factors, but also of the subjective ways they are experienced. One person’s adversity is another’s bad day. And what appear to be risk factors may operate in more than one way, sometimes becoming protective. For example, a family member’s involvement with crime and drugs can be
considered a risk factor, but Smokowski et al (1999) found them to be protective to those individuals who viewed them as examples of what not to do.

Therefore, whilst these or similar methods could have been used in this study they could not reveal the subtle and inter-related complexity of the participants’ personalities, histories, families and resources. Young people with SEBD are, as a group, resistant to positive interventions; their problems and behaviours are remarkably consistent over time. Research has revealed that even when interventions are seen as effective they only work with certain youths, in particular contexts, when delivered by the right people (Haydn, 2007). Thus, any attempt to understand the needs of young people with SEBD in transition, and so improve the support they are given, must take account of multiple influences on them and those working with them: the educational, social and economic context in which their transition takes place.

All the quantitative measures mentioned here involve ‘grab and run’ data collection methods, in which the researcher asks pre-determined questions based on their own ideas of what is important, the responses to which are then taken away for analysis. This form of data collection and analysis does not sit comfortably with my ethical stance, as it ensures that the researcher holds all power within the research process. Also, retention of the sample was likely to be challenging, so in my first meetings with participants I needed ways of building rapport and the beginnings of a trusting relationship with them, so that they would want to meet me again once they had left school. Asking pre-determined lists of questions that did not relate to their responses was not likely to support the building of the sort of relationships needed to keep them engaged throughout the study period.

In light of these ethical and practical issues, the methods used needed to be as participatory as possible. Whilst Hart (1997) presents a hierarchical model of participation, with children ‘assigned but informed’ at the bottom and ‘child-initiated and directed’ at the top, Treseder (1997) challenges this view. He suggests that all
levels of participation have equal value, and that the desired level of participation should be determined by the situation, rather than an ideological stance.

In this study, the level of participation was constrained by the abilities and inclinations of the participants. Any form of consultation requires ‘a degree of social confidence and of linguistic competence’ (Rudduck & Fielding, 2006, p. 227) and voiced research should not be conducted without consideration of the nature and impact of power on the capacity of the participants to speak, be heard and have their views acted upon (Fielding, 2004). Therefore, I needed to produce research which supported the participants in expressing their concerns, without them feeling overwhelmed by the demands made of them, whilst ensuring that those with power were prepared to listen to what they had to say.

Taking a qualitative approach allowed the young people to be partners in the research. Whilst the research agenda was set by me (with the schools’ agreement and interest), I used data generation methods which the young people had some control over – avoiding researcher-led structured interviews and instead creating a collaborative atmosphere in which we explored their lives and began to identify the issues relating to their transitions together. This was the only way to unravel the complex puzzle these young people present in a way that was meaningful, to them and to me, whilst avoiding imposing my own ideas about the significant influences on their transitions.

4.6 A Multi-site, Multiple Case Study Design

4.6.1 Why a case study?

The transitional experiences and support of young people with SEBD can only be understood by exploring the experiences of the young people in context. I wanted to know why some school leavers with SEBD succeed, whilst so many others fail. The case study is particularly well-suited to answering ‘why’ questions, when the answers to those questions are likely to be firmly rooted in context (Yin, 2009).

Case study is defined as:
‘an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident.’ (Yin, 2009, p.18).

In this case, the phenomenon was the transitional experiences of school leavers with SEBD, which cannot be separated from the context in which they occur (an individual life, a school, a family, a community). A case study has the potential to illuminate the many influences on the young people’s transitions, without reducing them to a set of factors, unconnected to the complex realities of themselves and their lives.

Other research designs could have been used to explore this topic, for example, phenomenology, with its focus on understanding the lived experiences of a phenomena, or narrative research and its attention to individual stories (Creswell, 2007). However, phenomenology’s aim of finding the essence of an experience runs counter to the aims of this study: to find better ways of helping young people with SEBD deal with transition. Defining the essence of their transitional experiences would involve smoothing over their differences. But it is their differences that make them so difficult to devise successful interventions for. One-size-fits-all interventions are certainly not appropriate to these young people, and an approach that focused the research on commonalities was likely to lead to these types of recommendations.

In contrast, a purely narrative research design would focus too closely on the individual. Hearing and telling the young people’s stories may be an important part of understanding their experiences, but it would not give the breadth of contextual information required in this study. The young people’s stories alone may have revealed something of why they fail or succeed as individuals, and their view of their transitions was one element of this research, but it was not the whole of it. I also needed to know about how others (their families and others who were supporting them) viewed them and their transitions, to move the research from the individual to the contextualised experience. Whilst the perceptions of those surrounding the young person could be understood using narrative, there are other aspects of their context, particularly the
procedural and structural elements of transitions, which would not be revealed through the use of narrative alone.

Thus, whilst narrative played an important part in the research, it needed a more holistic design, to place the individual firmly within their context. A case study was therefore the most appropriate approach to take in order to answer my research questions. It allowed for a focus on the individual in context, and left space for the use of a range of methods to generate and analyse the data. As has been stated earlier, SEBD is an umbrella term, covering a wide range of difficulties. Therefore a single case would be too specific to the difficulties of the individual participant, and a multiple case study was used, with the number of cases used being determined by the practical limitations of being a single researcher.

**Objectivity and Generalisation.**

Case studies are not without weaknesses, and are most frequently criticised for being unscientific, prone to selective and biased reporting, and overly specific, which limits the possibilities for generalisation (Punch, 2005; Robson, 1993; Yin, 2009). However, to describe something as ‘unscientific’ requires explanation of what is ‘scientific’, and most definitions of the latter involve ‘objectively proven knowledge’ (Chalmers, 1982, cited by Robson, 1993, p.58). Of course, even within the natural sciences nothing can be proven, any theory is presented as the most plausible explanation, based on the evidence available at that time, and is subject to change as improved research methods and understandings develop. The beliefs of the scientist, about what is going on, the instruments they select or develop (based on those beliefs), and the way their prejudices and opinions lead them to interpret the data can all introduce bias into the research: ‘objectivity cannot be guaranteed’ (Robson, 1993, p.58).

Objectivity can be increased through various means, including the triangulation of data, seeking out contradictions within the data when theory building. However, the subjective perspective of the researcher, their influence on the research process, in their contact with participants and analysis of the data, can never be fully countered.
Therefore, it is argued that it is more important for the researcher to be reflexive, aware of their role in the research process, and share that awareness when they report their research, than it is for them to aim for the unachievable, objective view (Maxwell, 2005). Whilst some case study research has been ‘sloppy’, not followed ‘systematic procedures’ and ‘allowed equivocal evidence or biased views to influence the direction of the findings and conclusions’ (Yin, 2009, p.14), this is an indictment of individual researchers, not the methodology. Similar practices have resulted in bad research in other fields, of which the flawed science and researcher bias behind findings that the MMR vaccination was linked to autism is a powerful example (BBCNews, 2010; Deer, 2011).

The issue of generalisation is dealt with in one of three ways in case study research (Robson, 1993). In some studies the intrinsic nature of the case is the prime interest, and there is no attempt to generalise. In others, a case-to-case approach is taken: this is what happens in this case, therefore another case, like this one, will show the same outcomes. The small sample, necessitated by practicalities, involved in this study was never going to produce sufficient case prototypes for this sort of generalisation to be feasible. The complex, interacting factors influencing each participant’s experience of transition are unlikely to be replicated closely enough in other cases for comparisons to be drawn. Therefore, the third approach, generalisation through theory was used. My aim was to understand the processes through which resilience was facilitated or inhibited in the young people’s transitions. These processes are understood on a theoretical level, through which generalisation is possible.

4.6.2 Why multi-site?

If this research was to reflect the variety of experiences that young people with SEBD have when they leave school then it had to draw its sample from the many types of schools they attend. Of course, there are a wide range of variations in schools (residential schools include local authority/privately owned, therapeutic and behaviourist, and even those schools which hold the same label differ in style and ethos) and it would be impossible to include representatives from every type of school.
However, residential, day and mainstream schools operate at different distances (physical and social) from the young people’s home communities. As one of my areas of interest was the support available to the young people as they made the transition out of school, the degree to which they were connected to their communities whilst still at school was potentially significant. Therefore, my cases were drawn from three sites: a mainstream school, a day special school and a residential special school.

4.6.3 Defining the cases.

Tight definition of the case, bounded by place and time, is crucial if case study research is to be successful (Yin, 2009). Here, the case is defined as the first post-school year for a young person with SEBD, with data collected from a number of sources to place the case in context (see Figure 2). In this framework the ‘unit of analysis’ (Yin, 2009, p.33), the case, is understood through the data collected with the young person over the year, whilst data collected prior to the young people leaving school, and from other people forms the context.

Figure 2: The case in context
Conceiving the case in this way helped to clarify the data collection process, ensured that data was collected from a range of sources, and kept the whole process tightly focussed on the issue (transition). This was particularly important when rich data, for example relating to parents’ relationships with schools, caught my interest. My clear understanding of the boundaries of my case enabled me to view this data only in relation to the case itself, leaving aside all other aspects.

Thomas (2011) suggests that one of the weaknesses of case study is a perception of vagueness about the structure of case study research. There is no prescribed list of methods, or set of analytical procedures to guide the case study researcher in the way there is for the grounded theorist, for example. He has therefore developed a typology for case studies which demands more than just definition of the case, but consideration of its subject, object, purpose, approach and process.

The case study should have a subject (the case: the first post-school year), but also an object: an analytical framework through which the case is viewed – a clear understanding of what the case is a case of. The cases in this study were cases of transitions of school-leavers with SEBD, with the processes involved in transition being the focus of the research. The cases are further defined by the criteria for their selection, whether they are chosen because of local knowledge (a category of particular relevance to practitioner researchers), or key cases or outliers, chosen because they exemplify particular aspects of the subject to be studied. The cases in this study were key cases, chosen because they came from different educational placements (mainstream, day or residential special schools), which would in turn provide a set of cases which exemplified a range of difficulties and diagnoses, as well as different social, family and practical situations.

The purpose of the study was both exploratory, in its attempt to identify key influences on the transitions of this group of young people with SEBD, and evaluative, in relation to the transitional support provided to them. These dual purposes reflect my need to:
• contribute to the limited body of research into the transitional experiences and support needs of school-leavers with SEBD;
• provide feedback to the schools and other agencies involved in the research relating to the efficacy of their transitional support programmes, as well as insight into the transitional support needs of their pupils and the barriers and facilitators to smooth transitions.

My approach to the study was initially predominantly descriptive. It was my intention to describe the transitional experiences of the participants, and illuminate the influences on their transitions and understanding what made some of the school-leavers more resilient in the face of the adversity constituted by the transition out of school. However, the data collected ultimately led me to theory building: considering the role of identity verification in the young people’s transitions and its contribution to their resilience.

The final element in Thomas’ (2011) typology is process: the operational processes of the study. The need to represent a range of experiences in this study to increase understanding of the subject of the study (the transitions of school-leavers with SEBD) led to the choice of a multiple case study, with the cases being studied in parallel, rather than sequentially concurrently. The groups of cases from of the three schools involved in the study could have been conceived as ‘nested’ cases, as each case is related to the larger whole case of the school and its transition practices. However, the school was only one of the many influences on the young people’s transitions, with the differences in their out of school environment being a major influence on their first year out of school. The cases do not, therefore, owe their integrity to an understanding of a wider case (the school) and are better considered as separate cases. The process of transition required a view of changes over time for each case, and the study was therefore ‘diachronic’ (longitudinal).

To summarise, in Thomas’ (2011) terms, this was a multiple, parallel, diachronic case study, the purpose of which was descriptive and theory-building. The objects of study
the participants’ first post-school year, and *key cases* were chosen to exemplify the *subject* of the study: the transitions of school-leavers with SEBD.

### 4.7 The Place of Narrative

As was stated in section 4.6.1, this is not a narrative inquiry, but narrative did play an important part in it. Since the focus of this research was the lived experience of the participants as they prepare for and go through the transition out of school, it would be almost negligent to ignore the narratives (the stories of their lives past and present, and their projected futures) that they choose to share. Narratives feature in this study in two ways. Firstly, data collected from multiple sources, including the young people, and their families and workers (where possible/applicable) was used to create biographical narratives. These life stories, developed with, and verified by the participants, formed an important backdrop to my understandings of them as individuals, and ultimately of their transitional experiences. Secondly, since all the interviews were open in structure, it is unsurprising that all the interviewees told stories within their interviews and these stories revealed a great deal about the participants and their relationships with their worlds.

The stories people tell often include references to multiple domains of their experiences: the intrapersonal, interpersonal, cultural and structural (Fraser, 2004), and the narratives in this study were no exception, with interviewees stories illuminating many of the psychological, social, educational and economic factors influencing their perceptions. Narrative is, thus, ‘inherently interdisciplinary’ (Reissman, 1993, p.1), and entirely suited for use in a study underpinned by a bioecological model of development, which itself is interdisciplinary in nature.

As well as allowing a view of the individual’s perspective on multiple domains, narrative allows the researcher to develop multiple perspectives on the data. Czarniawska (2004), building on the hermeneutic triad developed by Hernadi (1987), conceives three ways in which narrative texts can be read: explication, explanation and exploration, alternatively described as ‘standing over’, ‘standing under’ and ‘standing
in’ (Czarniawska, 2004, p.61). Explication is the process of understanding the text as it is presented; explanation responds to questions of why and how the text says what it does, and in the exploration stage the reader tries to ‘stand in’ for the author, bringing their own perceptions and understandings to bear on what is said. The way they were used in this study is outlined in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Explication</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Exploration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Standing under</td>
<td>Standing over</td>
<td>Standing in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reproductive translation</td>
<td>Inferential detection</td>
<td>Existential enactment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reconstruction</td>
<td>Deconstruction</td>
<td>Construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creation of biographical narratives,</td>
<td>Identification of factors involved in</td>
<td>Bringing together of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>which describe the participants’</td>
<td>development of difficulties and</td>
<td>explication and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>life-paths (before and after</td>
<td>choices made before and during</td>
<td>explanation to present a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>leaving school)</td>
<td>transition</td>
<td>cohesive picture of the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>participants’ transitions as a group</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Developed from Czarniawska (2004, p.61)

In using the stories people tell it is impossible to ignore the problem of ‘truth’. Are the participants telling the ‘truth’; are their stories verifiable, and do we need to make sure they are? There may be ‘truths’ revealed in stories even where the facts are, or may be, inaccurate. As an example, an eight-year-old boy recently told me he was being bullied at school. He described a playground incident in which his bully was attacking him. He said he broke free of the bully and ran towards a teacher, but at the last minute the bully grabbed him and pulled him away from her. The teacher turned away from him, and he had to deal with the situation alone. I had no way of verifying his story, but regardless of its objective ‘truth’, it revealed a greater truth. He was struggling with certain children at school, and felt that no-one was interested in helping him.

‘When talking about their lives, people lie sometimes, forget a lot, exaggerate, become confused, and get things wrong. Yet they are revealing truths. These truths don’t reveal the past “as it actually was,” aspiring to a standard of objectivity. They give us instead the truths of our experiences...’

(Personal Narratives Group, 1989, cited by Reissman, 1993, p.22)
Stories are a natural way for us to understand and relate our experiences, and ourselves, particularly when we need to make sense of difficult events in our lives. Reissman (1993) claims that ‘respondents narrativize particular experiences in their lives, often where there has been a breach between ideal and real, self and society’ (p.3). She relates this to the stories of bad marriages told to her by people justifying their divorce, but it is equally relevant in coming to terms with your (or your child’s) exclusion from mainstream school, or failure in education.

The stories created within families about a child’s education are likely to have an effect on their attitudes and experiences as they leave school. The allocation of blame for the school failure (to the child or the education system), the perception of the self as one who is ‘done to’, blown by the whims of others, or a ‘doer’ able to make their own way, are just some of the factors which may influence a young person’s transitions, and be revealed in the stories they tell. The ‘truth’ of these narratives is less important than what they tell us about the narrators and those around them.

However, although narrative analysis had the potential to produce multiple insights into the participant’s lives focussing only on narratives would have resulted in the loss of data which took non-narrative forms. Not all responses were stories, and some interviewees were greater story-tellers than others. Therefore, a thematic analysis was conducted alongside the narrative analysis, drawing on all data forms. Used alone a thematic analysis risked segmenting the data and removing it from its context. But by using this combination of methods of analysis I was able to use my data to maximum effect, whilst maintaining a focus on the contextualised individual, and gaining insight into their understanding of themselves and others (further detail on the analysis process is given in Chapter 5).

4.8 Summary of the justification of the research design

The key elements of the design, developed in response to my conceptual framework, ethical stance and practical limitations are summarised in Table 3. The remainder of this chapter describes the pilot study, conducted to trial specific data collection
methods and explore what may be significant factors in the transitional experiences of young people with SEBD (for a fuller account of the pilot study see O’Riordan, 2008).

Table 3: The influence of conceptual, ideological and practical issues on research design

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Design element</th>
<th>Justification</th>
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| Qualitative    | • Lack of previous research warrants exploratory study with no presupposition of the influences on transition.  
• Ethical stance: the use of methods that create a collaborative atmosphere and do not exacerbate power differentials.  
• The need to develop and maintain relationships over time. |
| Short longitudinal | • Need to collect contemporaneous, rather than retrospective data.  
• Need to observe processes in action over time, in light of the bioecological developmental model. |
| Multiple case study | • To develop a holistic understanding of individual transitions, within Bronfonbrenner’s person, process, context, time model  
• To accommodate multiple perspectives on the young people and their transitions, whilst maintaining a sense of the ‘whole’.  
• Representing a range of educational backgrounds that may influence the transitional experience. |
| Use of narrative | • Provides access to the individual’s perspective in multiple domains.  
• Allows the researcher to view the data from multiple perspectives (to stand over, stand under and stand in).  
• Offers insight into the participants views of themselves and their relationships with others.  
• Provides a nuanced understanding of the ‘truth’ in the information shared by participants |

4.9 The Pilot Study

4.9.1 Overview.

The pilot study aimed to inform the current project in two ways. Firstly it would help to focus this study by beginning to explore the issues young people with SEBD encounter in making the transition from school to adult life. Secondly, it would to trial methods of collecting data on the experiences and support of young people with SEBD (specifically the use of a life grid to collect biographical data, a support network mapping activity and the use of participatory photography as a way of gaining access to the participants’ lives beyond school).
The research involved four students who had left a local authority-run special school in the previous three years. The school was supportive of the study, and intended to use the findings to inform the development of its transitional support programme.

I collected data in two sets of interviews with the young people (one focussed on their experiences, the other on their support networks) and then created a case study for each young person. The case studies contained a summary of their history, a diagram illustrating their approach to life, and to dealing with the problems they faced, and the social support and capital resources available them. These were subjected to cross-case analysis to reveal common issues, which were then used to inform interviews with their teacher and the school’s Connexions worker. This enabled me to identify the problems faced by the young people; the school’s and Connexions service’s attempts to address them, and the structural and attitudinal barriers they encountered.

4.9.2 Research Questions.

The pilot study aimed to address the following questions:

1. How successful have these young people been in making the transition from special school to ‘mainstream life’?
2. What support was available to them, and how have they used it?
3. What factors have influenced the availability and use of support?

The first question requires some clarification. Success is subjective: successful by what measure and on whose terms? In answering it, I focussed on:

- the young people’s perception of how well they felt they had done since leaving school;
- how happy they were with the direction their lives had taken;
- the degree to which they had integrated into mainstream society;
- the extent to which they felt they had control over their futures;
- whether they were considered, by their teacher, to be fulfilling their potential.

The term ‘mainstream life’ is shorthand for engaging in activities which are not designed specifically for those with special educational needs, i.e. working in
unsupported employment, or participating in mainstream further education, and having a social life based on their interests and personal attributes, rather than their identified difficulties.

4.9.3 Procedure.
The sample was selected by availability and willingness to participate. An initial attempt to gain participants was made through a letter sent to all the students who had left in the previous year. This gleaned only one response. The other three participants were contacted by telephone by the school staff and asked directly to participate. They were all male, and aged between 17 and 19.

Data collection.
The young people were interviewed at the school. They were asked to participate in three activities, a biographical interview supported by use of a life grid, a photographic task and an interview focussed on their support networks.

The Life Grid.
A life grid is a table in which the rows are time periods, and the columns areas of the individual’s life. The time periods may be months, years, or longer periods, and researchers have adapted the grid to suit their needs. For example, Bell (2005), using the grid for a study of long term marriage, had a grid with 6 columns (year, age, life events, marriage and family, holidays and relationship issues) and 50 rows. Meanwhile, Parry, Thomson & Fowkes (1999), in their study of lifetime smoking behaviour dated their first column in five yearly periods, and added external events (such as the 1966 World Cup) to aid recall. Their other columns were age, family, work/leisure, housing, health and smoking. Each researcher’s labelling of the columns is dictated by the focus of their research, making it an adaptable tool for collecting relevant retrospective data.

The life grid has been used in a number of quantitative studies since the late 1980s, in which it was claimed it enhanced recall of long-past events by placing them in context, in relation to public events (e.g. the World Cup) or personal ones, such as leaving
school. The life grid’s ability to support cross-referencing and increased accuracy of recall in this way has led to its use in health-related research (Berney & Blane, 1997; Dawson, Thorogood, Marks, Juszczak, Dodd & Lavis, 2002; Edwards, Pless-Mulloli, Howel, Chadwicket, Bhopal & Harrison, 2006).

Qualitative researchers, meanwhile, have claimed greater benefits for use of the life grid. Parry et al. (1999) found that, as well as improving the recall of relevant details, the life grid had the ‘potential to alter traditional interview dynamics’ (Parry et al., 1999, p.11). They describe the completion of the grid as a shared endeavour, in which researcher and participant collaborate, generating data and beginning analysis (the making of associations) within the interview. Wilson, Preston-Shoot, McMurray, & Connolly (2007) found the grid disrupted power relations in the interview in similar ways, and claimed that it is particularly suited for use with vulnerable young people because:

- power differentials between researcher and participant are much greater than when both are adults;
- there have been many personal problems and challenges in their lives, which are hard to raise in a traditional, one-off, question and answer interview;
- they are often defined by the problems they have faced, where the life grid focuses on the whole of their lives, not just the difficulties they have faced.

However, Bell’s (2005) use of the grid to interview married couples about their relationships was less successful. He claimed the grid produced event-driven, linear conversations, with limited amounts of reflection. He found completion of the grid to be a barrier to developing rapport within the interview situation, since he was more focussed on completion of the grid than on the conversation, and he still had to ask direct questions at times. However, he was completing the grid himself, with the participants unable to see what he was writing, which would not create the atmosphere of shared endeavour described by Parry et al (1999) or Wilson et al (2007).
When I trialled a grid based on that used by Wilson et al (2007) I had similar problems to Bell. I found I was concentrating on putting the information in the right column and writing rather than on the interview and I found that there was still a need for some direct questioning. However, the young people I completed the grid with had no special needs, and I felt the structure the grid gave the interview would be highly useful when the participants were telling the often complex and chaotic stories that make up the life history of young people with SEBD. Therefore, I developed a simplified version of the grid for use in this study, reducing the number of columns to make its completion easier (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: The life grid

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Home</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preschool Years</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary Years</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary Years</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Future</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Using the life grid.
The grid was hand drawn onto A2 sized paper, and the participants were given the option of completing the grid themselves, but none of the participants wanted to do the writing (a reflection of their literacy skills). The simplification of the grid and its large scale made it easy for me to complete, and the young person to see what I was doing, alleviating some of the problems encountered in my initial trial of the method. I made brief notes on the grid, to serve as aide-memoires, but relied on the recordings of the interviews for the detail.
The grid removed the need for some direct questioning, but there the participants still required some prompts (such as: *What do you remember about primary school?*) and further probing (e.g. *What do you mean when you say you were aggressive?). As I listened to the recordings after the event I recalled questions which arose in my mind during the interview, but went unasked as the conversation moved past them. Some were asked in the next round of interviews, but others were lost as the moment when they could be asked had passed. Had I been making more detailed notes than those on the grid I may have been able to record and ask these questions within the interview. On the other hand, I would not have been able to focus so closely on what the young person was telling me, and other questions would have gone unaddressed. It is, perhaps, inevitable that in any interaction between people some things will be passed over in favour of others.

The grid allowed the participant and me to move backwards and forwards in time without losing focus, as everything that was said was recorded on the paper in front of us. The grid did not create an event-driven linear conversation, as described by Bell (2005). The participants would often tell stories which spanned time and place, and the structure the grid gave us accommodated this style of story-telling. It also meant that they could return to a time on the grid and give new detail when they felt ready. This led to some participants feeling able to raise sensitive issues, such as their mental health problems, once they felt comfortable, and when some rapport was built between them and me.

The data collected through use of the life grid was acquired in a way which gave the participants maximum control over the direction of the interviews. It was detailed and revealed a great deal about the participants: I could construct a biographical narrative from it and the young people seemed to enjoy, and gain satisfaction from the task. These narratives were read back to the participants at the start of the next interview to verify their contents.
The Photographic Task.
At the end of the life grid interviews the young people were given disposable cameras and asked to use them to photograph things, people or places that they felt had helped or hindered them over the time since they left school. It is claimed that photography can take the researcher into their subject’s worlds (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). I hoped use of photo-voice would be the empowering activity described by Berg (2004): the participants would be collecting the data on which our next round of interviews would be based; our discussion would be focussed on issues they identified; I could gain access to their concerns and share them with those with the power to act (the school).

Although all the participants took the cameras only one used it, and he took all his pictures within the school grounds. Their actions may be seen as a refusal to allow me to enter their worlds in the way a camera allows. It may also be that I asked too much of them. Taking the photos and sending the camera to me for development requires time, effort, focus, commitment and organisation. Many of these are a challenge for young people with SEBD, and without a tangible reward for their efforts, why should they make them?

Support network mapping.
Only two of the participants attended this second round of interviews (one left the area, the other did not turn up for two appointments and then stopped answering his phone). The aim of these interviews was to identify and analyse the support available to the young people since they had left school. Initially I planned to use the photographs produced by the participants to direct the discussion, but as they did not take any that were relevant I structured the mapping activity around the four types of support identified in the literature: practical, informational, esteem and emotional (see chapter 3).

I drew a spider diagram, with the young person in the middle and each type of support in a branch leading outwards. We then talked about each type of support and who
provided the young person with it. The two diagrams produced were strikingly different, with one being complex, with multiple inter-related branches, whilst the other was a selection of unrelated individuals and issues spread across the page.

I could have used more formal ways of mapping the young people’s support networks. Gilligan (1999) offers two examples:

the eco-map: a single page pro forma onto which the individual’s key figures, flow of resources and energy and quality of connections is mapped (Hartman, 1995);

the support network map: displays the members of the person’s network, including details such as frequency of contact, length of time known, types and direction of support (Tracy & Whittaker, 1990).

However, whilst these methods may be effective within an existing relationship, the detailed questioning required to complete either of these maps was likely to create problems within a research interview. I felt the activity would have to be researcher-led, with little room for the participants to collaborate in production of the map, and the networks produced would be too abstract to make sense to the young people. The mapping process I used was simple enough for the young people to understand, detailed enough to provide rich data on their lives, and the end product could be viewed and reviewed by us together to ensure it was a representation of their support as they saw it.

Interviews with the adults.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with the school teacher who had responsibility for transition planning and the school’s Connexions advisor. The interviews were focussed on a number of topics which had come out of analysis of the young people’s interviews.

Issues discussed with the teacher were:

- The participants: verification of biographies; expectations for them on leaving school; problems anticipated for them;
• Appropriateness of 16+ providers: were some students placed in programmes aimed at those with special needs when they could have aimed higher? Failure of several students who were placed with one training provider.
• Variations in coping and levels of support: is there a role for the school?
• How would he like to see things develop?

Issues discussed with the Connexions advisor:
• The role of the Connexions worker in school and beyond: who takes over? What hand-over procedures exist?
• Local youth service provision: why are the participants not accessing it?
• Variations in coping (the role of Connexions): how do they intervene when someone needs extra support?
• Appropriateness of 16+ providers
• What educational funding is available at 19+?
• Is there too much expectation of young people to seek help, rather than be offered it?

4.9.4 Analysis.

The data collected from the young people was treated as 4 case studies, to be analysed as holistic units. The biographical narratives were summarised so they could be presented, with details which identified participants or created ethical issues (such as information on mental health problems that one participant shared with me, but had not told the school about) removed.

I then conducted a narrative analysis of each young person’s transcripts, concentrating on how they talked about their lives, themselves and others, and their help-seeking patterns. From this I produced diagrams representing the key elements of the results of this analysis. This was followed by a thematic analysis, focussed on social support and the resources available to them. The results of these analyses were used to produce a case study for each participant (see Appendix 2 for a sample case study).
All the data, including the adult interviews, was then analysed again, this time allowing the themes to emerge from the data, rather than imposing concepts upon it. This enabled me to identify a range of issues that arose in multiple cases (the value of relationships; quality of post-16 training; discrimination and stigma; late maturing and lack of social contacts).

4.9.5 Findings,

Overview.
The participants were all very different: they had different problems, different solutions, different talents, different needs, different lives. Each one’s stories showed how multiple factors in their lives interacted in subtle and complex ways to lead them down a particular path. Whilst some had been more successful than others in making the move out of school, none were fulfilling their potential, according to their teacher. Although the teacher and Connexions advisor were aware of many of the problems faced by the school leavers, and attempting to address them with their current cohort, there seemed to be a large gap between the services offered and the young people’s needs.

How successful have these young people been in making the transition from special school to mainstream life?

The problems which the young people had in school continued when they left, and although some of them managed to find work, none of them could be described as successful. Three of the participants attended the same training centre, yet only one participant (who had the least problems in his life) managed to complete his course. There was evidence from a number of sources that this training centre was not equipped to deal with young people with SEBD, but as there was no other local training provider available students would continue to be placed there.

Three participants felt that discrimination and labelling had affected their choice of college and course, work and people’s attitudes to them. This issue has been identified
in previous studies (Farrell & Polat, 2003; Polat & Farrell, 2002). The teacher felt that colleges placed obstacles between school leavers and acceptance to college (application form, interview, test) which his pupils were unable to overcome. Even if they did manage to be accepted they were unlikely to complete a course, as there was no tolerance or understanding of their SEBD, and any poor behaviour in the post-compulsory sector was likely to result in them being kicked out.

In spite of this, three of the four participants were happy with their lives, and felt they were moving in the right direction. However, of these three, one would be classed as NEET (although he was working on the black market), and the other two are in and out of low-paid employment which offers no possibility of training or progression.

The participant who was not happy with his life saw no possibilities in his future. He was NEET, and on disability benefits. His social life centred on the local Mencap centre where he spent his time with other people who were not expected to work. He was capable of work, according to the teacher, and was not content to live a life on benefits. However, he could not see a way to change his life. He could not/would not access employment support services. As a result of this project the school has stepped in to support him, giving him the chance to set up a weekly car wash in the school car park and allowing him to help in the school kitchen.

Although they all expressed a desire to gain useful qualifications and better paid work, their main desire at this point was to get a job, any job. As with other young people with SEBD their aspirations seemed low (Casey et al., 2006; Farrell, Critchley, & Mills, 1999). The young person who was working on the black market seemed to have removed himself from mainstream society all together, socialising and working with the travelling community, although he was not a traveller. This would seem to demonstrate that where young people cannot make positive choices they will find people to support them in making negative ones (Thomas et al., 2002).
What support was available to them, and how have they used it?

The participants’ main source of support was their families and friends. None of them made use of formal support services, or accessed mainstream youth service provision. One used a Mencap support centre, but only as a source of social contact. They used the support and resources available within their networks to gain work, help them deal with their problems and to make them feel like worthwhile members of their communities.

What factors have influenced the availability and use of support?

The participants did not move outside of their immediate social circle for support. This meant that they only had access to the resources held within their social groups. Whilst this helped two of the participants find work, and another to deal with his offending behaviour, it meant they were limited in many ways. The people they knew, if they were working, worked in low paid jobs without access to training or progression, so these were the jobs that were available to them. One of the participants, the only child of a single parent with health problems, had no access to resources that could improve his lot.

Most of the participants had negative attitudes towards formal support services. They felt that those who worked for the job centre, Connexions workers and social workers did not understand them as people, seeing them instead as a set of problems or a case. There is no room in the way that services are currently provided for these young people with SEBD to build the sort of trusting, reciprocal and durable relationships they need.

Young people with SEBD are often seen as immature. This may affect their ability to engage in activities (such as training) which provide a benefit in some future time, rather than immediately. This is seen in the participants’ desire to gain any job, to have some money now, rather than invest in their own futures through training. There was
some evidence that by the time the young people were mature enough to want education and training they were no longer eligible for financial support to access it.

4.9.6 Implications for the current study.

Methods.
A key challenge in the pilot study was to find a way of getting young people, who may be resistant to talk openly to a stranger, to tell me their stories. The life grid proved a highly effective way of collecting biographical data. It allowed the participants to have considerable control over the pace and content of the interview, and created an atmosphere in which they felt safe to give highly personal details about themselves to someone they had just met. The stories they told were often chaotic and the grid provided structure to the interview and supported me in being able to construct narratives afterwards.

The failure of the photographic activity demonstrated that there were limits to the amount of participation I could expect from these young people, and the level of access they were likely to give me to their private worlds. This was something that I had to take into account in developing my proposal for this study. Whilst the ideals underlying participatory research, in particular the rebalancing of power between researcher and researched, could underpin the research, the methods had to take into account the abilities and inclinations of the participants.

The support network interview proved a useful way of eliciting and presenting the young people’s view of the support available to them. The diagrams produced were powerful illustrations of the way the young people felt about the people around them, and structuring the interview around the different types of support revealed gaps in what was available to them and disparities between availability and use.

Two of the participants dropped out of the study and did not attend the second round of interviews. This highlighted the problem of retention and the need to find ways of
ensuring on-going access to the participants, and to develop stronger relationships or incentives, so that they were willing to continue to engage with the research.

This study only explored the lives of four participants who all left the same school. The sample selection process, relying as it did on the school’s relationship with its ex-pupils, will have produced a biased sample, in that they are likely to have the most positive attitudes to their school, and possibly education and training generally. Any future study would need to involve a larger number of participants, from different schools, and the sampling process would need to be less reliant on the school’s relationships (though this would be difficult to achieve).

**Findings.**

To understand the participants’ lives, choices and opportunities I had to consider their personal attributes, connections with others (past and present), their histories, and those of their families, and their communities. All of these factors influenced their transitional experiences and the difficulties they faced, the support available to them and their ability to use that support effectively. All of these aspects of the young people’s lives were inter-linked, and effects were multi-directional, so that the young people and their support networks influenced each other in a transactional way.

The common themes in the young people’s lives were the value of relationships in providing effective support; the quality of post-16 training; discrimination and lack of understanding of SEBD in post-compulsory educational settings; late maturing and lack of contacts outside their immediate social circle.

However, the participants were viewing their transitions with hindsight, and their explanations of their failures in college and relationships with supporters could have been developed as a way of justifying their failures to themselves, and to me. I had no contact with the tutors, or other workers who had been involved in the young people’s lives since they had left school, and so no way of verifying their accounts. There would
be the need for the involvement of these people in a future study if the young people’s issues in transition were to be better understood.

4.10 Conclusion

This chapter has described and justified the methodological approach taken to the research. The pilot study supported previous research in finding that the transition out of school was challenging for this group of young people, and suggested that the support available to them was a significant factor in their outcomes. The life grid and the support network map were both useful ways of collecting data, in a collaborative way, on the lives of the participants and the support available to them. The next chapter will describe the way these and other methods were used in conducting the current research project.
5 Methods and Procedure

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter I describe exactly how the research was conducted, from the selection of the participating schools and the sample, through all aspects of data collection to analysis. I also describe the ethical issues that arose, those that were anticipated, and those that were unexpected.

5.2 The Sample

The sample was drawn from three settings (mainstream, day and residential special school). My aim was to engage 24 young people, eight from each setting, all in year 11, and all leaving school at the end of the academic year. In the event, I gained a sample of 16 young people; from a mainstream school and two day special schools, one of which was also residential; some of the pupils were older (Year 12 and 13) and not all were leaving the school at the end of the year.

5.2.1 The Schools.

The initial approach to the schools was made by letter (Appendix 3) and a summary of the research, and what would be required from the school, was enclosed (Appendix 4). The letter was followed up with a phone call. The mainstream school was keen to participate, but I had to approach two residential and day special schools before I found schools willing to engage in the research. The first residential school I approached felt unable to participate because they had a large proportion of looked-after children attending, and felt that their pupils were too vulnerable to participate. The first day special school I wrote to was initially very keen to participate. They rang me in response to my letter, the only school to make such an approach. However, the deputy head who made contact with me was very busy, and he failed to return phone calls or emails, making it impossible for me to progress with the research. As time was running against me, I had to approach another school, with whom I had worked previously.
The three schools who participated were:

- **Mosshead**: a mainstream comprehensive of 720+ pupils, in a semi-rural, deprived area in which there is a local authority grammar school. The school has been rated ‘satisfactory with good features’ by Ofsted, is a specialist school (sports) and has a strong pastoral care team;

- **Stenton**: a day special school (SEBD), with around 55 pupils in a semi-rural area. The school is run by the local authority, has been rated ‘good with outstanding features’ by Ofsted and is the first SEBD school in the country to be awarded specialist school status (behaviour). It has recently expanded to include a vocational learning unit.

- **Linton Hall**: an independent residential school with 60 pupils, around half of whom attend on a day basis, in a semi-rural area. Ofsted has rated the school ‘satisfactory with good features’ (2007). The school is run by a religious charity.

When the schools had agreed to participate I met with the person nominated by the head teacher to discuss my requirements. At Mosshead this was the SENCO (Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator); at Stenton I met the head teacher, and at Linton Hall I met with the head teacher and the Mental Health Manager (who was responsible for the care of the pupils). At these meetings a strategy was agreed for gaining parental consent and access to the young people.

### 5.2.2 Selecting the pupils.

A letter was sent to the parents of all the pupils in each school who fulfilled the criteria for being included in the sample, explaining the research (Appendix 6) and requesting their consent for their children to participate (Appendix 5). In the special schools the letter was sent to all their year 11s; in the mainstream school all pupils who were on the school’s SEN register (that is all those who were Schools Action, Schools Action Plus or Statemented) where the principle concern was behaviour. In all schools this first approach resulted in only one or two responses.
The letter was then followed up by a telephone call to the parents, made by my school-based contact, requesting verbal consent to participate with the promise of written consent to follow. The sample for each school was determined, ultimately, by the staff member following up the letter. Whilst the SENCO at Mosshead tried to contact all the parents who had been sent letters (see Appendix 7 for information on pupils who did not participate), I am not sure this happened in the other two schools. Telephone calls were sometimes made when I arrived, expecting to have interviews arranged, and on these occasions those making the calls would approach parents with whom they had a good relationship, so that they could gain consent quickly and give me someone to interview. Some participants were offered like prizes, or striking specimens: ‘He’ll have some things to tell you’; others as challenges: ‘You want to talk to him? Well, you can try!’

Access to looked-after pupils was restricted, although they potentially made up a reasonable proportion of the sample (I was aware of four at Linton Hall and one at Stenton, though as I was never given total numbers of leavers there may have been more). At Linton Hall I was not given access to any young people who were looked-after, although there were a number in the leaving group (the care workers told me, informally). I was offered one looked-after participant at Stenton, but he declined to take part because he had enough people ‘poking their noses in’.

Schools would also offer me young people who did not fulfil the criteria I gave them, sometimes because they felt the young person would benefit from my involvement. Mosshead, for instance, gave me one young woman whose behaviour in school never went beyond low level disruption (‘silliness and inattention’). She received some support from the learning support unit, but would not be classed as SEBD. She was, however, emotionally vulnerable, and desperate to have a baby, and I think they may have wanted someone to be watching over her when she left school. In spite of my asking for residential leavers from Linton Hall, four of the nine participants from there were day pupils. When I persisted in asking for more boarders they found more day pupils for me. I suspect this was to avoid the complexities involved in gaining consent
for the looked-after students to participate, as they seemed to make up the majority of the rest of the residential leavers.

There seemed to be a point at which the schools felt they had given enough, and no more participants would be forthcoming, though I knew there were more leavers. This may have been because of problems in gaining parental consent from the parents who did not have positive relationships with their children’s schools. I had no direct way of contacting parents, as the schools were the gate-keepers; they held the contact data, and could not release it to me, legally, even if they wanted to. The 17 and 18 year-old leavers participated on their own consent. The final sample is described in Table 4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
<th>School year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mosshead: Mainstream</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stenton Day special</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linton Hall: Day pupils</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linton Hall: Residential leavers</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linton Hall: Residential, placement extended</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.3 Data Collection

To gain a rounded picture of the young people’s transitions, data was collected from a wide range of sources, over a period of up to 18 months (see Figure 4). Almost all interviews were recorded (one participant refused permission).
5.3.1 Working with the Young People.

Data collection with the young people was conducted in distinct stages. Before they left school I conducted two interviews with all but three of the 16 participants.

The life grid interview.

This interview focussed on the participant’s history, including their home and school lives. The grid used was the one I had successfully trialled in the pilot study. It had proved an effective, non-interrogational method for collecting biographical data, and a rich source of information about the young person’s life and their attitudes to themselves and others. Participants were given the option of writing, but none took it, so it was completed by me, in full view of the young person, as they talked. The interviews took between 25 and 80 minutes. They interviews formed the basis of biographical narratives which, once compiled were verified by the young people at the start of the second interview.

The support network interview.

These interviews focussed on the support available to participants in the run up to leaving school. As in the pilot study, we mapped their support networks onto a spider diagram, showing key types of support (emotional, practical, information and esteem) (see Appendix 8). The young people were given the option of writing on the diagram themselves:

- some refused and asked me to complete the diagram for them;
- some took the pen towards the end of the interview to complete gaps;
- one took the pen right at the end of the interview because he wanted to list all his hobbies on it;
- one took the pen at the beginning of the interview and altered the diagram (combining emotional and esteem support) to reflect his understanding of his support.

Both sets of interviews were conducted in the participants’ schools, in private rooms (visitor rooms, conference rooms, and the kitchens or living rooms of the boys’ residential units). Three participants did not attend the second interview: one was
Figure 4: Data collection process

- Life grid interview
- Support network interview
- Teacher
- School Keyworker
- Connexions worker
- Parents - mainstream

- Data collected before leaving school (Spring 2009)
- Winter 2009 follow-up
- Summer 2010 follow-up
- Autumn 2010 final contact

- Data collected from young people after leaving school
- Home Connexions
- Parents - special
- Youth workers
- College tutors
- Hostel Keyworker
- Employment worker
- Engagement Advisors

- Adults interviewed after participants left school
excluded from school; the others did not attend on the arranged days, even though they had several opportunities and one of them missed an exam through his absence.

**Follow-up interviews.**

I attempted to interview all the participants twice during their first year out of school, during the winter (November to January) and the following spring/early summer (March to June). The interviews were conducted in places negotiated with the young people and included their homes, colleges, cafes and Connexions offices. The agreed place depended on the young person’s preference, availability of a suitable venue and considerations of safety. For example, before going to a participant’s home I would consult the school on the nature of the home and the potential risks involved in going there (to me and the family/participant), and attempt to ensure that a parent was going to be present. Meetings in cafes were arranged where I was familiar with the area and the venue, and considered it a safe and suitable place. Educational settings (colleges and training centres) were used if the young person said they were comfortable there, and access could be agreed with those working there. One young person was interviewed in a Connexions office, because I was unable to ascertain his situation at home, had no knowledge of the area he lived in and he was not attending any educational centre.

All follow-up interviews were ‘informant’ style interviews, unstructured conversations through which participants were invited to ‘explore certain issues, to impose their own structure on the session, in collaboration with an interviewer’ (Powney & Watts, 1987, p.18). These conversations covered the young people’s educational experiences, home lives, and relationships with peers and workers. The atmosphere was relaxed and questions open (e.g. *What have you been doing for the last few months? How are you finding college?*). This approach ensured that I collected core information about the young people’s lives, but left room for them decide what to tell me about what had happened to them and what was important to them. Almost all the young people seemed comfortable talking to me; some demonstrated their ease in surprising ways.
I met one participant in a café. Half way through the interview he spotted a friend outside and invited her to join us. This changed the conversation we were able to have, but provided rich insights into his social life and peer group. His comfort with the interview situation was demonstrated by his willingness to allow me to meet his friend and include her in the process. Another participant met me at home. His mother was supposed to be present but was not there when I arrived. He showed me into an immaculate sitting room and offered me coffee (filter, not instant!). I felt he had been instructed how to behave by his mother. Towards the end of the interview I commented on a photograph in the sitting room. He decided to show me another, in another room. The other rooms in the house were chaotic, and I felt sure his mother had not wanted me to see them, but the participant felt comfortable enough with me to allow me to see the room and to show me pictures he felt I should see.

Many of the participants took me further into their lives than I asked to go, in many different ways. They told me about aspects of their lives and those of their families and peers, their feelings about those working with them and even their love lives that were highly personal, and about which I would never have asked direct questions. Of course, some were less forthcoming, and only answered the questions they were asked, and others fluctuated at different times between sharing more than I expected and seeming unwilling to talk at all.

As can be seen from Table 5 only nine of the participants attended all the interviews and there was some variation in the amount of data collected from each participant. Some dropped out of the study or became impossible to trace, others missed data collection points, but returned at a later stage. One remained engaged with the research until the summer, then decided not to attend the summer interview, but gave her worker permission to see to me. The table contains information on 15 of the 16 original participants because one participant (a residential pupil who had seemed reluctant to engage from the start) was untraceable from when he left school.
Table 5: Data collected from young people

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Life grid</th>
<th>Support network</th>
<th>Winter follow-up</th>
<th>Summer follow-up</th>
<th>Autumn phone call</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Carl</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓P*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓C*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ben</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kayleigh</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>VC</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jon</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simon</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓F</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucas</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Some participants could only be contacted indirectly: P = Phone contact; C = contact with college tutor/training advisor; F = telephone contact with family

5.3.2 Data collection from the adults.

At school.

Data was collected from a teacher at the school the participant was leaving, and the school’s Connexions worker. There was no schedule for these interviews, but they were focussed on a set of questions/issues. These were:

- how the young person had been prepared to leave school (work experience, visits to college);
- what role they played in the young person’s preparation for transition;
what policies and procedures were in place to support the young person through the transition (links with colleges/home Connexions services/other services, information sharing, transition reviews);

- the transition review (when it was conducted, transition plans for the participants, parental involvement);

- their expectations of the school leaver’s ability to cope with the transition.

The last two issues were more difficult to get responses to in the mainstream school than in the special schools, as there seemed to be far less knowledge of the students as individuals. The Connexions workers did not seem to know two of the participants at all, and my other contact, the SENCO, was not directly involved in teaching them. Two of the participants did not leave school, but stayed on as residential pupils for a further year. In these cases I also spoke to their key workers in their school-based homes. These workers also spoke about other students I was working with who had left their school.

**Parents.**

Although all the parents agreed to be interviewed when they consented to their children participating in the study I only managed to meet with seven, although I had contact with six more. There were many reasons why I did not meet with the other parents. One mother made two appointments to meet me at her home, but was not there on either occasion when I arrived. One participant left home before I could meet with his parents, and although I spoke to his father several times on the telephone it was not possible for me to meet with him in person. Another mother failed to turn up for a meeting and then changed her phone number so I was unable to contact her. I could not meet with the parents of the two participants who did not leave school because they lived a long way away and it was not possible to arrange a visit. I spoke to the grandfather of one participant, but he had left home and could not be contacted, and I did not feel it was appropriate to ask to meet with the grandfather without the participant’s knowledge or consent.

The parents of the young people who were leaving the mainstream school (three parents of four participants) were interviewed at the school, before the pupils left. All
of them lived within a mile of the school and were comfortable meeting there. The special school leavers’ parents were interviewed in their homes when I visited them for follow-up interviews in the summer and/or winter, since they all lived some distance from their child’s school.

Whilst I had issues I wanted to discuss with the parents there was no pre-planned structure to these interviews. I intended to cover:

- the parent’s view of their child’s problems;
- relationships with school (theirs and their child’s);
- the transition planning process;

I also wanted to gain insight into their relationship with their child. In practice, the parents all had things they wanted to tell me. They led the interviews (without exception) and told long and detailed stories about their child’s schooling, their family history, their problems and their hopes and concerns about their child’s future. They discussed all the issues I had wanted to raise and more, with minimal prompting.

**Interviews with other adults.**

I interviewed as many of the adults working with the participants as possible. This was limited in some cases by the willingness of workers to meet me, and the practicalities of finding a time when they were available. Although a number of the participants had social workers I was unable to make contact with any of them: phone calls were not returned and messages and emails elicited no response. Some of the college tutors were keen to meet me to discuss their work and problems, but others did not return calls, made appointments and cancelled them, or said it was impossible to find a time when they could meet me. However, in some cases the tutors who could not/would not meet me gave me a lot of information in the telephone call I made to try to arrange the meeting. Some of the professionals working with the young people seemed very keen to share their experience with me, even if they could not meet me, and some emails I received gave considerable detail about the participants (that I would have thought breached their right to confidentiality).
The workers I interviewed were identified by the participants, who gave explicit consent for me to talk to them. I met all the workers in their place of work. On some occasions the young person was present for the interview, on others I interviewed the worker alone. In each case the young person had the option of attending. My aim in talking to the workers was to discuss with them:

- their role in the participant’s life;
- how they saw the young person and their transitional support needs;
- what would make their work more productive;
- what they believed was most effective in supporting young people with SEBD through transition.

As in the parent interviews, the workers took control of the direction and content of the conversation. A question such as, ‘How long have you worked with [participant]?’ would often elicit a long and detailed response, covering the worker’s role, what they should do, what they were able to do, and their view of the young person.

Table 6: Adults interviewed outside of school for each participant

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Adults interviewed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Carl</td>
<td>Mum, Dad, Grandma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack</td>
<td>Mum*, Connexions advisor*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin</td>
<td>College tutor*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>Mum, PAYP worker, trainer, college tutor*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ben</td>
<td>Mum, college tutor*, college SENCO*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>Engagement advisor (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kayleigh</td>
<td>Mum, Engagement advisor (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jon</td>
<td>Mum*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simon</td>
<td>Mum, college tutor, training centre manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>Grandfather</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>Dad, Connexions advisors*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>Dad*, college tutor, hostel Key worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew</td>
<td>Mum, Dad, Connexions advisor, Employment advisor (learning difficulties)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucas</td>
<td>Stepmum*, school key worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>School key worker</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Telephone contact only
The number of interviews conducted with parents and workers varied considerably amongst the participants. In some cases I spoke to parents and everyone working with the young person, but in others I did not even manage to meet a parent face-to-face (see Table 6, for data collected from adults outside school for each participant).

5.4 Analysis

As with most qualitative research analysis was not a separate process, but ran alongside data collection. Wolcott (2001) distinguishes between data analysis and interpretation, with analysis being the almost mechanical process of data reduction and chunking, whilst interpretation refers to the drawing out of meanings from the data. These two processes ran concurrently, as my interpretations were tested within and between the cases, and where possible checked with the participants or those working with them. Allowing for these cycles the analysis progressed through five stages:

- development of case studies based on data collected from participants, teachers and Connexions workers before the participants left school;
- addition of data collected in follow-up interviews, and from parents and other workers to the case studies;
- coding of all data for references to the individual, their family, other sources of informal support and service availability and use, and analysis of narratives;
- review of individual case studies in relation to the research questions;
- cross-case analysis to identify recurring themes.

These stages are described in more detail below.

5.4.1 Stage One: developing the initial case studies.

The first case studies I developed detailed the young person’s history, as they had told it to me, and the drawing out of information on their personalities, educational/social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, support networks and aspirations/expectations for the future (see Appendix 9 for an example).
The histories were developed from the life grid data, and shared with the participants at the start of the support network interviews. The participants had an opportunity to check and correct their histories. The other information was drawn from both interviews and field notes. Details of the participants’ histories, view of their support networks, difficulties and aspirations could be drawn directly from the interview data. However, it was equally important to record the way they presented themselves to me (who they seemed to be) especially when, as happened in several cases, this changed from one meeting to the next, or even within the course of one interview. It is difficult to ‘hear’ these aspects of the individuals in the recordings of the interviews, and field notes were an invaluable source of data, as I recorded how I viewed each participant, and how being in their company made me feel.

As an example, one young man seemed slightly hostile and withdrawn on our first meeting. It was at the end of the school day; he wanted to get ready to go home, rather than to talk to me. His answers to questions were perfunctory; he made little eye contact and did not smile once. I felt I was imposing myself on him and that we were both uncomfortable with the situation. I wondered if the school staff had pressured him into participating in the research. However, on our next meeting, the support network interview, he was a completely different character. He engaged fully with the interview, took control of the pen to add to his support network before I offered it to him, and had a smile that truly lit up his face. It was as if I was meeting with a different person. An advantage of meeting with the participants at different times, in different situations was that I saw aspects of their personalities that would otherwise have remained hidden. My field notes were an essential resource when it came to piecing together who I felt each young person was (an important element in understanding why they behaved as they did, and the way others related to them).

These case studies were more than a collection of facts. Whilst they contained known and verifiable details on the young people’s lives and their problems, I used them as a place to begin to explore the identity of the individual (a far more interpretative process). These ideas were put into the case studies in tentative form, sometimes as
questions, and always as a provisional view of the participants and their perception of their worlds. For example, notes from one interview included the following statements:

‘He seems keen to put a positive veneer on his future, but I’m not sure that it travels below the surface.’

‘Has the cosseted world of the special school given him time to mature, or allowed him the space not to have to?’

Through the development of the initial case studies I began the process of piecing together the person-characteristics described in section 2.2.1. Each case contained as much information as was available at this point in the study on the age and gender of the participant (demand characteristics); their intelligence and abilities, family background and relationships, and perceptions of their history (resource characteristics), and their nature, motivation and aspirations (force characteristics).

5.4.2 Stage Two: building up the case studies.

As further data was collected, from the young people, their families and those working with them, it was fed into the case studies. Sometimes there was conflict between the parents and young people on their histories. Workers often had a different view of their role and relationship with the young people than the participants expressed. All these contradictions were noted. Consistencies between informants were also recorded, and these were sometimes highly revealing. In a number of cases mother and son used almost the same words to describe incidents in school (usually relating to the child’s exclusion from mainstream school). This suggested that these incidents had become family stories: they had been discussed, interpreted, and regularly retold.

A further section was added to the case studies - post-school experiences. This section included the facts of the young person’s life since leaving school (placements, home moves), their view of their placement, and support, workers views of the young person, where available, and so on. The case studies at this stage were receptacles for all my thoughts about each case, with notes (and questions) relating to all aspects of the individual and their life.
5.4.3 Stage Three: coding the data – developing the case studies further

All the data, including interviews with the young people, their parents and those who were working with them, were then categorised. Four main categories were used: individual, family, informal support and service use. Coding was done manually, with relevant quotes and other information being recorded on post-it notes (colour coded to identify the source of the data), and then stuck onto a display, in circles labelled to identify the four categories (see Figure 5).

The post-it notes were then grouped into naturally occurring themes, such as motivations, self-image, mum, siblings, school, social services, best friends. The data informing each theme was written into the appropriate circle, creating a permanent visual record of the themes, and their supporting data. As this data was added, memos were written onto the display, noting links between categories, thoughts and questions as they occurred (see figures 7 and 8). Thus, the data was displayed in a way which incorporated the detail of different aspects of the participant’s life, whilst maintaining the wholeness of the case. This detailed thematic analysis was then added into the case studies.

Some of the data analysed took the form of narratives. There is considerable discussion in the literature about how narratives can be identified (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Czarniawska, 2004; Reissman, 1993), but narrative analysis does not conform to recipe book methods in the way of more structured methods (such as grounded theory). There is no consensus on how narratives can be identified. Therefore, I classed sections of the interview as narratives if they took the form of statements, followed by background detail offered as explanation:

‘I’m a gremlin...literally I was a gremlin. It started in year 5 when I was asking for help, the staff’s walk past you, and instead of me saying I want help I’d just get up, walk out, throw my book and walk out.’

(Carl, describing himself in mainstream school, life grid interview).
Or when a participant told of an event in detail:

‘Well, he [another pupil] nearly ripped all me art work, me art GCSE work! And he went over the back field and into the estate, and I chased him all the way round [estate name] but I got him, and I marched him from there to the front doors, I said to [Head teacher] you sort him out or I will. He [the pupil] come in here, he kicked the window through, he sat in [Head teacher]’s room, he started going ‘oh he’s a fucking nob-head’, so I ripped the door off the hinges, you know where you come into the building, I ripped them off the hinges, then the next minute I’m, there was like 6 teachers trying to stop me, so I had to fight through them as well. So I’m like, oh no. And that’s all I remember...All’s I remember is trying to haul the doors open.’

(Carl describing an incident in his special school, life grid interview).

Some of the stories were many minutes long, and analysing them thematically forced me to break them up to categorise them. Yet it is within the whole, and even more when the narratives are collected together that they tell the most. For example, in the excerpts above, and in the many other narratives drawn from Carl’s interviews, it

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1 The figures in this section are deliberately reproduced in a way which enhances understanding of the analysis process, whilst protecting the anonymity of the participants by being unreadable.
became clear that he consistently presented himself as a man of action, one who ‘does’, not one who is ‘done to’. This view of him was echoed in the way his mum and his Connexions worker talked about him. In considering his resource characteristics this is one of his ‘force’ characteristics, and a key influence on his transitional experiences, yet it may not have come across so strongly without the narrative analysis.

**Figure 6: Grouping by theme, colour coding and annotation**

![Image of grouped data with notes and annotations]

**Figure 7: Detail from display: grouping data within categories**

![Image of data grouping with color coding and notes]

The narratives drawn from the interviews were analysed for recurrent themes (as in Carl’s ‘action man’) and for contradictions, within and between the different sources of
data relating to each participant. The results of this analysis supplemented those from the thematic analysis and were added to the case studies, so that the case studies now contained:

- information on each individual’s person characteristics;
- some of the processes which had occurred throughout their lives;
- the context in which they grew up and were experiencing the transition out of school;
- information on their development over time (before and during the study period).

(See Appendix 10 for an example of a complete case study). As such they fulfilled the person, process, context, time criteria described by Tudge et al (2009) for research based on bioecological models of development.

### 5.4.4 Stage Four: the research questions, and cross-case analysis.

Once the case studies were complete, the research questions were applied to each case. This forced a focus on the questions and the extraction and application of the relevant information. At this point the cases were still being treated holistically, with the sole aim of analysis being to understand the influences on each individual’s transitional experiences. The responses to the research questions in relation to each participant condensed the analysed data to the point where it was possible to look for themes across, as well as within each case. Common problems, factors which helped the participants through the early stages of transition, and those which made the process more difficult were drawn from across the case studies. At this stage it was also possible to explore the role of school placement on the young people’s transitional experiences.

### 5.5 Ethical Issues

The ethical principles which underpinned this research were outlined in section 4.2. This section describes in more detail how these values were put into practice.
throughout the research process, and used to guide my actions when ethical dilemmas occurred which had been anticipated, and when unexpected issues arose.

5.5.1 Applying the Principles.

Young people with SEBD are a vulnerable group, so research with them is particularly ethically challenging. BERA’s (2004) ethical guidelines were followed, in particular: all data was held in confidentiality; informed consent was gained from all participants; the balance between the right to participate in research, and protection from harm or exploitation, was rigorously maintained. However, these basic ethical considerations were complicated in this research by the age and nature of the participants, so I shall address each in more detail.

Confidentiality.

Since most of the participants were under 18, there were limits to the levels of confidentiality that could be guaranteed to them. Should they have revealed that they were being harmed in any way, child protection procedures would have taken precedence over the right to confidentiality. They may have told me other things that I had a duty to report (as a researcher or a citizen), such as criminal activity (particularly violence).

The young people were informed of the limitations to the level of confidentiality I could offer them at every stage of the research, and I ensured they understood what would happen if they told me something which I had to share with others. They knew, therefore, that if they disclosed anything to me, I would act. Perhaps because of the clarity I gave them on this issue, none of the participants told me anything that needed reporting. Several mentioned recreational use of cannabis, but I did not believe this was something that needed to be passed on to any authority. It was not a matter that any of the workers supporting the young people would have acted on, and I am sure most were aware that this was a part of their clients’ lives. Whilst it was not my role to guide the young people in any way, and they were aware of this, I did feel the need as an ex-youth worker to explain to them the potential impact of their use of drugs on
their brain development, without preaching to them about the evils of illegal substance use.

**Consent.**

Consent was sought at every stage in the research, and I did not proceed until I was sure they understood what was expected of them, why I was doing the research and what would happen to the results. Even within this framework it was difficult to evaluate the degree to which they were giving informed consent. Most had below average levels of ability, and many seemed flattered that someone was showing an interest in them and their lives. This may have blurred their ability to make an informed judgement on participation. They had no interest in how the research would be disseminated, nor any concern for whether they would be identifiable. The world of academia I referred to in talking about what would happen to the results was far removed from them, and as a group they could not see how it would affect them if people in universities far from them knew about their lives.

Therefore, I needed to take extra care in ensuring that no element of the presentation of the research could be detrimental to them. The case studies give considerable detail about the participants’ lives, which could make them identifiable to those who know them, even with anonymisation of the individual, their school and home town. I have included one complete case study from the main study in the appendices (see Appendix 10), but this has been done with the express consent of the participant and his family. I chose the case study to be included carefully, and it is of one of the only participants whose parents were literate, able to understand what was being asked of them, and could in no way be blamed for their son’s difficulties. In this way I have protected more vulnerable and troubled participants and their families from exposure.

In the interviews the young people often raised sensitive issues (abuse, rejection, domestic violence, mental health problems). When I probed for further details on these issues I always reiterated the participant’s right not to answer the question, ensuring the atmosphere remained light, so they could just move on if they wanted to. Some of them took this opportunity, but others seemed keen to talk about their
experiences. It seemed important to allow both of these responses within the interviews, provided they were guided by the preferences of the interviewee.

**Participation and protection.**
To monitor the young people’s experiences, and any moments in which they lacked any form of support, without giving them any help would have been unethical. Therefore, I gave them express permission to contact me should they have a problem that they were unable to deal with alone, if they did not have anyone else to turn to. I ensured that I had a range of contacts, so that I could pass them on to someone who could help, if necessary contacting them on the young person’s behalf.

This issue only arose in one participant’s life. He had left school and was not attending college. The Connexions service was not working with him, as they were unaware that he had dropped out of college. I met him in his local Connexions office, and when he explained what had happened to him we went together to the front desk to ask who his allocated worker was. I explained that he had left a special school which was ‘out of area’ and that I was sure he should have a worker. This caused alarm in the office. His original worker was on long-term sick leave and he had not been allocated to anyone else as they believed he was attending college and would be seen by the Connexions staff there. He was rushed away from me to talk to a member of staff about other educational provision that was available to him. As his father was with him I left him at this point, having put him in contact with people who could help him. I did not support him any further, as this would have blurred the line between researcher and worker, but to do less than I did would have been an unethical act. Knowing what I knew, I had to intervene on some level and not leave him disengaged with all education, training or employment because he did not know how to access the services available to him.

**Unexpected ethical challenges – vulnerable adults.**
All the issues discussed above were anticipated and considered in the research planning process. However, unanticipated challenges arose in the course of data collection with the participants’ mothers whose vulnerability I had failed to consider. With hindsight, I should have seen this issue arising. Parents of young people with
SEBD have often had difficult lives themselves, and if their children have been witness to parental substance abuse or domestic violence, then the parents have endured these experiences. A number of the parents had special educational needs, which made it hard for them to access the materials I prepared for them about the research and their roles in it.

One mother, who had dyslexia, felt very vulnerable in her interactions with authority figures, which seemed to be how she perceived me – educated and middle-class, I shared key characteristics with the teachers and social workers who she described as making her feel negative about herself and her child in the past. I am sure that, initially at least, many of the parents felt similarly wary of me. The school staff warned me that she might ‘take against’ me at any time. She did not, and has been supportive of my continued contact with her son throughout the study. I overcame her insecurity by sympathetic, non-judgemental interviewing, and providing her with a CD of the recording of my interview with her, so that we both had the same record of our interaction.

Sympathetic and non-judgemental listening was the spirit in which all the interviews were conducted. The interviews were a sharing of experience, rather than an interrogation, but sometimes the open vulnerability of the mothers (all the parents interviewed in-depth were mothers) made me feel uncomfortable. They shared many details about their lives that I am not sure I would have told to a stranger. They told me about their drug abuse, experiences of violence, alcohol dependency and their failings as a parent (as perceived by them, not me). All the mothers had stories about themselves, their children and their experiences of school that they wanted to tell, and once they started talking they seemed unable to stop. I sometimes felt that they were not talking to me, but rather addressing an invisible, external audience who had the power to make things better for others in their situation.

There are not many opportunities for the parents of children who struggle in school to tell their side of the story, and have the possibility of being heard by a wider, more powerful audience. The novelty of this experience may have influenced them to talk
more openly about their lives than they would under normal circumstances. Indeed, some of them exposed their inadequacies with such unguarded honesty I felt they were unaware of the possibility of their lives being reported to others. This placed a greater burden of protection on me, to ensure that the confidences they shared could not be used to harm them in any way.

The rapport developed within the interview was built on the understanding that we were both mothers, and that parenting is difficult. I was keen to understand the situations that these women got themselves into, and could see how life led them to where they were. Each interview was different, but in some I told them that I was a parent, and expressed the view that it was a difficult job. I did this to help them see that they could share information with me (much of which was highly personal and sensitive) and that I would not judge them. I made clear that my assumption was that whatever mistakes we make, we all have essentially the same feelings and hopes for our children. Whilst this helped to create an atmosphere of trust in the interviews, and so facilitated the collection of rich data, I was not entirely comfortable with what could be seen as manipulating these vulnerable women; making them feel that they were safe to tell me their stories, where under other circumstances they may not have done so (this issue is discussed further in section 8.3: Verification within the research process).

I could empathise with their situations, and have made many mistakes of my own over the years, but we were not the same. I am doing what I want with my life, and have as much control over my destiny as any of us do; my children are happy and well-adjusted high achievers in school. I have never had to face the problems these women faced, and hope I never will. Our lives were very different, and I felt that I was being in some way dishonest in trying to make them feel comfortable with me by encouraging them to identify with me. I was not able to resolve this issue, but I can fulfil their wish (directly expressed by many, and implied by all) that their stories will be heard by those able to change things, and used to make the services given to others better. I have worked towards this by disseminating my findings to the schools, colleges and
Connexions services involved in the study, and to the academic community through conferences and publications. Throughout the dissemination process I have also ensured that the stories they told me were not told to others in a way which would expose them to scorn or derision, and to only share us much of their lives as is essential to effectively report this research.

5.6 Validity

Validity in qualitative research is described using a range of terms, including truth values, transferability, consistency (Merriam, 1988), but the core question that must be asked in any form of research is the same: can this research be trusted? Mason (2002) suggests that measures of validity fall into two categories: validity of method and validity of interpretation. I shall address each in turn.

5.6.1 Validity of methods.

Consideration of validity of methods requires us to ask the question: how do I know the data I collected was ‘true’? Before directly addressing this question I need to clarify what ‘truth’ means within this research project. My aim was not to collect data that would show me an objective ‘truth’ about the young people’s transitions, I do not believe that such a thing is possible. I wanted to explore their perceptions, of themselves and their past lives, their experiences and their view of the future. The same is true of their parents and those who worked with them. Our perceptions of ourselves and our situations are the basis of our actions, and my aim was to find out why the different parties to the participants’ lives did what they did.

The question here then is ‘how do I know that my interviewees gave me a true impression of their perspectives?’ This is a difficult question to answer, since we can never have access to another’s thoughts. Nevertheless there were measures within the study which offer reassurance that the participants spoke with honesty, or that I was aware when they were not being truthful. I collected data on all participants from multiple sources, which gave me the opportunity to view the same situation from different perspectives, and also allowed me to verify what the various parties had told
me (without ever breaking confidentiality). For example, a participant told me his tutor was ‘horrible’ to him, and he thought she did not like him. When I spoke to her she talked of him with barely contained hostility, which verified what he had told me.

Information from different sources not only acted to verify what participants said, but also to show me when they were being less than honest. A participant told me he was in a band at home, had loads of women chasing him, and was generally adored. My instinct told me that this was not true, and it was confirmed when his key worker described him to me as a fantasist, and indeed, in the three interviews that followed he never mentioned his band or women again. Another participant withheld information about her mother’s drinking. The mother had told me about it, but when I asked the daughter how her mother had coped with being threatened with prison her response was simply ‘Okay’.

Whilst it was important that I had some awareness of when the participants (or their parents or workers) were not being honest in our interviews I sometimes learnt as much about them from the information they withheld, or the fantasist versions of themselves they presented as I did when they were telling me the ‘truth’ about their lives. In the two cases above, the fantasist told me who he wanted to be, and how he wanted to be seen. This was apparent in other data collected from him, in which he would tell me how his family adored him, and he was his young cousin’s ‘hero’, although the reality was that he could not live with his family because he became aggressive and violent towards them and others in his neighbourhood. The girl who lied about her mother’s coping told me how protective she was of her mother, and this was borne out by her claim that she went back to school to stop her mother going to prison, and had to keep attending her course so that her mother kept her benefits.

These multiple perspectives offered one form of triangulation to the study, but they were supplemented by the length of time the study covered. There were months between my meetings with the participants, and whilst I reviewed the previous interview before we met they could not. This allowed me to monitor changes in their stories, or the way they presented themselves to me, and treat the data accordingly.
These aspects of the design combined to give me confidence that I knew (most of the time) when my interviewees were telling me the ‘truth’, and when they were telling me something else about themselves.

5.6.2 Validity of interpretation.

I verified my interpretation in a number of ways through the course of the study. Many of these were opportunistic. For example, when I had finished interviewing a participant at a training centre I popped into the office to say goodbye to her worker, and in passing asked ‘Do you find immaturity is a big issue for the young people who come here?’ Three heads shot up from their desks to exclaim, ‘Yes!’ This was the beginning of a conversation in which I presented my view of the problems my participants had, and tested them against theirs.

The biographical narratives I wrote, based on the life grid interviews, were all read back to the participants so they could correct them (and some did), and the case study included in the Appendices (Appendix 10) was checked by both the participant concerned and their parents. In interviews I would offer my interpretation of what I thought was important in what someone was telling me and invite them to comment. Often they agreed with my interpretation, but I was contradicted often enough to feel confident that I am not too intimidating to disagree with.

This study involved the collection and analysis of a lot of data, all of which had to be fed into the case studies. My use of multiple sources over a considerable time period meant that contradictions arose, and these were an integral part of the case studies. In presenting my findings I have been clear about when there was not enough data to enable me to understand an aspect of a participant’s experiences, where the data contradicted my theorising, and where participants contradicted themselves. Finally, I have clearly described my methods, supported my claims with evidence from my data, and offer ‘rich, thick description’ (Merriam, 1988, p.177) of my participants’ experiences, so that others can judge the validity of my interpretation.
5.7 Conclusion

The analysis of the data collected and presented in the case studies provided information on what happened to the young people before and after they left school, and what were the key influences on their transitions, from their perspective and that of those surrounding them (parents and professionals). These results will be presented in the next two chapters, the first focussing on what happened to the young people and key influences on their individual transitions (explication and explanation), and the second presenting the themes occurring in the participants’ transitions as a group, (exploration).
6 Explication and explanation: what happened and why

The paths taken by the participants were as diverse as the individuals themselves. Some went to college or vocational training centres, and one was employed throughout the year, whilst others were NEET for some or all of the year. They did a wide range of courses, from mechanics to care; basic skills, level 1 and 2 NVQs to more academic courses. The range of influences on the participants’ transitions is equally diverse. Whilst there are common themes between the cases, each one demonstrates a unique set of interactions between aspects of the individual and their environment. Therefore, in this chapter I have kept each case whole in presenting the results (the next chapter will explore cross-case themes).

In this chapter I briefly describe the transitional experiences of each of the school leavers during the 15 months of the study, and explain what appear to be the main influences on the nature of their transitions. The findings that are presented here are the result of analysis stages 1-3, as described in sections 5.4.1-5.4.3. In Hernadi’s (1987) terms this is:

- explication – the process of standing under the data and presenting it as ‘fact’: this is what happened, and
- explanation – standing over the data, and using inferential detection: this is why it happened.

Although the data was analysed on a thematic and narrative level, and segmented into individual, family, informal support and service use, it is not divided in a similar way for presentation. This is because the segmentation process, although it allowed me to draw out key elements in the data, creates a disjointed ‘story’ which does not reflect the interrelated way these elements influenced the participants’ experiences.

Results are presented for the 15 of the original sample of 16 for whom post-school data is available. The level of analysis which was possible with each participant’s data set varied as a result of the differing levels of interview attendance (see Tables 4 & 5, Chapter 5). For three participants only explication is possible, i.e. presentation of
information about what happened to them when they left school, with both explication and explanation possible for 12 of the original 16 (75%) (see Figure 8).

To aid readability and provide some sense of the levels of success experienced by the participants as a group I have divided them into four groups:

- **achievers**: those who managed to attain their goals, or continue to move towards them;
- **under-achievers**: those who managed to complete their courses, but did not fulfil their potential;
- **revolving door**: those who went from one placement to another without completing them;
- **NEET/unknown**: disengaged from education and employment altogether/untraceable (but some data available).

Choosing the category in which to place each young person has sometimes been difficult and may be seen as subjective, but I have justified their positioning when I see it as contentious. The level of data analysis conducted on participants falling within each category is shown in Figure 8.

**Figure 8: Level of data analysis conducted by category**

The stories of the young people’s transitional experiences told here are drawn from data collected from multiple sources. Information about their educational experiences comes from the young people and their college tutors/trainers, and some from
parents. Details of their home and social lives come from the participants and their parents or key workers. In this way I have ensured some verification of the young people’s stories from other sources. Where this data was not available I have indicated that this is the case.

6.1 Achievers

This group achieved their goals or kept moving towards them through the year. Five of the fifteen students fall into this category, Carl (from Sankside), Tom and Simon (day pupils at Linton Hall), James (a residential, year 12 pupil at Linton Hall on extended placement) and Anne (from Mosshead).

6.1.1 Carl.

**Post school experiences.**

Carl was in employment and/or training throughout most the year. Before he left school he said he was considering going to sixth form college, but ‘only if they’ve got the right course. I’m not just going for the sake of it.’ On leaving school he attended a training centre where he completed a short course in fitness training. At the same time he got his first job, working casually as a lifeguard. Over the year he added to this job, gaining a second casual lifeguarding post, and Christmas work in a retail outlet. When the casual work dried up he got a full-time job as a lifeguard. Unfortunately he was not kept on when he reached the end of his probationary period, and since then he has only been able to gain part-time work in a night club.

Carl applied to join the navy, but failed the medical. He had planned to re-sit his Maths and English GCSEs so that he could go to college to train as a paramedic, but then found out that he could begin his training whilst working as a volunteer for the Red Cross. It is still his long term goal to become a paramedic, as there are many nurses and paramedics in his family.

Alongside his paid work, Carl worked as a volunteer (senior member) for the youth service, who had given him training in child protection and safeguarding, and health
and safety. He did first aid training with school before he left and has since been involved with the St John’s Ambulance where he has received further training. He is also member of the sea cadets. Carl has a stable and supportive family, and has no immediate plans to leave home.

Carl had support from a Connexions worker for the first few months out of school. She had been the school’s worker, so he knew her well. He claimed he had not seen her much, and had not been given any useful help by her whilst at school. She claimed he was keen to see her every week, and that she had helped him to gain his training place. Once out of school he continued to be in regular contact with her, in person and through emails and text messages. She felt he was just making sure she was still there in case he needed her.

Carl could have been placed in the revolving door group. He has moved between training and employment, and from job to job, and his goals have changed by necessity (his plan to join the navy being stalled by him failing his medical). However, he has consistently moved towards his goals throughout the period of the study. Where he has been prevented from moving in one direction he has moved in another wholeheartedly. Employment has been a means to an end, and he kept his secondary aim (of becoming a paramedic) at the fore of his activity throughout the time I knew him. He has not achieved this aim, but he continues to find ways of moving towards it. However, it should be noted that I took a similar path to Carl when I left school, working a range of dead-end jobs to earn money to fulfil my goal of travelling. This may have influenced my view of his transitional experiences, and made me perceive them more positively than someone with a more conventional career path would.

**Influences on transition.**

Carl presented himself as a confident and capable young man. One of his teachers described him as ‘over-confident’ and ‘arrogant’. This self belief seemed to have both positive and negative effects on his transitional experiences. On the one hand, when he faced setbacks (such as not being fit to join the forces and not being kept on at the end of his probation period in one of his jobs) he was able to put aside any feelings of
failure or disappointment and move on to the next opportunity. On the other, he believed that he knew best in most things, and this seems to be the reason why he was let go at the end of his probation period of life-guarding. He had a pool-side argument with his manager over whether he should give first aid to a customer. He believed he was qualified and should, the manager said he should not. Carl ignored his manager and treated the customer. He was disciplined for the incident. He and his mother both believe that what he did was right, but his determination to follow his convictions lost him his job.

Carl was the only participant who came from a middle-class background. Both his parents were working (his mother in care management, his father as a civil servant). Household expectations relating to achievement and activity were high: his older brother was working a number of sport-related jobs, and was a volunteer coach with a youth rugby team. Carl’s engagement in volunteering activities, the cadets and multiple jobs can be seen as a fulfilment of these expectations. Unemployment and inactivity was never an option for him (from his own viewpoint or that of his parents). This meant that he was constantly looking for new opportunities, and his parents were willing and able to help him identify and apply for employment and training. His range of experience (with the cadets and the youth service) gave him skills which he may not have gained through school attendance alone, and also meant he had access to employment references other than teachers in a special school.

It is difficult to assess the influence Carl’s Connexions worker had on his transition because of their different accounts of their relationship. However, Carl’s use of her when he needed her is indicative of his approach to the support available to him. He takes what he needs from those around him, making maximum use of the resources held in his social network to work towards his goals. His ability to ensure that he is engaged in productive work or training throughout the year can be attributed to his personal drive and self belief, and this ability to access the resources he needs, as and when he needs them.
6.1.2 Tom.

Post school experiences.
Tom left home not long after he left school. He had been moving between his mum (who he accused of psychologically abusing him) and his dad (who he said had post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and struggled with life). When he left home he moved into a hostel for homeless young people, where he spent the rest of the year. He can stay at the hostel until he is 18, when he will be moved into his own accommodation, with support continuing for as long as he needs it.

The staff at the hostel have helped Tom claim benefits he is entitled to, including Disability Living Allowance (DLA) in light of his ADHD diagnosis. This meant he could support himself through college. On moving to the hostel he stopped seeing his dad, but resumed contact with his mother and siblings. He says his dad ‘brain-washed’ him, getting him to think bad things about his mum, who had always been good to him. His visits with his family seem to be focussed on the gifts he takes them.

Tom completed a life skills course at a local further education college. Although there were some breaks in his attendance due to his unsettled home life, he was supported by his tutor in maintaining his placement. He gained sufficient basic skills qualifications to progress onto his desired vocational course.

Tom’s year has not been entirely successful. He missed out on some of his college course, and did not do as well as he would have, had he had a stable home life. He could have been placed in the under-achievers group. However, given the circumstances of his life he has done extremely well to complete the year and pass enough of the course to progress. This was his goal. He was proud of his achievements over the year (as were those working with him, at college and at the hostel), and felt he was getting where he wanted to be.

Influences on transition.
All those who worked with Tom described him as a vulnerable and disturbed young man. In his interviews, he was sometimes defensive, seeming ready to attack if
threatened, and often seemed to struggle to focus on the conversation. However, he was also open about his problems, and very likeable: warm, funny and eager to please. He seemed to welcome any help he was offered with his difficulties, and was eager to help others in return (he helped me to trace another participant I was unable to contact). These qualities brought out protective feelings in those who worked with him. One of his teachers told me that although he was one of their most challenging pupils, he was well-liked, and most of the staff were keen to ‘go the extra mile’ for him. This seemed to continue after he left school, with his tutor actively supporting his engagement in the course, and fighting the college authorities to ensure that she could offer him the flexibility he needed to maintain his placement.

His tutor was highly experienced in working with challenging students. When I observed her in her classroom she was warm, friendly and authoritative (in a very gentle and non-confrontational way), and the students clearly respected her and valued her praise. The calm atmosphere she created seemed to suit Tom, who felt he would not have completed the year without her support.

Tom also valued the support he was given at the hostel. His key worker seemed to feel genuine affection for him, and was willing to persevere with him when his behaviour became challenging: ‘[Tom] makes a lot of mistakes, a lot of mistakes, but never the same one twice, so we’re making progress!’ His DLA was very important to him for his long term plans for independent living, and helped to keep him in college, as he did not need the income he would get from working. It is unlikely that he would have been awarded this benefit without the help of his key worker (two other participants with ADHD applied for DLA without professional support, but neither was awarded it).

Given the instability of Tom’s home life and the extent of his difficulties, it was almost inevitable that he would have some problems in the course of his transition out of school. However, he has been given appropriate and flexible support, both in his hostel and at college, which has helped him achieve as much as could be hoped for in the circumstances. His winning nature attracted him supporters who were prepared to
persevere with him, and he repaid them by keeping going through his setbacks, and achieving more than he had thought he could.

6.1.3 Simon.

Post school experiences.
Whilst at school Simon, along with others in his year group, went to the local further education college to do a course in tiling. When he left school he was selected by the college to join their vocational tiling course. They had never taken a student from Linton Hall onto their full-time course before, and the unit manager was keen to try. Simon was familiar with the course tutor, and had a good relationship with him.

Simon did well on the course, achieving some of the highest grades in his class. His tutor said he had improved more than anyone else on the course, and was impressed by his work and level of commitment. Simon had some problems interacting socially with his peers, but his tutor was aware of them and intervened to help Simon deal with his feelings when things became difficult for him, so that no situation ever escalated out of control. Simon valued the support the tutor gave him, and was proud of his own achievements.

Simon gained useful vocational qualifications on the course, which he planned to use to gain work to support himself through continued training. He intended to do a mechanics course next, and his tutor intended to continue being available to him should he need extra help.

Simon’s mother was very supportive, and they seemed close. He planned to continue living at home for the foreseeable future.

Influences on transition.
According to my school contact Simon was placed at Linton Hall because of his social difficulties. She described him as bright, likeable and self-assured, and was positive about his future prospects. His mother was reliant on a mobility scooter to get out of the home, and the staff at Linton Hall’s main concern was that on leaving school he
would become his mother’s main source of care and support. As one of her older sons was fulfilling this role, the issue did not arise.

Simon attributed his success on his course to the support he had from his tutor, whilst the tutor put it down to Simon’s hard work, and positive attitude. The tutor put a great deal of effort into supporting Simon, and spent time building a relationship with him outside the classroom. He played chess with him, and at the same time gave him the chance to talk about any problems he was having on the course. He seemed to know Simon well, and observed when he was struggling socially, and intervened to help him. Simon rewarded this extra effort by working hard, and achieving. I interviewed Simon and his tutor together, and it was clear that the success of this relationship was pleasing to both of them, and that each liked and admired the other. The unit’s manager supported the building of this productive relationship between Simon and his tutor. The tutor was given time to work with Simon, and the manager valued the skills that he brought to the job: ‘He’s good at that touchy feely stuff, not many of us here are!’

Linton Hall continued to send its pupils on the course on day-release, which meant that the tutor had access to on-going support and guidance from the staff that knew Simon should he need it. The tutor was in regular contact with Simon’s mum, so she felt involved in his continuing education.

Simon’s transition into college was the smoothest of any of the participants. This can be attributed to:

- his knowledge of the course, his tutor and the college before he left school;
- the relationship-based practice of his tutor, and the on-going support he provided with Simon’s social and practical problems;
- the manager’s support of the tutor;
- routine communication between the tutor and staff from Linton Hall;
- efforts to ensure Simon’s mum was involved in his education.
Together, these factors ensured that Simon felt secure, valued and able to succeed throughout the year.

However, Simon was well-placed to succeed before leaving school. He very rarely demonstrated any behavioural difficulties by the end of his time at Linton Hall, and his tutor said that he was not much more of a problem than the other students on his course. His tutor also claimed he was brighter than most of the rest of his students. Although he sometimes struggled to interact positively with his peers he had a very positive attitude towards adults, and related to them well. He was interested in the course and keen to learn the skills it involved. Together these factors made him very teachable, so that the efforts made by his tutor and the manager were rewarded by Simon’s success. This achievement, in turn, encouraged them to continue to provide him with extra time and support.

It is difficult to see how Simon’s transitional experience could have been improved. His personal attributes, the social and educational environment at college and the stability of his home life worked to reinforce each other, piling success upon success.

6.1.4 James.

Post school experiences.
James had a traumatic childhood and was extremely disturbed, according to his key worker. He stayed at Linton Hall, and it was expected that his placement would be extended for at least one more year after this one. He attended a college some distance from the school, because it was used to catering to young people with a range of difficulties. He enjoyed his course on life skills, but required intensive support from the school to cope with it. A member of staff accompanied him to college, and stayed with him throughout the day. There were concerns for the safety of other students if he was left unsupervised at any time.

James was often distracted during the interviews. He would attempt to take control of the situation by behaving in inappropriate ways (spitting into his glass and then drinking his phlegm, for example) or making noises. In spite of this he was always
happy to talk to me. He was both disturbed and disturbing, even to someone used to working with young people with SEBD, and it is difficult to see how he will ever cope with the mainstream world. The school staff are keen to continue to support him, and hope that his placement will continue to be extended.

**Influences on transition.**
James’ transition has effectively been delayed. He presented with the most profound and complex difficulties of any of the young people in the sample. He has been able to continue his education at college, with intensive support from the school staff. It is unclear what he will do when he does, finally, have to leave Linton Hall.

**6.1.5 Anne.**

**Post school experiences.**
Anne was unsure why she was one of the students chosen for participation in this study by her school, although she told me at the end of her first post-school interview that she had dyspraxia and anger management problems. The school SENCO said it was because she had received on-going support from the learner support unit, with the main concern being her behaviour. She found it difficult to focus in class and was disruptive, but never aggressive or confrontational. She described herself as ‘giddy’.

Anne felt most of the school curriculum was irrelevant and struggled academically. She did enjoy her child development course, which she felt would be useful in her future as she planned to have children whilst young, and to work with children until she did.

When she left school, Anne went to a privately run training centre, offering basic skills and vocational qualifications which were to be gained through work placements. She was unable to get a placement working with children, but accepted one in a home for the elderly. She enjoyed the placement, and felt her work there was important. She believed that it was work that needed to be done, but that not many people would want to do: ‘I want to do personal care. I know most people don’t want to, but someone has to and I do’. She had some problems during her placement, when she would leave because she felt she was not getting to do the work she wanted to do (caring) and was instead made to do the work the paid employees did not want to do.
(cleaning). She also felt that she was not a part of the team and was not valued by them. However, each time this issue arose she was supported in returning to her placement by her engagement advisor in the training centre. At the end of the year Anne applied for an apprenticeship in care. She was optimistic about being given one, and thought it would help her to get paid employment in the care sector.

Anne lived with her father, having moved from her mother’s home when she was 15 because she wanted to spend more time with him. She stayed with him throughout the period of the study, but intended to move into a home of her own when she turned 18, and received compensation money she was due from an accident she had had some years earlier.

**Influences on transition.**

Anne was not popular with the staff at her school. Whilst I was having coffee in the learner support unit they were discussing her amongst themselves (I do not know if they knew she was one of my participants). They were ridiculing her desire to have a baby, suggesting that any boy would have to put a paper bag over her head whilst he impregnated her. At the training centre she had a good relationship with her Engagement Advisor (EA). The EA seemed to like her, and was pleased with the level of commitment she showed to her placement. Anne seemed pleased with the praise she received, and this may have helped her to persevere when she faced problems in her work placement.

Anne’s desire to continue gaining vocational qualifications through work experience (rather than going to college) until she was able to get paid work was influenced by two factors. Firstly, she struggled to cope with the academic demands of school, and this was the main cause of her poor behaviour. In a working environment this was not an issue, and her caring attitude and ability to turn up on time (most of the time) and work hard was valued by her EA and the manager of the home. Secondly, she wanted to have children while she was young. She felt she needed to get into the workplace as early as possible so that she could begin to create a suitable home for a family.
Anne’s placement at the training centre helped her progress her towards her long-term goals, whilst giving her a sense of achievement and success she had not been able to experience in school. This was supported by her positive relationship with her EA, who was prepared to make extra effort on her behalf to ensure her work placement was maintained. Together these two elements helped her to persevere when she faced difficulties, and ultimately have a successful year.

6.2 Under-achievers

Three participants fell into this group. Although they maintained their placements throughout the academic year, they did not achieve the results they hoped for, or of which they were capable. Three of the fifteen students fell into this category: Ben and Kayleigh (from Mosshead), and Kevin (from Sankside).

6.2.1 Ben.

Post school experiences.
Ben left school with enough GCSEs to go to sixth form college and take a Btec course. He needed to get a distinction in his first year to be able to progress to the next stage of the course, which he did not achieve. This was not due to lack of ability, as staff at his school foresaw no academic reasons why he would not complete the course.

Over the year he had a number of problems at college. He found it difficult to get his work done on time and created low level disruption in his classes. He did not get on well with his tutor, who he believed ‘hated’ him. His tutor found him difficult, and seemed exasperated (in our first conversation she asked if I could tell her what to do with him).

Although he had a statement of special educational needs (he was diagnosed with ADHD) he was not given any support at the start of the course. The college had seen a large increase in the numbers of students applying claiming to have ADHD and the special needs support tutor did not believe that all the students had diagnoses. The college had a policy of not contacting the school the students had left to confirm
the existence of their statements, insisting that the students or their parents supply the relevant documentation. As Ben and his mum felt unable to do this no support was provided to him. Ultimately his behaviour in class became a problem, and support was put in place in response to a disciplinary hearing. This was over halfway through the year, and although he managed to complete the year, it was too late for him to be able to gain the distinction he needed to progress. On our last contact he was attending a vocational training centre, having given up on academic study, and was not optimistic about the opportunities this would open up for him.

Ben had no problems socialising with his peers. He has maintained his school friendships and developed new ones at college (most of whom are 'A' level students with professional ambitions). He had a girlfriend each time I met him, and although it was a different one each time he maintained these relationships for some months. He is comfortable living at home and although there is some conflict between him and his mum, their relationship is stable and he has no plans to leave.

**Influences on transition.**
The major obstacle to a successful first year out of school for Ben was a lack of communication between his school and his college. Because he had a Statement his needs were assessed by his school Connexions workers, who passed this information on to the college. Unfortunately it did not reach the relevant person within the college, so they did not believe that he had a Statement. The Connexions workers told me that this happened when I interviewed them. They attributed the break in communications to the people who reviewed applications not understanding the forms they were sent, and simply throwing them away, rather than passing them on to the college special needs department. The situation was exacerbated by the college’s refusal to contact the school to get a copy of the Statement.

According to its latest Ofsted inspection report (reference withheld to maintain anonymity) its inclusion practices are ‘outstanding’, but this does not tally with Ben’s experiences. When I spoke to the special needs co-ordinator she made it clear to me that she did not believe Ben had a Statement, and when I assured her he did she
laughed and said ‘he’s one of the ones telling the truth then’. The college’s policy and the SENCOs attitude meant that Ben was denied the support he needed, until he proved his need through his behaviour. Supports were then put in place, but he was over half way through the year and it was too late for him to be able to make up ground and gain the distinction he needed.

Ben had a poor relationship with his college tutor. She could not find the time to meet with me, but she spoke to me on the phone at some length. She sought advice on how to manage Ben’s behaviour (I explained that I was a researcher, not a behaviour support worker) and was clearly exasperated with the problems he caused in class (low level disruption and lack of respect). She seemed to dislike him. The college culture (evident in conversations with three members of staff) emphasised the voluntary nature of post-16 education. Students were expected to be self-motivated and self-disciplined learners. There seemed to be little room for spending time providing extra support to challenging students. Ben told me that seven students on his course were ‘kicked out’ in the first two weeks of the year, suggesting that the college’s high performance, in terms of qualifications achieved, is based on the swift ejection of students who are unlikely to succeed.

The special needs department provided support to those with proof that they had special needs, which meant the tutor did not feel she had responsibility for the sort of low level support (increased tolerance and time to complete assignments) that Ben needed. The segmented nature of the system, where support was provided from a separate department who only acted to help students when they had proof of need, made it easy for Ben to fall through the cracks in the system and be left unsupported.

Over the course of the year Ben seemed to lose confidence in his ability. Before he left school he told me he was ‘surprisingly clever’ having achieved above average test results at the end of primary school (levels 5 & 6 achieved, where the aim is level 4). He felt his ADHD diagnosis explained (but did not excuse) his problems in school. He was the only pupil in the school with a Statement relating to SEBD, and received limited support (extra time in exams and for homework). Ben felt he was gaining
control of his behaviour, and was optimistic about his future. He did not know exactly what he wanted to do (he initially wanted to be a PE teacher, but injured his knee and was advised it would not be possible for him), but was happy with the public service course he had chosen. By the end of the year Ben knew he could not gain the distinction he needed to progress. He told me he felt people’s expectations of him were too high, and studying was just too hard for him. His progression onto a vocational course reflects this loss of confidence in his academic abilities.

6.2.2 Kayleigh.

Post school experiences.
Kayleigh had a lot of problems at secondary school, and had refused to go to school at all for over a year. She was reintegrated successfully for the final year of school and managed to catch up educationally. As she left school she was confident that she would continue to be committed to education, although her mother was concerned that when education was no longer compulsory she would stop attending.

Kayleigh went straight from school to a vocational training centre. She was highly optimistic about the courses she would be offered there: she believed the staff would help her get vocational qualifications and then ‘get a job’ for her. The centre delivered basic skills training along with vocational qualifications gained through work placements. The centre aimed to be highly supportive, with each student’s progress monitored by an Engagement Advisor (EA) who was expected to work on their social and emotional development as well as their educational/vocational progress. They did this through a process of target-setting and reviewing.

Kayleigh attended the centre throughout the year, but dropped out of her first work placement and rejected other placements she was offered, so she did not gain any vocational qualifications. She attended the centre just enough to ensure she got her Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) and her mum continued to receive Working Tax Credits. She had no commitment to the course, and did not intend to try to gain employment when she left. She hoped to go to college until she was old enough to claim benefits, when she would move in with her boyfriend (also not working).
Kayleigh could be termed successful in her own terms, and placed in the *achievers* group. She was moving towards her recently declared goal of living with her boyfriend and claiming benefits. However, on leaving school she wanted to train and eventually to work, suggesting her goals had changed in response to her experiences over the year. In light of this, I placed her in the *under-achieving* group because she had not developed any adult-oriented goals. It is her intention to transfer her dependence on her mother, to dependence on her boyfriend and the state. Her aim seems to be to maintain the status quo rather than move into the adult stage of her life.

**Influences on transition.**

Kayleigh’s transitional experiences cannot be understood without some reflection on her history. Her mother was a single parent to her and her older brother (who had left home by the time I met her). Her brother’s father had died, and Kayleigh’s father had left when she was very young. He was a drug addict, according to her mother, and once he left they had no more to do with him. Her mother did not want her to meet him, but when she was about 12 she bumped into him in a nearby town. Having met him, against her mother’s wishes, she continued to see him, skipping school to spend time with him. After a few months he rejected her, but by that time he had introduced her to a ‘bad crowd’, according to her mum. She stopped going to school to ‘hang out’ with these new friends. During this time she began smoking cigarettes and cannabis, drinking alcohol, staying out late and seeing a much older boyfriend. Her mother found the situation very difficult to cope with, and was ‘drunk every day’ for months on end.

During this time a number of services were involved in Kayleigh’s life. The police brought her home regularly. Health services were involved twice when she was hospitalised for alcohol poisoning. Social workers tried to support the family, but their efforts to build a relationship with Kayleigh by taking her out were viewed by her mother as rewards for her bad behaviour, the worker changed frequently and without notice, and their work was not valued by Kayleigh or her mother. Kayleigh saw a play therapist. Her mother was taken to court for failing to send her child to school and threatened with prison if she did not ensure she attended within eight weeks of the hearing. Kayleigh says this is what triggered her return to school, although her mother
says that the change in her was more gradual. Once Kayleigh was reintegrated to school all services withdrew. From then on she was supported in school by a teacher who she said was her main source of help and guidance. This relationship ended when she left school.

Kayleigh had high expectations of the training centre: she said that they would train her and get her a job. Anne attended the same centre, and shared these expectations, suggesting that this is how the centre marketed itself to school-leavers. However, her expectations were not met. She wanted to be a hairdresser, but her first work placement ended because she felt that ‘sweeping floors and making tea’ was not what she wanted to do. The hours were long, and as her only payment was EMA she felt she was being used. After this no other placements could be found for her. Her attitude towards the training centre became less and less positive as time went on. At the beginning of the year she was enthusiastic, and believed she would soon be qualified and working. Within a few months she was only attending enough for her and her mum to keep their benefits and saw no need to work in the future. Had the centre been more honest about what it was able to offer to its learners at the beginning her level of disappointment may have been lessened, and her engagement increased.

At the centre Kayleigh was supported by two EAs, as her first one moved on. As I talked to her first EA it became clear that she knew very little about Kayleigh’s problems or her past. She seemed to have less of a sense of her than I had, although I had only met Kayleigh twice at that point, and the EA had been working with her for several months. There was no contact between the EA and staff at Kayleigh’s school, so the EA had no access to the knowledge and understanding held by Kayleigh’s trusted teacher. The EA saw Kayleigh as ‘a challenge’ but did not seem to like her. Kayleigh, in turn, seemed to have no interest in anything the EA had to say. Given her history of involvement with services, where the ‘help’ offered was either misunderstood by Kayleigh and her mother, ineffective in their view, or coercive, it is perhaps unsurprising that she did not form a productive relationship with the EA, but there are other factors which contributed to the failure of this relationship.
The training centre’s methods for supporting its learners social and emotional development was rooted in cognitive behaviourism. The EA would identify an issue that needed addressing, and then set a target drawn from a selection in their company-issued target book. The young person would monitor their own behaviour and attempt to use constructive rather than destructive/disruptive strategies when the issue arose. However, this system relies on the young person wanting to change their behaviour, and valuing the rewards they would receive once they had. Kayleigh did not seem to care what the staff at the centre thought of her: she said she did not like them. She did not want the education they were offering her, which were not the vocational qualifications and work experience she had expected. She did not share their long-term goals for her of further education and work. In these circumstances the methods for developing her emotional and social skills were destined to fail.

Kayleigh tended not to attract sympathy from those working with her. This may be in part because of the dissonance between her appearance (small, vulnerable and child-like) and her behaviour (disrespectful, foul-mouthed and confrontational). She seemed emotionally immature, and showed no signs of wanting to grow up and become independent. For example, she refused to ride on a bus alone, describing a phobic response to bus travel: ‘No, no, I couldn’t go on a bus. I feel sick at the thought. It makes me ill. No.’ And yet she would take a bus with a friend, suggesting the problem was independent travel, rather than the mode of transport. Refusing to use public transport meant that she relied on friends (particularly her boyfriend) to get to the training centre and her work placements. Determination to remain dependent is also suggested in her plan to move straight from her mother’s home to her boyfriend’s. Her EAs seemed unaware of any of these issues, and so were not working in any way to address them.

Kayleigh seemed to be a fragile girl. Her mother’s retreat into alcohol when she was dealing with her father’s rejection and its social and educational consequences meant she failed to support her. Although she and her mother were close generally, her mother did not feel she had been the adult helper that Kayleigh needed: ‘I were a
child, really. All I thought about was me. I think I’m only just growing up now’. Kayleigh has had no role model to show her how to be a woman, so it is unsurprising that her principle goal seems to be not to grow up and take responsibility for herself, but to find ways of maintaining child-like dependence on others.

Kayleigh’s first year out of school may have been more productive had there been some communication between the school and the EA. Had the EAs known about her troubled past it is possible that they may have been more sympathetic towards her, and perhaps involved the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) team in helping her deal with her problems (there was a suggestion that she may be depressed). It was within their remit to take a holistic view of the young person and involve any relevant agencies to set up a support package if needed, but the only people involved with Kayleigh were the Connexions service, and their support was peripheral.

6.2.3 Kevin.

Post school experiences.
Kevin had moderate learning difficulties and a history of violence and aggression in school. His home life was highly problematic, with a history of violence in the family. His mother had mental health problems, and attempted suicide twice in the year before he left school. She was extremely vulnerable, with learning difficulties according to Kevin’s Connexions worker. The Connexions worker only visited when the family’s social care worker was present, and recommended that I do the same. In spite of numerous phone calls, emails, and promises to call back to arrange a visit I never managed to see Kevin at home.

Kevin went to do a foundation level skills for life course. I managed to contact his college tutor, who gave me a progress report. Unfortunately, when I spoke to her Kevin had not been going to college. They were in the process of reintegrating him, and asked if I could delay coming to see him until he was settled back in college. Since then I have been unable to contact the tutor, and I have no further information on his progress.
6.3 Revolving Door.

This group is made up of four participants, Michael (from Mosshead), and Jon and Mark (day pupils at Linton Hall), and Lucas (a year 13 residential pupil at Linton Hall). They had multiple placements through the year, moving to a new one when they left the first (or second, third and fourth).

6.3.1 Michael.

Post school experiences.

Michael was already spending some time out of school before he left. He often walked out of school when he found it too difficult to cope with, socially or academically, and was spending a day a week working for the local vicar. At that time much of his social life was oriented around the church, and he attended a number of church-run youth groups. Throughout his last years at school he had regular contact with a Positive Activities for Young People (PAYP) worker. The PAYP worker’s role was to work with young people at risk of exclusion to maintain their engagement in education, training or employment. He had regular meetings with Michael and arranged his participation in a range of out-of-school activities, including outdoor pursuits and a visit to the local radio station. His work with Michael continued throughout the period of this study.

When he left school Michael went to sixth form college to do a skills for life course. His first half term went well, and he completed all his work on time and passed all his assignments. However, during the half term break he began seeing a new girlfriend and he missed a lot of college over the next couple of weeks. He decided it was impossible to catch up with the work he had missed (a view not shared by his tutor or his PAYP worker) and dropped out of college. He enrolled himself at the training centre his girlfriend attended, but then they dropped out of that as well. He went to another training centre for a few weeks, but they decided he was not ready for their course and he was referred to a third placement.

His third placement was a training service run by an environmental charity, which provided training in practical skills, such as dry-stone walling, and activities such as
food preparation and sharing to develop living and social skills. Michael completed the course there, but it was only eight weeks long.

Michael was ‘kicked out’ of home a year after leaving school. He moved into a hostel for homeless young people, where he said he was happy and settled – he knew many of the other residents before he moved there. He had been NEET since the end of his last placement, but the Connexions team were working with him, and he had joined a ‘course for NEETS’. He had missed a few weeks of the course, but felt he would do enough. He had no long term plans, but hoped to find a job with decent money.

_Influences on transition._

Michael was a complex and demanding character and my interviews with him were intense. For example, on our second meeting he spent the first minutes showing me the scars on his arms from his self-harming (he assured me that he no longer cut himself). He also told me how he had ‘done a depression test’ on the internet and had a very high score (I contacted the school following this interview to express concern about his mental health and was told that ‘everybody’ including the CAMHS team had been/was involved in his case).

Michael was emotionally and socially immature, and his PAYP worker told me this caused problems with his peers. He was over-familiar (physically and socially) with people he had just met, ‘invading their personal space’ and expecting them to be ‘instant friends’ with him. Other young people found his manner off-putting, although when encouraged by the PAYP worker to ‘give him a chance’ they would come to like him eventually. The instant intensity he experienced in his relationships explains why he gave up courses he was achieving in when he got a new girlfriend. In our first post-school interview he told me that he thought the girl he had started seeing only a few weeks before was pregnant, and they were going to get married. Three months later they had split up.

Michael seemed to attract friends who had mental health problems. I met one of his friends, who proudly told me she had been ‘sectioned’ before and was on incapacity
benefits because of her depression. Michael told me his girlfriend also suffered from depression. Within his friendship group his erratic and emotionally-led behaviour seemed to be normal. However, he was also a very kind young man, with a strong Christian ethic and a desire to help people, and it may have been this element of his nature that attracted him to people who were struggling with life. Certainly when he talked about his relationship with his girlfriend he talked of helping her to deal with her problems, and ‘making her better’.

Michael had a good relationship with his PAYP worker, who liked him and believed that he would ‘do well, eventually’. They seemed to trust each other, and Michael valued the PAYP worker’s opinion. However, Michael’s decisions about his training and education seemed to be led by his emotions, and made on the spur of the moment, without discussing the implications of his actions with any of the professionals involved in his life. He would actively avoid the PAYP worker when he was making a decision of which he believed the worker would not approve. Throughout his compulsory education, and into his post-school life, Michael would walk away from any situation he found difficult, whether that was his relationships with his peers at school or having to catch up on the college work he had missed. This deeply embedded defence mechanism made it difficult for his most trusted worker (the PAYP worker) to keep him engaged. He cannot be there at every moment, and Michael’s decisions, once made, were unchangeable.

Michael’s home life was unsettled throughout the period of the study. A relative who had been very involved in the family’s life for a number of years had, he said, been bullying him and his mum, and was no longer part of their lives. This created a split in the family, with two siblings supporting mum, whilst two backed the relative. An older brother, who had been fostered since he was a baby, also came into their lives just a few months before my first meeting with Michael, further upsetting the family dynamic. Michael spent a lot of time staying with friends while he still lived at home, and was trying to gain independence. However, he accused his mother of stealing his EMA money, and finances generally seemed to cause conflict between them. He did
not tell me what triggered his leaving home. It may have been the on-going conflict over money, but it is equally possible that he had friends who were living in the young people’s hostel and simply wanted to go and live near them.

It is difficult to see how Michael could have been supported more effectively. His college tutor wanted him to continue his course, which he was achieving in, although she was extremely exasperated with him when she spoke to me. He had a good relationship with his PAYP worker, who was readily available to him, and always at the end of a phone for him. He had support available to him in the church youth groups he attended. But none of his supporters could be there with him all the time, so inevitably they missed opportunities to intervene to stop him making poor decisions.

It is possible Michael would have benefited from more career guidance before he left school. His school Connexions workers had not worked with him, as they assumed the PAYP worker would be providing him with careers information. They felt that they did not need to worry, as they had been told that he had a college place. However, he had no long term goals, and this may have contributed towards his impulsivity. If his courses were moving him towards a future he was choosing he may have more reason to reflect and persevere, rather than simply run away.

6.3.2 Jon.

Post school experiences.
Jon did not get the GCSE grades he had hoped to and so was unable to enrol on a media studies course as he had planned. Instead he went to his local sixth form college to re-sit his GCSEs. Just before Christmas, after just three months at college he dropped out, saying that it was boring and he wanted to get a job. He made a number of unsuccessful attempts at finding work, which was in short supply.

Life at home was not easy. His mum split up with his stepdad just before he dropped out of college. By January, she was threatening to send Jon to live with his dad if he did not do something, so he was intending to go on an E2E (Entry to Employment) course. Although I made several appointments to meet with Jon and his mother
between January and February she either cancelled or was out when I arrived. I have not been able to contact them since then.

**Influences on transition.**

I have limited data relating to Jon. In the only post school interview I was able to conduct with him he seemed positive, in spite of having dropped out of college. He did not have a Connexions worker, although he had made contact with one and was due to meet with them in the near future. His mother was pushing him to do something, either work or college, and him continuing to be NEET was not an option as far as she, or he, was concerned. There were very few employment opportunities in the area. Jon had made several attempts to get work, by cold-calling on local restaurants and responding to newspaper adverts, but he had been unable to find anything. He lived on the edge of a small, non-industrial, affluent town, where the only employment opportunities were in the retail and service industry. As the country was in recession there was steep competition for the few jobs available, and a sixteen year old ex-special school pupil with few GCSEs and no experience could not hope to gain work.

The break-up of his mother and step-father’s relationship seemed to have upset Jon, and coincided with him dropping out of college (which with hindsight he regretted). He had a good relationship with his step-father. When he was excluded from his first special school his mother sent him to live with his father, and he attributed his welcome back into his mother’s home to his step-father’s intervention on his behalf. His problems in mainstream school began when his parents split up. He said he struggled to deal with the anger he was feeling and could not talk to his mother about it for fear of upsetting her. He told me he thought this was why he started misbehaving at school (and that once he started he was unable to stop). It is possible that his emotional response to his mum and step-dad’s break-up, combined with the loss of the intensive support he was used to at school contributed to his leaving college.

Jon went to a mainstream college when he left school. Although he was only a day pupil at Linton Hall, so he had friends who were going to the same college, there were no educational supports put in place for him. He had no home Connexions adviser that
he knew of when he left school, although because he was educated outside of his LEA and was leaving a special school he should have been allocated an adviser. This meant that he did not talk to anyone about his reasons for dropping out of his course, before or after he did so. He only gained access to Connexions through his own actions after leaving college, and on his mother’s instruction. Had he had an adviser he knew, to talk to before he made the decision to leave college, he may not have made a decision that he later saw as a mistake.

### 6.3.3 Mark.

**Post school experiences.**

Mark left school with the intention of going to a local sixth form college. He enrolled at college, but then received threatening text messages from other students, so became scared and did not go. He did not tell the college he was not going, and his parents did not take any action. He had no contact with the Connexions service.

I met him for interview, with his dad, at his local Connexions office four months after he should have started college. When he explained what had happened I suggested that we ask the staff in the office who his allocated worker was. As he had been educated ‘out of area’ and had a statement of special needs he should have had a named key worker. When I asked the staff who his worker was they explained that she had gone on long term sick, and he had not been reallocated. They did not see this as a problem because they believed Mark to be attending college. When the truth came to light he was immediately taken to talk to someone about joining an E2E course.

The next time I spoke to him, a couple of weeks later he had started the course and was happy there. I have been unable to contact him since.

**Influences on transition.**

The lack of communication between the college and the Connexions service meant that Mark slipped through the net. The Connexions service assumed that because he had enrolled at college he was attending, they had not checked that this was the case. Had his key worker not fallen sick normal procedure would be that she would make
contact after a few weeks to check on his progress, but this did not happen in her absence. When I met Mark in the Connexions office I had to explain where it was. He had never been there, and had had no contact with the service since leaving school.

When he decided not to go to college Mark did nothing to find something else to do. He went home and spent his time just ‘hanging around’. Both his parents were long-term unemployed. They had worked in the local steel industry, but had been made redundant a number of years ago and had been out of work ever since. They did not have the skills or resources to find employment themselves, so perhaps it is unsurprising that Mark was prepared to simply accept inactivity when he decided not to go to college. It seems likely that he would have continued just ‘hanging around’ had I not intervened to reintroduce him to Connexions.

6.3.4 Lucas.

Post school experiences.
In the previous year Lucas had been on a life skills course at a college which specialised in providing courses for young people with learning and other difficulties. He had completed the course and moved on to a vocational mechanics course at a local sixth form college. Even with the support of the staff at Linton Hall he could not maintain this placement. Problems relating to peers resulted in aggressive outbursts, and at the end of the first term he left, having gained some accreditation for his work and returned to his previous college. Back on the life skills course, having progressed to the next level, he had a successful year at college.

Although Lucas did well at college he had a number of problems on home visits. When he was allowed to stay with his family he invariably got into trouble, with the police being called to deal with his violent outbursts. Therefore, he was housed some distance from his family, in supported accommodation, for the bulk of the holidays, and allowed to visit his family for a day or two. He was often sent to different places for each holiday, and so found it impossible to make friends, or build any kind of social network. His time was spent doing activities with support workers.
Influences on transition.
As with James, Lucas’ transition has effectively been delayed, and it is unclear what will happen when he finally has to leave Linton Hall. His extended placement has provided him with the support he needed to persevere with education, even if that meant giving up on one course and moving on to another. However, he has had no opportunity to develop a life outside of school. He never knew until the last minute where he would be staying in the holidays. He could not make any plans for his holiday time, and was completely reliant on those working with him for social contact. Whilst this may have been adequate for a week out of school, it did not give him the chance to make his own friends, or to develop his ability to socialise with his peers. In the summer holidays, when he was out of school for longer, he got into trouble with the police. This may not have happened if he had had an independent social life, and something constructive to do. Whilst staying on at school facilitates his educational development, the sheltered world he lives in does not necessarily provide him with the opportunity to develop the range of skills and support networks he will need when he eventually leaves.

6.4 NEET/Unknown

Two participants were NEET for the whole year: Andrew (a residential pupil at Linton Hall) and Jack (from Sankside). The activities of Alex, a residential pupil at Linton Hall, are unknown, but the limited information available about his transition is presented.

6.4.1 Andrew.

Post school experiences.
Andrew was diagnosed with Asperger’s and ADHD. His placement at Linton Hall was extended so that he was 18 when he left. The school had hoped that he would be able to stay for a further year, but this was rejected by the Local Authority. Unfortunately this decision was not made until the beginning of the summer break, but which time it was too late to put support in place for Andrew and his family when he returned home.
Andrew found it difficult to settle in at home, and his family struggled. He refused any form of training or education, saying that he had spent enough time in school. A year after leaving school he had been persuaded to go on a ‘Job Search’ course. This was only an eleven week course, and the family did not know what he would do after it.

Andrew spent his spare time riding on and helping with the cleaning of buses. He was obsessed with buses, and the local bus drivers were his only source of social contact on his weekends home from school, outside his family. Once he left school, his only structured activity was his ‘work’ at the bus depot, for which he had shifts that he kept to rigidly. Even when he did begin to make other friends he continued to ‘work’ at the bus depot. It was an important part of his life.

Andrew had a lot of problems over the year. He took to staying out late, and was once beaten up; he spent time hanging out with people his mum described as a ‘bad lot’ (boy racers); he was brought home by the police more than once, when he was threatening to jump off a bridge. The family found this very difficult to cope with, but things did settle down after about 14 months at home. Andrew began accepting house rules (home by 11pm, calling if he was going to miss a meal) and stopped spending time with the boy racers. He still had his ‘tantrums’ but his mum felt better able to cope with them.

Andrew wanted to leave home, but would need sheltered accommodation. He could only gain access to this by being made homeless by his mother and being temporarily housed in a hostel. His mum would not consider taking this action, seeing him as too vulnerable to survive in such a place.

*Influences on transition.*

When he left school Andrew saw himself as a young man on the cusp of living an independent ‘adult’ life. Although he sometimes spoke of his reluctance to leave the safety of school, he was also keen to start his new life: ‘Look out world, I’m coming at ya!’ His expectation seemed to be that he would be self-reliant. In the support network interview his response to questions about who would help him in a range of scenarios
was often ‘Me, meself.’ However, when he returned home he found no employment opportunities, no prospect of leaving home, and continued reliance on his family.

Andrew was part of a close family, who were determined to support him in any way they could. However, there were limited resources within the household. Neither parent was working and they had three other children who still lived at home (the older two having left), meaning that space, money and time were all stretched. His parents had been trying to help him find employment, training and independent housing. However, they had few work-related contacts (and so little access to information about vacancies), Andrew resisted education, and there did not seem to be a way for him to access supported housing that was acceptable to the family.

Andrew’s parents tried to claim Disability Living Allowance (DLA) for Andrew, but were told he was not eligible. This is difficult to understand as the fact that his Local Education Authority extended his placement at Linton Hall for two years would suggest that he had considerable difficulties. Whilst Jon was given DLA because of his ADHD, Andrew, with a double diagnosis of ADHD and Asperger’s Syndrome was not. Of course, Jon had the support of the key worker in his hostel in completing his application form, and she had filled in many of these forms in the course of her work. It is possible, therefore, that it was her ability to ‘tick the right boxes’, rather than Jon’s level of difficulty that gained him his benefit. This suggests that knowledge of the system, rather than objectively assessed difficulties, is the key to gaining access to DLA (and possibly other supports associated with having a recognised disability).

The education and training opportunities suggested to Andrew when he returned home did not appeal to him. The school and home Connexions workers saw him as a young person with special needs, and the courses they steered him towards reflected that view. Andrew saw himself as a young man, ready to take responsibility for himself, keen to find work and begin his adult life. It is, perhaps, not surprising that he rejected the courses offered to him and continued to work voluntarily on the buses instead. This may explain why he agreed to attend the Job Search course: a course aimed at the unemployed in general, and not those with special needs in particular (though it may
be that he went because he had to, to continue to receive his benefits, and that having been at home for over a year he was bored, and ready to do anything).

Andrew’s transitional opportunities seem to have been constrained by the systems he encountered. The lateness of the decision on further extending his placement meant there was little time to plan for his move home. The courses offered to him did not have meaningful progression routes, so that he could not see a viable employment opportunity at the end of them. Access to supported housing for someone without a recognised disability was through homelessness, and so out of reach to a young man with a loving and supportive family. Disability benefits may have provided him with the resources to gain some independence, as well as access to other forms of support, but these seem to be awarded in an arbitrary way, and Andrew did not have the skills to be one of those who managed to get them. These systemic factors combined with the low level of resources within the family, and an economic climate in which youth unemployment was climbing, to limit the opportunities available to Andrew, and the chances of him accepting what was on offer to him.

Andrew’s first year out of school may have been more productive if:

1. There had been more time to plan and put in place appropriate supports for him and his family;

2. A partnership had been developed between the Connexions worker and the bus company so that his voluntary work was made into a formal work placement and he was able to receive accredited training in an area that interested him.

3. The family had received better help in claiming DLA, giving Andrew the prospect of financial independence.

4. Access to supported housing could be gained without the need to Andrew to be made homeless.
6.4.2 Jack.

Post school experiences.
Jack spent considerable time out of school before he left. He was assumed to be being home-tutored, but when it became clear to the school that he was not being provided with any education he was brought back into school. He did not turn up to sit all of his GCSEs.

Jack was difficult to trace once he left school. He moved out of home, temporarily according to his mother, and went to live in a nearby town with his older brother. He was NEET throughout the time I was able to track him (7 months). Connexions were trying to work with him, but felt obstructed by his mother. He told me he did not want their help. Although I tried several times to arrange meetings with him, each time he said he needed to consult his brother and would ring me back. He never returned my calls. I have been unable to trace him since April 2010.

Given that the data on Jack’s post school experiences is very limited it is difficult to draw any conclusions about what influenced his transition. His family, according to his school staff, lived on the edges of society. There were suggestions that they were involved in criminal activity and drug dealing. Were this true, it would explain his reluctance to engage with formal support agencies, and to allow me to come to his home to interview him. However, as I have no evidence to support this claim it can only be speculation.

6.4.3 Alex.

Post school experiences,
Alex did not engage easily with this project. He was diagnosed with ADHD, but his problems went far deeper than that. He was a distant young man, slow to smile and any eye contact he made felt like a challenge. It was clear from all he did not tell me in the life grid interview that he had had a difficult start in life. He claimed to remember nothing of the first seven years of his life, the time he lived with his parents, his memories only beginning when he was placed with his grandparents. Although he
attended both interviews whilst at school he said I could only contact him at the end of the year. He was confident that he would be fine when he left school.

I telephoned him at his home in July, by which time he had been out of school for a full year. His grandfather told me he was ‘with social services’ and had been for months. He no longer had any contact with Alex. I was unable to trace Alex directly.

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter has shown that the participants have taken very different paths since leaving school, with varying levels of success. Almost all of them have faced challenges that related to the problems they had in school, and although some have managed to overcome these issues, most have not. Only five of the fifteen could be classed as successful, with the others ranging from those who are under-achieving, to those who have dropped out of the education system altogether.

The influences on their transitions are equally individual. They are characterised by complex sets of interactions between the individual, the institutions they left and those they moved on to, set within the context of their families and communities, against a backdrop of a country entering a deep recession. All these factors have worked together to create opportunity or disadvantage in their first year out of school. Each participant had a unique experience, reflecting their distinctive individual characteristics and circumstances.

However, there are common threads between the cases, issues which have arisen in the lives of several participants including relationships, communication, appropriateness of placement, and the role of the family. These shared influences will be explored in the next chapter, framed within the Person-Process-Context-Time model described in Chapter 2.
7 Exploration: the influence of Person-Process-Context-Time on transition

The previous chapter focussed on the individual, contextualised experiences of the participants, to show how different aspects of themselves and their environments interacted to form their transitional experience. Each young person was a unique being, with a unique set of circumstances which operated together to create opportunity or disadvantage. However, there were common themes that emerged from the data.

This chapter presents the results of the fourth stage of analysis described in section 5.4.4, cross-case analysis. The findings described here constitute the third side of Hernadi’s (1987) triangle, exploration: conceived in this study as the process of construction, in which the participant’s individual experiences are brought together to develop understanding of the influences on them as a group. The results of this analytical process are presented using Bronfenbrenner’s Person-Process-Context-Time model. Although the chapter sections are divided according to these categories, they overlap substantially (as the model would predict) so there is some ‘bleeding’ between them. The chapter concludes by summarising the results in relation to the research questions.

7.1 Person

The demand, force and resource characteristics of each participant interacted to support smooth transitions, or limit their capacity to succeed in their first year out of school. The effects of these three sets of characteristics are so intricately connected that it is not possible to separate them. I have therefore divided them into person-centred attributes (demand, force and resource characteristics contained within the participant) and external resources (those held within the home and family).

7.1.1 Person-centred characteristics.

These characteristics include both physical and psychological aspects of the participants. Physical characteristics (demand characteristics, to use Tudge et al’s
(2009) term) include the age and gender of the individual, and these need to be viewed in their cultural context: there are cultural expectations of how young people of school-leaving age in general, and teenage females in particular should behave, and many of the participants confounded these expectations.

**Gender.**

Only two of the participants were female, and their gender seemed to affect expectations of them and attitudes towards them. Kayleigh was small and child-like, and unmistakeably female. There was little tolerance of her confrontational behaviour in the centre she attended. When she perceived an injustice to herself or her friends she would shout, argue, swear and threaten other students and members of staff. Her manner (the aggression and anger she displayed) was unfeminine, and did not match her appearance. She had ongoing problems with her tutors, and her EA’s attitude towards her was professional, but without warmth.

In contrast, Anne (attending the same centre, with the same EA) looked and behaved more like a young woman of seventeen (she had the mildest behaviour problems of any of the sample). She did not shout, or argue, but was sometimes giggly and talkative – more acceptable behaviours in a teenage female. As the EA talked about Anne she expressed a professional interest in her progress, but when she talked with her she did so with warmth, a lot of eye contact and encouraging smiles. Anne’s behaviour in classes at the centre caused almost as much disruption as Kayleigh’s, but it was culturally age- and gender-appropriate, and so more acceptable.

However, this analysis of Kayleigh’s and Anne’s experiences may be the result of my gendered interpretation of the situation. It may be that, although she was only small, Kayleigh’s behaviour was intimidating (to other students and tutors) and presented more of a behaviour management challenge, while Anne was merely irritating.

**Maturity.**

A further issue for many of the participants was a lack of maturity in comparison to other young people of their age. Mainstream post-16 education is organised around
the assumption that students are mature enough to manage their own learning, that they have chosen to continue in education, and that they will be self-motivated (to some degree). There is nothing in the appearance of most young people with SEBD to suggest they are any different to their peers, it is only through their behaviour that their difficulties become apparent. Where tutors of the participants were unaware of their special needs their behaviour was perceived as unmanageable and incomprehensible.

Only four of the participants began college courses aimed at the general population (Jon was re-sitting his GCSEs; Ben took a Btec course, Lucas attempted a vocational mechanics course and Simon did tiling). Simon’s tutor knew him before he began the course and had on-going information and support from his school. Because of this he understood, and was prepared to work with, Simon’s immature responses to challenging social situations. Lucas’ needs were such that even with support from workers from his school he was not mature enough to cope with the social demands of his course. Jon dropped out of college before I could talk to his tutor, but Ben’s tutor could not understand why he acted as he did: he had, after all, chosen to do the course she taught. She had received no information from his school about his difficulties (an issue I return to later), and could not understand why a young man of his age could not control his behaviour.

The vocational training centre attended by Anne, Kayleigh and (for a time) Michael was more accustomed to dealing with young people with behavioural difficulties. One of the issues I discussed with an EA there was Kayleigh’s immaturity. The EA told me that the immaturity of their client group was a large problem for the centre. However, Kayleigh made it clear through her behaviour and statements about her aspirations that she had no desire to grow up and be an independent being. Yet there was no apparent attempt to help her develop a more positive view of adulthood, or to develop adult-oriented goals with her.

Five of the participants attended courses aimed at students who have not achieved any qualifications at school. Lack of maturity is common-place amongst this group,
according to some of the tutors working on the courses, and the teachers, curriculum and classroom arrangements are set up to accommodate the needs of their students. Kevin, James and Tom all completed their year on these courses, and although Kevin and Tom both had periods where they did not attend (both had problems at home) the courses were flexible enough to allow them to rejoin the class when they were able. Lucas had attended one of these courses in the academic year before I met him, and returned to a similar course when he dropped off his mechanics course. He completed his year successfully once he was placed in a course that suited his developmental, as opposed to educational needs. The other participant who attended one of these courses was Michael. It was his first post-school placement, and he left after only a few weeks, but this was the result of his desire to be with his new girlfriend. The course suited him well and he was achieving good results.

Overall, the participants did best when their courses accommodated their social and emotional immaturity. These courses are readily available and suitable for those with lower levels of academic ability and achievement. However, for Ben who was academically able and achieved competitive GCSE grades, the course that provided adequate educational stimulation did not offer the levels of support that he needed in light of his less developed social skills. Intelligence is often cited as a protective factor in the lives of young people ‘at risk’ (Smokowski et al., 1999), but Ben’s experiences suggest that it can be a mixed blessing. There did not seem to be a relationship between academic ability and successful transition in this study: it was more important that the course the participant attended fitted their ability level, both academically and socially.

**Drive, goal motivation and perseverance.**

Intelligence was not the only characteristic to play a part in the young people’s transitions; personal drive, goal-motivation, and perseverance are seen acting, for better or worse, in all the young people’s transitions.

Carl’s transition into work and training was facilitated by his strong personal drive and motivation to achieve his long-term goal of becoming a paramedic. He was constantly
searching for opportunities for work or training in both the paid and voluntary employment sectors. At the other extreme, when Mark was too intimidated to attend his first college placement his response was to do nothing to change his situation. He had no goals that he was working towards, and there is no way of knowing how long he would have just stayed at home, neither working nor training, had I not intervened.

The capacity to persevere through the educational and social challenges of further education or training was particularly significant in the transitions of Anne, Ben and Tom. Anne sometimes felt her work placement was insufficiently challenging, and her efforts under-valued, and withdrew, but each time (with the help of her EA) she returned to her placement. Her desire to complete the work placement was rooted in her long-term aim of doing an apprenticeship in care. Ben found college a very difficult place to be. Although he made plenty of new friends there, his relationship with his tutor was very strained, and he did not feel he got enough support from the teaching staff. In spite of this he kept going throughout the year, and although he did not achieve as high a grade as he could have, he completed the course and gained a qualification. Tom returned to his college placement each time he had taken time out to deal with problems in his home life. He was determined that he would finish the course, so that he could progress onto a health and social care course and work towards a long term goal of becoming a carer of some sort.

In contrast, Michael left each of his educational/training placements when he felt challenged by them, or because he became distracted by other aspects of his life (his girlfriends). Kayleigh left her work placement within two weeks of it beginning because she did not like the working conditions, and Jon lasted only a few months on a course that prepared him to re-sit his GCSEs because he was ‘bored’. These three participants seemed unable to persevere through difficulties to gain long-term benefits.

Although perseverance was related to some extent to the young person’s feeling that their current placement was taking them towards their long-term goals, this was not always the case. Ben persevered with his course, even though he had no idea of how it would contribute to his future. He valued education and qualifications (as did his
family), and wanted to get something out of his course, even though he had no career
goals in mind. Kayleigh consistently told both me and her EAs that she wanted to be a
hairdresser, but this did not help her to stick with her placement in a hair salon. The
capacity to persevere was the result of interactions between the young person and
their educational placement, and influenced by the extent to which they valued the
education or training they were getting.

**Likeability.**

Being ‘likeable’ helped the participants find sympathetic helpers, though only one was
perceived in this way within all the microsystems that he was involved with, and I had
access to. For most it existed in some contexts (or relationships), but not others. The
move out of school placed some participants in situations where they were seen as
more likeable, for others the opposite was true. And one participant was seen as very
likeable by one worker, but not so by the rest of the people working with him.

Tom was seen as likeable by all who worked with him (at school, college and his hostel)
and this seemed to be why so many of his workers were prepared to go beyond what
was required of them to support him through his home-based difficulties and keep him
engaged with the education system. Anne was not popular with the workers at her
school, as is evidenced by the derogatory way the staff talked about her in her absence
(see section 6.1.5). Simon’s school staff gave him credit for his intelligence, articulacy
and good behaviour, but described him as vain and self-obsessed. However, once out
of compulsory education both Anne and Simon were popular with workers in their new
educational placements. The change of context somehow diminished the qualities
their school staff found annoying, and so changed the way they were viewed.

Kayleigh was described in positive terms by the staff at her school. This may have been
a reflection of their sense of achievement at having successfully reintegrated her into
school, and enabled her to catch up with her peers. However, attitudes towards her in
the training centre she attended were far less favourable. Her first EA did not relate to
her warmly (in the way she did with Anne) and her second EA had no real interest in
her as she was close to the end of the program and unlikely to achieve anything.
Michael, meanwhile, was very well-liked by his PAYP worker, but not by others who tried to help him. However, the PAYP worker identified with Michael, describing him as ‘a bit like me when I was younger’, which created a natural sympathy between them, and he did not have to try to teach Michael. The lack of warmth in the way other workers related to him could be attributed to the fact that in each placement he would begin well, raising the worker’s expectations of him, only to drop out as soon as he was challenged, or thought he had found something better to do.

Thus, likeability was not a fixed attribute possessed by some participants and not others. It was context/relationship specific and related to how the young person was perceived, both as an individual and as a reflection of the work of the educational establishment. Those who were not achieving at the level expected of them were generally perceived as less likeable than those who were doing well.

**Internalised previous experiences.**
The internalised consequences of previous experiences can be seen acting in many ways on the participants’ lives. For some, their time at special school seemed to have changed their understanding of themselves, so that they no longer saw themselves as people with SEN. This could be a positive influence on their transitions. Simon, for example, made considerable progress with his social difficulties at school, and almost never caused any problems for the staff. On leaving, he seemed to see himself as just another student at his college, and the support given to him by his tutor was discrete enough for him to maintain this self-image.

However, when this perception was not shared by others it could be a negative influence. Andrew saw himself as a ‘normal’ young adult, but the professionals working with him classed him as a young person with special needs, and offered him courses suitable for that group. He refused all the offers made to him until he was placed on a course aimed at the long-term unemployed, where he would have been just another adult claimant. He attended this course diligently, perhaps because it reflected his image of himself as a ‘normal’ young man, internalised through his experience of his school’s transition to independence programme.
For others, their previous dealings with a range of support services affected their attitudes to potential helpers. Ben and Kayleigh had both received support from a range of services through their lives (social services, CAMHS, educational support in school), but they did not see them as particularly effective. When they faced problems in their post-school placements they did not actively seek help. They saw the inadequacy of the support they were offered as normal and expected nothing better.

In contrast, Tom had positive experiences of support services. He expressed appreciation for the youth offending team worker who had come to his home and ‘seen what was going on’ with his mother (alleged emotional abuse) and moved him to live with his father. He appreciated the efforts made by his school to help him educationally, putting his lack of success down to his troubled home-life, rather than any failure on the school’s part. So when he faced problems (homelessness and difficulties at college) he turned to his workers for help. His openness to receiving help, and expectation that it would be forthcoming, made him behave in ways which made it likely that his expectations would be fulfilled.

As can be seen from these examples, the participants’ past experiences led them to have particular expectations of themselves and others. For Simon having high expectations was positive, as he got the help he needed and his year in college was a success. But Andrew’s view of himself was not shared by those working with him, and so he was disengaged for most of the year. Tom’s positive view of support services put him in a position to be effectively supported through a very difficult and insecure year. But the low expectations they had of support services led to Ben and Kayleigh failing to get the help they needed, and underachieving through the year.

7.1.2 External resources.

External resources can also be seen influencing the participants’ transitions. There seems to be a relationship between the family’s capacity to provide support of all forms (informational, emotional, esteem and practical) and the level of success experienced by the participants in their first post-school year. However, whilst the
family was the primary source of support for most of the participants, some managed to fill the gaps left by their families with support from other sources. Provided they had access to all types of support the young people were well-placed to achieve, but where there were gaps in their networks they were more likely to struggle (see Table 7).

Table 7: Availability of support within the family and level of success

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Level of success</th>
<th>Informational support</th>
<th>Emotional support</th>
<th>Esteem support</th>
<th>Practical support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Carl</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simon</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jon</td>
<td>RD</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>RD</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Limited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>RD</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Limited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ben</td>
<td>UA</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kayleigh</td>
<td>UA</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew</td>
<td>NEET</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A = Achiever; RD = Revolving Door; UA = Under-achiever; NEET = Not in Education, Employment or Training.
Ticked box = adequate support; Limited = some support; Other = support gained from other sources.

Carl and Anne both had access to all forms of support within their families. Both came from working households (Carl's parents were both employed; Anne lived with her self-employed father) and their parents used their knowledge of the working world to help them find the right course/employment. Both participants also described close relationships with their parents, in which they were able to talk about problems and which made them feel good about themselves (although Anne described her relationship with her mother, whose home she moved out of some time before she left school, as more distant). The two families each had an income which allowed them to run cars (which they used to get their children to interviews) and to offer their children a comfortable home with adequate space.

In terms of the support available from his family Tom is at the other end of the spectrum from Anne and Carl, as he had no input from his family at all within weeks of leaving school. However, he managed to gain informational, emotional and esteem
support from the professionals who worked with him (at the hostel he lived in and at college), as well as receiving practical support within the hostel and from the benefit system. Similarly, Simon was well supported emotionally, in terms of esteem and practically by his family, but lacked informational support. However, he gained this through his teachers at school before he left, and his tutor at college afterwards, and through use of the internet.

The cases of Carl and Anne seem to show that high levels of family resources, a strong family work ethic and supportive relationships can help a young person to keep trying to move towards their goals, and engage in productive activity despite facing setbacks. Tom and Simon show that where the family is unable to provide adequate support in all areas it is possible for professional workers to fill the gaps and help the young person to achieve. However, many of the participants did not manage to find workers who could help them in ways their families could not, and these young people struggled more through their first year out of school.

The lack of resources or direction in Mark’s family allowed him to fall through the net and drift for some months. When he failed to attend college he did nothing to try to find an alternative activity, he just went home and stayed there. Mark’s father accompanied him when he came to meet me at the Connexions office as Mark had never been there before. This suggests that he was keen to support his son, and he expressed no criticism of Mark’s lack of activity. Mark’s retreat back to home seemed to mirror his parents’ lives: they were made redundant from the steel industry some years ago and since then they had both been unemployed. They did not have the resources to help themselves, and so did not seem able to help Mark either.

Kayleigh’s mum also expressed the desire to help her to deal with her problems, but she viewed herself as lacking the maturity to be a ‘proper mother’. Whilst Kayleigh was at school she found a teacher who was able to give her the support her mother could not, but once she left she failed to find another worker to fill the gaps. In contrast, Michael had several workers through his year who could have provided him with the support that was lacking in his home, but he chose to turn to his peers (particularly for
emotional and esteem support), which disrupted his relationships with professionals and limited his access to productive support. The inability of these three young people’s families to provide the full range of support they needed combined with their failure to find alternative sources of help constituted a barrier to successful transition.

For some, the gaps in their network were relatively small, and can be seen as lesser influences on their transitional experiences, with other factors being more important. Ben’s mother was unable to engage fully with the college he went to because of her mental health issues. This resulted in them not acknowledging his special needs, and failing to provide educational support. However, this problem need not have arisen had the college received the information about his special needs from his school before he began his course, or if they had been willing to contact the school to verify that he had a Statement. Andrew’s parents had access to limited information to help him find work or a suitable training placement. But the greater influence on his transition was the opportunities that were offered to him by his workers, who were in turn limited by the provision available in his semi-rural area.

The cases described show that the capacity of their families to provide the full range of types of support to the participants was a factor in their transitional experiences, but where the support within the home was lacking it was possible for professionals to fill the gaps. However, other factors in the young person’s life could be as significant an influence on their transitional experiences, including the choices they made, the procedures of the educational placements they went on to and the provision available in their area. The factor that seemed to make the greatest difference to their transitions where support from home was lacking was their ability to build constructive relationships with their professional helpers.

7.2 Process: relationships

The dominant process in the young people’s experience of transition was the relationships they formed with their professional supporters (see Table 8) Those who built constructive relationships with their workers usually thrived (Tom, Simon, Anne
and Carl); whilst those who failed to build constructive relationships with those who had the potential to help them struggled (Ben and Kayleigh).

However, good relationships with supporters did not always lead to success, and could be over-powered by person characteristics (as in the case of Michael). They could also fail to become productive because of the opportunities the workers were able to offer the young person (as in the case of Andrew). Relationships also seemed to be an issue in the other participants' transitions, but the evidence in the data is not strong enough (or I have not been able to talk to the workers directly) for presentation here.

Table 8: Level of success and relationships with workers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>7.3 Participant</th>
<th>7.4 Level of success*</th>
<th>7.5 Good relationship˚ with workers (Yes/No)</th>
<th>7.6 Productive relationships ^ with workers (Yes/No)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Carl</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simon</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>RD</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>RD</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ben</td>
<td>UA</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kayleigh</td>
<td>UA</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew</td>
<td>NEET</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Level of success: A = achiever; RD = revolving door; UA = under-achiever; NEET = Not in Education, Employment or Training.

˚Good relationship = participant expressed positive views about the worker, and vice versa.

^Productive relationship = participant sought and received help from the worker when facing difficulties

7.6.1 Productive relationships.

Although Carl claimed he did not have much to do with his Connexions worker before he left school (she said he insisted on seeing her every week), once out of school he was in regular contact with her. He kept up this contact throughout the application process for his first training programme, and for the 12 weeks he attended. He then
stopped seeing her and made his later choices and applications independently. It seemed he had taken what he needed from the relationship and moved on.

Simon’s relationship with his tutor was at the heart of his success through the year. The tutor gave him regular, but discreet, help in dealing with the social demands of his course, and rewarded his achievements with fulsome praise. Simon was extremely grateful for this support, and told his tutor (in my presence) that he attributed his success entirely to the tutor’s support. The tutor, meanwhile, credited Simon with responsibility for his own success.

Tom built productive relationships both at college and in the hostel he lived in. His tutor and hostel key worker both spoke about him with warmth, and understanding of the difficulties at home that he was dealing with. When he faced problems (from managing money and applying for benefits, to struggling with the attendance and academic demands of his course) he turned to the people working with him to ask for help. And he got what he needed.

Anne used her EA in a similar way. She would try to persevere with her work placement when she felt under-valued there, but when she could not cope with it any more she withdrew. Each time she withdrew she turned to her EA for help, and the EA helped her to renegotiate her role at the placement.

Each of these participants built a warm, friendly and respectful relationship with their workers, and they have known when and how to ask for help from them when they needed it. The friendly relationship was the starting point, but it was the way the participants used it that had a significant influence on their transitions.

7.6.2 Good, but unproductive relationships.

Some of the participants had good relationships with their professional supporters, and seemed to value contact with them, but did not use the relationships effectively to help them when they faced difficulties. Michael got on well with both his first tutor and his PAYP worker. He spoke warmly of both of them, and regularly contacted his
PAYP worker just to talk. However, Michael actively avoided his tutor and PAYP worker whilst in the process of leaving his course, and used his friends as a source of support instead. The PAYP worker believed that had he been able to talk to Michael at the time he would have been able to persuade him to persist with his course. This pattern was repeated several times over the year.

Whilst it is hard to see how the PAYP worker alone could have used his relationship with Michael more effectively, it seems strange that the college tutor did not contact the PAYP worker and arrange to meet him and Michael together (she was aware that he was working with Michael). They may have been able to use the power of their combined relationships with Michael to persuade him to persevere with his course, and make sure he had sufficient support to catch up on the work he had missed. This case shows that a good relationship with a young person is not enough to help them when they are in trouble: the relationship needs to be focused on their problems, and brought to bear in the solutions.

Andrew also seemed to have good relationships with the Connexions worker and Employment Officer who were working with him, although I did not interview them with him, so was unable to observe the way they related to each other directly. He saw them regularly, and would visit the Connexions worker informally when he attended the youth club at the centre she was based in. Unfortunately, neither worker was able to use their relationship with Andrew to persuade him to engage with the opportunities available to him. This seemed to be simply because the activities that Andrew was being offered did not appeal to him. He did not want to continue training for the sake of it: ‘I’ve had enough of education’, and would only consider a course if it would move him quickly towards his goal of getting paid employment.

The workers admitted that courses they were able to offer Andrew were not necessarily the most suitable for him. Unfortunately, the provider which was most likely to meet his needs was based in the county town, some distance from Andrew’s home, and it would have been impossible for him to get there. Much of the local provision was only available to 16 and 17 year old school leavers, and Andrew’s
extended school placement meant he was 18 when he moved home. The relationships
the workers built with Andrew were a good basis for effective work with him, but the
services he needed were not available, so the relationship could not be used to
maximum effect.

7.6.3 Failure to develop relationships.
Some participants had poor relationships with their professional helpers, which
effectively limited the support they had access to through their first post-school year.
Neither Ben nor Kayleigh received the support they needed, and had been used to at
school, when they moved on to their post-school placements. Both were optimistic
about what they would be offered at college, and the animosity they expressed
towards their tutor/EA could be attributed to their disappointment at their hopes
being unfulfilled. The workers seemed similarly disappointed with them.

Ben’s tutor seemed to expect her students to be self-motivated, self-controlled and
not to be needing extra help with their work. This created a clash of expectations
between them, and each seemed to be frustrated with the failure of the other to
behave in the way they wanted them to. Kayleigh believed that her training centre
would support her in every way, and ultimately find her a job (with minimal effort on
her part). Her EA saw the learner’s motivation and effort as the key to success.
Kayleigh was apathetic towards the course, which made her hard to work with, from
the perspective of her EAs. Whilst her first EA was inclined to treat her as a challenge,
and try to engage her, by the time the second EA took over it seemed to be generally
accepted that she was beyond their reach.

In each of these cases the failure to build a constructive relationship between the
participants and their worker(s) can be attributed to the clash between the young
person’s expectations of their placement and the reality they faced. As Ben and
Kayleigh each struggled with the demands of their placements, they challenged their
workers. In response, their helpers drew back from them (placing responsibility for
supporting Ben with a disciplinary hearing and then the special needs department, and

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accepting that Kayleigh was not going to achieve anything substantial on her course). The young people were then prepared to invest even less in the relationship, and so the cycle continued.

### 7.6.4 The potential of relationships.

It is clear that the young people who achieved most over the year were those who were supported through the warm and productive relationships they had with their workers. When the participant’s nature, expectations and motivations fitted with those of the worker, and the provision the worker was able to offer fitted with the school-leaver’s needs and goals, the relationship had the power to help the young person cope with even severe problems, and to compensate for inadequacies in the support available within the home. Unfortunately, most of the participants did not form productive relationships with their workers, and did not have the support they needed to cope with the transition out of school.

### 7.7 Context

Context can be seen operating in a number of ways on the young people’s transitional experiences. This section considers the role of the school, post-school placement, provision of services and the wider social and economic factors in shaping the participants’ transitional experiences.

#### 7.7.1 The institutional context: school.

**Type of school attended.**

The sample was too small and unrepresentative for any generalisations to be made about the impact of the type of school attended and the degree to which the young person successfully negotiated transition. There is no direct relationship apparent in this data to suggest that going to a day or residential special school or a mainstream school affects success in transition (see Table 10). It is, however, possible to show that the type of school they left had an influence on individual transitions.
The most marked of these was Andrew, the only traceable participant to leave the residential school, and one of the few to remain NEET throughout the period of study. His residential school placement can be seen affecting his transition because he was so far removed from home that he had no connections to his home community when he left school. Although the school tried to ease him back into home life in his last six months at school by increasing his weekend visits home, this did not seem to give him sufficient opportunity to develop a social life or to prepare to return to the family home full time. The great distance between his school and his home made it impossible for him to have a more stepped reintroduction to life at home: he had to go from fortnightly weekend trips to full-time life at home in one step.

The pupils who left mainstream school faced a different set of issues. Ben, Kayleigh and Michael were all used to receiving special treatment at school. Once they moved onto their new placements they were treated in the same way as everyone else. Kayleigh and Michael did not have a Statement, and Ben’s college never received a copy of his, and as they left a mainstream school there was no reason for their onward placements to think they had any special needs. Whilst Anne was in much the same situation, she did not face the same difficulties as her level of need and the support she was used to getting were lower.

The experiences of the day special school pupils varied. Tom’s homelessness triggered interventions by social services, and helped to ensure that he was treated sympathetically when he was absent from college. However, the ex-pupils who had lower levels of need did not always receive the educational support they needed in their post-school placements (this will be discussed further later in this section). There was also variation in the level of non-educational support available to the participants.

The close proximity of Carl’s home to his school meant he kept the same Connexions worker once he left, and his ability to see her as and when he needed helped him to settle into his first post-school placement (as discussed above). In contrast, Jon and Mark (who both lived a little further away from their school) did not have access to any
<table>
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<th>Participant</th>
<th>School type</th>
<th>Distance of home from school (miles)</th>
<th>Social integration at home (friends/other social activity)</th>
<th>Effective placement support</th>
<th>Other service involvement (social services/Connexions/employment services)</th>
<th>Level of success</th>
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</tbody>
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Table 9: School type, proximity to home, support and achievement
non-educational support once they left school, as they had no contact with home-based support workers prior to leaving.

In summary, the type of school attended did seem to have some bearing on the transitional experiences of the participants. However, this relationship was not direct, and the important factors seemed to be the extent to which they were integrated into their home community, both socially and in terms of the services they could access. A high, multi-domain level of need would trigger the involvement of multiple agencies in the young person’s life, but for those with lower levels of need there was often little or no support offered by right (though it was available on request if they knew where to go to find it).

**Transition practices.**

**Timing.**
The timing of decisions on their educational placement affected those leaving Linton Hall. Andrew and Tom both wanted their placements extended for a further year (with the school sharing this wish in the case of Andrew, but believing it to be unlikely that Tom’s placement would be continued). In Andrew’s case the decision was made so late in his final term that there was no time to set up support services or find him a suitable onward placement before he moved home.

Four of the pupils at Linton Hall complained that their final transition reviews were held at the same time as their end of school exams. They felt this added to the stress they were under, and that they were pushed into making decisions about the future at a time when they were struggling to cope with the present. Simon was the only pupil at Linton Hall who knew throughout this time where he was going when he left school, and confident about what would happen when he got there.

**Engagement.**
Participants and parents seemed to have little engagement in transition planning processes. When asked about their transition plan almost all of the participants, and their parents, looked blankly at me. They were unsure whether they had attended
transition reviews, and often unsure about where they/their child was going on to when they left school.

The view of the Connexions workers’ roles in transition planning was generally negative. Four of the participants felt that their workers had told them what to do, or pushed them into applying for courses that did not really appeal to them. Of the other participants, none cited the Connexions worker when asked who they got help or information from when applying for their courses. Advice generally came from individual teachers, parents or the internet, even though the special schools both had Connexions workers assigned to them, who made regular visits to the school and met frequently with all the pupils in the final two years of school.

In the mainstream school the Connexions workers operated differently. They were still seen by the school as the main source of careers information, advice and guidance, but the participants had little contact with them. When I interviewed the workers they did not know one participant (Anne) at all, believed Michael to be receiving guidance from his PAYP worker, and were unsure where Kayleigh planned to go after school. They had seen Ben, to give him advice on alternative courses when injury prevented him from pursuing his first career option. However, this contact was viewed negatively by both parties. Ben felt they were pushing him to try courses that did not interest him, whilst they felt that he was not fit enough to cope with the physical demands of the course his friend had recommended to him.

Sankside School had the most comprehensive transition programme of the three schools involved in this study. They held meetings with staff at the local college before the young people left school, to share information about each individual’s needs. These meetings were attended by school staff, the Connexions worker and a member of staff from the college. Unfortunately, as I only managed to maintain contact with one of the three participants from Sankside, and he did not go to college I cannot judge the efficacy of this system.
Key workers at Linton Hall had minimal involvement in transition planning, although they probably knew the pupils best. One key worker told me how he had sat in a pupil’s transition review listening to the plans that had been made and wondering why the young person was agreeing to suggestions that the key worker knew he did not want, and would be unlikely to go through with. The key worker was proved right by the young person refusing to go to the college he had been placed at once he was out of school.

Overall, the usefulness and relevance of transition planning was limited because the people who knew the young people best, including school staff and parents, were not engaged in it in a meaningful way. Connexions workers seemed to be viewed as the experts, and there was an expectation that they would provide all the advice and guidance the school-leavers needed. However, whilst they may have been experts in careers, they did not generally know the young people (their needs, aspirations, motivations and skills) well enough to be the sole source of advice. Their expertise could have been put to better use by other school staff being present for at least some of their meetings with the pupils, to make sure the pupils understood what was being planned, and were willing and able to cope with it.

7.7.2 The institutional context: post-school.

Placement.

Some of the school leavers were placed appropriately, and had access to an appropriate curriculum and adequate support (Simon, Tom and Anne). However, others struggled in placements which they did not feel they chose, or which did not suit them (Kayleigh, Jon and Andrew).

Simon, Tom and Anne all began their courses feeling optimistic about what they were going to be taught. They all formed positive relationships with the workers in their placements, through which they had access to appropriate support when they faced difficulties. There was sufficient flexibility in the institutions they attended to accommodate their needs, and they were interested in the courses they were doing, and saw them as taking them closer to their long-term goals. In short, their courses
supported their goals, were suited to their abilities, and they were provided with the type and amount of help they needed.

Kayleigh, Jon and Andrew were less successful. Kayleigh did not receive the level of support or the opportunities she expected in her course. The vocational training centre claimed to be a highly supportive organisation, with close links to other agencies. However, the first EA to work with Kayleigh believed that the learners who succeeded on their course did so because of their own attributes (motivation and perseverance), and that it was the way the course was set up (the use of work-place learning, supported by some basic skills training) that allowed these young people to thrive. The behaviourist system they used to try to modify their learners’ attitudes and behaviour did not work for Kayleigh, whose seemed to need highly personal emotional support, rather than systematic, and rather impersonal, behavioural support.

Jon was placed on an academic course, re-sitting his GCSEs, although he had no interest in re-sitting his exams and felt he had been ‘pushed into it’ by college staff. He lacked motivation, and when he began facing problems at home he dropped out, rather than persevering through his difficulties. Andrew also felt that he was pressured into choosing a course he knew was not right for him. He felt the course would not add anything to his skill-base, and would not take him closer to his goal of gaining employment, so he refused even to register.

When the course the participant attended fitted their needs, was chosen by them and of interest to them, and they could see how it moved them towards their long-term goals they were well-placed to succeed. However, when the course was not suited to their needs (social, emotional or academic), they felt it had been forced onto them, and they could not see how it would contribute to their future aspirations they did not complete the course, or did not gain any qualifications out of it.

**Communication.**

Smooth transitions were supported by good communication between the school participants left, their onward placements and other agencies, workers and families.
Simon started attending college on day release from school in the year before he left. This gave the college staff and school workers the time and opportunity to share information about his needs and difficulties. Throughout his time at college, school staff were bringing the next group of pupils on day release, giving his tutor the chance to discuss any problems Simon was having. The tutor also ensured that he contacted Simon’s mum regularly so that she felt informed, and not excluded from his college life. As a result of this, Simon’s mum did not cause any of the difficulties in college that the school anticipated she might, and the tutor had a regular source of support and information.

Tom also benefited from the communication channels established between his tutor and his hostel key worker. When he was having difficulty maintaining his college attendance because of disruption in his home life, the contact between the key worker and the tutor ensured that he was given the space from college to focus on his problems at home. As the tutor knew what was going on she did not assume that he was uncommitted, but instead sought to support him through a difficult time and bent the rules within college to keep him engaged through the course in spite of his absences.

In contrast, there seemed to be little information sharing between Kayleigh’s school and the vocational training centre she went on to. Her EA seemed to know little about her past or her emotional problems. She had developed a strong and trusting relationship with a teacher at school, in which she shared her concerns and found support. But as there was no contact between the teacher and the EA, Kayleigh lost not only her supporter, but also the tolerance and understanding that knowledge of her difficulties had brought.

In Ben’s case the failure of the system by which information on the special needs of school-leavers with statements is supposed to be passed to their next educational placement had a profound effect on his college experience (this is discussed further in the next section). Mark, meanwhile, was left doing nothing because the Connexions Service had not been told by the college he enrolled with that he did not attend, and
Michael deliberately used the lack of communication between those working with him to ensure that by the time his PAYP worker knew what he was doing it was too late for him to effectively intervene.

Thus, whilst good communication between those involved in the participants’ lives helped them to cope with the transition out of school, communication failures, from lost paperwork to delays in contacting other agencies, acted to make the process more difficult for both the school-leavers and those working with them.

**Institutional culture.**
As described above, the relationships the participants formed with their college tutors had a significant impact on their transitions. The likelihood of supportive relationships being formed seemed to be influenced by the culture of the institution they attended, an issue that is also discussed in a paper based on this aspect of the thesis (O’Riordan, 2011). It is exemplified by the cases of Simon, Ben, and Kayleigh and Anne.

The manager of the college department Simon trained in was keen for his placement to succeed. He provided Simon’s tutor with extra time to spend supporting him, and valued the work he did: ‘Brian’s good at all that touchy-feely stuff, the rest of us haven’t a clue really!’ Brian was happy to ‘go against the grain’ of the department’s culture, by spending some of his free time engaging informally with Simon on an individual basis, eating with his students (the other staff always ate in a separate room) and playing football with them at the end of the day (other staff members opposed this on ‘health and safety’ grounds, but Brian dismissed their objections). He deliberately cultivated relationships with his students, developing a personal bond with them. This meant that they were not just students to him, but people, and when they were struggling he knew enough about their personal lives to understand and offer help and support. His manager saw the benefit in what he was doing, and provided him with encouragement, giving him the confidence and back-up he needed to work against the culture of the other workers.
In contrast, at Ben’s college the dominant attitude seemed to be that students chose their courses, if they did not want to attend, work hard and achieve that was their choice. Support for those with special needs came from a separate college department, and was not provided by the tutors directly. When Ben began to disrupt classes through his behaviour the tutor seemed to have neither the skills nor the inclination to deal with him directly. In our telephone conversation she asked: ‘Do you know what to do with him?’ and stated that ‘If he doesn’t want to be here he should just go home.’ Ben told me that seven students on his course were ‘chucked out’ in the first two weeks of term. Although he stated that they were ‘all divvies’ and ‘stupid’, he also claimed they were all Asian, so they may have been responding to racist attitudes among their peers, possibly feeling the need to assert themselves and their identity. The fact that they were removed from the course so quickly suggests there was little attempt to understand the cause of their attitudes/behaviour: it was interpreted as lack of commitment or desire to learn, and they were sent home.

This attitude to students, voiced by the tutor, was shared by the head of the special needs department. The department had been rated as ‘outstanding’ in their most recent Ofsted inspection report, and she was proud of the way they supported students with special needs. However, she seemed to see some students as more worthy of support than others. When asked about why Ben had not received any help from her department she stated that so many students were claiming to have ADHD in his year group that she did not believe they all had a diagnosis. She thought they were students ‘looking for an easy ride’. Ben had failed to provide the college with a copy of his Statement, therefore, as far as her department was concerned he was lying about its existence. Her manner suggested that she did not take the condition seriously, and she seemed contemptuous in her attitude to the students claiming it. The college policy, according to her, was ‘no proof, no support’, and they would not contact the school the student had left to verify their status as it would simply take too much time.

The combination of cultural attitudes and college policies and procedures left both Ben and his tutor without the support they needed. As support was usually given by the
special needs department it was not the tutor’s job to provide it. But as Ben was used to receiving support from his teachers at school he expected the same from his tutor. So the tutor felt that Ben’s behaviour was an indication of his lack of commitment to the course, whilst Ben felt that his tutor’s failure to support him showed a lack of commitment to him. This limited the possibility of any positive engagement between the two of them, and made the formation of a productive relationship impossible.

Ben was one of only two participants who took academically oriented mainstream college courses after school. The other participant was Jon, who dropped out after less than a term, and as I was unable to interview his tutor I cannot assume that he faced similar issues. However, the attitudes expressed by Ben’s college staff are not unique. The tutors in other colleges attended by participants frequently referred to cultures in which the students with SEBD were not recognised as having special needs, and where their difficulties were seen as a lack of commitment to the courses they attended. These tutors, who were all teaching on courses geared towards students with learning difficulties, generally cited these attitudes in contrast to their own.

Kayleigh was unable to develop the sort of relationship she needed with the EAs in her placement for different reasons. Her training centre’s behaviourist-based system sought to address problem behaviours and attitudes, without seeking to understand the emotional reasons behind them. The system worked well for Anne, whose behaviour seemed to be mainly the product of boredom and lack of ability/interest in academic learning. However, Kayleigh had emotional needs that were not met by this way of working. The relationships this organisational culture supported were practical sources of encouragement (just what Anne needed), rather than the emotional engagements Kayleigh needed.

The data shows that the relationships young people formed with their tutors did not exist in isolation, but were influenced by the organisation in which they were developed. The culture of the college they attended (or the classroom they entered) could work to support or inhibit the formation of productive relationships.
Furthermore, the type of relationship needed by the young person, and the form of support provided within it, varied from one participant to another.

7.7.3 Service provision: thresholds for intervention.

The only participant to receive support from multiple agencies, working together to fulfil his needs was Tom. Becoming homeless at age 16 placed him in a position to receive a comprehensive support package. The other participants’ needs did not reach the threshold of need required for intervention, as over-stretched services only seemed to act in cases of extreme need.

Mark’s enrolment in college was sufficient for him not to have a new Connexions adviser allocated to him when his original adviser was on long-term sick leave. Ben’s failure to produce a Statement of special needs for his college meant he had no entitlement to educational support. The Connexions Service did not pursue Jack when his mother did not return their phone calls (although they did express the hope that I would be able to put him in contact with them). All formal interventions in Kayleigh’s life stopped when she stopped truanting from school. Although Michael’s school claimed that multiple agencies had been involved in his life there was no evidence of this during the time I saw him.

All these participants would have benefited from relatively low level interventions, but their need was not deemed sufficient for them to receive adequate support. As a result they under-achieved, dropped out and slipped through the net altogether.

7.7.4 The wider context.

All the participants except Carl came from disadvantaged households, and there was some evidence of this disadvantage being multi-generational. Nine came from families in which neither parent worked. Those who were working tended to be in low-paid, part-time and unstable employment. Of the parents I had contact with, two had mobility problems, and four had mental health issues. These households had limited financial resources, little opportunity to help their children find work as they had no
working contacts themselves, and many were struggling to meet their own needs. Four parents talked about their extended families in which unemployment, and alcohol and drug abuse were the norm. Four of the family homes I visited were either social housing, or poor quality rented accommodation. The neighbourhoods were generally run down, with little evidence of community resources. The families’ social status, the culture in which they grew up (and passed on to their children in some cases), and the neighbourhoods they inhabited provided them with few personal, financial or community resources, and little opportunity for social mobility.

The poor economic climate at the time of this study meant that the only real option for most of the school leavers was further education or training, regardless of their inclinations. Several of them wanted to go straight into employment (particularly Jon and Andrew), but there were few jobs available to them, and the competition was steep for those that existed. Carl did manage to find work, but the opportunities available to him were predominantly part-time, short-term and with limited possibilities for progression.

7.8 Time:

7.8.1 Historical time.

This is not an issue that I intend to go into in depth, as it would involve discussion of the structural and social inequalities, and ways they are maintained and even accentuated within our society. I have already pointed out that most of the participants involved with this study came from disadvantaged backgrounds, and as social mobility in England is reducing, the likelihood that they will continue to be disadvantaged into adulthood is increased.

Furthermore, we live in a time when (in this country) academic qualifications are valued over vocational ones (an often heard translation of the acronym NVQ is ‘Not Very Qualified’) and when young people are expected to remain in education for as long as possible. At the time of this study the government aspired to have half of all school-leavers going on to higher education and most young people expected to go to
university (Ipsos, 2009). Few of the participants in this study had the qualifications required to begin on this path, and none had the combination of motivation, study skills and aptitude required to negotiate it successfully. Thus, when they leave school and take the opportunities available to them they are already failing to achieve society’s aspirations for them.

Youth employment opportunities are severely limited by the economic climate and employers’ desire for experienced or qualified workers, and this left vocational and basic skills training as the only option for most of the participants. The vocational training centres attended by Kayleigh, Anne and Michael were privately run, and needed to make a profit. Marketing was therefore an important part of their business, and they did not always live up to their promotional pitches to school-leavers, resulting in the disappointment described by Kayleigh and Anne.

7.8.2 Individual development over time.

Substantial change over time was observed in eight participants (there was insufficient data on the other seven). These eight were all changed, for better or worse, by their experiences in their first year out of school. For some the changes were gradual, building on their past experiences, but for the others they were more abrupt, brought about through the challenges and opportunities they faced in their new environments.

Change for the better.

Gradual development.

According to the staff at his school Simon had gradually developed more self-assurance, faith in his abilities, and his ability to cope with the challenges of social interactions in his time at school. His move from school to college was a progressive and smooth process, and the support he received once there was both consistent and entirely appropriate. He did not have to cope with a sudden change of expectation and environment as the other school-leavers did. It is therefore, perhaps, unsurprising that he continued to make steady progress, socially, emotionally and educationally. His confidence in his abilities was reinforced through success on his course. His tutor
consistently and sensitively helped him to deal with the social challenges of college. He ended the year as he had begun it, but more so.

Simon finished the year with an increased sense of independence. He was happy to accept the support of his tutor in settling into his next course, but did not seem to feel he necessarily needed it, his response being a casual ‘Oh, okay, thanks’ in response to the tutor’s offer, which suggested he appreciated the offer, but had not been waiting or hoping for it. His view of his future was clear: he would be a skilled tradesman, working and leading an independent adult life.

Carl can be seen as having begun his post-school life whilst still at school, through his life-guard and first aid training, and voluntary work. Although he faced setbacks they did not seem to affect his confidence in his abilities or his motivation towards his long term goals. He had said before he left school that he would only go to college if he was offered the ‘right course’, he was not prepared to use it as a time filler, or to get qualifications that he could not see a direct use for. Carl sought out ways of getting to where he wanted to be; where one path was blocked he would find another. He progressively built his skills and work experience through the year, never taking his eyes off his goals.

At the end of the year he felt he was in a stronger position to achieve what he wanted to than he had been at the beginning, and his view of the future was clear: he would find a way to become a trained paramedic, and keep working while he did it.

**Abrupt change.**

When Anne left school she seemed to adopt a whole new view of herself in relation to education. She felt she had chosen her educational placement, and although it did not entirely live up to her expectations she was happy with it overall. Where she was viewed as silly, and talked about derisively by her school staff, the training centre staff saw her as motivated and competent. Each time I met with her she seemed to have adopted the persona they gave her to a greater extent. She seemed to leave behind her negative school experiences, and to thrive in the new environment.
By the end of the year she presented herself as a confident and motivated young woman. She attributed problems in her work placement to the attitudes of the other care staff, rather than any weaknesses in her abilities, and she fully expected that she would gain an apprenticeship. Her view of the future was positive: she would have a career in care, and, at some point, a family.

Tom was forced to grow up by his move out of the family home. He suddenly had complete responsibility for himself, having to learn to cook, manage his money, and continue with his education. His response to this situation was to take all the help he was offered, and learn all he needed to begin living independently. He built his skills and his confidence throughout the year. He managed to achieve at college, and looked forward to continuing his education.

From our first meeting Tom said he would be able to learn when his home life became less stressful, and his experiences over the year seemed to bear this out. Having adapted to the abrupt change in his living arrangements he was able to successfully complete his course. By the end of the year he was looking forward to a future in which he saw himself living in ‘me own home, earning cash doing care work, you know, looking after disabled kiddies or something. Gonna have a nice girlfriend. Maybe we’ll have a few kids. I’ll be a good dad to ‘em!’

**Change for the worse.**

**Change in response to challenge.**

Ben seemed to lose faith in himself through the year. From being confident about his abilities when he left school, by the end of the year he though academic work was ‘just too hard’. Whilst I, as an external observer, attribute his failure to achieve at college to a lack of effective support, his view was that it was his lack of success was a reflection of his abilities. He internalised his experience of failure, and lost confidence in himself. At the end of the year he was attending a vocational training centre, which he viewed negatively, and had no future goals or aspirations.
Kayleigh also changed her view of herself, and her future over the course of the year. When she left school she wanted to be a hairdresser and believed that the course she was going to do would take her closer to that goal. She seemed to have overcome the resistance to education she had been demonstrating in the middle years of secondary school, and was keen to train and develop a career. By the end of the year she was effectively disengaged from education and work. The challenges she faced in making the move into training were too much for her, and she retreated into her earlier patterns of behaviour: disruptive when at the training centre, and more often absent.

The move from a supportive and protective school environment to one which expected independence and self-motivation was too great a leap for Kayleigh. In response she seemed to lose her sense of a productive future as a consequence of her training experiences, and her only goal was dependence, on the state and her boyfriend.

Andrew had to deal with the move out of school and back into the family home simultaneously. Before leaving school he held a vision of a future in which he would be working towards living independently and in paid employment. The reality of living at home and engaging in training which was a continuation of the courses he had already done, and which he did not see as taking him closer to working, caused him considerable distress. His mental health suffered, leading to threats of suicide. By the end of the year he seemed to have adapted to the life he was to lead. He settled at home and attended Job Club, but he did not seem to have a view of the future any more, he had merely learnt to live with the present.

_The influence of the past._

Michael did not have any defined goals when he left school, just a desire to get a ‘good job’ at some time in the future. Throughout the year he seemed to prioritise his social life over his education. This may be a response to his past, in which his interactions with peers caused the bulk of his problems in school, so success in friendships and relationships became more important to him than educational success (which he knew he was capable of). His move into a hostel made him part of a group, and may have
given him a sense of belonging. He was attending ‘NEET training’ with other residents, and although he still had no goals for the future he was happy.

**Looking towards the future.**
The main change observed in the participants was in their attitudes towards the future. Their experiences could reinforce their existing views of the future, as in the cases of Tom, Carl and Simon, or develop new and stronger goals along with a realistic way of achieving them, as Anne did. However, their visions of the future could also be diminished by their experiences, as in Ben, Kayleigh and Andrew’s cases.

Those who had a strong sense of their future selves achieved the most success through the year, whilst those with a vague view of their future lives (Michael, Andrew, Jon and Mark) tended to struggle more with the present. Unable to work out where they wanted to get to, they could not see any value in their present studies, and lacked the motivation needed for success.

The participants whose future projections were diminished through their experiences carry a warning for those who successfully moved towards their goals. The end of this study, and the end of their first post-school year is not an end-point in any other sense. Kayleigh, Andrew and Ben left school optimistic about their futures, and ended the year with no clear goals or direction. With different experiences they may have ended the year closer to their initial goals. Equally, Tom, Carl, Simon and Anne have all developed a stronger sense of their future selves through the year, but they are not at the end of the road, and their future experiences may knock them off course, as Kayleigh, Ben and Andrew’s did.

7.9 **Summary**

This chapter has shown how complex interactions between aspects of the individual and their context have influenced the participants’ transitional experiences. Using Bronfenbrenner’s Person-Process-Context-Time model to present these results demonstrates how they worked together to affect the young people’s school-leaving experiences.
Person level influences divided into those contained within the individual and external resources, contained in the family. Person-contained factors were:

- gender and maturity;
- drive, goal motivation and perseverance;
- likeability;
- internalised previous experiences.

Externally, the capacity of the family to provide support on all levels (emotional, esteem, practical and informational) played a key role in the ability of the individual to cope with the challenges of transition. Where support was lacking in some or all areas the gaps were sometimes filled by professional supporters, but in cases where this did not happen the participant struggled with their post-school life.

The main process seen influencing transitions was the relationships the young people formed with their professional helpers. Those who formed productive relationships thrived, whilst those who did not found the transition a more difficult process. Some formed good relationships with their workers, but failed to use them constructively because of person-centred, institutional or provision-related factors.

The context in which the transitions took place, both in school and after leaving also affected the participants’ experiences. The influence of the type of school they left was unclear for many, but for the participant who left residential school it was clear that the distance of his residential placement from his home made the transition more difficult. Other school-based factors were the timing of transition reviews, and the level of engagement of the young people, their families, and the school staff who knew them best. In the post-school context the appropriateness of the placement, level of communication between school and the onward placement, and the culture of the institution all affected the participant’s ability to adjust to their new placement, and succeed within it.

The influence of time, historical and in terms of change over time within the individual can be seen in the school-leavers transitions. Historically, they left school at a time
when the economy was in recession, which limited the possibility of them finding work, and when young people are expected to stay in education to age eighteen and beyond. On an individual level they showed signs of being changed, for better or worse, by their experiences in their first post-school year.

These factors all worked on the young people’s transitions in concert. Their influence on the school-leavers’ transitions was multi-directional, with each factor affecting, and being affected by many others. This section has summarised the results contained within this chapter, to conclude I draw on the previous chapter as well to bring together the results and respond to the research questions.

7.10 Conclusion: back to the research questions

7.10.1 What happens to young people with SEBD when they make the transition out of compulsory education?

The participants’ post-school destinations and experiences over the year varied widely (see Table 10). Of the 13 out of 15 for which this is data available, eight (62%) undertook vocational training, but only two (15%) went on to academic courses at further education college. Four (31%) did basic skills courses, one worked, and two (15%) spent all of the year NEET. Only seven (54%) gained a qualification, whilst five (38%) spent some or all of the year NEET, and three (23%) participated in more than one course, without gaining a qualification from any of them.

Most of the fifteen participants had stable home-lives throughout the study period. However, four (27%) moved out of the family home during this time (Michael and Tom into hostels for homeless young people; Alex and Lucas were being cared for by social services). Andrew remained at home throughout the year, but found the transition difficult and there was a lot of conflict within the home. He found the move out of the sheltered environment of residential school so challenging that it had an impact on his mental health, and he threatened suicide on several occasions. Thus, a third of the sample had severe problems at home during the year.
Table 10: Destinations and qualifications

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>NEET</th>
<th>Vocational education</th>
<th>Academic course</th>
<th>Basic skills course</th>
<th>Employed</th>
<th>Qualification gained</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simon</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carl</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucas</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ben</td>
<td></td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td>(√3 courses)</td>
<td></td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jon</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kayleigh</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7.10.2 What helped them in making the transition out of school?

Facilitators to successful transition existed on individual, family and institutional levels. There was considerable interaction between influencing factors on each level, and smooth transitions were best achieved when factors on all levels operated together.

On an individual level, the school-leavers needed to possess personal drive, perseverance, goal-orientation and likeability. Their families needed to have the personal, cultural and practical resources to be able to offer them support in all domains (esteem, emotional, informational and practical), though gaps in the support offered by the family could be filled by professionals. For this to happen, the school-leavers needed to form constructive relationships with their professional supporters, and to attend institutions which supported their development. They did best on courses that they felt they had chosen, and which moved them towards their long-term goals in a tangible way. The courses they attended needed to provide an appropriate level of support, and a curriculum and culture fitted to their academic, social and emotional needs. Effective communication channels needed to exist
between the young person, their family and all agencies and professionals working with them, as well as between the school and onward placement.

Whilst I have presented these attributes as distinct factors, they are in fact closely inter-linked. Young people who achieved tended to be seen as likeable. Those who were motivated were on appropriate courses, and they could see how they were linked to their goals. Those who were likeable and motivated were more likely to be receiving appropriate levels of support, and so on.

7.10.3 What hindered them in making this transition?

Barriers to transition were generally the absence of some or all of the facilitators outlined above. However, as can be seen from Table 11: Factors in transition and achievement, the distinct factors are so closely inter-linked that they are usually present together, or not at all. One attribute that seems to have the potential, when present, to over-ride short-comings in other areas is drive, perseverance, and goal-motivation. This was possessed by all the participants who gained qualifications, but not by those who did not. Those who felt they had not chosen their course freely, and who could not see how their course related to any long term goals they held (or who did not have any long term goals) were not generally able to persevere when faced with difficulties.

Communication, constructive relationships and appropriate placement seem to be linked: in all but two cases, where one is absent, all are. This is logical, since the failure of a school to communicate the needs of the ex-pupil to the college is likely to lead to them being unaware of the individual’s needs, and so unable to provide effective support, and in this situation constructive relationships are unlikely to be formed.

Only one participant managed to gain a qualification when these factors were absent (Ben, who demonstrated perseverance, see above). Andrew’s school communicated his educational needs to his home Connexions worker, but there was no suitable
Table 11: Factors in transition and achievement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Drive, Perseverance and goal-motivation</th>
<th>Likeability</th>
<th>Family resources*</th>
<th>Constructive relationship</th>
<th>Communication</th>
<th>Appropriate course</th>
<th>Achievement</th>
<th>Qualification gained</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simon</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carl</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>NEET</td>
<td>●</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>RD</td>
<td>●</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jon</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>RD</td>
<td>ND</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>RD</td>
<td>ND</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ben</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>UA</td>
<td>●</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kayleigh</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>UA</td>
<td>●</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>UA</td>
<td>ND</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Family resources: ● = support in all four domains; ○ = support lacking in one domain; ● = support lacking in more than one domain; ● = no support from family.

ND = No data available

√ = attribute present; ● = attribute absent
provision in his locality. Lack of suitable provision was also an issue in other cases. Appropriate provision did not seem to be available to participants who had particular emotional needs (Kayleigh), or who did not fit the usual profile of young people with SEBD (i.e. their level of academic ability was higher than expected for the group: Jon and Ben).

A further issue related to communication between schools and onward placements is the type of information shared. There is a focus on educational needs, rather than more personal information. Whilst there is a need to protect the privacy of school-leavers, some would have benefited if information about their emotional needs, self-perceptions and long-term goals had been shared.

**7.10.4 Does the type of school they attended (mainstream, day special or residential special) affect their experience of this transition?**

The effect of the type of school they left on their transitional experience is difficult to evaluate. Whilst there is evidence that the transition practices of the schools (and the establishments the participants went on to), as well as the distance between school and home (social as well as physical) influenced their transitions, the sample was not large or representative enough to draw any firm conclusions about the role of school type.

**7.11 Unanswered questions**

My analysis of the data revealed that a dominant influence on the participant’s transitional experiences was the relationships they formed with the professionals they encountered. However, whilst all the participants had access to workers they could have formed productive relationships with, only some of them did so. Often the response when a child or young person does not get on with a teacher or other worker is that there is a ‘personality clash’ between them. But this seems to be an inadequate explanation. The workers, for the most part, seemed to be committed professionals, doing their best for the young people in their charge. To suggest that they failed to
develop a constructive relationship with a young person because they did not like them seems to show a lack of respect for their professionalism.

The structural issues outlined in Section 7.7.2 (The institutional context: post-school: Institutional culture) are not sufficient to explain this failure, therefore, in the next chapter I view the data through a different theoretical lens (that of identity theory) to try to understand why some of the participants formed productive relationships with their professional helpers, whilst others did not.
8  Further ‘exploration’: the role of identity in building constructive relationships

One of the dominant influences on the post-school experiences of the school-leavers studied was the relationships they formed with their professional supporters. Those who adjusted well to life outside school built constructive relationships, in which they felt secure and took the help available to them. Those who struggled through their first year after school did not. Yet almost all the young people had access to professionals who could have improved their transitional experiences, so what distinguished those who built successful relationships from those who did not?

This question was not answered through use of the theoretical and analytical frameworks I developed at the beginning of the research process. I needed to return to the data, and reach a new theoretical understanding of it. This process is described in this chapter. It is unlike the other chapters because it contains a description of the theory I used to re-analyse the data and the results of the analysis. I have chosen to write it in this way, rather than fit it into the other literature and results chapters, because whilst the preceding chapters describe more-or-less what I expected to find out about the transitions of school leavers with SEBD, this chapter explores a new issue, which has come through the data. It was a distinct process from the rest of the analysis, which I came to after completing the groundwork for the preceding chapters. I therefore present it as a distinct chapter.

As I returned to the data to try to understand the influences on the participants’ relationships with their potential helpers, I began to see patterns relating to the way the young people viewed themselves, the goals they held, and the way their workers, and the systems in which they operated, perceived and supported them. This led me to believe that the issue of identity was relevant, and I sought a theory that could explain the role of identity in the way the participants related to their supporters.

Therefore, in this chapter I view the data through a different theoretical lens, that of identity theory, as expounded by Burke and Stets (2009). I begin by describing the key
elements of the theory, before applying it to the data collected from the young people and their supporters, and demonstrating how processes of identity verification, non-verification, continuity and conflict can be seen operating in the relationships between the young people and those who worked with them. This is provides greater depth to my ‘exploration’ (Czarniawska, 2004) of the data, as it draws on theory to explain the actions of the participants (a reconstructive process).

8.1 Identity theory

Identity theory, as proposed by Burke and Stets (2009) is rooted in structural symbolic interactionism, a sociological theory which attempts to accommodate the interactive influence of the individual and of social structures in a model to explain the operation of society. However, it fits equally well within a bioecological understanding of development, since here too, there is an attempt to understand the roles of the individual and of the wider forces acting on them. From a bioecological perspective identity processes can be seen as proximal processes, operating within the microsystems with which the child or young person engages.

According to Burke and Stets (2009): ‘An identity is the set of meanings that define who one is when one is an occupant of a particular role in society, a member of a particular group, or claims particular characteristics that identify him or her as a unique person’ (p.3). This definition makes clear that an identity is not a person: an individual may possess multiple identities, since we all claim multiple roles in society (mother, friend, worker, etc.), and belong to many groups (gender-, race- and class-based, social or political). Each microsystem a child enters will have an allied identity (pupil, son, friend) with an associated set of meanings. So the identity of ‘friend’ may be linked to meanings of loyalty, empathy and fun, and these aspects of the individual will be emphasised in their interactions with their friendship group. This view of identity emphasises the social nature of its construction and enactment. The development of identity is influenced by the social environment in three ways:
Interaction with others provides us with external judgements and perspectives on our behaviour, as it is reflected back to us: the ‘looking glass self’;

Use of social groups provides a ‘reference group’, in which those who are perceived to be similar are included, and those who are different are excluded. This supports both the construction and the reinforcement of identity;

Social interaction stimulates activation of different aspects of the self, whether through activation of a role (friend, pupil, daughter), a set of characteristics associated with a group (the sporty, competitive athlete), or on a personal level.

(Warin, 2010, p.44).

Academics working in many disciplines have established a link between the development and maintenance of a strong sense of self and psychological health and well-being (Warin, 2010). The period of adolescence (particularly as the young person leaves school) is a time when the individual’s identity is challenged: their social roles and group attachments change as they make the move from dependent child to independent adult, from school pupil for whom education is compulsory, to student or worker, who can make their own choices. As this change happens they need some sense of continuity to maintain a sense of well-being.

‘The young person, in order to experience wholeness, must feel a progressive continuity between that which he has come to be during the long years of childhood and that which he promises to become in the anticipated future; between that which he conceives himself to be and that which he perceives others to see in him and to expect of him.’ (Erikson, 1968, p.87)

Thus, the development of a strong sense of self is a developmental goal, and the processes by which it is attained and maintained are developmental proximal processes.

8.1.1 The identity model.

Burke and Stets (2009) have developed a model to illustrate their view of identity processes. Their theory is supported by evidence from a wide range of researchers, drawing on the results of both artificially constructed situations (experiments) and the
study those that occur naturally. There are four key elements to the model: the input, the identity standard, the comparator and the output (see figure 9). Each component is a process by which meanings are interpreted and managed within the environment and the individual. Their operation is cyclical, and their purpose is to keep perceived self-meanings within certain parameters (the authors compare them to a thermostat maintaining a temperature range).

Figure 9: Identity model

(Burke & Stets, 2009, p.62)

The identity standard is the set of meanings associated with the identity. When there is input from the environment it is fed through the comparator which compares the perceived meanings within the environment with those contained in the identity standard. In other words, the comparator takes the way an individual perceives themselves to be seen in a situation and compares it to the identity standard, which contains the way they wish to be seen. If the input does not match the identity standard, then an error message is produced, causing the individual to attempt to adjust the meanings in the situation (by modifying their behaviour) so that they
conform to the identity standard: this is the output. In doing so they change the environment, as it responds to the change in them, and the cycle begins again. This cycle operates continuously: consciously or unconsciously we perpetually compare the meanings contained in our identity standard with the feedback we receive from our environment, and behave accordingly.

To take a hypothetical example, Jessica is telling her friend, Mary, of an incident in which she felt she behaved badly. One of the meanings Mary associates with her role identity as friend is ‘accepting’. As Jessica tells her what she has done Mary’s perceptions of how accepting she believes Jessica sees her as (the input) are compared to the level of ‘accepting’ contained within her identity standard. If the input does not tally with the identity standard (Mary believes she is making Jessica feel judged, rather than accepted), then Mary will increase the behaviours she feels will make Jessica see her as accepting (the output). She will then monitor Jessica’s responses to the changes she has made (input), and the cycle will begin again. Mary will continue the process of comparison and modification until the meanings contained in the environment (i.e. her perception that Jessica views her as accepting) agree with the meanings contained in her identity standard. When the comparator produces no error message her identity is verified, and her behaviour in the situation will not change while this continues.

8.1.2 Identity verification.

The aim of the identity control system described above is identity verification. This is achieved when the perceived meanings in a situation correspond with those contained in the identity standard: when environmental feedback tells us we are who we think we are. Identity verification results in feelings of well-being, whilst non-verification causes stress (Zanna & Cooper, 1976, cited in Burke & Stets, 2009).

Processes of identity control expend considerable energy. Therefore we act to minimise the challenges we experience to our identities by ‘developing opportunity structures’ which maximise the chances of us experiencing verification (Swann, 1983, p.36). This is done in three ways:
1. By ‘displaying signs and symbols’: using our physical appearance and manner and possessions to demonstrate the way we wish to be perceived. This includes selecting the car we drive, the home we live in, wearing a suit or overalls to work and putting on a ‘telephone voice’ when we talk to the bank manager.

2. Through ‘selective affiliation’: by choosing to associate with people and in situations where our identity is most likely to be verified.

3. By changing the opportunity structure using ‘interpersonal prompts’: modifying your interaction strategies (behaviour) to get others to treat you in a way which is consistent with your identity.

(Burke & Stets, 2009, p.74)

The opportunity structures we create usually ensure that discrepancies between our ‘situated self-perceptions’ (Burke and Stets, 2009, p.77) and our identity standard are small, and that minimal energy needs to be used to achieve verification.

However, there are times when a large discrepancy occurs between the input to the comparator and our identity standard. This usually indicates there has been an ‘interruption’ to our identity. Interruptions take four forms:

1. The ‘broken loop’:

   This is the result of a major life-change, such as the death of a relative, moving house or job, getting divorced, leaving school. In these cases the associated identity no longer exists (once divorced you are no longer a spouse, when you leave school you are no longer a pupil, and so on).

2. ‘Interference from other identities’:

   Otherwise described as role-conflict, this occurs when the meanings associated with the different identities held by an individual clash (Burke and Stets offer the example of the sportsman who discovers that his friend is using performance-enhancing drugs as an illustration).

3. The ‘over-controlled identity’:

   This form of interruption is related to the previous one, but distinct, in that rather than there being a conflict between two identities of equal importance,
here one identity over-powers all others. Holding a tightly controlled identity, with little tolerance for discrepancies between situational perceived self-meanings and the identity standard requires considerable energy, and this may result in a lack of resources available to the other identities.

For example, Peter is a career-minded individual who is keen to climb the corporate ladder and be seen as successful. This identity is very important to him, and tightly controlled. He does all he can to ensure that this identity is verified, working long hours and often taking work home with him. He is also a husband, an identity he associates with caring for and supporting his partner. However, as he is rarely home and is often distracted by work issues, he does not have the energy or time required to ensure his husband identity is verified. Thus, the over-controlled identity absorbs excessive resources, and limits the possibility of verifying other identities.

4. ‘Episodic identities’:

All identities are episodic, since they are activated at different times, in different situations. Often we know when identities will be triggered (for example, at 3.15pm each day I switch off my ‘student’ identity and activate my ‘mother’ identity as I leave my studies to collect my children from school). These predictable changes cause minimal distress because they are routine, well–rehearsed moves from one established identity to another. However, some identities are activated only occasionally (such as job candidate facing an interview panel), so that there is little opportunity develop a smoothly operating control system. Other identities are activated more often, but in an unpredictable manner (the fire-fighter who moves from relaxed card-playing colleague to highly-trained professional ready to respond to an emergency as the station telephone rings). The erratic and swift nature of these changes of identity can cause increased levels of stress and distress.

(Burke & Stets, 2009, pp.77-79)
Leaving school is likely to create broken loop interruptions in the identities held by young people. Their role as pupil and their established identities within their school-based friendship groups are lost as they move into new institutions and meet new people. The interruptions may result in the development of ‘better’ identities, which are verified within the changed context (for example, the pupil who struggles with the academic demands of school, but can claim a more positive identity as a vocational learner). But the initial move is likely to cause stress, as new identities, and effective control systems are developed. Burke and Stets (2009) propose that a key influence on the individual’s ability to cope with this stress is self-esteem.

8.1.3 Identity verification and self-esteem.

Self esteem is a vague concept, poorly defined and difficult to measure (Warin, 2010). Yet it is a highly resilient and pervasive concept, which is commonly used in education and childhood studies, and in practices with children (almost every individual care or education plan I saw whilst working in a residential special school contained a reference to the need to boost the child’s self esteem). Burke and Stets (2009) describe self-esteem as a reservoir of energy, which the identity can both feed and draw upon. They build upon William James (James, 1890, cited by Burke & Stets, 2009, p.79) equation of self esteem:

\[
\text{Successes (achievements)} = \frac{\text{self esteem}}{\text{Pretensions (goals)}}
\]

In my experience this view of self esteem is dominant in practice-settings. Where a care plan identifies low self-esteem as a problem in a child, the action that follows is usually framed in terms of providing opportunities to achieve success, marked by attainment of certificates. However, from Burke and Stets perspective it is the meanings associated with the achievement, and their relation to the identity standard that are important (Burke & Stets, 2009, pp.79-80). Thus, the equation above needs to be rewritten:
Successes = environmental feedback = self esteem
Pretensions = identity standard

So, for example, when a young person takes their driving test, the outcome will not influence their self-esteem unless it is related to an identity they hold. Being a driver may be an identity in its own right, or a valued aspect of another identity:

- on a personal level: ‘I am a competent person, who acquires new skills with ease’;
- as part of a group identity: ‘I am a boy-racer’;
- an element of a role identity: ‘I am an independent adult, able to make my own way’.

If this is the case, then passing or failing the test will influence self-esteem. However, if the outcome of the driving test does not relate to an identity, failure or success will not affect self-esteem, since there is no verification or non-verification of the identity.

When a person feels their identity is verified the energy contained in their reservoir of self-esteem is boosted. When they experience non-verification it is diminished. The effects of persistent verification or non-verification on the reservoir are cumulative. Where an individual has obtained persistent verification and the levels are high, they are able to cope with difficult (non-verifying) situations in the short-term to gain long-term benefits (Burke & Stets, 2009). In terms of transition, they are better placed to cope with the broken loop interruption caused by the change of identity necessitated by leaving school: they have the energy reserves needed to develop a control system for their new identity. However, if a person has experienced consistent non-verification their reservoir levels will be low. Faced with the same situation, they are more likely to find themselves with insufficient energy to develop a control system to manage a new identity, and withdraw from the situation (for example by dropping out of college).

Warin (2010) claims that self-esteem is situation (or identity) specific: an individual may have high levels of self-esteem relating to one area of their lives (for example in
their friendships) but low levels in another (e.g. academic ability). This is logical if self-esteem is a consequence of identity-verification, since an individual may be able to gain more verification of some of their identities than they can for others. And if Burke and Stets (2009) assumptions about self-esteem acting as a reservoir of energy are correct, then it is possible that the energy gained through verified identities can help to support verification of other, more difficult identities.

8.1.4 Linking identity theory, bioecological theories of development and resilience

Identity development in a bioecological framework.
As identity theory is the third theory used to explain the results of this study it is important to demonstrate the links between them. As stated in section 8.1, within a bioecological framework of development, identity processes can be viewed as proximal processes, operating within microsystems. However, identity processes are also influenced by the macro-, exo- and meso-systems, as forces operating at these levels act to limit the identities an individual has available to them, or the likelihood that they will be claimed successfully. For example, in some working class cultures employment is valued over education (MacDonald & Marsh, 2005), which means that someone attempting to claim the identity of ‘student’ beyond the age of 16 is less likely to find that identity verified within their social network. This is just one example of a way that identity is influenced by environment, many more could be offered. The key point is that identities are developed in context, and the multi-layered influences on that context will affect the identity that is developed.

Identity processes and resilience.
Burke and Stets (2009) do not make direct reference to resilience, although it can be implied through their belief that the self-esteem energy reservoir built through identity verification allows individuals to persevere in identity-challenging situations (such as the transition out of compulsory education). A number of other researchers have made the link between resilience and identity (McMurray, Connolly, Preston-Shoot, & Wigley, 2011; Warin, 2010; Wexlera, DiFluviob, & Burke, 2009; Wigley,
Indeed, identity verification could be the process that underlies the factors, described in Chapter Two, which are associated with resilience. For example, being part of a family which is low on criticism and high on warmth would offer plenty of opportunity for verification, with little chance of non-verification. Having a religious faith provides access to a group identity which, through the structures of the church (or other religious institution), can be verified. From this perspective, the key to resilience lies in the individual’s ability to create or find opportunity (for verification) structures.

8.2 Application of identity theory to the data

To apply identity theory to the data I returned to the informants’ narratives, and analysed them focussing on self-perceptions and perceptions of how others saw them. By using the multiple perspectives available for each participant I was able to identify cases where the young person’s expectations and view of themselves differed from, or agreed with that of those working with them, and explore the impact this may have had on their relationships with supporting professionals. It was only possible to analyse eight of the cases at this level, as it required relevant data from a number of sources.

The move out of compulsory education is potentially a major interruption to the school-leavers’ identities, and almost all the participants involved in this study experienced a ‘broken loop’. However, this was not always a negative experience, since some had the opportunity to leave behind identities which were unverified in school, and develop verifiable ones in their new educational setting.

8.2.1 Verification.

Two participants appeared to have their identities verified in their relationships with those who worked with them. Tom, who saw himself as needing a lot of help and support, and was given it, and Anne, who saw herself as a caring and capable worker.
**Tom.**

When Tom talked about his SEBD he described it as a consequence of his circumstances, rather than an element of his ‘self’. When I read him the biographical narrative I had written for him on our second meeting he was so pleased with the way it explained his problems (as he had described them to me, the consequence of his mother’s emotional abuse of him, and his unstable living arrangements) he asked if I would attend his transition review and ‘tell them’. He believed that if I explained his story to the review panel (as it was written in the biographical narrative) they would understand his problems and extend his placement at Linton Hall for a further year:

‘*cos I couldn’t learn before, you know, with all the stress and that, but now I can, I just need a bit more time to make up for what I’ve missed.*’ He had always been keen to learn, he said, but had been unable to whilst dealing with a difficult home situation.

The fact that he saw the source of his problems as external to himself does not mean that he did not take responsibility for his actions: he accepted his mistakes, and determined to learn from them. For example, he told me that when he first moved into the hostel and began getting benefit money he would ‘*blow it all, on nothing really, and then have nothing left for food and stuff. Did that a few times, then I thought, can’t go on like this!*’ With the help of his hostel worker he began to budget his money, so that he had enough for his everyday essentials and some to spend on clothes and music. As he put it: ‘*I was a bit stupid before, but I’ve got the hang of it now.*’ The problem in this case (from Tom’s point of view) was not fecklessness, but lack of knowledge and experience, and his response was to find someone to help him overcome his problem.

Tom’s head teacher, hostel key worker and college tutor all seemed to share his view of Tom and his problems. They all commented on how he would make mistakes (rather than perform deliberate acts of disruption or defiance), and that he would never try to

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2 In response to this request I explained my role as researcher, and that I could not attend his review. I told him that if he wanted I could give a copy of the biographical narrative to his head teacher, for use in the review. He decided he would manage without it. I think he saw me as someone who could advocate for him, and who would be taken more seriously that he would. His request for an extended placement was turned down.
deny his actions, learning from them instead. Thus, the identity he held for himself, as someone whose problems stem from external influences (his troubled home life or lack of experience or knowledge) was verified by those who worked with him.

When Tom left his dad’s home and moved into the hostel he stopped attending college for a few weeks. He and his college tutor both said that he could not cope with the demands of college whilst undergoing such an upheaval. However, if we view this process through the lens of identity theory it can be seen as a response to an interruption to Tom’s ‘home’ identity. The move out of his father’s home created a ‘broken loop’ interruption to his ‘home’ identity: he was no longer a dependent child living at home. He needed to create a new ‘home’ identity and control system. The resources required to support this change of identity meant that there was not enough energy to continue enacting his ‘student’ identity, so he withdrew from the college situation and focussed on his home life. Once his home life and its associated identity stabilised he was able to return to college, and had the resources to maintain his ‘student’ identity.

His college tutor’s acceptance of the situation, and understanding of Tom’s needs made her willing to ensure that the college systems were flexible enough to allow him to take a break from classes, and then return. In doing so she gave him the time he needed to repair the broken loop, whilst providing further verification for his identity (it was not his fault he was not attending college; it was circumstances). Being verified in both his college and his hostel may have contributed to Tom’s overall level of confidence and optimism about the future. He successfully completed his course, found a suitable course to progress onto, and had plans to leave the hostel when he was old enough (and ready) to live on his own.

Anne.
Anne did not view herself as having any form of SEBD. At the end of our interview in spring 2009 she told me, as she walked out of the door, that she had ‘dyspraxia and anger management issues’ but this was not supported by her school SENCO, or by her
in other interviews. She was provided with support by the Learner Support Unit at her school because of low level disruption (she described herself as ‘giddy’), rather than any more deep-seated social or emotional problems.

In all the interviews I conducted with her, Anne was consistent in stressing her work-focused view of education (for example, the only class she enjoyed - and applied herself in - at school was child development, which she saw as relevant to her future career). She frequently talked about her desire to care for others, whether through her initial aspirations to work in child care, her later pleasure in working in a nursing home, or her baby-sitting work. Her view of herself, therefore, seemed to be centred on her identity as a worker and a carer.

School did not provide Anne with many opportunities for verification. Her lack of interest or ability in academic work meant that the ‘pupil’ identity available to her was generally negative, and did not reflect the qualities she saw in herself. She had baby-sitting jobs throughout school, and felt she was good at her work, and valued in these roles: they will have provided verification in a way that school did not. When she left school and began a work placement in a nursing home, she was able to activate this ‘worker/carer’ identity in an educational setting where it would be valued, and the more negative ‘pupil’ identity could be left behind at the school gates.

Although Anne was not given the opportunity to work in childcare as she had hoped, her placement at a nursing home gave her the chance to be a carer. Her EA at the training centre viewed her very positively, describing her as ‘a real worker’, and claiming that she was one of their successes, even though Anne did have some difficulties in her placement. She was not always taken seriously as a carer, and was sometimes given menial tasks that did not allow her to express (and have verified) the ‘carer’ element of her identity. When this happened she would withdraw from the (non-verifying) situation and leave her placement. Her EA would then go into the placement with her and renegotiate her working conditions, ensuring that her work was focussed on care, not cleaning. In this way the EA verified Anne’s identity as a
carer, and ensured that her placement did too. And the verification she gave to Anne gave her the energy resources to return to the potentially non-verifying situation of her placement.

Anne enjoyed her placement when it gave her the chance to care for others, and valued the (verifying) relationship she had with her EA. Verification processes helped her to develop trust in the EA, so that she was willing to try to re-engage with her placement when she had problems, with the EAs support.

8.2.2 Non-verification.

Three of the participants seemed not to have their identities verified by those who worked with them. Ben’s college tutor failed to acknowledge his special needs, Kayleigh’s EA did not recognise her desire to remain a dependant, and Andrew’s workers classed him as a person with disabilities, rather than as a young man on the verge of independence.

Ben.

Ben talked about his ADHD in every meeting I had with him. It seemed to be a prominent part of his understanding of himself. He saw it as a reason, but not excuse for his poor behaviour at school and at college. He felt that it made learning harder, and the classroom a more difficult place to be for him than his peers. He was keen to take responsibility for his actions, and accepted that he had to try to conform to class rules, but he felt he needed help in doing this. He did not feel he had ever received enough help with his problems, and attributed much of his improvement whilst at school to his own efforts. He expressed the view that he had worked hard to improve his behaviour, and that this should be recognised.

In college he did not receive this recognition. Without a copy of his Statement they would not provide any support or flexibility. When he ‘muttered’ at his tutor in his college classes he was disciplined, as his tutor found this behaviour unacceptable. Ben, however, saw muttering as evidence of his progress: ‘I’m not throwing chairs or yelling
at her like I used to when I was younger’. Whilst he was at school he was given extra
time for homework and exams; in college he was marked down when his assignments
were late, although he believed he had done well to get them done when he did: ‘I
thought I was doing ok. I mean, I did ‘em all, and was only a few days late, but they
didn’t care.’

The hostility in Ben’s relationship with his tutor and other members of staff at college
(which seemed to be mutual) can be seen as a result of the gap between his identity
standard and the version of himself that Ben felt they presented him with. Whilst he
saw himself as an able student, doing his best, who needed some lee-way to enable
him to achieve, they saw him as a disruptive and unmotivated student who would not
meet their deadlines. Viewed in this way, the animosity Ben felt towards his tutor was
his emotional response to the non-verification he was experiencing. And it is likely that
a similar process was producing anger and frustration in his tutor, as he challenged her
‘competent teacher’ identity.

It might be expected that Ben would withdraw from this non-verifying situation at
college. However, he had close and supportive relationships with his family. He was
very close to his maternal grandmother (who lived in the same building as the rest of
his family). At times he worked alongside his step-father, and he had an open and
trusting relationship with his mother. He also had strong friendships, and his friendship
group increased during his time at college. These relationships may have provided him
with the verification he needed to maintain the energy levels in his self-esteem
reservoir, and persevere in the non-verifying context of college. However, the effect of
his failure to gain verification at college throughout the year drained his reservoir, so
that he lost confidence in his ability to succeed in an academic context: ‘I can’t do it,
it’s just too hard’.

Kayleigh.

Although Kayleigh was optimistic about her future when she left school, a few months
into her placement at a vocational training centre she seemed reluctant to take on the
dual identities of young adult and trainee that were being offered to her. Throughout most of the year she consistently said that her goal was to become a hairdresser, but created obstacles to prevent herself achieving this goal. As was explained in section 6.2.2, she left her work placement because of the long hours and menial tasks she was given. She refused to accept that it was normal to begin learning to be a hairdresser by ‘sweeping floors and making tea’: she wanted to cut hair. She could not accept the role identity of trainee hairdresser that she was being offered.

The staff at the centre worked on the assumption that their learners wanted to become independent young adults, but there was little evidence that Kayleigh shared this aspiration, and her person identity seemed to be tied to meanings of dependence. At school she had a close relationship with a teacher, who was always there when she needed her, which allowed Kayleigh to develop a dependent relationship with her. Outside school no-one seemed to want to step into this role, and Kayleigh’s desire to remain safely dependent on others was expressed in other ways (refusal to use public transport, transferral of dependence from her mother to her boyfriend). She could not get verification for the dependent meanings contained in her identity standard within the training centre, so she sought out other opportunities for verification.

Kayleigh’s relationship with her first EA seemed strained. There were no signs of warmth or respect on either side. The EA expressed the view (in Kayleigh’s presence) that the main difference between the young people who succeeded at the training centre and those who did not was the individuals themselves. Those who were motivated achieved; those who were not did not. She could help those who were willing to work hard (like Anne), but her work would make little difference with those who lacked commitment to the course. Kayleigh did not seem to be committed, and therefore the work that the EA was doing with her was unlikely to be effective.

Thus, within this relationship Kayleigh was not being verified in her chosen identity, and her EA was not receiving verification in her role identity as an effective support worker. The response of both parties to the discomfort caused by non-verification was
to withdraw from the relationship. The first EA worker seemed to give up on trying to place Kayleigh in a suitable work placement. When she left and her role was filled by someone else, they did little to try to engage Kayleigh, and instead seemed to have accepted that the centre was no more than a holding station for her. Kayleigh, in turn, withdrew her commitment to the course. She attended, but did not apply herself in her basic skills classes and refused all work placements: the bulk of her energy seemed to go into her identity as a dependent girlfriend.

**Andrew.**
Before he left school Andrew was optimistic about his future: ‘look out world, I’m comin’ at ya!’ He was confused about what he was going to do: on the one hand he told me he was going to college, but did not know what course he would be doing; on the other, he said he wanted to find work (preferably relating to buses, though he was unsure what he would do). He projected an identity in which he was a young man, leaving the shelter of school, and ready, even eager, to take a place in the adult world. Having told me initially that he had ADHD (he never mentioned his Asperger’s diagnosis) he did not discuss his behavioural difficulties again, except to tell me his parents advised him not to drink alcohol with his medication. This did not seem to be a part of his self that he considered important, or wanted to draw attention to.

When he left school he refused to take up the college place he was offered (further basic skills training), saying he had ‘done enough learning’ and decided he wanted to work. However, there was little employment available and he was unable to get a job. He was provided support by a Connexions worker and a learning disability officer from the job centre. The opportunities they suggested to him were all basic skills training, and were all for young people with learning difficulties.

This created a clash between the identity of young adult that Andrew was claiming, and the identity of person with special needs being reflected back to him. He spent his time helping out at the bus station, which he described as his ‘work’, and for which he had a shift timetable he adhered to rigidly (on one occasion when I visited him he was
very upset because he thought I was coming the next day, and he had to go to ‘work’). The bus drivers and other workers at the depot accepted his help, and treated him as a junior colleague, according to his mum. At the same time he began socialising with a group of ‘boy racers’ (his mum’s description), and staying out late or not coming home.

These two activities would have provided opportunities for verification of his ‘adult’ identity. Within the bus depot he was able to claim the adult role of worker, albeit without pay. With the ‘boy racers’ he could assert his independence from his parents, and associate with young men who possessed what may be the ultimate symbol of adulthood and freedom in our society: the car. It may be that it was the verification he received in these contexts that provided him with the energy resources to persevere with the non-verifying relationships he had with his workers.

Ultimately, his perseverance gained him a place in a job search club, in which he was just another young claimant, and his identity was finally verified. However, this did not happen until he had been out of school for a year. Had a work placement been arranged for him (perhaps at the bus depot) he may have felt verified at an earlier date, caused less problems at home (his mother was extremely concerned about him staying out all night), and made more progress towards his long-term goals of employment and independent living.

8.2.3 Continuity.

For two of the participants the transition out of school did not present the same challenges to their identities as it did for the others. For Carl this was because his membership of multiple groups, and occupancy of different roles outside of school meant that he had pre-existing ‘work’ and ‘training’ identities to draw on. Simon, meanwhile, was familiar with the college he moved onto before he left school, and had had time to develop a suitable identity before starting at college full time.
Carl.

Carl did not experience the ‘broken loop’ to his identity control system as most of the other participants did. Whilst the others tended to have role identities associated with school, home and peers, Carl had a range of other identities available to him. His experiences volunteering with medical charities and the youth service provided him with ‘worker’ identities, whilst his life-guard training and activities undertaken with the Sea Cadets allowed him to develop a ‘vocational learner’ identity. These pre-established identity control systems were available for him to apply in his working life, and on his fitness trainer’s course.

His identities were challenged at times through the year. In the conflict with his manager at the swimming pool Carl was asserting his identity as a capable, trained first-aider, whilst the manager seemed to be perceiving him as a new and very junior employee. Carl worked at a retail outlet in the run up to Christmas, and believed that he had been one of the best employees. However, he was not allocated one of the permanent posts available after Christmas, and although he was told he would be given a job at a new store which was due to open this never materialised. His ability to cope with these non-verifying experiences may be attributed to the verification he experienced within his family.

Carl’s interpretation of the incident at the swimming pool was that the manager was threatened by his competence, as he was less skilled and qualified in first aid than Carl was. His mother supported this view of the situation, thus providing verification for Carl’s view of himself. During one interview Carl and his mother told me proudly of his success in his temporary retail job, and how he would be taken on permanently in the near future. However, when he was not offered a permanent post they simply never mentioned it again. Overall any non-verifying experiences Carl had were dismissed as the fault of the other person, or ignored. His mother consistently provided him with verification, whilst minimising the importance of non-verifying events and situations.
The high levels of verification Carl experienced at home helped him to continue to seek out opportunity (for verification) structures throughout the year. When one structure (or situation) failed to provide him with verification he was able to simply move onto another, as the energy levels in his self-esteem reservoir were constantly being topped up by his mother’s verification of his claimed identities.

*Simon.*

Simon developed a particularly strong bond with his college tutor through a process of mutual verification. Simon’s identities were verified in this relationship in several ways. As a student he received praise and reward (in the form of good marks) for his work, and the tutor considered his success to be the result of Simon’s efforts. At the same time he offered Simon verification as an individual by choosing to spend time with him out of class (playing chess with him, eating with him). In this way both his role and person identities received support from his tutor.

The tutor, meanwhile, gained verification from Simon, who not only achieved highly on the course, but also attributed his success to the tutor’s support. The unit manager, who valued the work the tutor was doing and expressed the view that he was the only person in the department who could do it, was also providing verification for the tutor’s teaching identity. These processes created a bond between Simon and his tutor which went beyond the limits of the classroom, and the duration of the course.

In ‘mutual verification contexts’ (Burke & Stets, 2009, p.86), such as that described between Simon and his tutor, each individual’s verification process serves to support the other, creating a bond that helps to provide continuing mutual verification. Whilst this claim is made through research that was concerned with marital relationships, there is no reason why it should not apply to other sorts of relationships.

It appears that the bond developed between Simon and his tutor, through which both were verified, created a relationship that was deeper and more durable than would be expected between a tutor and his student on a one year course. And the fact that both
the tutor and Simon were prepared to continue to invest in the relationship after the course finished suggests that they were each getting something out of it (I suggest identity verification) that was not directly related to their roles as teacher and student.

Simon had a number of advantages over the other participants when it came to building a productive relationship with his tutor. Firstly, he and the tutor were able to begin working on their relationship before Simon left school, as he attended the college on a day placement in year 11. Secondly, Simon had already established himself as a capable learner before he began the course, and had that identity verified by being ‘chosen’ out of all the boys in his year to attend. Thirdly, the tutor was actively involved in that choice (it is very rare for teachers to be able to choose their students) and so had an added interest in Simon’s success. This meant that the two parties to the relationship had time to develop identity control systems before Simon started the course full-time, and that they had created an opportunity structure in which verification was highly likely. From this starting position, the processes of mutual identity verification, which developed the bond between them and was highly influential in facilitating Simon’s success, was almost inevitable.

8.2.4 The contradicting case: Michael.

Michael had good relationships with the professionals working with him, and yet failed to maintain a placement in his first post-school year. He contradicts the theory presented so far that positive relationships with helpers, developed through processes of verification support successful transition. However, this can be explained using identity theory, since the main reason for Michael’s failure to maintain a placement was his prioritisation of his social identity over all others.

Michael received verification from his PAYP worker, who he had known for some years. This worker genuinely liked him, and compared him to himself when he was young. Michael presented himself as a very caring young man, and his PAYP worker shared this view of him, and encouraged other young people to see through Michael’s ‘odd’ behaviour and befriend the kind individual behind it. As such, he was not only
providing verification directly, but also increasing the possibility that Michael would be verified by his peers. Most of the tutors and trainers who worked with Michael also provided him with verification, through his achievement on their courses and the praise that resulted. In spite of receiving verification in these contexts Michael walked out on these relationships (and his courses) and avoided his PAYP worker as he did so.

The reason Michael gave for leaving his first college course was that he had missed a few weeks and was unable to catch up with the work. However, his tutor and his PAYP worker were confident that he could easily catch up if he wanted to, and that he had left because he wanted to go to the same training centre his girlfriend attended. This theory is supported by the fact that when the girlfriend left that training centre and moved to another, Michael followed her. His educational/career decisions were being led entirely by his desire to be with her.

Michael adopted a ‘hero’ type identity in his relationship with his girlfriend. When he talked about her, he stressed how she needed him, how he was ‘there’ for her, and told of his acts of kindness towards her. He claimed she had been ‘sectioned’ before, and that he was going to take care of her so that she no longer suffered from the anxiety and distress that had plagued her. By moving placement to stay with her he was ensuring that this identity, in which he was needed, could be verified. However, in doing so he was prioritising his boyfriend identity (and the meanings associated with it) over all others. Thus, it can be described as an ‘over-controlled’ identity, which takes so much energy and resources to maintain that his other identities are neglected.

His workers could not help him with the transition process, even though they provided him with opportunities for verification because he was over-investing in his other identity, which was not relevant in their work with him. Michael’s relationships with his peers had been his main source of problems at school, and this may be why he prioritised verification in this area outside of school. He split up with his girlfriend after around six months, and not long after that he left home. Although he claimed his mother threw him out, he also said that he had a lot of friends who lived at the hostel.
before he moved in there. It may be that his need for verification from his peers was
greater even than his need to sustain his relationship with his mother, and this
contributed to his departure from the family home.

This case demonstrates that positive relationships with workers are not a cure-all in
the transitions of young people with SEBD. However, understanding the way Michael
was making choices, and accommodating his need for verification from peers within
the educational setting (rather than him having to move outside it for this verification),
may have helped him to maintain his placements.

8.3 Verification within the research process

Identity verification processes were also evident in the research process, in relation to
me, the participants, their parents and their workers. As I listen to the interview
recordings and read the transcribed narratives I see that I was unconsciously
attempting to offer verification to all interviewees. When I talked with the young
people I made no judgemental comments about any of the stories they told me,
beyond an occasional ‘I bet that went down well!’ in relation to tales of thrown
furniture or verbal outbursts while they were at school. Sometimes I told them that I
had found school a difficult place. Combined, these actions created an atmosphere in
which it was understood that their behaviour was just behaviour, school was difficult,
and there was nothing inherently wrong with them.

In interviews with parents I invariably mentioned that I was a mother, usually
accompanied by a comment about how hard a job it is. Again, I was a sympathetic and
non-judgemental listener: I never told them whether I thought they were right or
wrong, but I did say I understood why they felt as they did. For example, when a
mother told me she never went to the parents’ evenings at their child’s school because
she only heard what a bad parent she was, and how awful her child was I told her I
could understand her feelings. In doing this, I allowed the parents to present
themselves to me as they wanted to, which was invariably as loving mothers who were
struggling to help their children.
When talking to those working with the participants I often mentioned my own work background. This was done when I saw exasperation in their eyes at having to explain something to me, such as the different branches of youth work and the restructuring of the service. At this point I would explain that I was a youth worker, or had worked in a residential special school. On the audios of the interviews you can sometimes hear the sigh of relief, followed by ‘Well, you understand then’. And the atmosphere would change to one of colleagues, one of whom is sharing their knowledge and experience with the other. Their comfort in the interview situation seemed to increase, as they felt they were talking to a fellow worker, who understood what they were coping with, not an academic with no clue about the restrictions they operated within.

In each of these situations I was inadvertently providing my interviewees with verification of their identities, as a young person who struggled in school, but was not ‘bad’; as a parent who loved her child, but found parenting difficult, and as a worker doing their best in difficult circumstances. However, verification is a social process, and as I was verifying their identities, they were verifying mine.

I consider myself to be a good listener, someone people feel safe talking to, who will not judge them. In almost all the interviews I received verification for this identity, as parents, young people and workers opened up to me and told me far more about their lives or work than I would have dared to hope for. One mother told me her son liked talking to me, and looked forward to our meetings, and this made me look forward to seeing him. However, when people did not talk openly with me I felt uncomfortable (and unverified) and I got nervous before phoning them or meeting with them.

I was unaware of any of these processes whilst conducting the research, and yet as I look back it is easy to see them in action. The identity verification I received increased my confidence as a researcher; the verification my participants received made them feel comfortable with me, and so safe to talk about their troubles.
8.4 Conclusion

Overall, positive relationships with professional supporters facilitated smooth transitions and helped the participants cope with difficulties they faced. Using identity theory to analyse the cases reveals that processes of identity verification underpin the development of constructive relationships between the young people and the professionals working with them.

Opportunities for identity verification in their interactions with the professionals working with them increased the strength of relationships between the participants and those working with them, and this supported smooth transitions out of school. However, few of them had access to verifying situations in all the microsystems with which they engaged.

Some of the school-leavers were able to persist in non-verifying situations, whilst others withdrew from them. Their capacity to persevere in difficult situations can be attributed to them receiving enough verification in other settings to keep their self-esteem energy reservoir topped up. Others rejected non-verifying educational situations, and used other contexts to verify the identity they sought to claim. One participant had an identity (boyfriend) that was so tightly controlled that all others (student, son, brother, friend) were sacrificed to ensure it was verified.

To maximise their chances of success through the year, the young people needed to:

- build constructive relationships with their professional helpers, which was most likely to be achieved when the participant’s identity was verified in the context of the relationship;
- maintain a balance between the multiple identities they held – using those that were verified to provide them with the energy resources to persist in situations where they were not verified;
- prevent any of their identities from drawing so much from their energy reservoir that other identities suffered.
The ability to create or find opportunities for identity verification that are socially acceptable may be a key process in resilience. It has been claimed that young people who feel unable to make positive choices (or to find opportunities for verification of positive identities) in their lives will find people to support them in making negative ones: it is the verification that is important to the individual, and any form of verification makes them feel good. Where young people have access to positive ways of having their identities verified they will use them (as in the cases of Anne, Tom and Carl), but if they do not receive verification in these ways they will find other ways of ensuring they are verified (as in Kayleigh’s pursuit of dependence and Andrew’s choice of ‘boy racers’ as friends).

This chapter, and the two preceding it, have offered a multi-layered picture of the transitional experiences of this group of school-leavers with SEBD. I have described the individual pathways taken by each participant, the common themes running between them and a process (identity control) which seems to underpin one of the key themes (relationships with workers). The understanding I have developed of the transitional needs and experiences of young people with SEBD has implications for policy, practice and further research, and these (and other issues) will explored in the next chapter.
9 Summary & Conclusions

In this chapter I aim to draw together the threads of this thesis. I present my findings in relation to the research questions, and relate them to the existing literature, evaluate the success of the project in fulfilling my research aims, and identify implications for practice, theory and future research. I close the chapter with a reflection on the short-comings I perceive in the theoretical aspects of this thesis.

9.1 The research questions

9.1.1 What happens to young people with SEBD when they make the transition out of compulsory education?

The experiences of the participants in this study broadly reflected the findings of other studies into the transitions of school-leavers with SEBD, with many facing educational difficulties, and a significant proportion having problems at home.

Education, training and work.

All but two of the 14 for whom data is available went straight from school into further education or training. Vocational and basic skills training (which for most were a preparation for vocational training) predominated, with only two participants attempting an academic course, echoing the findings of Bradley et al (2008) that vocational pathways are the most common for this group.

Of the thirteen I have knowledge of only seven gained a qualification, two of whom were still at residential school on extended placements. Of the six who gained no qualifications, five spent some or all of the year NEET, two enrolled on more than one course through the year without completing any, and two were NEET throughout the year. One participant spent the year working, as well as completing a short training course. His jobs were all short-term and low paid, and he moved jobs frequently. The experiences of this group of school-leavers mirror previous studies in the UK and beyond, which found that instability, of education and employment, are common (Farrell & Polat, 2003; Hornby & Witte, 2008; Zigmond, 2006).
Four participants left home during the year. Tom came from an unstable home and left within weeks of leaving school. Michael left towards the end of the year following an argument with his mother. Both moved into hostels for homeless young people. Alex was taken in by social services (he had been ‘looked after’ previously, and was living with his grandparents). Lucas, who did not leave school as his school placement was extended, was placed in supported accommodation during the school holidays as he got into trouble with the police when he stayed with his family. Jack, a day special school pupil, went to stay with his brother when he left school, but as I was unable to track him for the full year I do not know whether this was a permanent arrangement, and so have not classed him as leaving home.

Andrew, who had been at a residential school, found the move back into home so difficult that he threatened suicide on more than one occasion. He struggled to adapt to life at home, and his family found him difficult to cope with. Davis and Vander Stoep (1997) claim that separations from the family, such as attendance at residential school, weaken family ties and de-skill parents. Andrew’s experience supports this claim. He and his family found his return home extremely challenging, but by the end of the year they seemed to have learnt how to live together once more.

To my knowledge, only Lucas had any involvement with the police during the year and none of the participants had any drug or alcohol dependency, although some used cannabis recreationally. This contradicts previous studies which claim that drug and alcohol abuse and criminality are common amongst school-leavers with SEBD. However, it is possible that the young people chose not to tell me about these issues, or that it is a consequence of bias within the sample, which was dominated by participants who were broadly positive about their schooling and continued to remain engaged with education. I was unable to track two participants who were amongst the most disaffected in the group, and perhaps most likely to engage in criminal activity and drug/alcohol abuse.
Development.
Davis and Vander Stoep (1997) claim that the tasks young people need to master in this stage of life are the ability to:

- take care of oneself;
- develop one’s own goals and act to achieve them;
- understand and plan for the future;
- engage in productive relationships;
- reform or maintain one’s identity.

Some of the participants in this study possessed these abilities, or were supported in developing them, and they experienced successful transitions out of compulsory education. However, the majority did not have the full range of skills and did not receive the help they needed in acquiring them, and they struggled, to a greater or lesser extent, throughout the year. In answering the rest of the research questions I hope to shed some light on why this was the case.

9.1.2 What helps them in making this transition?
Facilitators of smooth transitions existed within the individuals and their families, and through the education system and formal support services. These factors were most effective when they worked in concert.

The individual and their family.
On an individual level, drive, goal-motivation and perseverance were evident in all the participants who were successful through the year (completing courses and gaining qualifications). Likeability was also a factor, though only Tom was seen as likeable in all the contexts in which I met him. For the others likeability seemed to be linked to their success: where they fitted into the placement they attended, and responded well to the methods used to teach them they were seen as likeable by their workers.

Successful participants came, in the main, from families with the resources to provide them with all types of support (emotional, esteem, practical and informational). Any gaps in their support networks were filled by the professionals working with them. The
gap to be filled could be small, as in Simon’s lack of informational support at home which was filled by his school and college staff and the internet. But comprehensive support could also compensate for lack of resources at home, as in the case of Tom who had no family support, but whose support needs were fulfilled by his hostel key worker and his college tutor.

**Formal support.**
The results relating to the education system and formal support services relate closely to Wagner and Davis’ (2006) analysis of the key elements in effective transition programmes: relationships, rigour, relevance, and attention to the whole child. The other element of successful transition planning identified by Wagner and Davis (the involvement of students and families in transition planning) is not included here, as there was little evidence of it in any of the participant’s school experiences. Aston et al’s (2005) study identified ‘luck’ as an influence on the transitions of school-leavers with SEN in the UK, and this is evident in the success of the participants in this study. It is therefore the fifth element discussed here. Whilst I consider the role of relationships as a distinct element, rigour, relevance and attention to the whole child are closely linked, so are considered together.

**Relationships.**
As Wagner and Davis’ (2006) claimed, relationships affected the transitions of the successful school-leavers on two levels: the individual’s relationship with those working with them, and the relationships between professionals and agencies involved in their lives. Successful participants had good relationships with their professional supporters, which they used when they faced difficulties in their educational placements. These supporters were sources of advice, praise and motivation for the young people, which kept them engaged with their courses and feeling able to succeed.

The relationships the participants had with their workers were supported by the institutions within which they operated. Productive relationships were more likely to
be formed in institutions in which their formation was seen as an important part of the worker’s role and where the needs of young people with SEBD were understood and catered to as a matter of routine. As Gilligan (1999) suggested, mentoring relationships worked best when they involved the adult teaching the young person, or being directly involved in their training.

A further key influence on the development of productive relationships between the participants and their workers was the extent to which their identities were verified within the relationship. Simon, Tom, Carl and Anne all had workers who seemed to see them in the way they wished to be seen. This helped the workers to provide appropriate support to the participants, made them comfortable and able to seek help within the relationship, and the boosted their self-esteem, providing them with the energy they needed to allow them to persevere when they faced difficulties in their home, work or educational lives. In Simon’s case the mutual verification experienced by him and his tutor created a bond that was set to outlast the course, and his tutor planned to continue to offer him support on his next course.

The five participants who were classed as successful also benefited from good relationships (and communication) between the workers and agencies involved in their lives. The parties to these relationships varied. The connection between school and college were important for James and Simon. Anne benefited from the relationship between the staff at the vocational training centre she attended and the manager of her work placement. Tom managed to keep his college placement through periods of non-attendance because his hostel keyworker was in regular contact with his college tutor. Carl’s attendance on a fitness training course was arranged for him by his Connexions worker through her relationship with the training organisation. These relationships between individuals and organisations ensured that those working directly with the young people had an understanding of their difficulties and strengths, and so were able to support them effectively.
Rigour, relevance and attention to the whole child.

Wagner and Davis (2006) define rigour in educational terms: the placement of the individual on a course with an appropriate curriculum and adequate levels of support. Relevance is the extent to which the course on which they are placed furthers their goals. Attention to the whole child is consideration of all the child’s needs, rather than just their educational needs.

The participants in this study did best when placed on courses which accommodated their developmental and emotional needs as well as their academic ones, and they could see how they moved them towards their long term goals. The suitability of the course and its relevance to their future plans seemed to help them to stay motivated, and to persevere through the challenges they faced. At the same time, their problems were minimised because they were able to meet the academic and social demands of their courses.

Luck.

It is unfortunate that the success of these school-leavers must be attributed more to luck than to judgement (James is excluded from this section as he was still based at school, and his life both in school and at college was tightly controlled). There was little evidence of planning in the young people’s transitions. Most of them did not remember attending transition reviews, and many did not recall (in June) where they had applied to go in September, or what course they were going to do.

Anne’s placement fitted her needs, but the fact that Kayleigh and Michael were both placed at Anne’s vocational training centre and both failed there suggests that this good fortune was not a result of careful assessment and planning. There was planning involved in Simon’s placement, but the care which was taken in selecting him for his course was not evident in the experiences of the other pupils who left his school. It seems that he was lucky to be chosen. Tom happened to be placed on a course with a particularly skilled and experienced tutor, who not only understood his problems, but had enough seniority in the college to bend rules to accommodate him. He may have
been less successful if he had been placed in the class of a more junior member of staff. Carl’s school Connexions worker was a manager who had taken on the caseload at Sankside because of staff shortages. When he left school she went back to carrying a half caseload in the community, with Carl as one of her cases. This provided him with a continuity that was not available to any of the other participants.

Overall, there was no evidence of the participants’ non-educational needs having been assessed, and their placements were arranged around what was available, rather than what was needed. It is clear from the varied outcomes of participants leaving the same school, and even going on to the same placement, that the success of these five young people was almost certainly a matter of luck, not judgement.

9.1.3 What hinders them in making this transition?

Barriers to smooth transitions were the absence of some or all of the factors described above, but explaining what limited the other participants’ likelihood of success requires explanation of why these factors were absent.

The individual and family.
The participants who struggled through their first year out of school were not necessarily those with the highest levels of educational need. Indeed, while four of the five classed as successful were ex-special school pupils, three of the ten who struggled had attended mainstream school. One of the characteristics they shared was a lack of a long-term goals, which in all but one case contributed to their inability to persevere through challenges in the onward placements. The one participant who did persevere to the end of his course and gain a qualification (though not at the level he needed or was capable of) valued education for its own sake, and had a strong friendship group at college. The rest of this group dropped out of one or more courses, or ceased to engage fully with their courses, attending but not achieving.

All but one of this group had families who were unable to provide the full range of forms of support, and they did not have other people to fill the gaps for them. The
exception was Andrew, whose family (although short on space and money) provided him with consistent support in all areas, but were constrained by the lack of suitable educational or housing provision in their area. The other participants came from families who were often struggling to deal with their own problems (mental health issues, learning difficulties and disability) and so lacked the personal, financial, practical or emotional resources to help them effectively.

**Formal services.**
This group did not receive effective support from educational or other services. Their needs were not considered sufficient to trigger intervention as a right, and lack of awareness of the help available, combined with a reluctance to seek help from professionals because of negative experiences in the past prevented them from accessing supporting services.

**Relationships.**
Barriers to the formation of relationships existed on two levels, the institutional (which are considered below) and the individual. On the individual level identity processes seemed to be operating to inhibit the development of relationships. This occurred when participants did not feel their workers saw them in the way they saw themselves. This took a number of forms. Ben felt his tutor did not recognise his special needs, and so failed to support him, but Andrew saw himself as a ‘normal’ young man, whilst his workers insisted on identifying him as someone with special needs. Kayleigh seemed to want to remain a dependent child, but her workers were pushing her to reach for independence and adulthood. Michael’s workers seemed to be pushing him towards their goals for his future, whilst he seemed to want only to be with his friends and enjoy ‘now’.

The conflict between the workers’ view of the young people and their view of themselves seemed to create discomfort in them, and reluctance to engage with the relationship. With their energy diminished by these non-verifying contexts these young
people were less able to persevere through difficult times on their courses, and more likely to become disengaged, or withdraw altogether.

Where relationships between organisations and individuals supported the smooth transitions of the successful participants, lack of communication between agencies hindered the transitions of the less successful. There was little evidence of communication between the schools they left and the institutions they went on to, or between the professionals working with them. A breakdown in communication between a college and the Connexions Service resulted in one participant falling though the net altogether and being left doing nothing for several months. For the others, information about their needs and problems, which may have helped their new workers to understand them better and build stronger relationships with them, was lost in the move between institutions.

**Rigour, relevance and attention to the whole child.**
The group who were less successful tended to be placed on courses which suited their academic, rather than support needs. There was little evidence of their non-academic needs having been considered in the selection of their placement. The two who took academic courses received no support, and one dropped out and the other underachieved. Two of the mainstream school leavers (neither of whom had Statements) had emotional or social difficulties that were not addressed in their placements (one dropped out of three of the four courses he attempted, the other disengaged with the learning in her course).

Lack of suitable provision was evident for the participants who were more academically able, and for Andrew, who left school at 18. Many of the courses that would have been suitable for him were only available to 16 and 17 year old school leavers (and were like the courses he had spent his final two years at school doing). Other courses that might have been appropriate for him were too far from his home. This not only left him NEET for the year, but also prevented the warm relationships he had with his workers from becoming productive: they had nothing to offer him.
Other participants also experienced a poor fit between their needs and their placements, which inhibited the development of productive relationships with their workers. There was often a clash between the young person’s expectations of their course and the support they would be given, and the worker’s expectation of their students. In post-16 education students are expected to be self-motivated and self-disciplined, and where the participants did not meet this expectation their tutors saw it as a lack of commitment, rather than an expression of their unmet needs. The students, meanwhile, accustomed to a certain level of tolerance and support at school could not understand why they received different treatment in college. There was little possibility of a productive relationship developing in a situation in which each party felt the other lacked commitment to them (or their course).

The participants who were less successful in their first post-school year lacked long-term goals. They did not seem to have received meaningful careers guidance. Many complained that they had been pushed into applying for courses they did not want to do by their Connexions workers. Lack of goals, and feeling their course was not their choice meant they struggled to persevere when they encountered problems.

**Involvement in transition planning.**

Like Aston et al (2005), I found that in most cases, neither the participants nor their parents were unable to recall their transition review. Only those who were trying to have their placement at Linton Hall extended seemed to be aware of their review, and they only focused on this aspect of it. As the schools assure me the reviews took place, this suggests that the parents/pupil’s engagement in the process did not mean enough to them for them to remember it. Overall, there did not seem to be enough engagement in the transition planning process from either the pupils and their parents, or the school workers who understood their needs and goals the best.
9.1.4 Does the type of school they attended (mainstream, day special or residential special) affect their experience of this transition?

The sample was too small and too skewed to give a definitive answer to this question. Of the 15 participants four left mainstream school, seven attended one of the two day special schools and four were in residential placements. Of the four residential pupils only two left school, and I lost contact with one of them, so I only have data for one residential pupil who left school, and he was 18, rather than 16 when he left. There are indications that the transition practices of the schools they left may have influenced their transitional experiences, but there is insufficient evidence to determine whether there is a relationship between the type of school they attended, and the level of success or difficulty they faced outside it.

However, there is evidence of school type influencing individual transitions. Andrew, who left residential school at age 18 found the move home extremely difficult. His home was over 100 miles from his school, and he had only spent occasional weekends and holidays there for a number of years. The distance made it impossible for him to have a gradual reintegration into his home, and it took almost a year for the family to adjust to the sudden change in living arrangements.

Lack of integration into services at home was also an issue for some day special school leavers. Those who lived at greater distances from school (over a mile) were less likely to have made contact with the support services available to them (notably Connexions).

Mainstream school pupils were also disadvantaged, because the institutions they went to once they left school had no way of knowing that they had special needs: they came from mainstream schools and did not have Statements (or the institution had not received a copy of it). This made it difficult for the post-school placement to provide appropriate support.
9.2 Evaluation of research process

Although I encountered some problems in conducting this research (relating to accessing the sample, time limitations, and the physical distance between my base and my participants’ homes) which had an impact on the range of data collected from participants, the research aims were fulfilled.

9.2.1 Strengths of the research process.

Sufficient data was elicited relating to enough of the participants to allow for analysis of multiple domains of their lives on multiple levels. The case studies allowed me to develop an in-depth understanding of the young people’s experiences, and offered a holistic view of them and their lives. This enabled me to see patterns in their behaviour, across contexts and time and even through generations, which deepened my analysis of their first post-school year. Cross-case analysis exposed common themes and revealed patterns across the cases.

The use of thematic and narrative analysis combined to provide me with maximum insight into the data. The thematic analysis was useful in identifying factors that facilitated or hindered smooth transitions, whilst the narrative analysis revealed more of the underlying processes, particularly relating to the role of relationships. It was the narrative analysis that led me to consider the role of identity in transition, which has provided this thesis with a firmer grounding in theory.

Use of the life grid to collect and construct biographical narratives was successful, as it was in the pilot study, and the collaborative and non-interrogational atmosphere its use created offered a good starting point for building rapport with the participants. There was one participant with whom the life grid, with its time-bound structure proved a barrier to building a relationship. I would begin the interviews by asking the participants where they lived when they were born. For most this was a good starting point as it was not usually a question that had any emotional charge. However, one young man simply glared at me, looked at the floor and told me he could not
remember. I asked who he lived with, and got the same response. I changed tack and asked who he lived with now, and the interview moved on. It transpired that he had lived with his parents until he was seven, when he taken into care and placed with his grandparents. In asking that simple question I had inadvertently asked about the most painful time in his life. Although he continued with the interview and agreed to be seen by me again there was always a distance and frostiness to our encounters. Of course it is possible that he would have been distant with me no matter how I had approached him, but I do not think that accidentally probing his most difficult memories helped.

I could have avoided this situation by finding out about the participant’s histories before I met them, but this would have biased my view of them and breached my ethical standards – only they had the right to share their story with me. Ultimately only the research suffered from my faux-pas, as I was unable to fully track this participant (and it is likely this would have happened anyway), and to collect information about all the participants to prevent the loss of this one would have been methodologically and ethically wrong.

The support network map proved to be more useful than I originally thought. I conceived it as a way of getting an idea of what support was available to the participants, but was unsure how this information would fit into my final analysis of the data. However, through the analysis process it became clear that access to all forms of support was a key factor in the transitional experiences of the school-leavers, with those with access to all forms of support proving successful, and those without struggling. I had not expected to see such a direct relationship.

9.2.2 Weaknesses in the research process.

I had difficulty in finding special schools that were willing and able to participate in this study. This had two implications: firstly, I was working further from my home base than I initially envisaged and secondly, it was later in the year than I had hoped when I first met the special school leavers. This meant I did not get to spend informal time
with them as I had hoped before asking them to participate in the study, so I was only able to access the young people the schools selected for me, and our first meeting was a research interview. Consequently, the sample was biased in the residential school towards its day pupils; I was only able to engage three pupils from the day school, and there was no opportunity to develop any sort of relationship with the participants before I began probing them for details about their lives.

Working at some distance from the special schools also had an impact on the data collection process. I was unable to meet all their parents, and only saw those I did meet after the participants had left school. I did not know the areas they came from, which sometimes made it difficult to arrange meeting places, and increased difficulties in visiting colleges and interviewing tutors and Connexions workers. Distance also made tracking some participants more difficult than it might have been: there is a limit to how many times you can drive 60 miles to see someone who does not turn up.

Finally, the ‘add-on’ nature of my use of identity theory meant that the participants were never asked any questions relating to their identity, and the importance of identity in their transitions has been inferred by me, rather than directly informed by them. However, these questions were not asked, and the issue became evident in the data anyway. And as the choice of theory was led by the data, rather than the data being collected to fit the theory, this can be seen as a strength in the research, and to contribute to its theoretical validity.

Overall, the strengths in the research process outweigh the weaknesses. Problems in accessing samples are almost inevitable in real world research, especially when it involves a vulnerable group with powerful gatekeepers. Sufficient data was collected to allow deep understanding of the participants’ transitions, and as the results are consistent with findings of other studies, both in the UK and internationally, there is no reason to suppose that the bias in the sample invalidated the research.
9.3 Implications for practice

This is a very small-scale study, and although it is possible to draw out a number of practice-related issues suggestions for how they may be enacted in schools and colleges are offered tentatively, as ideas to consider, rather than recommendations. The main areas of consideration are transition planning, developing good communication, training of staff in post-16 provision, and the nature of post-16 provision.

9.3.1 Transition planning.

Most of the participants had no recollection of their transition reviews, suggesting that they are not effectively engaged in the review process. In my experience, reviews tend to be meetings where everyone agrees what has already been decided, which may explain why young people feel peripheral to the process. Therefore, there is a need to engage them, their parents, school staff (ideally those chosen by the young person) and career guidance workers more effectively before the final transition meeting.

This working group would be well-placed to develop a plan which took account of all the young person’s needs (not just their educational ones), interests and motivation. Reviews can be intimidating processes for parents and pupils, who are surrounded by professionals with power over their lives. However, if they have played a more significant and meaningful part in developing the plan being presented, and they have had the chance to get to know at least some of the people who will be present, they are likely to feel more comfortable and confident, and better placed to get what the young person needs out of the review.

None of the schools involved in this study had a transition policy for school-leavers. Whilst good policy does not necessarily make for good practice, the development of a transition policy would give schools a chance to identify and spread good practice within, and even between, their establishments. The policy could include guidance on
the development of a transition plan, the holistic assessment of needs, and identification of suitable provision.

The support network map used in this research clearly indicated which students were adequately supported, and which required external support. An activity such as this could be used in schools to identify pupils at risk of being inadequately supported when they left. If this was done some time before their leaving date there would be the opportunity to begin finding workers who could potentially fill the gaps in their support network, and time for the pupil to develop a relationship with them before they left the shelter of school, and really needed them. This process need not take up excessive amounts of time or resources, as the maps could be generated in a PSHE (personal, social and health education) class, for example, and the school pastoral team could take the work from there. There would, of course, be cost implications to taking on this work, but the benefits to school-leavers could be substantial.

### 9.3.2 Communication.

Communication failures negatively affected the transitions of many of the participants in this study. Therefore, I would suggest that schools need to ensure that information is sent to colleges, and check that it has been received by the relevant person. Colleges and other educational providers need to contact relevant workers (Connexions, or whatever service ultimately replaces it) as soon as it is evident that students are not attending. Schools could act as an on-going contact for the minority of their pupils who are identified as vulnerable (through the assessment procedures suggested above), and make regular checks to ensure they are still engaged.

In an ideal world schools would have a transition/outreach worker who can take responsibility for making links with post-16 providers, assessing the needs of leavers, maintaining contact with them and facilitating communication between the workers, agencies, families and school-leavers. However, this is unlikely in the current financial climate.
9.3.3 Training.

The participants placed on mainstream post-16 courses often struggled, and some of their problems can be attributed to a lack of understanding of SEBD and inadequate knowledge of behaviour management techniques amongst staff at the colleges they attended. As the school leaving age is set to rise over the next few years there will be more young people with SEBD staying in education, and it is important that those who will be teaching them receive training so they are better placed to meet their needs.

9.3.4 Post-16 provision.

The day special school involved with this study was keen to develop post-16 provision, in partnership with local colleges and training providers. Were this practice adopted by more special schools it would remove the need for pupils to go directly from school to other institutions before they were ready. A staged move between institutions would reduce the number of changes the pupils had to cope with at one time, and minimise the psychological impact of coping with the move. The benefits of early access to the vocational education offered by colleges and training providers seems to be accepted by many schools (both mainstream and special), who place their pupils in colleges before they leave school (as was the case for Simon). Extending this flexibility to allow college students access to their special schools post-16 may provide equal benefits.

9.4 Contribution to theory

The findings of this study, unsurprisingly, confirmed ecological theories of development in that factors influencing resilience in transition existed from the individual level to the macro-economic, and their relationships with each other were transactional, rather than uni-directional. These factors included:

- Individual characteristics: drive, motivation and perseverance, and likeability;
- access to all forms of support (emotional, esteem, practical and informational) from families or others;
- development of productive relationships with workers;
• access to suitable provision, with an appropriate curriculum and adequate support.

These findings echo findings from previous studies of young people at risk in a range of situations (Gilligan, 1999; Luthar et al., 2000; Smokowski et al., 1999).

Like Smokowski et al (1999) I identified supportive relationships as a key contributor to resilience in transition. However, whilst Smokowski et al focussed on the way the parties to these relationships helped young people (providing advice, motivation, and guidance on how to cope in dangerous situations) I have focussed on the psychological process of identity verification to explain how these relationships are formed, and act to help young people cope with transition. The identity verification process helps to explain how the presence of supporters in young people’s lives helps them to cope with challenging situations where they are unsupported. By conceiving the consequences of verification as a well of self-esteem ‘energy’ which can be drawn on in non-verifying situations and topped up by verification, Burke and Stets (2009) offer a process which may underpin resilience.

The actions of supporters, described by Smokowski et al, are also actions which may serve to verify the young person’s identity. Motivation is provided on the assumption that the young person has skills and talents that are worth developing. Advice is offered on the assumption that the young person needs, and will take it. Guidance on how to cope in dangerous situations is given on the basis that the young person does not want to get into trouble, and is inherently good. These actions would all provide the young person with the feeling that they are good people, and worthy of help. Assuming they share this view of themselves (which they are likely to do if they have grown up surrounded by this view of themselves) they will feel verified. This verification will provide them with sufficient self-esteem ‘energy’ to allow them to risk rejection in new environments, and they are more likely to be open to forming relationships with others, where they may receive further verification. If they are not verified within this new environment then the constant top-up to their energy
reservoirs that they receive at home, or from other existing relationships, will allow them to persevere with this difficult situation, until they are verified or move on.

Thus, identity processes offer insight into the way the presence of supportive relationships in young people’s lives help them to overcome adversity, even when they have no support in a particular context (such as school). Researchers are beginning to explore the link between identity and resilience (Warin, 2010), but it is an area which warrants further attention and research.

9.5 Future research

There is very little research on the transitions of school-leavers with SEBD, particularly in the UK, so there is huge scope for further exploration of this field. This is a small-scale study, which only followed the participants for their first post-school year, and there is a need for larger-scale, longer-term studies to;

- evaluate the role of school type in transition;
- determine whether the experiences of this group of leavers from three schools in the North West of England are typical of young people with SEBD, or whether local and individual factors have influenced their transitions;
- explore the longer-term influences on the transition to adult life, rather than just the transition out of compulsory education: does achieving/struggling in the first post-school year have a long term impact on the participants’ lives?

Other potential avenues for research include the identification and evaluation of transition programmes in schools; action/collaborative research to explore the effects of training on post-16 inclusion of students with SEBD, and to develop effective transition programmes in schools and post-16 provision. Also, my participants were most likely to form productive relationships with people directly involved in their education, yet on mainstream courses support to students with special needs was given through a separate, special needs department. This raises the question: should support be provided in this way, or is it better provided by those involved in teaching
the young person, and who are, in turn, supported by the special needs department, through the provision of training and advice?

A further issue, which it was not possible to explore fully in this study, is the possible multi-generational aspects of SEBD and disaffection with education. Many of the parents in this study had negative views of school, stemming from their experiences as pupils, as well as parents. Their negative feelings are likely to be transmitted to their children and may contribute to the child’s disaffection, as well as the parent’s reluctance to engage with school. There is the potential to challenge the parent’s negative attitudes early in the child’s school career, which may have an impact on their engagement in the longer term. Further research is needed to explore this issue.

9.6 Final reflections

As I wrote this thesis I became increasingly aware that I was skirting around possibly the most important influence on the participants’ lives and transitions. I have written many, many words about their lives, but never dared to mention the one that was always on my mind: love. And yet it is the presence or absence of love in these young people’s lives that has had the most effect on them, as on all of us.

Love is not a word social scientists use; we come up with words which hint at its presence, but never quite encompass it: ‘belonging’, ‘esteem’, and in this thesis ‘identity verification’. These are concepts that we can find ways of measuring, and they are safer than ‘love’. Love is a word that comes with too much baggage, associations with romance, religion and sex. It is hard to measure; there seem to be only two states, loved enough and not loved enough, and these can change over time. In the space of a day we may go from feeling loved enough, to unloved, even unlovable.

Many of the participants in this study just did not feel loved enough: not by their families, their teachers, or their peers. None of the theories or concepts I have used in this study could really explain why some of the young people thrived while others struggled. This is seen most in the case of Michael. He was a puzzle to me throughout
the time I knew him, and while I was trying to analyse the data I collected from him. I have used identity theory to try to explain his behaviour, and talked about the prioritisation of one identity over another. However, when I take my researcher hat off, and think of him as one person thinks of another, I know exactly why he kept throwing his education away in favour of friends and lovers. It is simple: he needed love, and he needed it far more than he needed any certificate.

It seems a shame that the essence of these young people’s experiences can only be a footnote at the end of a thesis. But I hope that at some point, some social scientist, if not me, will be brave enough to talk about love.
References:


Evans, K., George, N., White, K., & Sharp, C. (2010). *Ensuring that all children and young people make sustained progress and remain fully engaged through all transitions between key stages*. London: Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People's Services (C4EO).


Rogers, R. A. (2009). 'No-one helped out. It was like "Get on with it. You’re an adult now. It’s up to you." You don’t...it’s not like you reach 17 and suddenly you don’t need any help any more': a study into post-16 pastoral support for 'Aimhigher Students'. *Pastoral Care in Education, 27*(2), 109-118.


Appendices

Appendix 1: Literature search

Data bases searched:

- ERIC
- CERUK
- Education Sage
- British Education Index
- Scopus
- ASSIA
- Index to Theses

Search terms:

- Transition*, School leavers, Post 16, Post compulsory education

AND

- EBD/emotional and behaviourl difficulties/disorder
- BESD/behavioural, emotional and social difficulties/disorder
- SEBD/social emotional and behaviourl difficulties/disorder
- SEN/special educational needs/special needs
- Behaviour difficulties/disorder
- Emotional difficulties/disorder
Appendix 2: Case Study

Andrew

Andrew’s story
Andrew has two sisters, 5 and 10 years older than him, and another a year younger. When he was born he lived with both parents, but they split up when he was one. His father was violent towards his mother. When his father left his maternal grandmother moved in, and his uncle moved next door, to support his mother. His father subsequently became involved with ‘really hard drugs’, and died a year or so later. Around this time his mother developed arthritis; she has been unable to work since.

He went to nursery, and then one primary school. At school things began to ‘go wrong’ and his behaviour became a problem. Interventions at primary school were successful, for a time, but then ‘it all just went wrong again’. Andrew then went to secondary school, where he estimates that out of the 18 months he attended he only spent around 6 months actually in school, due to his frequent exclusions, before he was permanently excluded. He then went to a community-based behaviour unit until the end of year 8. His relationship with his mother was very difficult at this time: she was ‘dead stressed out’ by his frequent exclusions.

He went to Barston in year 9, and ‘started to turn [his] life around’ in response to being offered ‘lots of support’. Life at home became happier: he was in ‘better moods’, and he and his mum ‘began to build [their] relationship back up’. His Nan died when he was 16, which was very difficult as she was ‘a very big part of [his] life...the person [he] could go and talk to about stuff’. Not long after her death his stepfather moved in with them. They got on well initially, but more recently there’s been some friction: ‘He’s started kicking off with us now. Thinking he’s the big man. And he’s not. I’m still the man of the house.’
On leaving school Andrew went to college, but maintained this for less than a year, as he felt they were messing him around, changing his courses all the time. Since, he has had a variety of unskilled jobs, none of which have lasted long. He ‘got in with the wrong crowd’, which culminated in him receiving an Anti-Social Behaviour Order (ASBO) for ‘terrorising [his] neighbourhood’. He says he ‘didn’t do half the things they said’ and that he was blamed for the behaviour of those he was hanging around with. He is no longer involved with these people, and is spending time with his cousins, and one other friend.

In the future Andrew says he would like to work at Barston, as a support worker: he ‘understands what the pupils are going through’. He has ‘no idea’ how this goal might be achieved. He is now 18.

**Figure 6: Andrew**

*The unbreakable circle*
If Andrew has a catch phrase it is ‘it just went wrong’. Lots of things have gone wrong for him: his early home life, his education, and his experiences in the work-place. Nevertheless, he gets himself up, each time, and tries something else. He was the most academic of the four young men interviewed, and capable, intellectually of far more than he is achieving. However, he is working, and when he decides he has had enough of one job, he seems to find the next without much trouble. His reasons for leaving are invariably ‘they were messing me around’, usually over money (although this also applied to the college he attended). Breaking the cycle seems impossible for him at the moment.

**Personal reflection**

Andrew was a friendly and likeable character who spoke openly and articulately about his life. He was enthusiastic about his job, and talked of enjoying the company of his workmates. However, by the time I spoke to him again, less than a week later, he had left that job, saying they were ‘messing him around’ over his pay. He had started a new job. I felt a certain irritation with Andrew, which I did not feel with the others. He was bright and capable, yet he was wasting his talents. I forgot, for a little while, the nature of SEBD, its invisibility and complex manifestations, and I lost my tolerance towards him. What chance do young people like him have, then, in dealing with others who do not have my experience and so-called knowledge? How can he be expected to cope in the mainstream world of college and work?

**Social support**

As with Ryan, Andrew failed to attend the second interview (in spite of agreeing to two separate appointments). The information on his support network lacks detail, although he told me a lot about his family and friends in his first interview. Andrew has a supportive family, both immediate and extended. They seem to step in for each other when things get difficult (when his father left, and his mother developed arthritis, and when Andrew got an ASBO). He has a few close friends (including his cousins).
It is impossible to say from the available data in what ways his family and friends support him, apart from giving him a home and socialising with him. However, he placed great value on them, and said he felt well-supported overall.

**Capital**

Andrew has an advantage over the other participants in that he has achieved more academically, and although he is not using his qualifications at the moment, they will still be there in the future, should he decide to use them. Although all his extended family seems to be working, he has not used his family as a way of finding work. Instead he has used his own resources, finding work through newspaper advertisements, and through contacts he made whilst at college.

He has not, to date, made maximum use of the capital available to him. His desire to do things on his own, without the help of those around him leaves him vulnerable to exploitation, and being led astray. His rejection of the education system means he is not making use of his greatest asset, his intelligence.
Dear [Head teacher’s name]

I am a PhD student at the University of Manchester researching the transitional experiences of school leavers with SEBD, and I would like to include [school name] in my study. I intend to involve a residential and day special school and a mainstream school in the study, and follow their leavers for the first year out of school. I hope to gain a detailed picture of what has happened to the young people since they left, and what has helped and hindered them in making the transition to college or work.

I enclose a summary of my research plan and details of what I would require from you, should you choose to participate. I will contact you in the next week to see if you are interested, and arrange a meeting to answer any questions you may have. I hope you will then feel able to decide whether you wish to participate or not. I understand that schools are very busy places, but I do feel that this research will benefit everyone involved.

Thank you for taking the time to read about my research, and I look forward (hopefully) to meeting you soon.

Yours sincerely,

Me
Appendix 4: Research plan summary

Research Plan Summary

Issue to be explored:
The move out of school into mainstream life is difficult for students with SEBD. We have all known young people who have failed, dramatically, in making the transition and found themselves homeless, imprisoned, drug-addicted or dead. Keeping track of what happens when students leave is beyond the remit schools, so information about what helps and what hinders them in making the transition is limited. This study aims to find out what the barriers to success are for young people with SEBD leaving school, and what has helps them.

The researcher – who am I and why am I doing this?
My first experience of working with young people was as a care worker in a residential school for boys with SEBD (a baptism of fire!). I later worked as a youth worker, encountering teenagers with similar problems in a community setting. I love working with challenging youngsters, and my experience has kindled in me a desire to find better ways of helping them.

I began a BA in Childhood and Youth Studies with the Open University in 2001, and 4½ years later graduated with first class honours. I went on to a Masters in Educational Research at the University of Manchester. My dissertation, a pilot study for this research, focussed on the transitional experiences of young people with SEBD who had left a day special school in the previous three years. The findings were interesting but limited, leaving me with further questions I wanted to answer. These are the basis of this study.

Research questions
This study will address the following questions:
a) How do educational establishments manage the transition process for pupils with SEBD as they move from school to adult life?
How are transitional support programmes experienced by the ex-pupils?
a) To what extent do young people with SEBD have access to professional help and other support during this period?
What are the young people’s views of the support available to them?

3. a) Are levels of support maintained, increased or diminished when young people finish compulsory education?

b) How do the young people perceive any changes?
4. Does the support (both professional and informal) available to school-leavers vary in mainstream, residential and day special schools?

What will I need from you?
[Parental consent to participate for any year 11 pupils you identify as having SEBD]
[Parental consent to participate for as many of your year 11 pupils as possible.]
[Parental consent to participate for as many year 11 boarders as possible.]
Access to your transition policy documents.
An interview with the teacher with responsibility for transition planning in your school.
An introduction to your school’s Connexions advisor.
To visit your school and spend some informal time (lunch-times?) with the pupils you select for participation.
To interview each participating pupil twice between January and April, 2009, with each interview lasting up to an hour (though many will be less).

What do I want to do?
I will follow a group of school-leavers with SEBD, from different types of educational placement, for a year. I will focus on the support available to them, the way they use it, and the influence of school policies and educational placement on the help they access. I aim to gain an in-depth understanding of the young people’s transitional experiences, identifying not just what happens to them, but how they feel about themselves and their lives, their motivations for their actions, and their individual support needs.

The first stage of the research will take place before the young people leave school (January-April, 2009). In order to gain a rounded picture of them, their education and their experiences I want to spend time with them before they leave school, and gain information from them about their lives so far, their aspirations and the support they feel is available to them in the run up to leaving school. This will be done in two interviews; one focused on their history, the other their support networks. Longitudinal data will then be collected from September 2009-September 2010, when I will meet with them at regular intervals to find out how they are doing.

I also want to understand how the school and Connexions service influences their transitions. Therefore, I will collect policy documents relating to transition planning from each school, and analyse them, to identify key elements in each school’s transition policy and differences between them. This will be the focus for interviews with the teacher with responsibility for transition planning in each setting, and each school’s Connexions advisor.

I would also like to speak to the parents of the school-leavers, although this is likely to be problematic. Ideally, I wish to hold a focus group meeting with the parents to discuss how they feel about their child leaving school, supplemented by a ‘secret box’ into which they could put any concerns they felt unable to raise in front of the other parents. However, I realise that I may be unable to get enough parents to agree to
participate to make the activity worthwhile. In this case, I hope to interview parents individually, early in the transition process.

Why would you do it?
Schools often lose contact with their leavers. Few schools have the time or resources to follow their leavers and find out how their policies affect them as they move into the mainstream of life. This research will bridge the gap between the participating schools and their leavers, and the findings will be fed back to help develop transition planning. A pilot study for this project offered justification for the participating school’s existing development plans, as well as highlighting aspects of transitional support that could be improved.

This study will benefit the young people who participate, as I will be monitoring their progress and will offer guidance when it is needed. It will benefit the school, since you will be able to see what is working for your leavers, and what may need tweaking. It will benefit the Connexions workers associated with the participating schools, as they will have the chance to see how others operate, and to see how their work affects their clients’ lives. It will involve the commitment of some time, but I hope the rewards will more than compensate for the effort.
Appendix 5: Letter to parents/carers

Dear

A colleague of mine, Zoe O'Riordan, a PhD student at the University of Manchester, is carrying out a study into what happens to young people with SEBD when they leave school. [School name] is one of three schools she is using for her study.

She plans to interview year 11 pupils before they leave school to find out a bit about who they are, what plans they have and who they think will help them when they leave school. She then wants to keep in touch with them over the following year to find out what happens to them and why (see enclosed research plan for more information). She would also like to talk to you about how you feel about your child leaving school.

Yours sincerely

(Headteacher)

I do/do not consent to my child ...................... participating in this study.

Signed........................................Parent/Carer

I do/do not consent to the school giving Zoe a contact number so she can talk to me.

Preferred contact number:..........................................................

Signed..............................(Student)........................................(Parent)
Appendix 6: Parents’ research summary

What is the research about?

Young people with who have had problems while at school often struggle to cope with life when they leave, so this research is looking at what happens after school, and what support they have. I aim to find out who helps, what makes life harder for them, and to find better ways of supporting them.

The researcher – who am I and why am I doing this?

My first experience of working with young people was as a care worker in a residential school for boys with SEBD. Having had a baby, residential work no longer suited me, so I became a youth worker and met teenagers with similar problems. Getting to know all these young people, and seeing the troubles they had, made me want to find better ways of helping them.

To do this I needed an education! I hadn’t done as well at school as I might. School didn’t suit me, and I was a difficult, disruptive pupil. Fortunately, the Open University let me begin a degree with no ‘A’ levels and I eventually got a BA in Childhood and Youth Studies. I went on to do a Masters in Educational Research at the University of Manchester. My dissertation, a pilot study for this research, focussed experiences of school-leavers with SEBD who had left a day special school in the previous three years. The findings were interesting but limited, leaving me with further questions I wanted to answer. These are the basis of this study.

What do I want to do?

I will follow a group of school-leavers from three schools (residential, day special and mainstream) for a year. Before the young people leave school I want to spend some time with them and find out who they are: about their lives so far, their aspirations and the support they feel is available to them in the run up to leaving school. This will be done in two interviews; one focused on their history, the other their support networks. I will then contact them every few months over the next year to see how they do, and who really helps them.

I will also be talking to the teacher with responsibility for transition planning in each school, and the Connexions advisers. I’d like to talk to you, the parents/carers, now, about how you feel about your child leaving school and how well prepared you think they are, and at the end of the year, about how you feel they have coped.

What will your child gain out of this?

This is a research project. I will not be giving you or your child any direct help or guidance. However, I will be available to you and your child, should you have a
problem and not know who to turn to. I will not become directly involved, but I will offer advice on who to go to. Your child may also benefit from having someone tracking their progress through the transition out of school. I hope to be a sympathetic ear for them. The study should help us improve what we offer the next group of young people with behaviour problems when they leave school.

All information given to me, by them and you, will be confidential (within certain legal limitations), and I will make sure you are not recognisable in my final report, and any academic papers or presentations I make based on this study.
Appendix 7: Non-participants at Mosshead

1. Attending specialist unit. Described as having very weak skills, a non-attender, with a mother who has special needs.

2. A looked after child who was living with his aunt, but who has now found his dad and gone to be with him in another area. A bright boy with serious behaviour problems.

3. The young person is on ‘extended study leave’ and the school has no current contact number.

4. A young person who has a brother in school showing similar problems. The school made several attempts to contact mum, leaving messages each time, but she didn’t return any calls.

5. The pupil has arranged to start attending a local college. His mum said no, point blank.

6. All the children in this young person’s family have behaviour issues. Mum doesn’t answer the phone to the school.

7. Another looked after child who is on extended study leave. The school does not have a current contact number.

8. The young person has been in ‘prison’. The teacher believes he is out, but has been unable to contact the family.
Appendix 8: Support network map

[Diagram of a network map with categories: Practical support, Information, Emotional support, and Esteem. The map is centered around a node labeled '[Name of participant]' with branches pointing to each category.]

N.B. The maps used with the young people were hand-drawn, on A2 sized paper, in the young person’s presence, as I explained each category of support. I am not able to include any original data, given highly personal nature of the information shared by them, since, with such a small sample, it is likely to make participants identifiable to those who know them.
Appendix 9: Initial Case Study

Case Study 3

Andrew Y13 Linton Hall

History

Andrew was born in a lay-by on the way to hospital! He lived in a two bed council flat with his mum and dad, brother (now 22) and sister (now 26). In 2000 his parents had another daughter (now aged 9) and the family moved into a 3 bed house. They have since had 2 further children, a five year old girl and a 10 month old boy. Andrew is close to his older brother, who has left home now. He stops over at his brother’s flat and they go out together. He is very taken with his baby brother, even though he is a bit of a handful!

Andrew’s dad works for an agency doing the bins and that. However, the recession has meant there has not been much work for him recently. His mum is a full-time mum. His older sister, who still lives at home works for a cleaning company.

Andrew went to nursery and primary school and both were alright. Towards the end of primary and into secondary school he began to have problems. He has been diagnosed as having ADHD, for which he takes medication. He feels the medication helps him to be calm and focussed and that he is high when he doesn’t take it. The mainstream secondary he was sent to did not support him properly and he only stayed there for just under a year. He was happy to leave mainstream school.

Having missed considerable time from school, Andrew started at Linton Hall in 2003. He found being at a residential school hard at first, but he got used to it. His being away gave his parents a bit of space from him, and that made things better when he went home. He got 4 GCSEs, in maths (G), English (F), ICT (C) and PE (F?). Andrew has done well at Linton Hall. He used to be aggressive sometimes, but he isn’t any more. The staff are very fond of him.

His placement was extended a further 2 years, and he has been going to 6th form college in a city 20 miles from school. He has completed a life skills course which included ICT, English, Maths, and money management. He will get a qualification at the end of it.

At home Andrew is friends with lots of the bus drivers, and he likes to ride the buses and chat with them. He doesn’t drink because his mum and dad have told him it is not a good idea with his medication. Sometimes he goes to youth clubs when he has spare time. He also goes out with his older brother. He recently completed his Bronze Duke of Edinburgh award through his college.

Andrew has to leave Linton Hall this summer. He plans to move back home, where he will be given his brother’s old room (his sister will have to move out of it). He plans to
go to a local college, but he is not sure what course he is on. He got information about courses at home from the school’s Connexions worker. He has not met any Connexions workers from home yet. He expects to get EMA. He feels it is going to be hard to leave school, and that he will miss the staff, but it has to be done sometime.

**Personality**

Andrew is cheerful and likeable. He seems keen to please. He speaks with confidence about his time and relationships at school, but is less sure of himself when talking about going home. He is keen to put a positive veneer on his future, but I’m not sure that it travels below the surface. He is well-liked by the staff at Linton Hall and is seen as a success.

He passively refuses to discuss his bad behaviour and aggression. It’s not him now. He failed in mainstream school because he has adhd, they couldn’t cope with it (not him, it). He doesn’t say he was worse behaved in secondary school, he says he got noticed, suggesting it was the school that changed, not him – school is both problem and solution.

Laughs a lot through the interview. Seems to be trying to purvey an image of a cheerful chappy, slightly eccentric, part of a large and happy family – although he admits him being away from home has made all lives easier. He comes across as child-like. When he talks about leaving school and starting life alone it is more like a young teenager talking – there is a naivety to his talk. He’s keen to emphasise that he’s ready to face the world alone, but also wanting to stay at school, and return if things become difficult at home.

‘It’s gonna be hard, but you have to leave some time.’
‘Outside world, I’m coming at you!’
‘Up to me, innit!’
Re school staff: ‘If it weren’t for them...keeping an eye on my and that.’
Repeatedly talks about coming back and camping in school garden.

**Difficulties**

Diagnosed Asperger’s and ADHD (medicated). Problems building relationships with peers? Describes Lucas as a mate he shares problems with, describes relationship as reciprocal. Lucas does not talk about him in the same way. Only home friends are bus drivers (captive friends?).

**Support Network**

He has relied heavily on the school staff for support. He does not seem to have friends at home, other than the bus drivers with whom he has no contact off the buses. He feels his immediate family are behind him. He has contact with his Gran and mentions an uncle. He says he has other family around, but can’t remember them.
Aspirations/Motivations

Andrew is keen to be independent. He feels it is time for him to stand on his own two feet. At the same time he seems quite afraid of leaving school. His college choices have been guided by the Connexions worker, to the point where he has no idea what course he will be doing in September. He also doesn’t know what qualifications he has earned in the last 2 years.

Has the cosseted world of the special school given him time to mature, or allowed him the space not to have to?
Appendix 10: Complete case study - Andrew

Andrew (m, 20/11/90) Linton Hall - residential

History

Andrew was born in a lay-by on the way to Hospital! He lived in a two bed council flat with his mum and dad, brother (now 22) and sister (now 26). In 2000 his parents had another daughter (now aged 9) and the family moved into a 3 bed house. They have since had 2 further children, a five year old girl and a 10 month old boy. Andrew is close to his brother, who has left home now. He stops over at his brother’s flat and they go out together. He is very taken with his baby brother, even though he is a bit of a handful!

Andrew’s dad works for an agency doing the bins and that. However, the recession has meant there has not been much work for him recently. His mum is a full-time mum. His older sister, who still lives at home, works for a cleaning company.

Andrew went to nursery and primary school and both were ‘alright’. Towards the end of primary and into secondary school he began to have problems. He has been diagnosed as having ADHD, for which he takes medication. He feels the medication helps him to be calm and focussed and that he is high when he doesn’t take it. The mainstream secondary he was sent to did not support him properly and he only stayed there for just under a year. He was happy to leave mainstream school.

Having missed considerable time from school, Andrew started at Linton Hall in 2003. He found being at a residential school hard at first, but he got used to it. He felt that his being away at school gave his parents a bit of space from him, and that made things better when he went home. He got 4 GCSEs, in maths (G), English (F), ICT (C) and PE (F?). Andrew has done well at Linton Hall. He used to be aggressive sometimes, but he isn’t any more. The staff are very fond of him.

His placement was extended a further 2 years, and he has been going to a 6th form college in [city close to school]. He has completed a life skills course which included ICT, English, Maths, and money management. He will get a qualification at the end of it.

At home Andrew is friends with lots of the bus drivers, and he likes to ride the buses and chat with them. He doesn’t drink because his mum and dad have told him it is not a good idea with his medication. Sometimes he goes to youth clubs when he has spare time. He also goes out with his older brother. He recently completed his Bronze Duke of Edinburgh Award through his college.
Andrew has to leave Linton Hall this summer. He plans to move back home, where he will be given his brother’s old room (his sister will have to move out of it). He plans to go to college in a neighbouring town, but he is not sure what course he is on. He got information about courses from the school’s Connexions worker. He has not met any Connexions workers from home yet. He expects to get EMA. He feels it is going to be hard to leave school, and that he will miss the staff, but it has to be done sometime.

**Post school update**

**January**
Andrew was offered a place at college, but didn’t want to be college-based any more. He has been NEET since returning home. In his spare time he rides on the buses and helps at the bus depot. He takes this very seriously and considers it to be his ‘work’. His parents are very supportive, but are finding his return home full-time difficult. They would like him to be placed in some sort of sheltered housing provision, but are struggling to find a way of accessing it. They are in contact with the Connexions worker, and she is going to help them.

**May**
Andrew is still unemployed and refusing education. Things have become more difficult at home. He is hanging around with a gang of boy-racers, staying out late or all night at times. He has been brought home by the police several times after threatening to jump off a bridge. His Connexions worker and a learning disability support worker from the job centre are working with him, but do not appear to be making any progress. His mother is exasperated with the situation. He cannot gain access to supported housing without being made homeless, and spending time in a hostel first. His mother does not feel he would cope in the hostel, and so is unwilling to make this happen.

**November (phone call)**
Things have settled down at home a bit. Andrew continues to have ‘tantrums’ but his family are better able to cope with them. He is still NEET, but is going to a job search club. It is unclear what will happen at the end of the job search course. He is accepting the rules of home now (in by 11 or not at all) and is not hanging out with the boy racers as much. His family continues to support him, but would like more help.

His mum feels that he should have been better supported in making the move home. The lateness of the decision on his extended placement at Linton Hall made this impossible for the school to set up, and there seems to be nothing in place locally to help young people like Andrew returning home.

*Analysis of data (role of individual, family, informal support, and services)*
Individual

Diagnosis: Asperger’s and ADHD.

Lack of emotional Awareness/insight:
E.g. discussion of meds (LG) ‘Keeps me calm, keeps me focussed so I don’t go over the top.’ ‘If I take it they notice I’m calm, but if I’m high they know that either I haven’t taken it or I haven’t took the right amount and then they can see a difference. I’m high.’

All talk is about what they see in him, there is no reflection on what he sees in himself. It is the same talking about his behaviour in mainstream school – ‘as I got older it got more and more noticed’. He acknowledges his own aggression previously, but has no insight into its causes.

Lack of social skills;
Mum: ‘He couldn’t work in a shop...no way he’d work in a shop. It wouldn’t work for him or the other people.’ Dad: ‘If someone upset him he’d have ‘em!’

He didn’t engage with the interview when I went to his home. He interrupted the conversation frequently with snippets he’d heard on the radio, information about his plans, playing with his baby brother, cooking, but struggled to engage with the conversation we were having. He was unhappy at my being there, he thought I was coming another day, and this seemed to be what upset him most.

He was beaten up outside a local pub where he was hanging out with the bouncers, pretending to be one of them, and although he sees the attack as completely unprovoked it appears his behaviour annoyed someone (mum)!

‘He’s going to be helping doing voluntary work with the police...but he keeps telling everyone he’s going to have them arrested’ (mum) and he wonders why this doesn’t go down well!

On moving home he will take his sister’s bedroom, and she will have to move in with her two younger sisters (she is 26, they are 10 and 5) but Andrew is convinced that ‘she won’t mind’. This shows considerable lack of insight into his sister’s potential feelings (in the event sister moved out anyway).

Obsessions:
‘He’s always loved his buses and trains!’ Books and mags piled under his bed (at 19?). ‘I think if he had the choice he’d go and work on the buses’ (Mum) ‘I am going to work on the buses.’ (Andrew) ‘Even if it’s just cleaning them’ (Mum). His social life is centred on the buses, and he has a timetable of ‘work’, which shifts he is riding the buses on. He also helps out at the bus station.
**Self belief – leaving school**

In spite of his difficulties Andrew has a strong belief in his ability to act in his life. On leaving school and facing the world, dealing with problems: ‘It’s up to me, innit!’ ‘I’d get meself back!’ (response to being asked who he would turn to if he was stuck somewhere away from home with no money). ‘Outside world, I’m coming at ya!’ Source of support= ‘Myself!’. On leaving home: ‘As soon as I can find somewhere, when I’m older I’ll find a flat and move out.’

He is realistic about the difficulties of leaving school: ‘It’s gonna be hard, but you have to leave some time. That’s life, innit!’ But when I present him with hypothetical problems in his future: ‘I want to live in the garden, right here. Camp, right there!’ ‘I’d get them to get a bed here. Tell them, I’m coming back!’

**Family**

The family is large, and supportive (Andrew’s brother takes him out; oldest sister taking 10 yr old to dancing performance in Blackpool). Of the 6 children only Andrew has had problems at school. Andrew values his family: source of esteem ‘knowing I’ve got a good family’, friendship - older brother = favourite: ‘He’s actually got his own flat with a mate and I can go and stay with him sometimes’, advice – ‘cause I’m on medication mum and dad advise that I don’t drink alcohol...yet!’. The extended family is also around, particularly Andrew’s paternal grandmother and maternal uncle, who he sees ‘when I’ve got time on my hands’. There is other family around but ‘it’s just hard to remember them all’, suggesting some detachment (consequence of residential schooling?), or there are so many he can’t be bothered to tell me them all.

In spite of closeness, family is still struggling with reintegrating Andrew full-time into their lives. Andrew recently had his mother in an arm lock, and regularly complains to police about his parents (Mum) (suggested he needed to contact police while I was there because his mother said he was trouble, reckoned she could be done under the terrorism act).

They were prepared for the difficulty; ‘Even [school keyworker] said it would be hard for him to get back into living at home and it has been. It’s been really hard. Not just for him, but for everybody else.’ Residential school helped with the over-crowding and gave the family a break: ‘Bit of a relief, it gives them a bit more space when I’m not there.’ His parents would like him placed in supported housing, where he could have the independence that, at 19, he wants, with the support he needs.

Andrew does not always respect his parent’s opinion: ‘He goes down the Copse, doesn’t he, and I don’t like it, but I don’t like telling him what to do.’
Informal support/friends

Andrew claimed a best friend at school: ‘My mate [other pupil], he’s my best mate and he’s there if I’m down, and I’m there if he’s feeling down. We look after each other.’ However, the friend did not feel the same way about him, and found his incessant talk of buses and trains hard work. They have not stayed in contact since Andrew left school. His only other social contact is the bus drivers: ‘I’m mates with some drivers…and they do a [bus route into town] and my mates are always driving it.’ However, they have no contact off the buses.

Andrew goes to youth clubs sometimes ‘when he has time’, but has no particular friends there.

Having been at home for a while he made friends with a group of ‘boy racers’ who he hung out with for a while. This caused some problems at home (staying out half the night, worrying his parents). This may have been a way of proving he was a ‘grown-up’ – cars are a mark of independence. Eventually he stopped seeing so much of them and settled down again.

Services

Andrew describes going to Linton Hall as a positive move, to compensate for mainstream school’s failure, not his problem: ‘I’ve got ADHD and they couldn’t support my needs, that’s why I came here.’ ‘I thought it would be better to try and find a school like this’.

At Linton Hall Andrew was quite reliant on the staff for support: ‘If it weren’t for them I wouldn’t be here, cause they keep an eye on my and that.’ ‘I’ll miss the staff. The staff have known me for quite a long time…they always say if I’ve got a problem I can always speak to them.’ On leaving school all this is gone.

The original placement extension worked well: ‘The education offered me it. Well, I asked, well the school asked the education if they would fund it for another 2 years and this is my last year.’ But the request for a further extension was mismanaged the family feel: ‘It didn’t help that they didn’t let us know until the holidays’ when it was too late to appeal.

The move up to college does not appear to have been well-handled. At Linton Hall, Andrew told me he was ‘hopefully going to [neighbouring town] College’, although he had no idea what course he might be going to do. Later he said ‘I actually didn’t apply for college – they applied for me.’ ‘I was pushed into it’. ‘He went purely because he was pushed into it. He didn’t really wanna go, did you?’ (mum) ‘The lady from the education’ suggested an alternative course when she came down, but the later found out he couldn’t go on it because it wasn’t suited to his needs.
There seems to be a problem in the services provided because the family has no history of service use – they have always coped, but then Andrew has been at school most of the time – and his problems are not seen as severe enough.

On DLA: ‘They said he might not need it because he hasn’t actually got a learning disability.’ – the difference between a difficulty and a disability?

**Placement**

At the end of the year Andrew started going to a job club, which he attended consistently. There did not seem to be a plan for what would follow.

**Responses to the research questions**

1) **What happened to Andrew when he made the transition out of compulsory education?**

Andrew’s placement at Linton Hall House was extended so that he was 18 when he left. The school had hoped that he would be able to stay for a further year, but this was rejected by the Local Authority. Unfortunately this decision was not made until the beginning of the summer break, by which time it was too late to put support in place for Andrew and his family when he returned home.

Andrew found it difficult to settle in at home, and his family struggled. He initially refused any form of training or education, saying that he had spent enough time in school. He has been supported by a Connexions worker and a Disability Employment worker. A year after leaving school he has been persuaded to go on a ‘Job Search’ course, which he has attended regularly. This is only an eleven week course, and the family do not know what he will do after it.

Andrew has had a lot of problems over the year. He took to staying out late, and was once beaten up; he spent time hanging out with people his mum described as a ‘bad lot’ (boy racers); he was brought home by the police more than once, when he was threatening to jump off a bridge. The family found this very difficult to cope with, but things did settle down after about 14 months at home. Andrew began accepting house rules (home by 11pm, call if late for meals) and stopped spending time with the boy racers. He still had his ‘tantrums’ but his mum felt better able to cope with them.

Andrew wanted to leave home (an idea supported by mum), but would need sheltered accommodation. He could only gain access to this by being made homeless by his mother and being temporarily housed in a hostel. His mum would not consider taking this action, seeing him as too vulnerable to survive in such a place.
2) **What helped him in making this transition?**

*Personal factors:*
Andrew is part of a close and supportive family. They do not have a lot of resources, and they have lots of other children to think of as well as Andrew. However, they provide a stable and loving home, and they stick with him through everything. They help him with trying to gain work experience (on buses and with police – didn’t come off).

Although he can be moody, Andrew has a generally sunny nature and is optimistic. He’s friendly and happy to talk, and this helps him find people who are willing to help him (as the bus drivers, school key worker and home Connexions worker have). He takes responsibility for his own life, and expects to have to look after himself.

Andrew wants to work: he has long term goals – independence in his own home – which require money, and is willing to persevere with job hunting until he is successful (hence willingness to go on job search course, but no others). His employment goals are realistic.

*Institutional/service related factors:*
He has a good relationship with his Connexions worker, who he sees informally when he goes to youth club, as well as in formal sessions. She has persevered with him until he has felt ready to accept a placement (although only job search club).

3) **What hindered Andrew in making this transition?**

*Personal factors:*
Limited qualifications and work experience. Social network provides little access to employment opportunities.

He sees himself as a young adult, ready to take on adult life (own home, working). But others see him as still vulnerable, with special needs, needing further training before he can work, and support to live independently.

*Institutional/service related factors:*
The decision about his placement was made very late in the year, leaving little time to find an appropriate placement for him. There has been no reintegration support for the family in having him home full time. They were told it would be difficult, but no-one provided them with any support. They have had to find their own way through the difficulties.

It seems the advice given by the Connexions worker at the school was not appropriate. Andrew felt pushed, not guided, in his choice of course. Andrew seems to have been placed on a course that seemed appropriate to the worker, rather than him, his family or his key worker.
The only way to access the supported housing that the family feel he needs to move towards independence is through homelessness, a move that is unacceptable to his loving mother. It is unclear how he will make the move to living away from his family without some help.

Andrew left school at a time when the country was entering a deep recession, which has seen youth unemployment rise to unprecedented highs. With so much competition for so few jobs it is hard to see how there will be space for him in the open employment market at the present time.