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# **Bridging the gap? The role of transition advisers in the move from compulsory education**

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## **Introduction: the transition from compulsory education - the policy context**

The quality and impartiality of careers advice has been in question for as long as it has been provided, with numerous studies (see Morris, 2004 for a summary of NfER research in this area) pointing to the efficacy of impartial guidance, but also pointing to gaps in provision for particular groups. As Watts (2001) notes, the development of the Connexions partnerships (see below) meant that the group that used to be under-supported - those most likely to drop out - are now the focus of provision. It is possible to distinguish three areas of educational policy - although this is not exhaustive - which have had a clear effect on young people's experience of advice and guidance over recent years.

The first area is in provision of careers advice itself. Connexions partnerships and Personal Advisers were introduced in 2001 (SEU, 1999) following pilots in 2000. The new Connexions Service had both the broad remit for providing advice for all young people in conjunction with a specific aim to reduce numbers of young people not in employment, education or training. This represented a move away from traditional advice. In practice, the twin aims were not entirely successful and several studies (Hogarth and Smith, 2004; Grove and Giraud-Saunders, 2003) noted that provision for young people not in the most need was at best patchy and at worst poor or non-existent. Another problem, noted by Watts (2001), was the issue of caseload. The combination of the requirement for in-depth work with those most in need with providing a universal service for others meant that *"the rationale for the role of a Personal Adviser ... was clearly neither credible nor sustainable"* (Watts, 2001: 168) . One area that is not much commented on in the literature is the continuing separation of provision according to the rapidly outmoded cut off point of compulsory education at 16. There is little support to cover this gap, particularly for those *not* in most need.

The second area is the 14-19 learning environment. The move to increase the availability of and, arguably, the status of vocational routes has been twinned with the opening up of the pre-16 education environment to colleges and training providers. The learning options now available to young people are far removed from what can now be seen as the narrow academic focus of the early years of the National Curriculum. However, schools are in many cases beginning to close

down these options by streaming young people into a set of 3 or 4 routes (typically academic, mixed academic/vocational, mainly vocational and 'alternative curriculum') within which they can choose a more narrow set of options. This has meant that Personal Advisers and teachers have needed to develop their skills in supporting transitions into new opportunities, which teachers in particular may not be familiar with.

Linked to this shift in the 14-19 environment is the third area, the impact of market-driven reforms starting with the Education Reform Act in 1988. Initiatives deriving from these reforms included Local Management of Schools and subsequent budgetary devolution from LEAs to schools, as well as the incorporation of colleges and, more recently, the deregulation of post-14 provision. In the mid- to late-90s, colleges saw the opportunity to develop income streams and began to employ link advisers and other mechanisms to market their courses. At this time, highly competitive behaviour became apparent, particularly in urban areas (Foskett and Hesketh, 1997; Maguire et al, 1999). Problems with students taking on inappropriate courses, led to high rates of drop-out. This put the onus on colleges and training providers, partly through the stick of LSC funding and partly through the apparent benefits of partnership working, to develop collaborative working, although it has been argued that the market environment makes this problematic (Harris, 1997). Recently, this collaboration has been exemplified in the new 14-19 Pathfinders<sup>1</sup> (Higham, J and Yeomans, D, 2005) and in other areas, for example the innovative work in South Yorkshire (Holland et al, 2003; Coldwell et al 2004).

### **Transition Advisers - Bridging the Gaps?**

These three areas of policy reform come together in one part of South Yorkshire in a project which aims to overcome some of the difficulties inherent in the current system. The Dearne Valley Learning Opportunities Partnership (DeVeLOP) in South Yorkshire commissioned research which found that for school leavers in 2002 in the Dearne Valley (totalling over 1400), 11% were unemployed immediately after leaving school, and a further 8% became unemployed after leaving their first destination in the following months, particularly if they undertook work-based learning or employment without training<sup>2</sup>.

Since April 2004, DeVeLOP has employed 6 'transition advisers' (TAs) each working in two secondary schools (with one in a secondary school and a college, and another in two Special Schools). They support young people in the P2 category (those not in most need of support, but in the 'middle range') as they move from the end of Year 11 and through their first few months after leaving school. They were employed to try to prevent this problem of drop-out, and to narrow the gap in careers support noted in the introduction as a difficulty with the

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<sup>1</sup> This issue is still current, and not just in respect of providers. Foskett et al (2004) note that 11-18 schools provide advice biased towards their own academic routes - corroborating earlier research by Morris et al (1999) - in comparison with more impartial advice available in 11-16 schools. Detail of one example of this is given in Maguire et al (2001).

<sup>2</sup> In contrast, Morris et al, 2004 note that for a national (English) cohort of young people in 1997/8, less than 5 per cent of those in education and training dropped out in the first four months post-transition [figures derived from Morris et al, 2004 p17] and most of these dropped out of GNVQ and A-level rather than NVQ courses.

current Connexions service (the first policy area noted above). They work with a small group of young people, typically 15-20 in each school (not all of the P2 group) from April in Year 11 until they are in a 'settled' destination. This can mean support for several months after leaving school. Their work involves guiding and supporting young people and their families, and providing interventions where problems arise. Their knowledge of the new post-16 qualifications is one aspect of this support (relating to the second policy area above). They were, in addition, expected to "foster cross-institutional collaboration" (DeVeLOP, 2004:1) between schools, colleges and training providers (relating to the third policy area above). They are employed by Lifetime Careers, who deliver careers provision across the Dearne Valley, but the TAs are also managed within schools and, to some extent, by Connexions South Yorkshire and have responsibility for monitoring to DeVeLOP. It is worth noting at this point that the Dearne Valley is unusual in that, though an area with a distinct identity for those who live there, it is not a single authority; in fact it is located in area shared by three South Yorkshire local authorities. Thus the fostering of collaboration is not merely between institutions, but also between different local government areas.

In this paper, we explore the role of these transition advisers, briefly looking at the their management and the selection of young people they work with, and the impact of the TA project on destinations.

## **Methodology**

Three main methods of data gathering were used:

### **1. Semi-structured face to face interviews with stakeholders**

These included interviews with transition advisers themselves, TA line managers and, where possible, careers teachers. In addition there were interviews with key stakeholders (representatives of DeVeLOP, Connexions, the LSC and Lifetime Careers). Over 20 such interviews took place.

### **2. Structured telephone interviews with young people**

These included interviews with young people who had a TA, and a comparator group matched on a range of data (gender, academic profile, Connexions category, social background as measured using free school meals).

### **3. Documentary evidence**

Destinations data for both the young people supported by a TA and the comparator group were sought. In addition, TA reports and school documentation was gathered.

The qualitative interview data was used primarily to examine the role of the TA and the understanding of it from the perspectives of the key players involved. Ideally, young people would have been interviewed, but project timing (most of the fieldwork took place after young people had left school) meant this was not possible.

The structured telephone interview and destinations data for individuals were gathered by Connexions South Yorkshire, to help establish the impact of the programme. By the time of writing, these data were not available, so an analysis cannot be presented here. A further comparison using published destination data and other data gathered by TAs is presented in this paper.

## Findings

### 1. The role of the TA

The TA role did not differ significantly in terms of tasks undertaken from that of Connexions Personal Advisers, with the key difference being that TAs have much smaller cohorts. It is possible to distinguish the following aspects of the role. The **Task focus** included the following, outlined in Table1 below:

**Table 1: support undertaken by Transition Advisers**

Time of support	Type of support	Examples
<b>During Y11</b>	Supporting careers education	Interview practice, assistance with writing CVs, completing application forms. In some cases, TAs supported work experience.
	Linking with providers	TAs took young people on visits to colleges and training providers, including open days and taster sessions.
	One to one support	Discussions with young people about their future career plans, personal issues, supporting them in choice making
	Home visits	Working with young people and their parents to provide information on options and to discuss these, to provide personal support where necessary
<b>Post-Year 11</b>	Summer activities	Residential involving working on work-related skills, discussing first day at college fears, career plans, different styles of learning
	Follow-up contacts	Weekly phone calls, home visits as above where necessary to support young people where necessary (e.g. if young people want to change course or have already dropped out)
	Ad hoc contacts	TAs gave young people a mobile phone number to make contact if necessary to support them if necessary
	Support in post-16 destination	Advocacy (e.g. getting access to Education Maintenance Allowances), information on course switching
	Support to prevent specific course drop out	Particular to the TA working in college

To be able to complete these activities successfully, Transition Advisers needed specific skills and knowledge. The most common attribute necessary, was the ability to *build relationships*, mentioned by the majority of interviewees. The key relationships were of course with young people, but TAs also had to work with parents and school staff and their other managers (see below). An ability to counsel young people and provide pastoral support was seen by interviewees to be important. They also needed knowledge of careers opportunities in the local area. Our group of TAs all came from careers-related backgrounds, many of them having worked with young people in a counselling or guidance role, and they studied for a Personal Adviser qualification as part of their role.

Despite the varying settings, TAs working in mainstream schools found that their roles did not differ across the schools significantly, although the role did differ in college. In the best cases, TAs were able to fit in with school systems and felt welcomed by informed staff. This often (although not exclusively) meant working within the careers and guidance area, often closely with PAs. But sometimes, TAs felt isolated and did not fit in clearly with school structures, or were in a school where school staff were not clear about who they were and what their role was, particularly at the start of the programme.

The distinctiveness of the role - being able to provide broad support for a small group, working across the transition, supporting P2s, providing a careers focus, rather than a wider mentoring role - was widely supported by staff in schools, and the chief complaint was not having enough time in school, which can be seen as a compliment to the work of the TAs. Managers and Careers Advisers were supportive of the individual contributions of TAs, who were felt to work hard and effectively, and had made a clear contribution to improving positive destinations for young people:

*"The TA was seen to have a specialised role within the school....the personal contact with the young people led to positive extended relationships which were crucial for the students ....they put their trust in her...."* (School deputy head)

Within the Special Schools and the College, the role did not work in the same distinctive way. In the College, a very small cohort was worked with and the TA role was not as clearly defined. This was due at least in part to the very different nature of post-16 learning environments. There is also the fact that the college is a large institution: the TA role was not advertised widely, for fear of the TA being "swamped" with referrals. The College Manager was still grappling with this issue at the time of our interview. Finally, the distinctiveness of the TA role - supporting young people from Year 11 through the transition into post-16 destinations - is not apparent for the college work.

*... "It is different to other roles because of the college and but also the school is recognised as being challenging ... the TA working with the special schools was also seen as a different and challenging role."* (Transition Adviser)

In the Special Schools, the environment again meant that the role of TA was less distinctive than in the secondary schools as they did not target P2 pupils specifically, and in fact worked with all Y11 pupils, providing more intensive

support for some. This did not mean that the work of the TA was unnecessary; there is evidence that guidance work with young people with special educational needs is particularly important (Grove and Giraud-Saunders, 2003), but that the particular support of the TA was not clearly distinct from that of the Personal Advisers working in these schools.

## **2. Management issues**

The TAs felt that having a number of managers - within Lifetime, Connexions, DeVeLOP and the schools - made their roles more difficult to negotiate. In particular, the varying tasks required of them - undertaking an empirical investigation, Personal Adviser diploma training, pupil support in schools, providing detailed monitoring information - meant that their time was squeezed. School managers and careers teachers in almost every case stated that they would have liked the TAs to have more time in school, and in some cases felt that without this happening the impact of the TA could only be marginal. Schools also felt that they would like more control of the TA's time, and had in some cases discussed how this could be managed in the future, for example by creating a TA-type role in house or across clusters.

*.. "TAs should spend more time with youngsters before leaving school - if this is well done they can spend less time with them after leaving school...".* (School Careers Coordinator)

*...."At present the schools decide what is done and how a TA works ... it would be better if they were line managed by the school."..*(Transition Adviser)

However, there was some concern about bringing TAs into the total control of schools due to differing priorities, as explained by one stakeholder representative:

*"There could be a simplification of arrangements, for example give it to one organisation to oversee ... the alternative for schools to take the lead is not the best option .... there is a need for impartial advice post -16 and a tension between progression targets, school needs and the outcomes for young people"*  
(Stakeholder representative)

This issue was illustrated by examples of issues around conflicting requirements of the group managing TAs, in some cases. For example, some TAs had difficulty getting pupils out of school lessons due to school issues:

*"At [school] there is an issue - they had bad GCSE results last year, so it is difficult to get them out [of lessons] to do tasters"* (Transition Adviser)

## **3. Selecting the cohort**

In mainstream schools, a variety of mechanisms was used. Selection of the group who the TAs would work with could be a problem with the multifarious options for supporting young people - for example one school manager said *"there are lots of agencies overlapping"*. Some systems provided clear mechanisms that worked well. An example was the pupil referral group at one school, where a group of managers at the school made all pupil referrals to the various intervention strategies in the school. This provided an effective mechanism to deal with multiple needs for referral. In several cases, a 'filtering' process worked well, with a larger group working with the TA to begin with. The group was progressively whittled down by the TA as those in most needed were singled out and supported as required (or passed on to the Personal Adviser if they appropriate).

In fact, this issue of working with P1 or P2 category young people contributed to some difficulty in the first year. Several TAs and their managers reported that initially they were asked to work with 'P1' young people, who took up a large part of their time and needed intensive support at home, since many had poor attendance. One of the difficulties involved here is the fluidity of the terms involved. Young people at risk of facing multiple and profound problems, who require intensive support from Connexions, are identified as being in Priority Group 1, or P1. Young people with fewer or less acute problems, who are nevertheless at risk, are considered as being in Priority Group 2, or P2 (Hogarth and Smith, 2004: 22). Yet clearly young people can move out of these groups and from one group to another over time.

In some schools, the distinctions between P1, P2 and P3 (essentially, 'the rest') were switched into familiar categorisations of young people in terms of ability:

*I had 6 of the bottom ability kids, but passed these on [Transition Adviser]*

*Connexions help those at the bottom, TAs those in the middle, middle upper - not much help, upper ability get open campus. Those in the middle suffer most.  
[School Manager]*

Although we found no evidence that this kind of conflation had a negative impact on any of the young people working with Transition Advisers, there is a body of research suggesting that differentiating young people according to ability can have negative effects on their feelings towards education, both in school (Hargreaves, 1967; Lacey, 1970; Ball, 1984) and in colleges (Rosie 1988). This kind of differentiation can have particularly negative effects on working class young people. This is an area for further investigation.

#### **4. The impact of the TA**

The qualitative data showed us that the TAs felt valued and were in fact valued by the schools and other partners involved in the project, and it was reported that young people felt the same.

Quantitative analysis of available data was undertaken to see if this view could be borne out from the actual destinations achieved. As we noted earlier, currently we do not have access to the information on destinations for the TA and comparator groups. The next best alternative is to compare outcomes for the TA groups with the school as a whole. One would expect that the TA group without intervention would have poorer destinations than the school group as a whole. Table 2 below shows the destinations for the schools involved in 2004 (Connexions, 2004) and for the TA group (the college young people are excluded, since the data are not comparable):

**Table 2: Comparison of destinations (Feb 05) of first cohort pupils supported by TAs**

		Education	Training	Employment	Unemployed	Other	positive destination
School A	TA		4 (40%)	4 (40%)	2 (20%)		80%
	School	105 (53.5%)	16 (8.1%)	52 (26.3%)	19 (9.6%)	5 (2.5%)	87.9%
School B	TA	3 (37.5%)	2 (25%)	2 (25%)		1 (12.5%)	87.5%
	School	114 (60%)	8 (4.2%)	11 (8.4%)	4 (3.1%)	10 (5.3%)	84.2%
School C	TA	11 (73.3%)	1 (6.7%)	3 (20%)			100%
	School	126 (84%)	2 (1.3%)	52 (26.3%)	3 (2%)	2 (1.4%)	96.6%
School D	TA	9 (60%)	2 (13.3%)	3 (20%)		1 (6.7%)	93.3%
	School	210 (71.2%)	6 (2%)	53 (18%)	18 (6.1%)	8 (2.7%)	91.2%
School E	TA	3 (25%)	4 (33.3%)	3 (25%)	1 (8.3%)	1 (8.3%)	83.3%
	School	77 (46.4%)	7 (4.2%)	24 (4.5%)	24 (14.5%)	5 (3%)	82.5%
School F	TA	6 (37.5%)	4 (25%)		1 (6.25%)	5 (31.5%)	62.5%
	School	144 (71.3%)	3 (1.5%)	41 (20.3%)	11 (5.4%)	3 (1.5%)	93.1%
School G	TA	7 (58.3%)	2 (16.7%)	3 (25%)			100%
	School	119 (63.3%)	8 (4.3%)	36 (19.2%)	17 (9%)	8 (4.2%)	86.8%
School H	TA	6 (54.5%)	1 (9.1%)	3 (27.3%)	1 (9.1%)		90.9%
	School	104 (64.6%)	4 (2.5%)	38 (23.6%)	12 (7.5%)	3 (1.8%)	90.7%
School I	TA	7 (87.5%)	1 (12.5%)				100%
	School	131 (60.6%)	8 (3.7%)	56 (25.9%)	15 (6.9%)	6 (2.9%)	90.2%
School I	TA	2 (20%)		6 (60%)	2 (20%)		80%
[Special]	School <sup>3</sup>	28 (62.2%)		8 (17.8%)	not settled - 7 (15.6%)	2 (4.4%)	80%
School J	TA	6 (54.5%)		5 (45.5%)			100%
[Special]	School <sup>3</sup>	57 (78.2%)		9 (12.3%)	not settled - 5 (5.5%)	3 (4%)	90.5%

The data are variable, and may not be directly comparable using the categories in Table 2. For example, the categories of 'employed' and 'training' have some cross-over and may be defined slightly differently, and the special school data are weaker than the rest, because direct comparison with the school overall cannot be made. However, if we look at positive destinations, we obtain a better comparison, since we iron out the problem of categorising different positive destinations. For most schools, the TA group has positive destinations at a similar or higher level when compared with the school data overall (the exception being School F, where there was a large amount of missing data). If we take the average percentages of students in positive destinations we find that the numbers of school and the TA groups are virtually identical - the average percentage of TA students in positive destinations is 89.9%, compared with 89.5% of the wider student population in our schools. If we leave out School F, because of missing data, we find that the TA group average moves up to 91.5% and the overall student percentage moves down slightly to 89.1%. This analysis indicates that the TA group has at least as high a proportion of its members in positive destinations as the schools as a whole, but the difference is slight.

This, then, does not provide robust evidence that the TA group has significantly better destinations than the school group as a whole, but does give some (weak) evidence that the TA group is performing better than might be expected.

<sup>3</sup> Schools I and J are compared with Special School Data for their respective LEAs overall

As noted above, the main source of data for examining impact is not yet available. It is hard to quantify the impact of the TAs, since there is no control group with which to compare the students, and it is impossible to know what destinations the young people would have arrived at without TA intervention. Without any comparator group data to use at present, claims about impact on career destination are limited to those we make above.

We stated earlier that the overall view of the TA project is that it has been worthwhile for young people, and is valued. However, for some individual young people, the programme was not successful. By analysing the qualitative data, we were able to establish that reasons for this included:

1. Poor selection as described above: if schools were unsure about how to distinguish P1 from P2 youngsters - if this is in fact possible - then the young people in most need were sometimes selected. They took up a large part of the TAs' time.
2. Attendance problems. Young people with attendance problems were less likely to benefit. When TAs were asked to identify failures, several pointed to young people who were simply not around at school. Of course, this raises the issue of what support is provided for these young people.
3. Undeveloped relationships. TAs found that in the short timescale they had to build relationships in the first year (they were employed in April in 2004, giving them in some cases just a few weeks to form relationships) sometimes these relationships were not strong enough to enable them to make a lasting impression.
4. Lack of integration into school systems. Where TAs were given adequate induction into schools, where other school staff were well-briefed about their role and where they were located clearly within school structures (e.g. in the careers department) TAs were able to settle more quickly into their roles and provide support more quickly and effectively. By the end of the first year, all TAs had been integrated in this way in schools, but this process took much longer in some settings than in others.

## **Discussion**

Transition Advisers were put in place to try to meet some of the shortcomings inherent in the current system. In fact, the role of the TA has proved to be somewhat similar to that of the Connexions Personal Adviser, particularly in the pilot programme (Dickinson, 2001), in that they had a small workload and were able to make (we tentatively suggest) an impact. In this sense, this research tells us what we knew already from the literature (Foskett et al 2004; Morris et al, 1999; Morris et al, 2001; Morris, 2004): intensive support for young people in their decision-making helps them make appropriate decisions more quickly. However, we also know that a significant minority of young people switch courses and destinations in the months subsequent to leaving compulsory education (Morris, 2004), and here the role of a trusted adult in supporting these changes is perhaps important: TAs can make a difference compared with other forms of support.

In many ways, the TAs are part of the new influx of non-teaching staff in schools, including learning mentors, youth workers and teaching assistants. These 'friendly

adults' (Coldron et al, 2001) can develop personal relationships to support decision-making. These personal relationships are often seen by young people to be in contrast with traditional teaching roles (Cullingford, 2002), yet these new professionals have to make their home at least partly in the school.

Integrating these differing roles into existing school structures often requires intense preparatory work on the part of schools. This preparation has to be practical, for example, developing induction programmes informing staff who these new people are, but also in the more fundamental sense of embedding these new roles within the wider educational work of the school. TAs, as we note above, were usually located in the careers areas and rooms of schools, and thus worked alongside careers teachers and Personal Advisers who, arguably, have been able to find a position for themselves over time within the school. Yet Careers departments are often themselves marginal in schools both in importance (without a place in the core of the National Curriculum, and with little to contribute to GCSE results), and sometimes geographically. For example, in one school in this study, the Careers department was located in a building separated from the main school, that could usually only be accessed by the TA if she asked the caretaker to provide a key. This gives a clear if unintended message as to the importance of this work to the school. For Transition Advisers and Personal Advisers, this marginalised position can create problems, such as unwillingness on the part of some class teachers to allow young people to leave core GCSE lessons for meetings with TAs and PAs. This issue can be more acute in schools with poor league table positions where time out of such lessons can be perceived as a luxury that cannot be afforded.

The recent government consultation document *Youth Matters* (DfES, 2005) may provide an opportunity for new roles such as the TA to become more central to the work of schools, as careers and guidance provision is reformed, and many local authorities look to innovative methods of delivery.

*Youth Matters* suggests that schools are allowed to opt out of local authority provision if it is perceived to be poor. This needs to be carefully monitored, since schools with priorities in terms of examination results (typically, those in more deprived areas) may be tempted to sacrifice independent advice for new mixed roles providing support for exams as well as careers input. TAs could well develop into this kind of hybrid role, but whether this turns out to be in the best interests of the young person remains to be seen. Our TAs valued their independence from schools, and it is essential that whatever comes after Connexions does the same. For this reason, the wish for school managers as expressed in the body of this paper for control over TAs needs to be questioned.

The strength of the TA in continuing relationships built whilst young people were at school into the months afterwards is not best managed within schools that have no responsibility for young people once they leave. Therefore, local authorities, through Children's Trusts, would be the most appropriate employer. Yet there are still two structural problems that militate against the development of TAs at present. First, in areas like the Dearne Valley (which, as we noted earlier, has 3 local authorities) the likely re-organisation of advice and guidance from sub-regional to local level may well make strategic provision across a wider area more difficult.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly across England as a whole, our system continues to end compulsory education at 16 whilst policy direction moves toward a 13 or 14-19 framework. Until and unless this changes, Transition Adviser and other roles that aim to 'bridge the gap' will always face a structural barrier, no matter how talented or diligent the individuals fulfilling these roles are found to be.

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