A Long and Winding Road to Employment?: Disabled Young People in Northern Ireland Making The Transition to Adulthood

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A Long and Winding Road To Employment? Disabled Young People in Northern Ireland Making The Transition to Adulthood

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Abstract

This paper presents the findings of a qualitative research project that explores the experiences and aspirations of disabled young people in Northern Ireland as they make and deal with the transition to adulthood. The study involved young people with disabilities (n=76) in four areas of Northern Ireland, ensuring a geographical spread, an urban/rural mix and representation of both communities. Young people with learning disabilities were included as well as those with physical and/or sensory impairments. This paper focuses on those who were completing job training or work placements and examines the role of such schemes in assisting young people's transition to adulthood. The research found that many young people had positive experiences of work placement and job training and that social interaction was important to them. Few young people, however, had made the actual transition from work placement or training to 'real' employment.

Keywords: disabilities; young people; employment training; work; social interaction

Introduction

In the context of the human life cycle, the transition from adolescence to adulthood represents for young people a major developmental phase in their journey towards establishing social and economic independence and personal autonomy in an adult world. As young people leave school and enter further education, employment training or employment, social groups break up and reform which can in turn create a
bewildering degree of uncertainty and apprehension in their lives. Young people with disabilities, however, may have additional difficulties and challenges to deal with in the course of their development towards adult status (Wagner et al., 1991). Many social groups, for example, are not integrated and do not easily accept young people with disabilities. In addition, the relationships built up with adults throughout childhood may in fact increase the risk of continued dependency and may make it more difficult for disabled young people to become more autonomous in a society where self-sufficiency and independence receive widespread recognition and social endorsement.

This article looks at the experiences of disabled young people making the transition between school and employment in Northern Ireland in the course of their transition to adulthood. While there is a substantial body of literature and research on transitional issues in adolescence (Coleman and Hendry, 1999; Mutss, 1996; Kroger, 1996; Steinberg, 1996), there has been a comparative lack of qualitative research analysing the views and experiences of young disabled people negotiating this important stage of the life course. The article reports on a study of seventy-six disabled young people aged between 16-21 making the transition from school to employment in Northern Ireland. It concentrates on the findings in relation to the 23 disabled young people who were in a job placement or training scheme at the time of the research. The results of the study are compared with other research studies in the UK and Europe on transition to adulthood for young disabled people. The implications for practice and policy development in Northern Ireland are also addressed.

The transition to adulthood

It has long been recognised that the transition to adulthood is a complex process involving a dynamic interplay of personal, social, psychological and economic factors. Contemporary theorists of youth transition (Coles, 1995; Irwin, 1995; McGinty and Fish, 1992) view the process as consisting of a number of key transitional goals which are interconnected to holistically represent adult life. It is suggested that while these individual elements do not necessarily occur at the same time, they are none the less inter-related and one element or attribute can impact on the progress of the other. Coles (1995), for example, suggests that in addition to making the transition from school to work, young people may be expected to move away from the family home and establish alternative domestic arrangements as well as negotiating an independent housing transition from the family home before they are accorded adult status. According to McGinty and Fish (1992) the transition to adulthood is viewed as both a phase in time and a process of personal growth and development consisting of three main stages, which may occur at different times for
different individuals. In this model, young people are seen to pass from the final years of school on to further education and job training before progressing to the last stage in which employment and independent living are gradually secured.

Other conceptual frameworks of the transition process (OECD, 1986; Hirst, Parker and Cozen, 1995; Morrow and Richards, 1996; Barnardo's, 1996) propose similar transitional goals to be accomplished by young people as they move into adult life, Morrow and Richards (1996) for example view the transition to adulthood as a ‘disjunction’ with a number of inter-connected adult attributes (legal, financial, social, parenthood) occurring at different times in the young person’s life. Bullock et al’s (1998) two-dimensional model of the transition to adulthood (life route and life process) further reflects the inter-relational nature of this developmental phase while Monteith (2000) highlights the complex interplay between personal, social, economic, cultural and environmental factors as transitional goals are progressively negotiated.

While young people with disabilities should be afforded the same opportunities and choices as other young people and follow a similar transitional pathway in respect of education, training, employment, leisure, social life and independent living, research studies have identified notable differences between the two groups. In previous studies, a number of areas of concern have been identified. These included the high degree of social isolation of young disabled people which worsened after leaving school, a higher incidence of psychological problems compared to non-disabled peers, lack of confidence and self-esteem and difficulty finding or keeping a job (Anderson and Clarke, 1982). In a ten-year follow-up study of the previous research, Clarke and Hurst (1989) found that few of the young people in Anderson and Clarke’s study had made the transition to a more independent adult life. This cohort of disabled young people were less likely to have had a paid job, to have set up a home on their own, to have married or have become a parent, compared to other young people in the general population. In an earlier study, Walker (1982) also found that young disabled people were less likely to have experienced paid employment and were more likely to experience unemployment than other young people. Indeed, similar findings were reported throughout the 1970s and 1980s in relation to young people with learning disabilities, which highlighted, in particular, their vulnerable and marginalised position within the labour market in Britain (Roberts, 1975; May and Hughes, 1986), America (Richardson, 1978; 1988) and Ireland (O’Callaghan and Toomey, 1980, cited in May and Hughes, 1988).

Hirst and Baldwin (1994) conducted the most recent, comprehensive British study of young disabled people’s experiences of the transition to adulthood. This research involved interviews with a nationally representative sample of young people. It incorporated a large sample of disabled young people, covering all the teenage years.
and included all types and degrees of disability. The study examined how young people with disabilities made the transition to adulthood and considered how their experiences differed from those of other young people in the general population. While the study concluded that the lives and circumstances of disabled young people can fall within the range of other young people, similarities with the findings of earlier research (Anderson and Clarke, 1982; Clarke and Hurst, 1989) into the experiences of disabled young people were still prevalent. For example, respondents were less likely to be in paid work than their non-disabled peers and were often less prepared for and less likely to be living independently of their parents. Furthermore, it was estimated that between 30-40 per cent of disabled young people would find it difficult to achieve a level of independence in adult life that would be comparable to that of other young people. As they leave education, disabled young people are less likely to have access to employment resulting in them having less spending power and financial independence compared to other young people (McGinty and Fish, 1992). In relation to unemployment, for example, it has been shown that disabled young people are prone to experiencing higher rates of unemployment than their non-disabled peers (Freshwater and Leyden, 1989) which can be more than double the rate for the total economically active population among those aged 16-24 who have a health problem or a disability (Youthaid, 1995). Furthermore, American research by Blackorby and Wagner (1996) found that although the rate of employment for young disabled people rose in the 2-3 years after leaving high school, it lagged significantly behind the employment rate of youth in the general population in the first five years after high school.

Although school career services and the role of teachers play an important part in helping guide and advise young disabled people about future career choices and vocational preparation (Morningstar et al, 1995; Whitney-Thomas and Hanley-Maxwell, 1996), structural, procedural and organisational barriers in the post-school transition planning process mitigate against the effective inclusion and empowerment of disabled school-leavers in respect of future vocational goals (Tisdall, 1996; 1997). Research by Armstrong and Davies (1995) for example, found that while the careers advice and support offered to young people with learning disabilities at school was generally helpful, the lack of coherence in this regard after leaving school made the young people particularly vulnerable when they moved to employment, training or further education. Other researchers (Hirst, 1984; Parker, 1984) have even suggested that the education, training and preparation for work undertaken by young disabled people had made little difference to the proportion of them finding employment.

In relation to the value of the segregated education and training system in assisting young disabled people with the transition to adulthood, interesting findings have been reported. Research by Rodgers et al (1994) who surveyed 108 physically and sensory impaired people who had experienced segregated education and training in Northern Ireland, found generally low levels of satisfaction among respondents. Teachers, for
example, were reported as having low expectations of the abilities of the young people and tended to steer them towards stereotypical jobs for disabled people with considerable emphasis given to progressing towards a training centre. Input from employers was minimal and the experiences offered at the special colleges of further education were viewed as basically an extension of those afforded at school. Although it was acknowledged that segregated employment training provided useful opportunities for the development of basic educational competencies and social/interpersonal skills, the extent to which it prepared them for work in the ‘real’ world was questionable. For many, it seemed that training was viewed as an end in itself and not a means to finding eventual employment; while others were highly critical of the low-level and menial tasks which constituted ‘work experience’, invariably resulting in low self-esteem and self-worth among the trainees.

For disabled people who made the transition to ‘adulthood’ and who have been involved in a variety of training schemes and employment, evaluations of the experiences have similarly been less than complimentary. Research by Kitchin et al (1998) who examined disabled people’s experience of employment in Donegal, found that structural, cultural and attitudinal barriers militated against disabled people securing meaningful employment. In addition to the ‘conveyor belt’ (p. 804) of inadequate training schemes which invariably led to unemployment and not to work, the negative and discriminatory attitude of employers to disabled people, often based on ignorance and fear, significantly diminished their opportunity for gaining long-term paid employment.

Similar findings have also been reported in Britain. According to Barnes et al (1998), disabled people were sceptical about the value of training schemes which did not lead to real, sustainable jobs with wages for the market rate for the job. Furthermore, too many employment projects were seen to concentrate on training and entering work rather than sustaining employment while the training offered was considered too basic to meet employers’ requirements. As reported by Kitchin et al (1998), negative attitudes on the part of employers and colleagues served to stifle rather than foster the potential of disabled employees.

Despite recommendations by researchers throughout the 1980s (Walker, 1982; Anderson and Clarke, 1982) for better preparation for disabled young people about the world of open employment, developments in this regard have been limited in the U.K. However, creative initiatives, addressing the realities of work experience and employment training for young people with learning difficulties in the school context (Winup, 1992) and in the further education setting (Jones, 1992), have been established in Birmingham and Cardiff respectively. Other supported employment projects for young people with learning disabilities in England, Wales and Northern
Ireland (Tackney, 1992), Ireland (Walsh et al, 1992), New Zealand (Hinge, 1992) as well as a vocational training project in Scotland (Catterson, 1992), have also been successful in creating and maintaining valuable contacts with employers and in marketing and promoting their clients. Because vocational preparation alone is often insufficient to guarantee trainees a job (McConkey and McGinley, 1992), new and innovative partnerships in supported employment need to be professionally and strategically negotiated with the business world in order to promote and demonstrate the contribution disabled young people can make to the local and national economy (Wertheimer, 1992).

An innovative project recently implemented in Northern Ireland was successful in establishing valuable work opportunities for people with learning disabilities. Project ‘Career’, a European programme funded through the European Union’s ‘Employment: Horizon’ initiative, was implemented in South and East Belfast between 1995-1998 and ran concurrently with similar projects in Finland, Ireland, Sweden and the Netherlands. Managed by a local consortium ACET (Agencies in Consortium for Education and Training) comprising statutory, voluntary and private bodies, the project aimed to devise a method and model of career education for people with learning disabilities that would facilitate their progress into employment. By the end of the project trainees had been afforded a wide range of employment placements with over fifty employers. This was aided in no small measure by the representation of employers on the ACET organising committee and the appointment of two Personal Careers Advisors who had an important co-ordinating and support role at both organisational and operational levels. Approximately 8-10 of the trainees gained subsequent employment. A local research study of Project ‘Career’ (Frampton et al, 1998) and an independent evaluation of the initiative (McMullan, 1998) highlight the enhanced level of co-ordination among consortium agencies through closer inter-agency working; as well as the notable improvements in the skills and confidence of trainees and their parents who were centrally involved throughout the project. A follow-on scheme in the same area, ‘Project Transitions’, which involved parents earlier in the transition planning process, has also reported positive outcomes for young people with learning disabilities. Of the eighteen young people who participated in the project, six have been subsequently employed in part-time work while half the group has signed up to participate in the government’s ‘New Deal’ for disabled people once they leave school.

Methodology

Aims

The research involved a two-year qualitative study of young people with disabilities making and dealing with the transition to adulthood. It explored the views of disabled
young people including attitudes to leaving school, experiences in their daytime occupation, and their aspirations for the future.

**Sample Construction**

The study involved 76 young people with disabilities (physical, sensory and/or learning) who were aged between 16 and 21 years and were resident within Northern Ireland. The sample was identified using snowball sampling techniques with the assistance of a wide range of organisations including Health and Social Services Trusts, voluntary organisations, schools and colleges, adult training centres, and the Training and Employment Agency.

**Data Collection**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted consisting of an interview schedule with two sections, components of which were based on standardised interview schedules designed by Hirst and Baldwin (1994) and Flynn and Hirst (1992) in a large survey of disabled young people. The current study, however, was fundamentally a qualitative study. The first section of the interview lasted approximately 15 minutes and collected socio-demographic background information (age, education, household details, type of disability). This information could be completed by the young person alone, by the young person with the help of a parent/carer, or by a parent/carer alone. The second section consisted of a semi-structured interview with the young person to obtain their views on this important stage of their life. To this end, a degree of flexibility was built into the interview schedule, so that, the interview could be adapted to suit the young person being interviewed. The semi-structured interview covered six topics: current daily occupation (Monday to Friday), preparation for leaving school, leisure activities and social life, experience of social work services, home life and aspirations. The questions could be adapted or rephrased by the interviewer if the young person had difficulty understanding them. A shorter version of the semi-structured interview schedule was available for use with young people with more severe learning disabilities. In this way, we were able to include more young people with learning disabilities in the study.

**Findings**

The initial data focused on the experiences of 76 disabled young people in Northern Ireland and their experiences making and dealing with the transition to adulthood (Monteith and Sneddon, 1999). The research showed that many of these young people were still in formal education on either a full or part time basis. Twenty one were still at school, three of whom were in residential schools. Only two young people had found employment while 23 young people were undertaking job training schemes or work placements, usually involving part time attendance at further
education colleges as well. This analysis concentrates on the experiences of those who were currently completing work placements or job training (at the time of the study this was the JobSkills programme). Twenty one young people reported that they were undertaking JobSkills while two were in sheltered employment placements. Obtaining work provides economic independence and, as such, is a key goal for those making the transition to adulthood. The study indicates that finding adequate employment is a key aspiration for many of these young people (Monteith and Sneddon, 1999). When discussing their aspirations for the future, almost one third of the total sample mentioned getting a job and some of these responses are listed below.

*I'd love to have a job that I love to do with a reasonable salary....*

*I'd like to try and keep a good job....*

*To have a full time job with good money....*

*Get a job, get a house and be happy.*

*To get married... to have children and to be in a good secure job that's got plenty of money just for myself and my family.*

Many of the young people in the sample had not experienced employment at the time of the research, but almost one third were in job placement or training schemes. Although there were slightly more women (39) in the overall sample compared to men (37), there were more disabled young men (13) undertaking work placements or job training compared to women (10). Similarly, while 26 percent of main sample had physical disabilities only, 30 percent of those in work placements had physical disabilities only. Similar proportions of young people with moderate learning disabilities or with sensory disabilities were represented in the main sample compared to those in work placement. Those with severe learning disabilities were much less likely to be in work placements. Only one in ten of those in work placements had severe learning disabilities compared to one quarter of overall sample.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Work Placement/Job</th>
<th>Total Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Training</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

43
Table 1. Work Placement or Job Training Scheme Participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Number</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>56.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>43.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-18</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>52.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19-21</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>47.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>65.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>34.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disability</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>30.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>21.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensory</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple Disabilities</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>29.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Young people undertaking job training or work placements were spread across the age range of 16 to 21 years (inclusive) with 11 out of the 23 young people being 19 years or older. Nearly all the young people reported that they were studying for some qualifications while on work placement, and 17 said they were studying for NVQs while one young person was completing GNVQs and two others stated they were studying for a qualification but did not state what this was. Fourteen young people already had some form of qualification (GCSEs, NVQs, City and Guilds, RSA examinations) while nine young people did not have any at that time. Most young people were reliant on a combination of training allowances and social security support as income. Thirteen young people received disability living allowances while six young people received severe disability allowances and one young person received a mobility allowance.
Type of work Experienced

Many of the job placements were in the retail or catering sector or in leisure industry (local bowling alley or ice rink). Several disabled young people reported that they were working in shops or supermarkets, mainly shelving and stacking work, while other young people worked in catering such as hotel kitchens, sandwich bars, or coffee shops. A few young people had placements in offices where they were undertaking tasks such as taking messages, answering the phone, filing, and shredding. Two disabled young men had organised their work placement themselves, one of whom was working as an apprentice mechanic and the other was working in a computing firm.

I just opened the phone book and I rang a computer place and said what I was doing and was there any chance of a placement? And they said yes or no, I would wait and say, by the way is it wheelchair accessible?

Most other young people reported that either the Training and Employment Agency or a voluntary sector organisation had found their placement for them. There did seem to be some degree of uncertainty for young people, however, about how long placements might last. While some young people gave very definite answers indicating the duration of the placement, many young people were more vague and unsure. Some thought that it could last for a few years or as long as they were studying NVQs while others said that they did not know.

What Participants Liked

Most young people liked their work placement and valued having something to do. In particular many enjoyed working as part of a team and meeting people. They liked the combination of work experience and attending college to obtain qualifications. Many were aiming at NVQ levels 2 and/or 3 with some having already completed qualifications. Experiencing the working environment and in particular meeting other people was important. One young man who worked in a hotel said he preferred the cleaning and preparation of bedrooms to dishwashing in the kitchen because,

...its teamwork, that's what its all about and I didn't get that washing up.

Relationships within the workplace did seem to play an important role for young people with several commenting on the people they worked with when discussing what they liked about their placement. Friendly, helpful and respectful colleagues were important. As some young people said.
The staff is very helpful – I try to work my best.

The people are pleasant, tell me what I need, they know I'm a wee bit slow, but we have a good laugh – I love it.

I'm interested in administrative work because basically I like meeting people and talking to people.

They tend to treat me as an equal ... they take me seriously and they do not at same time focus on my disability.

Social interaction did seem to be important to the young people and the type of environment they working in was more likely to be mentioned then the type of job that was being undertaken. On the few occasions when young people expressed dissatisfaction with their work placement this tended to be in terms of social interaction rather than the actual work tasks being undertaken. For example, the young man in the hotel who did not like dish-washing because he had to do that alone and was not part of the team. Similarly, one young woman said a previous placement did not work out because 'they just didn't have time – it never worked out'. A number of young people particularly enjoyed their job placement because it involved social interaction with general public as well as with other staff. Those young people who had worked on placements involving leisure activities (bowling alley or ice rink) particularly enjoyed meeting and helping members of the public. A few young people referred to the actual type of work when discussing what they liked about their placement.

I like working on the computer.

I like futtering [tinkering] with cars.

I like working with children.
Most disabled young people in the sample were happy with their current placement. Unsatisfactory experiences included having to work alone rather than as part of a team, and concerns about completing paperwork. Very few young people expressed dislikes about their placement and many focused on the good experiences of the work environment. Access, however, was an issue for a few people, particularly where stairs were involved. One young person experienced problems at work due to accessing other offices because of stairs and this limited some of the tasks she could carry out. Access problems were also discussed by several young people in terms either course choices or placement choices open to them. Two young people reported that they would have chosen to have studied at a different college if it had been accessible to people with mobility problems. For one young man this meant that he had to undertake a different course as his first choice was not available at his local college. Several young people reported that choice of placements were often based on what was locally available to them so that transport problems did not arise. This in turn limited the choice of placements which were available to some young people. As two young people said,

_The girl at Training Services asked me what places were around near where I lived that I would want to go to. You know it was handiness [convenience]. She phoned around a couple of places and then she just told me where I was working next._

_There was limited choice – not really what I wanted to do._

For other young people, however, convenience of placement was important as this gave them independence in that they could undertake uncomplicated journeys without needing assistance or reliance on expensive means of transport.

Discussion

From the data outlined above, a number of important issues emerge. The findings indicate that a notable proportion of the young people had aspirations for getting a job in the future and looked forward to the associated sense of achievement and self-worth which employment can bring. Interviewees talked openly about their hopes for the future including getting a job, earning money, getting married. It is of course tempting to assume that disabled people, because of their impairments, have 'different' hopes and expectations than non-disabled people. These findings however lend some empirical support to other research which challenges such stereotypical
beliefs. In a control group study of 15-17 year olds, Arnold and Chapman (1992) found that students with physical disabilities and their non-disabled peers did not have significantly different levels of self-esteem. Indeed, both cohorts of students reported similar aspirations and expectations on life events and the future.

The study did however highlight a significant difference between the numbers of severely disabled and less disabled young people on placement or training schemes. Young people with moderate learning disability or sensory impairments were two and a half times more likely to be on a job placement or training scheme than their peers with severe learning disabilities. Earlier research would tend to support the view that the potential for social exclusion in terms of employment is intimately linked to the severity of the disability. According to the Policy Planning and Research Unit (1993) the likelihood of being in paid employment markedly decreases as the severity of the disability increases. For this group of severely disabled young people, therefore, it seems that they undoubtedly face more barriers than their less disabled peers in negotiating the pathways to training and employment. Professional agencies and employers need to identify and explore ways of addressing these barriers, and to consider whether additional assistance and support is required, so that these young people can consolidate and further develop their existing skills and abilities in preparation for employment (Frampton et al 1998).

In an era where the social rights of disabled people have gained increased prominence on legislation and policy agendas in the UK, including their right to work, it is argued that 'inclusion' rather than 'integration' should be emphasised to address the inequality of employment opportunities for this marginalised social group (Wang, 2000).

Most of the young people seemed to enjoy their placement and in particular working as part of a team. What was less clear however was the degree of choice they had in selecting their placement. It is possible that in a proportion of the cases, local availability and convenience of placements prevailed over the personal preferences of the young person. For example, in some cases, the tasks undertaken were menial and repetitive such as shredding paper and washing dishes which were unlikely to provide opportunities for social interaction or the development of social skills. Moreover, it is interesting to note, that what the young people disliked most about their placement was working alone and not being part of a team. In an earlier study in Northern Ireland (Rodgers et al, 1994) low self-esteem and self-worth were found to be closely associated with unstimulating activities and an apparent absence of personal career planning. It would seem that the findings in this study are not substantially different. The uncertainty expressed by respondents about the duration of their placement can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, it may indicate a lack of understanding on the part of the young person about the particular details of the placement. Alternatively, it could suggest the need for more coherent policies in relation to placement allocation, to ensure that they are formally contracted, similar to the approach implemented in other European countries (Sariola, 1998).
It was notable that only two young people had secured a job which did not involve a work placement. As might have been expected, many of the young people aged between 16 and 18 participated in vocational training and placement schemes. It might have been hoped however that higher numbers would have progressed to employment. In comparison to Hirst and Baldwin's (1994) study where 15 per cent of young disabled people were in employment (rising to 33 per cent for those aged 19 - 20), it would appear that achievement of adult status in terms of employment has yet to be realised for most young people with disabilities in Northern Ireland. It is possible that dependency on welfare benefits contributes to this situation. Almost all of the group relied on a combination of training allowances and social security support as income. Some commentators (Booth, 1997) have argued that the rules of the existing benefits system serve as a disincentive for young people with learning disabilities entering the labour market, thus making continued training more likely. It has also been suggested that parents' perceptions of the levels of risk, uncertainty and possible loss of income involved in the young person taking up employment can further jeopardise the chances of them obtaining work. Frampton et al (1998) suggest that, in addition to the introduction of a national framework of benefits similar to the system in the Netherlands, employers need to be assisted in providing opportunities. In addition, potential trainees and their families also need to be reassured that welfare benefits will not be lost if a supported employment opportunity is not successfully sustained.

One of the more impressive findings was that nearly all of the young people interviewed were studying for qualifications while on work placement. Indeed, others had already gained some form of qualification including GCSEs, NVQs and City and Guilds. While research indicates that people with disabilities are now seeking places in further education (Shepperdson, 1995) and have similar hopes about future occupations as their non-disabled peers (Flynn and Hirst 1992; McConkey, 1989; Conliffe, 1989), it would seem that having qualifications and vocational training are only part of a more complex formula for securing 'real' jobs. Therefore, having qualifications and job training did not seem to have improved the employment prospects of those interviewed, given the low number of young people who had a job. A possible explanation of this situation is that the low proportion gaining employment was not due to inadequate qualifications or training per se but could be attributed to other structural factors. It is also possible that the complex task of developing employment opportunities required closer inter-agency co-operation and partnership arrangements at operational level. In contrast to the low level of employment for the young people in this study, the employment outcomes reported for those who participated on Project 'Career' and Project 'Transitions' in the South and East Belfast Health and Social Services Trust area are encouraging. A major strength of both projects was the pan-disability approach adopted by the inter-agency consortium ACET (Agencies in Consortium for Education and Training). The shared vision of
the consortium at a strategic level and the incorporation of employers representatives onto the organising committee helped forge productive links within the partnership and enabled information sharing on the skills, knowledge and standards required for particular jobs. Moreover, the establishment in Project 'Transitions' of a bank of employers willing to accept trainers and an Employer Focus group from the various employment sectors to discuss issues and difficulties related to accessing work served to further consolidate valuable strategic links with employers. Indeed, there is a growing body of research to suggest, as reported by Mattikainen (1998), that earlier assimilation into employment and task specific, on-job training (Beyer and Kilby, 1996) is more beneficial for people with learning disabilities than a long pre-vocational training programme, which aims to improve vocational or social skills. Certainly it would seem that the strategic focus of the inter-agency consortium in combination with the multi-disciplinary partnership approach at operational level, contributed significantly to the overall success of each of the projects.

The present research certainly provides enough evidence to suggest that while there was evidence of joint working among the range of professional, there is a need however to develop stronger and more integrated communication linkages between the various agencies in Northern Ireland to ensure a more coherent approach to transaction planning.

Conclusion
Throughout the 1990s a growing body of literature in Britain (Routledge, 1998), Europe (Lamoral, 1996) and America (Wehman, 1996) has highlighted the importance of developing effective inter-agency policies and good practice guides on transition planning for young people with disabilities in their development into adulthood. However, despite the increased emphasis on this issue over recent years, social welfare agencies in Northern Ireland are only slowly coming to realise the extent to which equal opportunities and social inclusion can be successfully promoted through the establishment of sensitive working partnerships between users, carers, employers and professionals. If agencies are to effectively assist disabled young people in their progression to adulthood, then a collaborative framework of transition needs to be put in place, supported by joint working agreements between agencies. In addition, adequate budgets for service delivery will also need to be negotiated and agreed by key stakeholders. Such inter-agency collaboration will necessitate developing shared values, agreeing a structure for working together, understanding each other's roles in the transition process, developing joint planning arrangements and the sharing and dissemination of good practice and information (Monteith and Sneddon, 1999).
The successful outcomes for young people with learning disabilities reported in Project 'Career' and Project 'Transitions' may offer a template for the further development of transition planning models for all young disabled people. It is clear from the reported success of the two schemes that there are tangible benefits to be gained through the development of a pan-disability approach to facilitate and support young people with disabilities in their transition to adulthood and into the world of employment.

For organisations addressing all types of disabilities, the wider implications of this study are clearly apparent. Young people with disabilities and their carers need to be seen as key stakeholders in the planning of post-school life and representatives from the world of business should be strongly encouraged to commit to membership of multi-agency partnerships. Although progress has been limited but positive in this area, multi-disciplinary professionals need to continue to collectively challenge the social, attitudinal, and ideological barriers of existing disabling infrastructures. The promotion of such a strategy should go some way towards ensuring that young people with disabilities in Northern Ireland are afforded equal opportunities and the right to work as active citizens in a more enabling society.

References


