**‘Entering a new dimension’: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of the experience of transitioning from school to Further Education college for three young people who have an Education, Health and Care Plan**

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# Abstract

Transition points within education can present as a time of challenge and opportunity for all young people. The transition from School to college arguably features an important step in the transition to adulthood which can be crucial in enabling young people to develop both personal and work related skills which will support them in their chosen futures. There is a disproportionate amount of young people who have identified Special Educational Needs (SEN) represented in the NEET (not in education employment or training) statistics highlighting a vulnerability for this group of learners as they make post-16 transitions.

This research project explores the perceptions of three young people who have an Education, Health and Care Plan as they make their transition from mainstream secondary school to Further Education (FE) College. The young people were each interviewed twice about their experiences of planning, preparing and making their transitions, firstly in the summer term during their last year in school and secondly in the autumn having spent a few weeks at college. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA was chosen with the aim of eliciting a rich detailed understanding of the young people’s experiences.

The analysis went some way to supporting previous findings that the following may be prominent features of young people’s experiences of post-16 transition, namely: a developing sense of self, the nature of the support they receive in each educational establishment and in preparing for their transition and the role of family and friends. Moreover the young people interviewed expressed a feeling of being prepared for their transition and reflected on what this process was like. This supports the significance of facilitating and encouraging young people to have their say about what is important to them, their hopes and ambitions. In addition, this study revealed a developing sense of self-determination for the participants at this time, which has not been widely explored within previous research conducted in the UK. Recommendations linked to the existing literature in this area are highlighted with reference to possibilities for Educational Psychologists (EPs) supporting professionals to develop good practice. Further implications for EPs, schools and FE Colleges in supporting young people as they embark on post-16 transitions are provided, including recommendations for future research.

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# Chapter One: Introduction

## Introduction

Transition points within a young person’s educational journey are critical times which can evoke challenge, excitement and uncertainty for the individual and those around them.

Arguably the transition which takes place post-16 may further heighten such emotions due to the greater number of possible destinations available. For instance this can include: programmes within schools, colleges, private providers, specialist provisions, training courses and apprenticeships. Equally within college and school settings there may be further variety within the types of programmes on offer such as the level and style of delivery.

My interest in this topic emerged from my personal experience and work in the education sector to date. Firstly, growing up I experienced a number of transitions within education, arguably only slightly more than the typical young person, however I found myself within this stage of my life finding the experience of transition and change particularly significant. Such transitions for me presented the opportunity for reflection both upon who I was and where I was within my educational journey.

Each educational setting I attended had its own ethos, culture and approach to the learning environment. Relationships were also a key part of this experience as each time I left behind good friends and began the process of developing new friendships all over again. A significant shift in ethos could be seen in the move to post-16 education which is arguably reflected across a variety of settings in the UK, namely an increase in student autonomy and a clearer focus upon future goals. I consider that education has a central role in preparing young people for their future, which is supported by Wallace (1989) and reflected in the Ofsted framework (2014); the transition into post-16 education therefore is a pivotal point in this process.

As a Trainee Educational Psychologist and within my roles in education prior to starting my training I have experienced supporting young people in secondary schools and FE Colleges. This experience led to an interest in the challenges facing young people in this age group and the journey they take to develop their goals and aspirations for their future. Moreover, in my current role I am passionate about empowering children and young people to have their voices heard which, as further emphasised in the Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice (2014), remains central to the practice of professionals in education, health and care. I am interested in the young people’s experience of planning for their futures, the extent to which they feel that they had a say and how confident they were in enacting their plans. In particular it is hoped that any challenges or insights which are highlighted may resonate with aspects worth considering, ensuring good practice for myself and other professionals working in education.

It is hoped that by providing an opportunity for three young people who have an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) to explore their experiences of transitioning to FE college in detail, a sense of what this was like for them will be evoked.

Chapter two will examine the current context, research and theoretical literature which is deemed prominent to understanding the nature of post-16 transition. Chapter three describes the methodological approach taken to completing this research as well as detailing the pilot study, research design and potential limitations.

Chapter four then presents the phenomenological analysis of the data collected. The four super-ordinate themes which were revealed will be introduced and explored with reference to extracts from the interview transcripts. These findings will then be explored further in relation to wider literature in chapter five, before the conclusions, limitations and recommendations for practice and future research are outlined.

# Chapter Two: Critical Literature Review

This chapter will firstly explore the current political climate with regards to the nature of post-16 education and the legislation which outlines the expected practice for supporting young people with SEN as they navigate this transition. The role of schools in particular will then be highlighted before reviewing literature focussed on the experiences of post-16 transitions for children with SEN. Finally the theoretical underpinnings that were considered at this stage of the research and the impetus for completing the study will be outlined as well as drawing the reader’s attention to the research questions.

### The national perspective

#### Raising the age of participation

Following the publication of the consultation paper ‘*Raising Expectations: Staying in Education and Training Post-16’* (DFES 2007), The Education and Skills Act 2008 set out a legal requirement for young people to participate in education, employment or training until the age of 18 or until they have completed a level 3 qualification. This Act also cited expectations on behalf of Local Authorities to promote and provide support to facilitate this process including the duty to complete assessments of young people with SEN during their final year of school. The main aims of increasing the age of participation that were outlined in the 2007 Green Paper included: improving the qualifications and skills of young people needed to develop a skilled workforce that can compete in an international market, ensuring young people had the necessary skills needed to equip them for adult life and the idea that young people who stay in education are more likely to be healthy, earn more and less likely to commit crime.

Maguire (2013) considers the proposals drawn out by the Education and Skills Act (2008) and focuses on what impact the legislation will have for the rate of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET). In this paper she argues that the rates of young people aged 16 and 17 participating in post-compulsory education had significantly increased over the years prior to the implementation of the proposals, suggesting this was due to new approaches and incentives for this age group, for example the introduction of education maintenance allowance (EMA). Interestingly as highlighted by the author such approaches have since been removed therefore leaving Local Authorities to individually plan and implement their approach to supporting and engaging post-16 learners in education and training. Equally the author highlights that at the same time that the rates of participation rose for 16/17 year olds there was an increase in the number of young people aged 18 who were classified as NEET. This suggests that perhaps such incentives were merely masking the problem which then emerged at a later stage. This paper recognises that there may not be a quick fix for the vulnerable young people who make up the NEET statistics but suggests that financial incentives, support services and individualised programmes of provision can go some way to encourage young people to continue their education and training. It can be viewed that this paper seeks to demonstrate that merely increasing the compulsory age of participation in education alone will not solve the problem of the number of young people categorised as NEET. I argue that this policy acts to reinforce and make explicit the importance of post-16 education through making it compulsory and therefore bringing it into the forefront of people’s minds. Consequently it becomes paramount to consider how to engage young people in further education and training and most effectively support learners as they take their next steps. The significance of taking into consideration how young people will be supported as they transition into post-16 education and training opportunities is alluded to by Acquah & Huddleston (2014). In their paper they raise concerns about how schools will provide the necessary information advice and guidance (IAG) and careers support to young people when there have been substantial cuts in this area. Moreover a key tenet outlined by Maguire (2013) and Acquah & Huddleston (2014) is the need for a highly individualised approach to supporting, facilitating and delivering post-16 programmes for young people identified as vulnerable, which includes children identified as having SEN. The section on the relevant legislation will explore the developments and guidelines for these young people in more detail.

#### NEET statistics

Taken from the DfE NEET statistics: quarterly brief - October to December 2015 and ‘NEET data by local authority’ published May 2015**:**

* ‘Northern English regions have higher NEET rates, i.e. North East, North West and Yorkshire and Humberside. In comparison, London and South East have the lowest NEET rates’.
* In the period November 2014 to January 2015 for 16-18 year olds in London the NEET rate was 3.4%, compared to 4.2% in the South East and 5.1% in the Yorkshire and Humber region.
* NEET rates for the age cohort 16-18 in Oct-Dec of 2013 was 7.6%, 2014- 7.0% and 2015- 6.6%. For 19-24 year olds in 2013 it was 17.1%, 2014- 15.9% and in 2015- 13.8%.
* ‘40 per cent of young people with SEN were NEET at least once and a quarter were NEET for six months based on the Connexions Client Caseload Information System (CCIS) databases in nine councils from September 2007 to September 2009’ (Against the Odds, 2010).

Despite trends decreasing which is a more positive picture than that portrayed by Maguire (2013) it can be seen that there remain a proportion of young people classified as NEET.

#### Legislation

In this section the guidance on post-16 transitions put forward by the SEN Code of Practice (2001) and more recently the SEND Code of Practice (2014) will be considered to provide a basis for later discussion of research evidence which highlights strengths and weaknesses of the subsequent approach taken by professionals to supporting transitions.

The SEN Code of Practice (2001) detailed clear steps for schools to take to ensure effective post-16 transitions for young people with a statement of SEN. This process was outlined to begin in year 9 at the young person’s annual review to which the school should have invited the Connexions service and Social Services if necessary to facilitate any parallel assessments. At this annual review the school in liaison with parents, young people and external agencies should have drawn up a transition plan which would be reviewed at all subsequent annual reviews. The core ethos of this planning,

‘should be: participative, holistic, supportive, evolving, inclusive and collaborative’ (9:52 SEN Code of Practice, 2001).

The Connexions officer was highlighted as the key individual responsible for overseeing the delivery of the agreed plan and it was clearly cited that young people should be fully involved in the transition process. Furthermore the code suggested that good practice would follow that a representative from the identified provision would have attended reviews from year 10 onwards. However a clear barrier in ensuring this good practice was adhered to would be any uncertainty in where it was hoped a young person was transitioning to, and equally any changes in this decision as the event drew nearer.

The Connexions service was also indicated to provide support for young people with SEN who did not have a statement. As part of this role they could provide support and advice on the range of provisions available, ensure the right information is transferred when the young person makes their transition and complete a needs and provision assessment where appropriate. There were however criticisms of the Connexions service, for instance Cullen et al (2009) found that there were potential flaws in the training and approach of the personal advisors which resulted in variation in the effectiveness of the support young people with SEN received. Such findings combined with the increasing NEET figures at this time arguably contributed towards a government decision to transfer the duty to provide careers guidance and supporting the participation of young people in education and training to schools (Education and Skills Act, 2008). This decision resulted in a variety of practices being adopted by schools including many continuing to buy in the role of a Connexions advisor. Whichever method is adopted it cannot be ignored that the duty remains and the effectiveness of the approach must be demonstrated. This is supported by the new Ofsted Inspection Handbook (2014) which indicates that inspectors will be looking for evidence of schools providing ‘effective careers guidance’ for all pupils from year 8 onwards which enables them to make their own informed decisions about their future.

Two of the fundamental changes featured in the SEN and disability code of practice (2014) should arguably make the transition to post-16 education more effective and successful for young people with SEN. Namely, the greater emphasis on the participation of children, young people and their parents in the decision making process and a commitment to supporting young people not only post-16 but up to 25, with a focus on making successful transitions into adulthood. Moreover the code details throughout its guidance a priority on life outcomes which include forward thinking to adulthood no matter how young the child is at that given point. These outcomes should be aspirational and include a focus on ‘employment independent living and community participation’ (SEN and disability code of practice (2014) 8.9). Despite this process arguably beginning from the onset of an EHCP being requested and issued, the key time where more detailed planning begins is again in year 9 at the annual review. The main factors indicated by the new code that should be included in the planning for post-16 transitions are: accessing provision which builds on the young person’s previous achievements, exploring the individuals own aspirations, sharing key information with an emphasis on the new provision checking out any areas where they are uncertain, schools and colleges working together to plan taster sessions and preparatory visits and planning how this next stage fits within the young person’s outcomes for transitioning to adulthood. Conversely the new code of practice fails to mention a key individual who should oversee this process unlike the previous suggestions where this was cited to be a Connexions officer. A new addition to this guidance however, is that the local authority must ensure that these reviews take place perhaps indicating less of a focus on schools taking the ownership. A further criticism of the new regulations is a lack of clarity for how post-16 transitions will be managed for young people who have identified SEN but do not have an EHCP. The new code does however highlight the importance of making a contingency plan for times when changes to the planned transition occur.

#### The role of schools in preparing young people for post-16 transitions and adulthood

The idea that school acts as a socialisation institution through which children are prepared for adulthood is recognised within literature (Wallace, 1989; Lyons, & Coyle, 2007). Subsequent theorists have developed this arguably simplified model further through consideration of the complex nature of the transition from childhood to adulthood. For instance, it is suggested that children do not just passively accept and conform to such ideals, but exercise autonomy and choice (Rudd, 1997). However, there arguably remains a key function for schools within this process to support young people to develop their knowledge, skills and confidence in making such choices.

This message is echoed by the Ofsted inspection handbook (School inspection handbook, (2014), which highlights the key role schools play in preparing pupils for these next steps. Namely in order to be judged as an ‘outstanding’ school there must be evidence that pupils are:

‘very well equipped for the next stage of their education, training or employment’ (p38).

Furthermore the guidance goes on to cite that through access to a broad curriculum pupils should be prepared for the responsibilities and experiences that they will encounter in later life. This could include developing skills in order to live as independently as possible such as managing money and using transportation. Consequently schools who are aiming to be viewed as ‘good’ and ‘outstanding’ will need to be furthering their approach to facilitating this process for all their learners including those with SEN.

### What research evidence tells us about the nature and experiences of a post 16 transition for children with SEN

Keil & Crews (2008) carried out an investigation into the process and experience of post-16 and post-18 transitions for young people with visual impairment (VI) in Wales using a multiple case study design. This research aimed to explore the themes that arose from interviews with the participants at different stages of their transition to provide an understanding about the factors that contributed to successful or unsuccessful transitions. A key finding from this piece of research was the inequality in the provision that the students received depending on whether they continued their education in a school sixth form or an FE college. In this case the inequities related to both the process for receiving specialist equipment and more importantly support from a Qualified Teacher of the Visually Impaired (QTVI). The prominent benefits that the QTVI provided for the students who remained in school settings was the continuation of support, advice for teachers to provide a modified curriculum, liaising between home and other agencies as well as mentoring for the young person. I consider that the main issue highlighted by this research aside from the importance of all students accessing the correct support once they make a transition to a new provider is the issue of ‘continuation’. Whether that be the continuation of a key worker or effective support strategies there needs to be a joined up approach to facilitating post-16 transitions. As highlighted by both the 2001 and 2014 SEN Codes of Practice information needs to be shared between settings as soon as possible to enable provision to be put in place and familiarisation for both the setting and the young person. Furthermore, the challenge of transition plans changing was evidenced in this study whereby one young person changed their mind at the last minute deciding to attend an FE college rather than attend their school’s sixth form. For this young person it was described how this change of plan led to: a lack of communication between key parties, a delay in the necessary support provision being arranged and ultimately the individual dropping out of college. This illustrates the importance of the addition to the SEN and disability code of practice (2014) to ensure that alternative plans are made in case there are changes to what had already been agreed. The code doesn’t however indicate the nature of what such planning should entail and consequently similar challenges will surely arise in the future. For instance who is responsible for passing on information in a timely manner and equally ensuring this is received and acted upon; this is particularly difficult when changes happen over the summer holidays when educational professionals may not be available in schools.

On reflection of the research literature surrounding the topic of post-16 transitions for young people with SEN, a substantial number included studies focussed on the experiences of young people with specific language impairment (SLI) (Palikara, Lindsay & Dockrell, 2009; Johnson et al 2010 and Carroll, & Dockrell, 2012).

Palikara, Lindsay & Dockrell (2009) conducted a longitudinal study into voices of young people with a history of SLI in their first year of post-16 education highlighting a number of key findings which map onto recent developments in the SEN legislation. Firstly, the young people interviewed were able to detail the nature of their SEN, the areas in which they needed additional support throughout their time in school and how effective they felt their support had been. As commented on by the authors this provides clear support for young people being fully involved in making decisions about their education. This approach is further supported by Madriaga and Goodley (2010) who raise the importance of Higher Education (HE) institutions thinking about the individual and really listening to their voice in order to identify what support would be most beneficial to them. This paper makes reference to young people with a diagnosis of Asperger Syndrome and their experiences of HE however the argument can be applied across institutions, thus highlighting the importance of recognising the young person within decision making and their role in communicating and planning what support they personally would like as they make their chosen transition.

Furthermore a large proportion of the young people in this study felt positive about their post-16 experiences to date, despite almost half having experienced some problems with their education and around 16% identifying that they had experienced problems with their peers. An important factor which was highlighted by the authors in potentially facilitating these positive experiences was the value placed by the young people on the support they received from friends and family members. This indicates that having extended support networks may be important for young people with SEN when embarking on post-16 transitions. Therefore emphasising this to schools and families is vital as is assisting young people to develop such links within school if they do not already have such connections at home; such as making use of mentoring or peer buddy schemes that may facilitate this process.

Carroll and Dockrell (2012) investigated the perspectives of young people with a history of SLI regarding the factors which acted as challengers and enablers in their post-16 transitions. The authors cited similar findings to those of Palikara, Lindsay & Dockrell, (2009) evidencing the importance of parental support. In particular, there was an emphasis on parents assisting their children throughout the process including providing emotional support, confidence building, practical help and advocating on their behalf. Clearly there were differences in the specific nature of the support that each young person received from their parents and arguably this type of support could be offered and obtained from a variety of other individuals, for example friends or professionals. Consequently I think that it is important to acknowledge not only the details of what parents did to assist but also why it was so beneficial. A further important factor highlighted as an enabler of transition were the personal characteristics which the individuals exhibited and alluded to as important for their success, these included: self-determination and motivation, possessing a particular interest or talent and self –belief. In contrast the support that the young people had received from careers support advisors including connexions officers had been helpful for a couple of the participants but less supportive for the rest.

This leads me to wonder whether this mixed opinion about how supportive the advice that is offered to young people may be due to the wide range of courses and education or training routes available. Consequently the specific knowledge and skills of the advisor, their motivations for providing support and their understanding of young people’s specific needs can all impact on the quality of the advice given. For example, does the advisor have the most up to date information about the courses on offer in the local area and what they entail? Do they have the time to think holistically about an individual or simply consider which of the most popular or common entry level training routes might be most appropriate? It can be a difficult task for anyone to accurately research the options available but perhaps the introduction of the ‘Local Offer’ will further facilitate this process? The Local Offer refers to the responsibility of local authorities to publish information about the provisions available for children and young people in their area who have SEN or are disabled (SEN and disability code of practice, 2014).

It is essential to recognise that Carroll and Dockrell’s (2012) study took place two-three years after participants had made their transition to post-16 education and training. Therefore the findings can be seen to represent the views and perspectives of the young people on reflection of their past experiences. Arguably this does provide an important insight into how their previous experiences are currently thought of, however the details of what their experiences were like at the time may not be accurately represented.

As part of a three wave longitudinal study Polat et al (2001) aimed to explore both the experiences of young people as they make their transition from compulsory education as well as the strengths and potential challenges of the transition process. Within the first wave of this research semi-structured interviews were conducted with over 5000 participants, including: SENCOs, Teachers, Parents, Carers and young people. The interviews took place whilst the young people were completing year 11 programmes at mainstream and special schools. Key findings that were identified in this research which can be viewed to shed light on the experience of post-16 transitions for young people with SEN are outlined below.

Firstly, 70% of the young people interviewed felt that school helped them to plan for their future, however less than 60% felt that school gave them confidence to make such decisions. The majority of parents and young people attended annual reviews where a transition plan was created, 60% of these meetings took place in year 10. This can be viewed in contrast to the current recommendation and aim that the process should begin in year 9, Woolfson et al (2007) provide further support for this approach. In their study children themselves reported a desire that post-16 planning take place sooner, including a preference for information and advice being provided from the beginning of their secondary education. Polat et al (2001) also discovered that some parents were unsure about whether they or their child had attended an annual review, produced a transition plan and had a feeling of uncertainty about the whole process.

Furthermore a proportion of the young people felt that they had not been able to express their views in annual review meetings with 38% indicating that they could have been better supported to do this. Most of the young people did speak to a careers advisor either from within or outside of school and 80% reported that this had been very or fairly useful. Consequently it can be seen that at the time this research was conducted, schools could have taken more steps to fully involve and support young people and their parents or carers in the transition planning process.

Polat et al’s (2001) study can be criticised for the richness of the data obtained. The analysis used in this investigation was cited to be ‘descriptive and exploratory’, leading to the production of descriptive statistics as well as correlational and associational analyses. These types of analyses do hold value when considering the large number of participants that were involved and the possibility of determining the significance of the findings across the given population. However, I consider that the methods used may not have elicited a richness of data and understanding of the nature of the individuals experiences. For instance, questions such as: ‘What would you like to do the following year?’ led to six potential options that a young person could have responded with, equally closed questions and likert scaled questions were asked. Consequently the responses recorded for each participant were very succinct ranging from a couple of words to brief sentences. This suggests to the reader that the responses were guided to fit within closed categories and deeper elaboration was not included or considered.

In the third wave of this longitudinal research project (Aston et al, 2005) a literature review, quantitative survey and 16 in-depth qualitative case studies were included to further explore the experiences of young people. The support mechanisms and outcomes which had been achieved now they were aged 19 and 20 were also examined. The majority of the young people had received contact with professional services since leaving school and although a large number of young people reported this to have been as useful, if not more useful than the support they received whilst at school, inconsistencies were revealed in the type of support young people received. For instance, many young people, particularly those who were more independent did not have a key worker or a particular organisation who continued to overlook and provide necessary support. This resulted in young people dipping into different agencies and receiving reactive rather than proactive support. This finding supports the argument portrayed in the previous section that having a continuation of support is beneficial for young people. It can be viewed that new the new Code of Practice and associated literature is further emphasising this aspect, paving the way for a more joined up approach of services to support young people as they progress into adulthood, however the beginnings of this are more focussed on young people with complex education and health care needs. Consequently a gap in the approach for more independent young people with SEN who do not have an EHCP may continue to exist. Within the context of this research study it will be interesting to examine the ways in which schools and colleges are moving towards a more consistent and coherent approach for the three participants.

In concurrence with the previous research findings cited, Aston et al (2005) also found that the role of families, parents or carers was hugely influential in supporting young people as they made their transition. Interestingly the authors did acknowledge that this capacity can be undermined if parents themselves are not aware of the options and associated outcomes that different post-16 routes may elicit for their child. For example, parents may have a desire to want the best for their child however this has to be balanced with their own perceptions of whether their child can meet the challenge and what they themselves hoped their child’s future would look like. Consequently providing the knowledge and information about the options available for parents as well as young people is hugely important.

A further important factor which is important to consider when preparing young people for their post-16 transition is highlighted by Kohler and Field (2003) who summarised that:

‘successful transition requires the development of a student’s abilities through education and other experiences, specific supports that enhance or facilitate those abilities and opportunities through which one can apply those abilities. Furthermore...student’s playing a key role in planning and preparing for post school outcomes’ (p2).

This argument was formed through reference to research literature at the time and reflection on programmes which develop not only work skills but also young people’s autonomy and understanding of themselves, such as their hopes and aspirations and motivations. This approach is considered to contribute to increased self awareness and the confidence of pupils to communicate their wishes within the transition planning process. I consider that some schools may place a more explicit emphasis on this process than others, however with the expectation that schools prepare young people for their next steps and foster their ability to make informed decisions about their future it is hoped that good practice in this area will continue to develop.

### Theoretical perspectives that can offer an explanation for the nature of post-16 transition

The research evidence examined has highlighted key areas that can be considered in line with theoretical understanding of human development at times of transition. Firstly, Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Model (1979, 1989) for instance can offer an explanation for the range of factors impacting on young people as they transition to post-16 education or training. From this perspective the environment and in particular the role of the various systems around young people, such as peers, family, school and college interact with each other and the individual to influence their experiences, perceptions and development. Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1989) uses the following terminology to reflect on the systems that make up the ecological environment around a person, the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem. The microsystem is considered to represent the closest relationships and environments that a child experiences for example family, friends and school. The relationships between two or more of these systems make up the mesosystem. The exosystem relates to the systems which may impact on the individual even though they are not directly a part of them such as a parent’s workplace. Finally the macrosystem indicates the wider cultural and societal systems. Bronfenbrenner developed this model further into the Bioecological Model of human development (Bronfenbrenner, & Morris 2006; Rosa & Tudge, 2013) which included more of a focus on the individual (their characteristics) as having an explicit role in their own development, as well as taking into account the nature of the activities they engage in (‘proximal processes’) and the impact of time (when and how activites occur and the historical context). Consequently it was put forward that:

‘the four elements of … (process, person, context, time) simultaneously inﬂuence human beings’ developmental outcomes; their effects are not merely additive’ (p251, Rosa & Tudge 2013).

A person is seen to develop through the interactions they have as they evolve with others and objects in their direct environment. The frequency, closeness of the relationship and nature of the interactions are considered as impacting on their subsequent development.

Consequently the experience which young people have as they transition to post-16 education can be seen as a result of their own characteristics and interactions within their environment, for example, the activities they engage in related to planning and making the transition, their relationships with peers, family members, professionals and the educational settings of school and college, the interactions between these parties and the context of this in relation to the historical and cultural time.

The importance of acknowledging this approach is supported by the research findings that parental and family support and the way that schools and colleges work together with families can be hugely influential on the experience of transition. Furthermore as highlighted by research which explored the times that transition plans broke down, or were not as successful as had been hoped, there had been a lack of communication or empowerment of the young people and their parents. Consequently, ensuring that the varying systems around a young person are considered and supporting the young person to find their own voice within the possibly divergent voices of those around them is vital.

Another psychological theory which can be linked to the topic of transition is attachment theory. This perspective recognises that children’s early experiences of relationships form the basis for later relationships that they develop, and times of transition in education are considered challenging as young people move away from secure relationships and an environment where they feel safe to a new environment (Ainsworth, 1973; Geddes, 2006; Bombèr, 2007; Chow & Healey, 2008). There may be a sense of loss for young people at this time as well as the opportunity to develop new relationships. This approach therefore highlights the importance of considering how confident young people feel about developing new relationships, for example the extent to which they are able to build on their previous experiences of this at school, and recognises that this can be an emotionally significant time. On reflection of this understanding and the current legislative aims to begin transition planning in year 9, I am interested in the extent to which young people feel prepared and secure in their move to a new establishment and what if anything could be done to facilitate this process further.

### The significance of the area under study

As highlighted by Carroll (2015) there has been an increase in research exploring the post-16 transitions for young people with SEN however there is a clear need for further research to be completed in order to develop understanding of the nature of this experience. It can be viewed that much of the research which has examined the nature of transitions for young people with SEN has been motivated or centred on exploring outcomes. Equally, as alluded to earlier with reference to SLI, there has been a greater proportion of studies completed using participants with a particular area of need rather than a more diverse sample. Carroll (2015) conducts a review of the approaches used to investigate post-16 transitions for young adults with learning difficulties, suggesting that it would be useful for future research to consider the context in which such transitions occur. I agree that an awareness of the different systems for example: school, college, home, friendships and the legislative drives, which can all interact to impact on the nature of the transition experienced is important to acknowledge. Moreover although this research project will not be able to address the recommendations suggested by Carroll (2015), for further research to be longitudinal in nature and conducted across Europe, it is hoped that a sample of young people with a label of SEN, rather than a specific SEN category of need, will be included and a richer picture of their experience of preparing for post-16 transitions achieved.

Furthermore within the changing landscape of EP practice, which now includes working with children and young people up to 25 years of age (SEN and disability code of practice: 0 to 25 years, 2014). I consider that there will be an increase in EPs supporting schools, colleges and other post-16 providers to ensure that the recommendations put forward by the code with reference to this age group, are achieved. Namely, that young people are continuing to reach the outcomes they and the key adults around them aspire to and that agreed plans for their future are created.

As highlighted in some of the literature (Palikara, Lindsay & Dockrell, 2009; Madriaga and Goodley, 2010; Polat et al, 2001) and legislation (SEN and disability code of practice, 2014) summarised above there is an increasing focus on the extent to which young people are given the opportunity to have their voices heard. Norwich et al (2006) conducted semi-structured interviews with adults and pupils with SEN in primary and secondary schools with the aim of exploring how children are supported to participate and express their views regarding SEN procedures. The authors cited that a systemic school focus on eliciting pupil views can have a positive impact on the success of such practice at the different levels within the setting. In addition there was recognition of the importance of both informal and formal processes, such as informal interactions within school and completing specific activities such as developing personal targets. The former was considered to play a significant role in building relationships which may therefore support pupils to feel comfortable in contributing their views within the more formal processes. Barriers that were identified which made this process more difficult, included the challenge of eliciting some children’s views and the extent to which children and adults were open to sharing the decision making process. This research aims to provide the time and space for the young people to express their views about their experiences of transitioning from secondary school to FE College. Through doing so it is hoped that further support for the inclusion of young people’s voices in decision making will be illustrated as well as consideration of how the young people felt able and supported to contribute within their own journeys.

### Key questions emerging from the literature review

It can be seen that the literature reviewed in this chapter has identified that family and friends and the nature of the support young people receive in school and college can be important factors impacting on the outcome of their post-16 transitions. In addition, there is a call for young people to be more actively involved in this process through having their voices heard as they plan for and transition into adulthood. This research was interested in exploring the extent to which these aspects were pertinent for the young people who took part in this study. Furthermore, in contrast to previous research the aim was to use a semi-structured interview approach focussed on the participant’s individual experience of their transition very close to the time in which they were preparing and making this. At the time of completing this research the young people were part of a cohort of year 11s whereby their Statements of SEN had transferred to EHCPs in line with new legislation (SEN and disability code of practice: 0 to 25 years, 2014). This presented the opportunity to explore whether the core principles put forward by this legislation featured in the young people’s experiences, for example their involvement in the planning process. The following questions can be seen to summarise this aim and reflect the changes brought about by the new legislation.

What is the experience of young people as they prepare to make a post-16 transition?

Do young people feel prepared for the transition? What are the feelings connected with the transition experience: Comfortable? Excited? Inspired? Motivated? Unsure?

How involved in the process do young people feel?

What support have young people received to find out about what opportunities there are and to share their views?

Do young people feel able to share their views?

What has been positive about their experiences to date?

What additional support might have been helpful?

Do young people have a key worker, if so who is this and how are they involved in the process?

Is there a transparent transition planning process and what does this look like?

How do EPs fit within this process?

What can this area of knowledge offer EPs in developing their practice of working with older young people?

It was hoped that this study would elicit the participant’s views about their experience of transitioning to post-16 education, which may therefore evoke consideration of the above aspects, through addressing the research questions below.

### Research questions

How do young people who have an EHCP experience their preparation for a post-16 transition from secondary school to FE College?

How is the post-16 transition experienced by young people and what does it mean to them?

# Chapter Three: Methodology

## Introduction to methodology

The aim of this chapter is to outline both my approach to conducting this piece of research and the process by which this was completed. Firstly, the motivating factors which led to my interest in completing research into the experience of post-16 transition are summarised and the ontological and epistemological approaches which frame the chosen methodology of IPA highlighted. In the next section IPA and the associated philosophical underpinnings will be explored as well as reflecting on alternative methodologies which were considered before deciding upon IPA. The research design will then be presented including: pilot work completed, participant recruitment, the interview procedure, ethical considerations and analysis. Finally, steps taken by the researcher to reflect on the quality of research that is hoped to be achieved will be detailed.

## Approach to research

Willig (2008) outlines the importance of reflecting on the impact that personal values, beliefs, interests, life goals and experiences may have upon one’s approach to conducting research. As detailed in the introduction the following impacted on the direction I chose for this research: my personal experience of transitions in education, a belief that education has a central role in preparing young people for their future, experience of supporting young people at this stage in their educational journeys and my passion for ensuring that young people’s voices are heard.

Through completing this study I hoped to contribute to the current knowledge and understanding within EP practice and research. It was with this in mind that I approached the start of my two year placement and through my initial experiences in this context my ideas took shape. This involved reflecting on the role of schools and the emerging role of EP work to include working with young people aged up to 25 years.

### Ontology

‘Ontology is concerned with the nature of the world’, (p13, Willig 2008).

Within research, ontology refers to the researcher’s understanding of what makes up the reality that exists in the world which is to be under study. As highlighted by Ritchie and Lewis (2003) the question of whether reality exists in the world outside of people’s perceptions or as a construction of individuals understanding and experiences, provides the foundation to a researcher’s approach to conducting research.

Within this research I have taken a phenomenological approach to ontology (Willig, 2013) as I am interested in the reality that exists through an individual’s interpretation of their world and the meanings they place on their experiences. The focus is on how three young people experience the phenomena of a transition from secondary school to FE College.

### Epistemology

Epistemology is the philosophical position concerned with how we arrive at an understanding of what constitutes knowledge about the world (Langdridge, 2007). A positivist epistemological approach to conducting research would typically aim to achieve an objective stance on what is out there in the world, through experimental designs and quantitative research methods. Conversely qualitative research approaches seek to explore the world from the perspective of the individual (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003).

This research investigation has been approached from an Interpretative Phenomenological epistemological position which is interested in the way individuals relate to the world and experience the things that are important to them (Larkin and Thompson, 2012). Through this approach it is understood that the knowledge that is sought will be a reflection of the experiences and meaning that three young people perceived through their experience of transition. It is considered that the participant’s subjective perceptions will be facilitated and further explored by the interpretative process both they and I as the researcher engage in. Consequently the aim is not to arrive at a finite understanding of what is real or not real in relation to the participant’s experience as this cannot be known, rather:

‘Any discoveries that we make must necessarily be a function of the relationship that pertains between researcher and subject-matter (person and world, subject and object, etc)’, Larkin, Watts and Clifton (2006), p107.

As Larkin, Watts and Clifton (2006) go on to explain, such findings can be viewed as the ‘emergent reality’ which will develop through the analysis process. Consequently within this epistemological approach the aim is to elicit as closely as possible the participant’s experience of the phenomena, however the interaction of the context for both the participant and researcher is acknowledged.

### Chosen methodology IPA

IPA is a qualitative approach to research inquiry which is centred upon exploring how individuals make sense of experiences which are significant and important in their lives.

It is understood that there may be more to an experience than an individual conveys in their dialogue alone, therefore within an IPA study the researcher engages in a deeper level of interpretation of what has been said to develop an understanding of the participant’s experience (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). In this sense IPA adopts an approach whereby the researcher engages in a process of interpreting what the participant has said which in turn is the participants own attempt to make sense of their experience (this is termed a ‘double hermeneutic’ and will be explored in more detail below).

IPA seeks to establish a rich detailed understanding of individual experiences and therefore it is typical for such studies to have small samples allowing such an in-depth understanding to be gained.

For this research project the phenomenon in question is the experience of transition from secondary school to FE College. This experience is considered significant as it encompasses not only the physical move from spending time in one environment to another, but equally a potential change in friendships, interaction with education, independence and looking towards the future. Transition has been the focus within other IPA studies such as Smith (1999) and Beal (2014), supporting the representation of transition as a significant personal experience.

As highlighted by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) IPA has theoretical roots within phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography, these positions will be explored below after a reflection on the alternative approaches that were considered for this research project.

### Alternatives

There were two alternative research methods to IPA which I explored as part of the planning phase of my research project, Q Methodology and Narrative.

Q methodology is a method which allows for the subjective viewpoints of participants to be gathered using a structured approach (Watts and Stenner, 2012). This involves sorting statements to reflect how an individual views the topic under investigation. I found this method appealing as I thought it might be an enjoyable way for the young people to express their views. Having completed a couple of Q sorts I was able to reflect on how it felt as a participant. I decided that this would not be appropriate for my research as the format of working through a set of statements and deciding how closely they agreed with each might actually be a challenge for my participants and wouldn’t allow for the richness of their individual experience to be conveyed.

A Narrative approach however would have enabled the desired depth of individual perspectives to have been explored through drawing out the story and meaning that the young people portrayed about their experiences. Nevertheless I felt that the emphasis on a narrative itself and the stories that people tell about themselves did not match the way I approach thinking about experiences and events. I tend to think about what a situation was like, the key features and how this felt rather than forming a broader story. Equally I did not feel that stories would naturally come across in the way the young people would communicate in the context of an interview. In line with my ontological position I was interested in exploring the participants’ lived experience of post-16 transition, which IPA would facilitate.

A further important factor was a lack of direction in how to complete such research,

…narrative research offers no overall rules about suitable materials or modes of investigation, (p1 Andrews et al, 2008).

This did not appeal to me as a method I felt comfortable embarking on as a novice researcher.

### Phenomenology

Phenomenology is an approach within Philosophy which is concerned with the lived human experience and understanding how this is experienced.

As outlined by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) four key phenomenological philosophers: Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre provided a significant contribution to the development of phenomenological approaches and nuances to reflect on as an IPA researcher.

Firstly, Husserl who is considered the founder of phenomenology focussed on the detail of conscious experience and how it is that individuals perceive the world if you attempt to take away their wider thoughts and preconceptions by acknowledging what these may be and instead focussing on the particular. The process through which this can be achieved and such prejudices put to one side was termed ‘bracketing’. By seeking to achieve this it was considered that,

‘we can encounter things themselves in their appearing’ (Finlay 2008, p4)

Moreover Husserl was interested in the way people direct their consciousness to experience phenomenon which he termed intentionality.

Heidegger took these ideas further to purport that the experience of being human cannot be separated from ones interaction with the world and suggested that ‘intersubjectivity’ is the process by which we can make sense of each other through our shared experience of the world. Merleau-Ponty and Sartre equally recognised the importance of personal perceptions and perspectives which they considered to develop through relationships and the context of the experiences individuals have.

Phenomenological approaches to conducting research can be seen to take this essence of being human and attempt to capture it to gain an understanding of individual’s experiences.

‘Phenomenological psychology is all about rich description of people’s experiences. So that we can understand them in new, subtle and different ways and then use this new knowledge to make a difference to the lived world of ourselves and others’, p9 Langdridge (2007).

It is hoped that this research project will enable a more detailed understanding of how three young people experience their transition to FE College to be gained and through this process the potential for new and developed perspectives to be explored.

### Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics, the theory of interpretation, is another theoretical approach central to IPA (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). Although Hermeneutics was originally applied to the interpretation of biblical and historical texts the same approach has been applied by researchers trying to get close to the ‘true’ meaning of dialogue and text shared within research projects.

Smith (2007) supports the application of Schleiermacher’s (1998) ideas, that aiming to understand both the words that have been said or written as well as making sense of the person themselves is key. Moreover Schleiermacher alludes to the fact that the person looking in from the outside may be able to gain a deeper understanding of what has been said than the individual themselves is aware of. Gadamer (1990/1960) however suggests that the primary focus should remain on understanding the intention of the speaker.

As outlined by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009), Heidegger can be seen to acknowledge the role of our pre conceptions (‘fore-structure’) and how we may instinctively view the world. However he puts forward that when interpreting something we should not start with this but rather focus on the what is being said.

The Hermeneutic circle is the theorised process by which understanding is developed through examining both the individual parts and the whole using a dynamic and circular approach. It is suggested that by considering information at both these levels as well as the interaction between them, a new understanding and a deeper knowledge can emerge (Debesay et al, 2008). Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) suggested that such an interactive approach is central to IPA analysis, whereby the researcher seeks to explore the data at a number of different levels. As emphasised by Smith (2007) however it is important to identify a point where a ‘good enough’ level of interpretation has been reached as this process does not have a specified end point.

A further important aspect of the hermeneutic approach within IPA is the notion of a ‘double hermeneutic’ (Smith and Osborn, 2003). This is the way in which the researcher is engaged in a process of attempting to make sense of the participant who in turn is making sense of their experience. As highlighted by Norreklit (2006) the researcher is trying to get close to the participant’s own understanding and although they cannot fully know what this is like for them, they can, through the analysis phase engage in a questioning dialogue where this is explored.

### Idiography

As indicated above IPA is focussed on gaining a rich, understanding of individuals’ experiences. Consequently IPA studies embark on the detailed analysis of a single case which can then be presented as a case study or the same process applied to the next case as part of a study including a small sample of participants (Lyons and Coyle 2007). This matches an idiographic approach to conducting research which is concerned with the personal detail and reaching an in depth understanding.

Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) outline the potential impact that the IPA approach can have-through facilitating an in depth understanding for a small number of individuals, significant aspects of their experiences may hold resonance for others. It is argued that this may enable individuals to reflect on and develop understanding of their own experiences.

### Critique of IPA

Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) present IPA as an accessible and effective method for researchers keen to explore the nature of human experience, such as the experience of life events. There are a number of accounts that acknowledge some of the limitations of this approach, for example Willig (2008) and Langdridge (2007).

Firstly, Willig (2008) highlights the impact of language within the IPA approach whereby verbal accounts and text are collected and analysed to reach an understanding of how an individual experienced the phenomena under investigation. Willig (2008) argues that this approach therefore presumes that language provides a means through which experience can be directly understood, however she suggests this can be criticised as language does not achieve this and rather reflects the way an individual constructs their experiences. It can be seen however that IPA is not claiming to convey the nature of the experience itself rather the way that participants make sense of it (Smith, 2011). In addition, through taking part in a semi-structured interview which focuses on drawing out the essence of this sense making participants are given the opportunity to express their views in a context which can be seen as less driven by their wider social constructs such as those developed at home and school, as the researcher is independent of this.

Willig (2008) goes on to acknowledge that by relying on language as a means to signify and communicate experience there emerges a question as to how well participants are able to communicate in this way and provide rich accounts. This criticism is particularly pertinent to this investigation where the young people in question were identified as having communication difficulties. It can be argued however that one of the aims of IPA is to give a voice (Larkin and Thompson, 2012) and consequently although providing a rich account of their experiences could be viewed as a challenge for the participants in question I addressed this through sampling and procedural considerations to support the participants in providing their personal accounts.

Phenomenological approaches in general have been criticised for being too descriptive in their focus however Langdridge (2007) puts forward that IPA is a move away from the traditional descriptions of meaning towards an interpretative approach. Brocki and Wearden (2006) support the steps that the founders of IPA have taken to provide a clear account of how to complete analysis and interpretation within IPA studies, however it cannot be ignored that similarly to the language used by the participant, the robustness of the interpretation is only as good as the researcher themselves. Moreover as this method is appealing to researchers with varying levels of experience, including the novice researcher, it is important to acknowledge this fact and seek to ensure the quality of the research and the analytic processes employed.

## Design

### Summary overview

This investigation aimed to explore the experience of transitioning from mainstream secondary school to FE College for three young people who have an EHCP. The secondary schools and FE College were within a large town in the North of England. I planned to conduct semi-structured interviews with three participants using a schedule which enabled the young people to communicate their views and the nature of their experiences of the transition to college. The interview transcripts would then be analysed using IPA with the aim of exploring, describing and interpreting how the participants make sense of their experiences. Each participant would take part in an interview in the June/ July during their last few weeks enrolled at their secondary school and during the first few weeks in the September/ October when they have begun attending FE College. This approach is based on an understanding that ‘transition’ can be considered as fluid rather than a fixed entity. As referred to by Beal (2014),

...‘Transition as a process rather than an event’ (p66).

Therefore by exploring the views and understandings of the young people both at the end of one chapter of their lives and the start of the next this essence of their experience of the transition process is hoped to be elicited.

### Pilot study

#### Overview

A pilot study was conducted to explore these two aspects of the proposed research design:

1. My approach as a researcher collecting qualitative data.
2. How young people talk about their experiences of transitioning from School to FE College.

As a novice researcher I hoped to gain the opportunity to practice and reflect on my approach to collecting qualitative data through interview methods. In particular I was interested in my demeanour within the interview setting, the extent to which the participant’s views were elicited and my use of questioning. I aimed to complete a focus group and a 1:1 interview with participants who had transitioned from a mainstream secondary school to the FE College in question at the start of the current academic year and had a ‘statement of special educational needs’.

In addition, I was keen to ascertain the way the young people responded to the topic and the questions asked in order to reflect on the suitability of the developing interview schedule in eliciting a richness of participant views.

#### Reflections

Out of the six participants originally identified there were only four who were keen to take part in a focus group, one of which dropped out before I arrived and no young people were interested in taking part in a 1:1 interview. This highlighted the importance of identifying a large number of potential participants that could be contacted to take part in the main research project. In addition, the invitation to take part had been passed on through a number of individuals; it would have been more beneficial for me to have spoken to the young people (with consent) directly, to explain what the activity would involve.

On reflection, I realised that in my approach as an interviewer, I stuck quite rigidly to the predefined interview questions and using more prompts may have facilitated the young people to share their experiences further. In addition some of the terms and language used in my questions needed to be explained and checked out with the participants as their understanding didn’t always match my intentions, for example I asked about talking to a careers advisor but this was interpreted as a careers talk.

### Participants

A sample of three participants took part in this research project. The individuals were selected based on the following purposive sampling criteria:

* Currently in year 11.
* Attending a mainstream secondary school in a particular Northern Local Authority Region.
* Planning on attending the same FE college in the following September.
* Possessing an EHCP.

There was no specification in relation to gender or type of SEN, rather I aimed for the sample not to be biased towards a particular type of SEN as this has been the focus of the majority of previous research.

The aim of applying inclusion criteria meets the requirement of IPA studies to have a homogeneous sample. As outlined by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2009 having a sample of participants who may have experienced similar circumstances does not presume that they will reflect a shared perspective rather it allows for the similarities and differences between their experiences to be drawn out and explored.

The participants were recruited through communication with secondary schools in the Local Authority in question to identify potential individuals based on the above criteria and a perception that they might be interested. Subsequent conversations with parents and young people were then conducted to confirm their initial interest and provide further information as detailed on the participant information sheet (Appendix 1). Sam, Bill and Rebecca (pseudonyms) were the three young people who were keen to take part, please see Figure 1 for further details about the participants.

A sample of three participants, each interviewed twice, was deemed appropriate based on guidance outlined by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2009 who indicate that conducting between four and ten interviews is advisable for a professional doctorate research project.

Figure 1

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Name (pseudonym) | Gender | Age at first interview | Identified SEN category (taken from EHCP) |
| Rebecca | Female | 16 | Moderate Learning Difficulties (MLD) |
| Bill | Male | 16 | MLD/ Physical/ Hearing Impaired |
| Sam | Male | 16 | Autism Spectrum Disorder |

### Procedure

The aim of conducting semi-structured interviews was to draw out rich personal accounts of the participant’s experiences of preparing and transitioning to FE College.

The interview schedules were developed through reading texts and papers that had used an IPA design and discussion with my research tutor. This included developing my understanding of the kinds of questions that are most appropriate within this approach. It was evident that open ended questions that encourage the participant to share information about their experience were advisable, for example: what happened, how it made them feel, how it compared to what they expected and the structure of particular aspects of their experience (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2009). It was equally appropriate to reflect on the different aspects of the experience of transition that I hoped to elicit. In particular, the first interview schedule (Appendix 3) was composed of questions that related to the key areas of interest that had emerged from completing an initial literature review, such as the process of deciding, planning and preparing to go to FE college including the role of school, family and friends in this process. The second interview schedule (see Appendix 5) was based on the stage of the journey the participants had recently embarked on (the first few weeks at FE College), aspects that had arisen for the individual participants in the first interview (see Appendix 4) and anything that had not been explored in the process to date. For example on reflection it was apparent that the young people had not shared their experiences of making a plan regarding their transition, something which might have been completed as part of an annual review of their previous statement of SEN or within the process of this transferring to an EHCP. Therefore a question related to this was included in the second interview schedule.

Throughout my time with the participants as part of the interview phase of the research there was a focus on building rapport to enable the individuals to feel as comfortable as possible. As a semi-structured approach was applied there was flexibility to deviate away from the predefined interview schedule where the participants showed a preference for talking in more detail about certain aspects that had not been previously considered, as the aim was to elicit the essence of their experience. In addition, I kept in mind the importance of using prompts and probes to support the young people in conveying a richness of their experiences.

The precise location of the interviews was organised in liaison with a key contact at the participant’s schools, the FE College and their parents; however a prerequisite was that the location be a quiet confidential space where the young people felt comfortable.

The interviews were recorded using a Dictaphone and a mobile phone (for back up) which were then saved onto a disk and kept in my safe at home. The recordings were transcribed by myself using Microsoft Word.

### Ethics

Ethical approval was sought for this research project from the Ethics board within the University of Sheffield (see Appendix 6 for a copy of the approval letter). In preparing the application the BPS Code of Human Research Ethics (2010) and the BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct (2009) were consulted as well as engaging in discussions with my research tutor and peers to reflect on potential ethical dilemmas that could arise within the research.

The following were felt to be the main aspects that were considered and addressed within this research project to meet ethical criteria and ensure the safety and wellbeing of the young people involved and the researcher.

#### Informed consent

It was appropriate to ensure that all the participants were fully informed about the nature of the project and what would be expected of them if they chose to take part. This was achieved by detailing this on a participant information sheet (see Appendix 1) which was read through with the participants before the first interview, a copy was also provided for parents. If both parties were happy with the information provided and the young person was interested in taking part they provided written consent which was recorded on a participant consent form (see Appendix 2). At the start of the second interview the young people were reminded again about the nature of their involvement which included asking whether they were still happy to take part, explaining that they did not have to answer a question if they did not want to and explaining the researcher’s interest in hearing about their experiences.

#### Potential harm

Any potential risk of harm to the participants was considered as it is necessary to ensure that such risks are minimised, it was felt that the potential risks were as follows:

1) The participants may feel inconvenienced by taking part in the research.

2) The interview may evoke negative feelings or emotions from the participants related to the topic under investigation, for example feelings about school, feelings about college or feelings about the transition process.

Firstly, steps were taken to ensure that the time of the interview was arranged to best suit the participant and that this would not impact on their attendance or vital school or course arrangements. On two occasions this priority was demonstrated by rearranging interview times in accordance with commitments that arose for the young people.

Secondly, if a participant became upset the researcher was prepared to offer support for them within the context of the interview space as well as ensuring that the relevant contact within the organisation was informed to provide appropriate ongoing support.

#### Confidentiality

Issues around confidentiality and data protection were adhered to in the following way:

* The identity of the participants was anonimised by using pseudonyms, in addition personal information which could be used to identify the participants was not included.
* The names of the establishments and the area in which the study was conducted were not revealed.
* The participants were informed about how the research would be disseminated once it was completed.
* The recordings of the interviews were kept safe until they were transcribed at which point the original files were deleted.

### Decision points

As part of the process of planning and implementing this piece of research there were a number of key decisions that I considered which I have highlighted below.

#### The best time to conduct the interviews

Having identified my interest in young people’s experience of the transition from secondary school to FE College I was then faced with the task of deciding at what stage in the process of making the transition I would aim to elicit the young people’s views.

An important factor in making this decision was the logistical constraint of completing the research within a set time frame. The data would ideally be gathered in the summer, this would therefore mean interviewing young people who had made the transition to college in the previous September or were preparing to make the transition in the coming September.

I felt that it would be interesting to interview young people who had already made the transition as they would be able to reflect upon the whole process. I was however concerned about how much the young people would be able to remember about how they felt during the different stages of this process. I became aware of another study which had explored transition and interviewed participants at different stages of their transition (Beal, 2014). Through discussion with my research tutor it was felt that this would be a valid and interesting way to approach my study and I decided to interview young people before and after they transitioned to FE College. Moreover this would equally address my concern over how much the participants would remember months after making their transition as I would be exploring their experiences closer to the event.

Had I interviewed participants at a single point I would have aimed to have gained a sample of between four and six young people; however by completing two interviews with each participant the sample size could be reduced. I felt this was beneficial as it enabled me to focus in more detail on fewer individuals and facilitated an idiographic approach whilst enabling insight into the experience of transition as a process.

#### Inclusion criteria

Set inclusion criteria were established to facilitate a sample which could be said to be homogeneous in nature (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). I decided to include participants who had an EHCP as this provided recognition of the level of the individual’s additional needs and support which was consistent across the authority. An alternative would have been to have included young people who were supported at the level of ‘SEN support’; however at this stage there was not a fully established approach to identifying this level of support in the area I was completing my research.

Young people who had an EHCP (Spring 2015) would have arguably received a similar level of input from their schools and the Local Authority in developing a personalised plan to continue to support them in their next steps (as identified by the SEN Code of Practice).

To establish a further level of homogeneity I decided to include young people who were currently attending a mainstream secondary school and were planning to transition to the same FE college. This would suggest that there would be similarities in the approaches of both schools and the college in supporting young people in making their transition. Although it is understandable that there would be differences between schools it was felt that these differences would not be as distinct as those between mainstream and specialist provisions.

#### The structure of the interview

Within the context of the interview I considered the following decisions: the use of written materials, inclusion of visual aids or icebreaking activities and whether to use an unstructured or semi-structured approach.

Firstly, I reflected on the use of written materials as both an aid and a means through which the young people might convey their experiences of the transition process. I considered designing a diary entry chart where the young people could have detailed any relevant events and experiences. I decided against this as I felt that it would both have been hard to control and would have acted as another responsibility for the young people at an arguably highly pressured time, during their final exam period.

Secondly, I debated including visual stimuli to facilitate the opening of dialogue about transition. This type of activity does not come naturally to me as someone who prefers to use text or words rather than images in conveying my feelings; however I was aware of literature supporting the use of such materials in eliciting children and young people’s voices (Lewis and Porter, 2004). I decided to reflect on my approach within the pilot study where such materials would not be used to consider whether their inclusion was necessary. I focussed on building rapport with the participants throughout my engagement with them, this included ‘icebreaker’ questions at the start of the interviews such as, ‘how was your summer holiday?’

As highlighted by Willig and Stainton-Rogers (2007) semi- structured interviews are a common interview design applied within IPA research. The nature of this approach aims to facilitate participants to share their personal experiences by asking open ended questions and allowing for a deeper exploration of the aspects of interest to them. I felt that as a novice researcher interviewing young people this type of approach would be helpful as I would be able to develop a number of open ended questions to cover key aspects of the process of transition whilst giving the participants space to explore the aspects most important to them.

## Analysis

In order to analyse the data obtained from the semi structured interviews, I followed the steps outlined by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) which have been suggested as a helpful guideline for researchers new to qualitative methods and IPA.

This process was completed over three phases.

1. Analysing and comparing the first set of interviews,
2. Analysing and comparing the second set of interviews,
3. Comparing the two interviews for each participant and across participants.

Upon completion of each interview I spent time noting initial reflections in my research journal; this was felt to be important to enable reflection on the process and to facilitate preparing for the second interviews (Appendix 4). I transcribed each interview word for word as well as recording any long pauses and significant communication tools used such as laughter (see figure 2).

Figure

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| …  | Extended pause in speech |
| (Giggle)  | Audible giggle |
| (Laughter)  | Audible laughter |

An extract from each transcript is provided in Appendix 7.

Following the transcription of each of the first set of interviews, I started by analysing the interview which had been the most detailed. I read, re-read, listened to the interview and made any initial reflections on the experience and what was being said. This was followed by a process of making detailed notes and commentary of the data, aiming to move towards a description of the core meanings attached to what is being said through my interpretations.

Figure 3 represents the categories of commentary that were recorded and Figure 4 an example taken from Rebecca’s transcript.

Figure

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Descriptive comments | Things that are important to the participant |
| Linguistic comments | *Language used and its impact on the meaning of what is being said* |
| Conceptual comments | Possible interpretations of meaning  |

Figure



Thirdly, emergent themes were identified through reflection of the exploratory comments and ordered chronologically with regards to where they occurred in the transcript. This is portrayed in Figure 5 which shows how this process was completed for the featured section of Rebecca’s transcript. Please see Appendix 8 for extracts from the initial noting tables for each interview.

Figure

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Emergent themes | Original Transcript | Exploratory comments |
| Parents (mum) help out when you need them toFocussed with some flexibilityFeeling different in/to one’s family | I: yeah definitely, so you looked online yourself and sorted it all out?R: yep and then I asked my mum if she could help me to like do this sheet to erm get me the interview and they said *yeah let’s have an interview* and like yeah mh (giggle)I: so your mum helped you with that?R: Yeah, I found the course I wanted to be in but art or graphics will be perfectly fine I don’t mind either one because both of them are both enjoyable to me. My, my, my family just can’t draw squat they can’t even draw a stick men (giggle) | Rebecca asked her mum to get her the interview and she didMum got me what I needed*Pleased that it was so easily/ readily sorted*Finding the course herselfWanting to do art but being a bit flexibleA feeling that it is not definite that she will be doing Art at college (which technically is correct as she has not enrolled yet).Being different to her family (in a good way) |

The emergent themes were then analysed to draw out overarching ‘super-ordinate’ themes. This was achieved by transferring the left hand column for each interview into a Microsoft excel document, printing the document, cutting the comments out and viewing them as a whole (Figure 6).

Figure



The emergent themes were considered with the aim of exploring how they fitted together, themes which were felt to have a similar meaning were grouped together (abstraction) and contrasted with those that were felt to have an opposite meaning. The techniques of subsumption, where an emergent theme can seem to encompass others within it and numeration, the process of recognising the frequency of the theme, as detailed by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) were included as well as recognising the key voice of the participant and what was felt to be really powerful and important for them. The tables of super-ordinate themes for each participant with corresponding quotes from their transcripts can be seen in Appendix 9.

This process was then repeated for each participant with attempts to make sure the data was treated independently without too much consideration of the themes that had emerged from the previous data set.

In turn each interview transcript was subject to the same process before finally considering the patterns of super-ordinate themes across all the first interviews. This process was repeated for the second round of interviews before finally comparing within each participant and across all the cases. A table representing the super-ordinate themes across participants and interviews can be found at the start of chapter four.

## Quality in research

It is intended that this research project will meet quality criteria for qualitative research. A crucial aspect of this is ensuring that the plan, approach and exploration of the phenomenon under study are transparent and evidenced throughout the research.

As referred to by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) the essence of IPA is one which attempts to elicit how the participants make sense of their lived experience through the analyst’s interpretation of what they have shared with them. Consequently the findings will seek to be an accurate portrayal of how the participants interviewed experienced the phenomena of transition from secondary school to FE College. This process of analysis will be evidenced through clearly presenting how the findings map onto the original transcripts as well as detailing my thoughts and reflections in a reflective research journal.

In order to ensure that the process by which I analysed the data is credible I followed the guidelines proposed by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) and, as suggested by them, sought adequate supervision, for instance, from my research supervisor as well as reflecting on wider sources of knowledge about IPA methodology and the process of analysing data such as an IPA online forum (http://ipacommunity.tumblr.com/-). Being transparent about my approach to the area of study and my analysis including how my thoughts, ideas and interpretations are formed will be a crucial part of the process and the write up of the study. This practice has been highlighted as essential criteria for quality in qualitative research methods (Yardley, 2000; Stige et al, 2009).

A further factor which is detailed by both these perspectives is the consideration of impact and how the research study will add knowledge which is both useful and relevant. I consider the topic in question to be a ‘worthy topic’ as highlighted by Tracy’s (2010) criteria; the research is relevant, timely, significant and interesting. This is evidenced in the literature review section through recognition of the current changing face of post-16 education and the roles of professionals within that context seeking to develop their practice further. The extent to which the findings and potential impact can be deemed useful will be further drawn out in the concluding chapter of this thesis; however it is hoped that the study will lead to a richer insight into what the experience of post-16 transition to FE College can be like for young people with SEN. For instance, the themes which are drawn out may provide a useful starting point for professionals working with this age group to explore their current practice and whether the essence of experience highlighted does translate to the current processes and moreover how young people’s views can be incorporated further.

Through providing a detailed and rich account for how the young people in the study experienced the transition to post-16 education, it is hoped that transferability, as referred to by Tracey (2010) can be achieved. For instance, that the reader of this research may be drawn to consider how their own experience may overlap and connect with the elicited themes. Consequently this may offer insight which can be transferred to their practice in the area of post-16 transition.

In relation to IPA studies in particular, Smith (2011) has identified a set of criteria which represent a ‘good IPA paper’, these include: the importance of having a clear purpose to the research, collecting high quality data and writing in an engaging style. The latter two factors have been addressed above in reference to the background to the research topic and the steps taken to conduct effective interviews. In addition, Smith (2011) highlights factors more closely linked to the analysis stage emphasising that findings should be presented in a rigorous manner with sufficient evidence to represent and elaborate on each theme, centre on interpretation and demonstrate the patterns of similarity and difference for each participant in relation to the identified themes. These criteria have been considered throughout the research: planning, writing, data collection and analysing stages which will be demonstrated further within the results chapter.

# Chapter Four: Analysis

## Overview of chapter

This chapter aims to present the phenomenological analysis of the data. A table representing the super-ordinate and subordinate themes that were revealed across participants will be presented before each super-ordinate theme is introduced and explored with reference to the interview transcripts. The researcher’s reflections regarding the context of the interviews can be seen in Appendix 10.

The four super-ordinate themes of: self-determination, supportive relationships, college as enabling and the experience of change will be explored in turn in relation to how the participants experienced their post-16 transition. In depth tables illustrating each theme with examples of the corresponding sections of transcript for each participant can be found in Appendix 9.

## Super-ordinate and subordinate themes across participants

Figure

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Super-ordinate themes** | **Subordinate themes** | **Participants (S, B and R) and interviews (1 or 2)** |
| 1. Self-determination
 | Self-understanding | S1, S2, B1, B2, R1, R2 |
| Agency in decision making | S1, S2, B1, B2, R1, R2 |
| Self-belief | S1, B1, B2, R1 |
| 1. Supportive relationships
 | Personal support | S1, S2, B1, B2, R1, R2 |
| Systemic support | R1, R2, S1, S2, B1, B2 |
| Belonging  | S1, S2, B1, B2, R1, R2 |
| Experiencing friendship | S1, S2, B1, B2, R1, R2 |
| 1. college as enabling
 | Course centred opportunity | S2, B1, B2, R1, R2 |
| The college environment | S1, S2, B1, B2, R1 |
| 1. The experience of change
 | Being prepared | S1, S2, B1, R1, R2 |
| Managing change | S1, S2, B1, B2, R2,  |

Tables of super-ordinate themes, subordinate themes and emergent themes including quotes from the interview transcripts for each participant and interview can be seen in Appendix 9.

Quotes taken from the interview transcripts will be presented in italics. The name of the participant followed by the interview number, page number and line number will be indicated in brackets. Any names that appear are pseudonyms.

### Super-ordinate theme 1) Self-determination

Self-understanding, agency in decision making and self-belief are seen to reflect a developing sense of self-determination experienced by the young people interviewed.

Throughout the interviews the young people conveyed a clear awareness of who they are through their reflections on their experiences of planning and making the transition to college. This included an understanding of their own strengths and interests, areas of difficulty, actions they have used or plan to adopt to overcome challenges and how they will continue to meet their future goals. There is a sense of increasing autonomy that is reflected throughout these aspects and in the young people’s recognition of their own role in the decision making processes.

#### Self-understanding

Across the interviews there was a prominent sense of the young people exhibiting confidence in their understanding of themselves, who they are, who they want to be and how this represents them as an individual.

Sam

Sam highlights his understanding of his interests and strengths through his decision to complete a catering course at college, “*it’ll actually be really interesting*” (Sam 1, 9, 299) “*it’s just my hobby it’s cooking it’s everything I love about coming here really*” (Sam 2, 7, 197-198). Equally Sam recognises that as he is skilled in this area he therefore does not need the additional support of a Teaching Assistant, however in Maths he finds this support more beneficial, “*I have support shown in Maths and Functional Maths and I don’t mind in Maths cause it is something I really need help with, so, but I don’t in Catering I don’t really need much*” (Sam 2, 2, 60-63).

Within both interviews Sam makes reference to how he has grown as a person, in the first interview reflecting on his increased confidence to share his views with other people “*over time I have grown I’ve just gained that confidence*” (Sam 1, 5, 164-165) and in the second, viewing going to college as “*growing up*” (Sam 2, 8, 248). This demonstrates that Sam is recognising how he is growing and developing as an individual. Despite this self-knowledge Sam also shows a desire to reflect back on decisions he has made and perhaps begin to view them differently, “*they did have a prom but I didn’t really think of going, really, even though I would have probably wanted to go, but then there was one part of me that said no really*” (Sam 2, 9, 268-270).

Bill

Within the early stages of the first interview Bill revealed that his personal goal was to increase his independence, “*I would like to be more independent and not relying on my mum and all that, I would like to do my own thing and all that and get into town by myself*” (Bill 1, 1, 15-17). This is what Bill felt that the Life Skills course at college would help him to achieve and as he mentions in the second interview having been at college a few weeks he feels this is still very much the focus, “*it’s helping me learn more independence*” (Bill 1, 2, 54-55).

In the first interview Bill identifies things that he perceives he will find difficult at college, for example the ‘Bells’ and getting ready in the morning as his timetable will be more varied than at school. Through acknowledging these areas of potential challenge Bill equally seeks to identify how he will address them, demonstrating his drive for independence across his experiences.

“*I think just rely myself rather than my parents because like using my phone for like alarms. I think I need to use my phone more often so I can make loads of alarms then so I know. So I will be able to go to college and not in my pyjamas again*” (referring to his Dad waking him up in the morning) (Bill 1, 6, 176-179).

Bill makes reference to himself as having special needs, “*my special needs*” (Bill 1, 2, 34) which he conveys as something which means he needs extra help but also as an avenue to help others through reflecting on what he and others are capable of.

“*I can be able to, to, do things that other people can’t do because, like, different special needs, but I get to do what I want to do but other people might not be able to do that because of their disability and all that. So I think it is great for me. That inside it feels great for me but outside I find it horrible for that other person because I like to help people so that their problems can be solved*” (Bill 1, 9, 230-237).

During the second interview Bill shares some of his negative experiences at school, fearing that he might get kicked out due to his ‘behavioural problems’, he identifies that his success at school was due to him taking action himself and internalises this, “*what helped me most, is me*” (Bill 2, 11, 237).

Rebecca

Rebecca shared her keen interest in her chosen course subject Art, something which she feels she is both good at and enjoys. “*I am good at it so I wanted to do something in Art*” (Rebecca 1, 1, 10), “*Cause I do like doing creative stuff*” (Rebecca 1, 4, 123). Rebecca talked passionately about Art and described a situation where she found herself arguing what Art really is when she was told she could study textiles or a computer based course in sixth form, “*I said but you, them, but you don’t do Art*” (Rebecca 1, 2, 31). Rebecca’s enthusiasm for the subject appeared to strongly reflect how she identified herself as a person; that Art is part of who she is.

In addition, Rebecca incorporated her knowledge about herself into her reflections of her decision to go to college and her enjoyment of her course, “*I don’t think I, I would be suited in that bit* [sixth form]” (Rebecca 2, 6, 166-167), “*it’s nice like it’s like all bits I like to do so it’s quite an enjoyable day, for me, I don’t know about the other people it might be boring for them but it is quite enjoyable for me*” (Rebecca 2, 3, 72-74).

Rebecca highlighted a number of areas that she found difficult, including: maths, getting lost and being forgetful. She seemed mostly comfortable in sharing these difficulties however when explaining that having someone to help her in Maths and English at college would be helpful Rebecca got quite frustrated, “*like what the hell is this and what’s this and I don’t understand this, cause like percentages, I don’t even understand 5% what is 5%? I don’t get it, it’s like, is it like £10 or something, is it*?” (Rebecca 1, 12, 411-414). This anger directed at the subject that she had struggled with throughout school, seemed to represent a disappointment that despite moving on in many areas of her life, in Maths she remained in the same place.

Rebecca also acknowledges the role of external factors in her experiences to date and how these continue to impact on her understanding of herself and her developing values. Such as: taking on board the values of her close family members, “*if I said I hate English my mum would say ‘no you have to do it right now’ [strict voice] cause she’s head of department so yeah [laughing]*” (Rebecca 1, 6, 174-176) and her difficulty in maths, “*I was never good at Maths, like they never really teached us properly*” (Rebecca 2, 9, 257-258). In this sense Rebecca identifies that although she is not particularly excited by English and Maths she will continue to pursue these subjects and by attributing her maths ability to poor teaching she is able to maintain a positive sense of self.

#### Agency in decision making

Within the interviews the young people shared their experiences of choosing their college courses as well as reflecting on their role in decision making in other aspects of their transition.

Sam

In the first interview Sam explained how his parents helped him to make the decision regarding his post 16 education.

“*Well basically they just, well basically it was my decision obviously I had the decision to do it obviously and they just gave me a bit of an open door really and told me about everything that I could do and basically just gave me a bit of support really*” (Sam 1, 2, 50-54).

Sam acknowledges the role his parents played in supporting him; however he very much feels that this was his decision which he made through pursuing his interests and reflecting on what he enjoys. It is also revealed that Sam took action independently to explore the options further by talking to the individual in school who organised apprenticeships. In the second interview Sam explains that he has applied for jobs and does not make reference to receiving any parental support, “*Yeah I am looking to work in [name of local restaurant] cause they are looking for waiting staff*” (Sam 2, 4, 101-102). Sam equally shared examples of taking control over other aspects of his college experience such as making friends, “*I just started chatting to everybody and having a smile on my face*” (Sam 2, 2, 51-52), he gave a clear sense that this was something very important to him that he hoped to gain from his time at college.

Bill

Across both interviews Bill demonstrated that he makes the decisions about his future based on what he knows will suit him. He perceived that the particular college would be able to meet his needs, “*It is very perfect for me*” (Bill 1, 2, 31-32), the Life skills course had a variety of subjects he enjoys “*they’ve got all of it so I thought perfect*” (Bill 1, 2, 48-49) and when thinking about the next level of course he could complete, “*I just want something that suits my personality, like bubbly*” (Bill 2, 9, 284-285).

Rebecca

Rebecca shares examples of independently exploring her future options and having a secure knowledge of what these are across both interviews.

“*Well I just looked on line to see what they are offering and like I also looked at apprenticeships to see if they have anything*” (Rebecca 1, 2, 45-47).

“*there are some jobs that you can do window designing and stuff like that for shops maybe that might be helpful for an art course of something like that*” (Rebecca 1, 5, 133-135).

 “*Well I was checking, I was looking for apprenticeships this summer and I was looking online*” (Rebecca 2, 6, 178-179).

Rebecca also describes how she has taken action to become involved in creative enterprises outside of her course, it can be seen that this acts to further propel her on her journey towards becoming an artist.

“*Like I have been starting doing some crafting so maybe I might sell some stuff*” (Rebecca 2, 3, 77-78).

#### Self-belief

Self-belief was exhibited by the young people through a sense of confidence in themselves and the steps they were taking towards their chosen futures.

Sam

Sam highlighted his experience of taking part in the interview as in itself evidencing his growth which he both acknowledged and felt proud of. There was a feeling of his self-confidence being something that has developed overtime and perhaps not always been apparent. This can also be seen through Sam’s aspiration for what he hopes it will be like at college, “*because I am such a jolly person that they’ve told me that I am such a nice person*” (Sam 1, 5, 145-146). He identifies his quality of being a ‘jolly person’ but also benefits from the support and recognition of others to further build his own self-belief.

Bill

In the first interview Bill identifies that he believes that he can succeed and the steps he needs to take to get there, “*I might need to up my game*” (Bill 1, 6, 189). By the second interview, once he has made the transition to college, Bill already feels that he has achieved his goals and is ready for the next challenge.

“*I am more proud of myself that I have come this far*” (Bill 2, 11, 336-337).

“*there is no challenge too big or too small for me. I just power through it*” (Bill 2, 6, 167-168).

Moreover through Bill recognising his own role in his success, “*there is one massive difference and that is, is me*” (Bill 2, 7, 207) it is possible that he feels even more empowered to replicate this in the future.

Rebecca

Rebecca demonstrates her confidence in her own ability through examples of her exceeding the expectations, for example though taking all her art work to her college interview.

“*I got all my Art stuff with me like saying ‘did you have, did you just take all this from school and I said yeah, like it was like five books’ full with Art stuff yeah and then some at home saying ‘you didn’t need all this and I said I didn’t know how much you wanted’, so yep*” (Rebecca 1, 2, 50-54)*.*

In this way Rebecca wants to show that she has got what it takes to succeed. Although she believes that she has she also seeks reassurance from others to validate this further.

### Super-ordinate theme 2) Supportive relationships

All the young people interviewed conveyed a sense of recognition and reflection on the nature of the support they received from school, college, home and friends. The interaction between each young person and their home, school or college environment and the individuals within them, is seen as a relationship. The experience of these supportive relationships and what this meant to each individual is accounted for within the following subordinate themes: personal support, systemic support, belonging and experiencing friendship.

#### Personal Support

A sense of experiencing individualised support was shared by the young people. The role of parents and either college or school staff was highlighted by all the young people and Sam and Rebecca refer to support from friends.

Sam

The main supportive relationship that Sam refers to is that of his parents, he speaks highly of the support he received from them throughout the transition process, including helping him to make his decision regarding his post-16 options.

“*they were the ones who were supportive to me really and helped me out*” (Sam 1, 3, 90-91).

“*They, they support me in a way where I felt really comfortable and they sort of didn’t force me into doing it sort of gave me a bit of space to think about it and what I wanted to do and things like that so*” (Sam 1, 3, 83-86).

In the second interview Sam described how important family are to him through his enjoyment of spending time with his father who works from home on the day Sam is off college, “*I like being with me dad and things*” (Sam 2, 5, 135-136). Sam also recognises his role in the family in supporting when things got hectic at the end of the summer holidays, “*got a puppy, I had that to look after*” (Sam 2, 1, 8).

Sam feels that the level of support he received from his parents meant he didn’t need to rely on the other supportive mechanisms that were available to him, “*obviously cause my parents had it so straight forward I didn’t really need the school to help me out with anything*” (Sam 1, 3, 90-91). He does however identify that he benefitted from personalised support in school, “*Beth West is the one who helps me out a lot*” (Sam 1, 4, 124-125). This value is further highlighted in the second interview where Sam expresses sadness on leaving the SEN staff behind, “*I was a bit sad to say goodbye to the staff cause they’ve helped me for a long time, since I was year 7*” (Sam 2, 9, 264-265).

In the second interview Sam also identifies a new source of personal support from friends,

*I: “What do you think helped you settle?”*

*R: “Well it’s er, that it’s, I’ve had help from new friends and things I’ve been talking with new people and made loads of good friends and it’s helped me really settle down, a lot better than I did at school, so”* (Sam 2, 2, 36-40).

Bill

In the first interview Bill acknowledges that he is expecting to receive more personalised support at college, “*they know what I need to do they can focus on me and not on other people*” (Bill 1, 10, 245-246). Within the second interview Bill reveals that he has experienced this being the case, “*there is much more support at college than school*” (Bill 2, 10, 313). Bill also explains that he has a personal tutor he can speak to if he has any problems.

Similarly to Sam, Bill feels appreciative for the support he has received from his parents, “*they help me a lot through, between when I was born and now they helped me a lot*” (Bill 2, 11, 332-333). On a number of occasions across both interviews Bill refers to the worry that his mum has experienced related to him going to college.

“…*but she is a bit worried about transport*” (Bill 1, 6, 153).

“…*my mum was worried about the timing of taxis*” (Bill 2, 11, 349).

Bill acknowledges that his parents felt the college Life Skills course was a ‘good idea’ however the references to his mum’s worries are clearly very much on his mind. Bill himself identifies the impact that parents can have on their children’s experiences, “*every time he wanted to do something it’s his dad was getting in the way so I feel sorry for him*” (Bill 2, 8, 222-224). This highlights Bill’s understanding of the role of parents and the impact that their views, wishes and actions can have. Bill feels that he needs to protect his mum and reassure her that he is doing well. “…*she always asks me how was my day my mum and I say fantastic and all that and I show her pictures*” (Bill 2, 11-12, 352-354).

Rebecca

Rebecca acknowledges that others, including family members, a friend or a teacher, can provide her with support; however this is framed within a self directed approach as she feels it is her role to ask for this.

“*I can ask people if someone can help me in maths and English if I needed it*” (Rebecca 1, 12, 404-406).

“*I’ve been asking my parents or relatives for a lift in the morning*” (Rebecca 2, 5, 129).

There is a sense of autonomy developed through Rebecca taking ownership of when she needs help, however this equally shows the effectiveness of her support mechanisms as she feels she can rely on them when necessary. For instance, Rebecca explained that her mum was fundamental in supporting her to apply and prepare for a college interview.

“…*then I asked my mum if she could help me to like do this sheet to erm get me the interview and they said ‘yeah let’s have an interview’…”* (Rebecca 1, 2, 59-61).

Rebecca equally outlined an example of her mum campaigning on her behalf without her having asked for this help.

“…*my mum was complaining cause of erm my coursework and like she said that they put me down with the wrong grade and it should have been higher not that grade so yeah she’s kinda annoyed by that. I am also doing that at my mum’s school my English*…” (Rebecca 2, 9, 250-253).

Rebecca doesn’t express negative or positive emotions in response to this level of support but perhaps views this as the way it is; parents are available to support you and will fight for what they believe is right.

In the second interview there were a few moments when Rebecca reflected on the negative impact of her recent family experiences. Rebecca explained that there had been issues over the summer holidays that she did not want to talk about, she did however state that this experience resulted in her struggling to remember things and not having a chance to think about preparing for college.

“*Like at the moment my mind has been really bad at the moment so yeah I might remember some days and then the next minute I just can’t remember*” (Rebecca 2, 5, 151-152).

“*plus there was things going on in the summer so I was thinking of those things than*” (Rebecca 2, 7, 211-212).

#### Systemic support

The interviews revealed a reflection on the support that school and college provided on a more general level, this can be seen to mirror their systemic policy and practices as experienced by the young people.

Sam

Sam describes a confidence in his knowledge and understanding of the support systems in place and how to access them both at school and at college.

“*you talk to your support officer it doesn’t really have to be Miss West obviously only for special needs but for usual students you’d probably go to Miss Crawley*” (Sam 1, 8, 250-252).

“I *could picture where her office is but yeah I’d speak to Meryl if there is any problems*” (Sam 2, 10, 294-295).

The curriculum and holistic approaches of the settings are also experienced as supportive for Sam for example; the opportunity to complete a catering course at school is identified by Sam as helpful in preparing him for college. Sam identifies that this meant he was “*learning an awful lot*” (Sam 1, 8, 236) and was where he “*gained…interest*” from (Sam 1, 8, 238). Equally Sam found the induction activities at college helpful in supporting him to build new connections, “*I remember drawing faces to I think show some kind of friendship or summot show that we’re all a class, things like that. Just getting used to each other*” (Sam 2, 1, 29-31).

A prominent feature of the systemic support Sam received at school was ‘visible’ support from Teaching Assistants; this was something that Sam found negative as it made him look different. Sam expressed during his transition planning that he did not want to receive visible support at college and was able to confirm that this had been put in place when I met with him for the second interview.

Bill

Bill refers to himself as having special needs in both interviews and explains that this means he needs a certain kind of support that college can provide.

“*because they can help me with my special needs and all that cause I’ve got Down Syndrome and they can help me like*” (Bill 1, 2, 34-35).

At college Bill feels that he is supported and feels confident in the systems in place if he feels worried. At school Bill describes receiving support ‘like anger management’ however he found that there wasn’t the opportunity to develop his personalised plan and explore his future goals, “*it was quite difficult because, because, because you don’t get like, find time to do it at School*” (Bill 2, 6, 179-180). It can be argued that this may have contributed to Bill’s fears about school.

“*I was scared that I would get kicked out or summit from school cause of my behaviour and that*” (Bill 2, 11, 340-341).

It can be seen that Bill now has an emerging sense of safety at college as he believes his needs can be met, he no longer perceives the fear and risk that he felt at school.

Rebecca

Rebecca presents a negative view of her experiences of school as a supportive system.

“*We did have a few lessons in school but it didn’t really help*” (Rebecca 1, 3, 69), referring to sessions at school to help the young people explore their post-16 options.

Rebecca explained that the environment at school made it both difficult for her to learn and a difficult place to be.

“*cause sometimes you wanna listen to your teacher but they’re there shouting in the background and that’s very annoying*” (Rebecca 1, 10, 345-346).

“*sometimes annoy or teased me and I found that annoying*” (Rebecca 1, 10, 325-326).

“*sometimes you’ve got teachers who just don’t know what to do*” (Rebecca 1, 10, 336).

This experience of school acted as a barrier for Rebecca that she tried to push against. It can be viewed that the journey of moving to a different setting is enabling her to escape from this difficult environment. In reference to how College will be different Rebecca says, “you do have to make your way through life don’t ya” (Rebecca 1, 10, 358-359).

In the second interview Rebecca expressed that the support in college has been adequate in the sense of feeling like she can ask for help when needed and that the teachers seem ‘alright’. Rebecca highlights there had been some timetable problems which she found frustrating but the experience as a whole appears more positive.

#### Belonging

The young people reflect on their experiences of feeling that they are a part of a community which they value. The development of their individual understanding and hopes for experiencing belonging can be seen as shaped by their previous experiences in school and are different for each young person.

Sam

Sam’s desire to experience belonging is centred on his hopes to gain friends at college with individuals who see him as similar to them. Sam identifies as being part of a community, those completing a catering course, therefore he feels confident that he can be a valuable member of this group and develop connections within it.

“*they’re doing the same thing as you are so they’ll have the same interests and they’ll probably talk about the same thing you are*” (Sam 1, 9, 277-279).

“*they’ll feel the same way as you do*” (Sam 1, 10, 327).

College for Sam is allowing him the chance to be included in a peer group by showing his similarities to others; this is something he missed out on at school as he was made to appear different. Sam is now keen for the experience of being the same as others which he feels will provide a sense of belonging.

 “*I don’t want to be seen as different I want to be seen as everybody else*” (Sam 1, 11, 348-349).

In the second interview Sam shares that his experiences at college had matched his expectations.

“*if they are the same traits as you, you know you just sort of gain friendship from there just chatting with each other*” (Sam 2, 2, 49-51).

Bill

Bill also indicates a desire to make new friends at college; although he recognises that he has been successful in making friends previously he acknowledges that there is a risk that this may not be so easy. For example Bill considers that new people may not like his ‘style’ or ‘like having a joke’. These are qualities that are important to Bill that he hopes to express at college.

Similarly to Sam, Bill shares that he has had a positive experience of feeling like he belongs at college, this is evidenced through making friends with peers and sharing experiences with them, building connections with support staff and college assuring him that he would have a place on the course.

“*Like sometimes we go, well a lot of times we go down to the food hall*” (Bill 2, 4, 89-90).

“*one of them is absolutely hilarious he’s called Phillip*” (Bill 2, 2, 37).

“*so college trusted, like that, and they didn’t worry about English and Maths*” (Bill 2, 10, 300-302).

Rebecca

In the first interview Rebecca shared her experience of being part of a minority of people who wanted to work hard at school, “*for people who had been looking really hard*” (Rebecca 1, 3, 74-75), “*there was a few*” (Rebecca 1, 10, 341). This was in contrast to other peers which Rebecca viewed as ‘silly’, she perceived that there would be less of these people in college. During the second interview Rebecca revealed that this was in fact her experience of the environment at college.

“*everyone wants to learn and that’s really good, yeah it is a positive atmosphere and everyone wants to get it done*” (Rebecca 2, 2, 56-57).

This reflects the increased sense of belonging for Rebecca at college where she has a shared attitude to learning as her peers. This is equally evidenced in her actions of getting involved, something she feels positive about, for example in the ‘introduction week’ activities.

“*Yeah that was fun, I was in there doing some stuff, so it was nice*” (Rebecca 2, 2, 37).

#### Experiencing friendship

The young people’s experiences of friendship were revealed within all the interviews. For Sam and Bill friendship can be seen as something they held with high regard that they hoped to gain from their time at college. Rebecca acknowledges the role of friendships in her experiences of school and college but doesn’t suggest this was a priority for her within her transition to college. The young people refer to the process of making friends and in Bill’s case some of the challenges that can emerge from friendships.

Sam

In the first interview Sam explains how he perceives that he will develop friendships with people at college. Despite Sam sharing that he had not made friends at school he was very confident that this was something he would achieve at college.

“*at first I wasn’t very good at making friends and that’s I mean, the thing I am hoping to get when I get to college…obviously I’ll get plenty of friends there*” (Sam 1, 5, 142-148).

In the second interview Sam reflects on the impact that developing friendships has had including helping him to settle into college and experiencing different levels of friendship.

“*I’ve been talking with new people and made loads of good friends and it’s helped me really settle down*” (Sam 2, 2, 38-39).

“*as in a proper friend I’d probably only have two proper, proper friends that I spend most time with. But most of the class who am friends with really*” (Sam 2, 6, 177-180).

It is as though Sam does not allow any time or energy to be taken up on worrying about the possibility of developing friendships at college or being held back by his negative past experiences. Rather he takes ownership of this new opportunity to make friends which has come at a time where he feels confident that he can achieve this.

Bill

Bill recognises that he has experience of making friends at school; this can be seen to support him in feeling secure about making and experiencing new friendships at college.

“*I am hoping to meet some people, even with my friends that I’ve got at school, like some that are coming to college anyway, I am hoping to make new friends*” (Bill 1, 3, 70-72).

“*that’s why I love college, making new friends and meeting new people*” (Bill 2, 44-45).

Bill also identifies some of the struggles that can come along with the experience of friendship.

Referring to his two best friends at school, “*I do, I do speak to them, they both have little fallouts. I just feel like if I am near someone I know that trouble is brewing. Like I’m a trouble causer, like that, you know what I mean?”* (Bill 2, 8, 238-240).

This highlights that as well as friendships being important to Bill he perceives that relationships can influence your developing sense of self. Bill questions whether he is a trouble causer and reflects on the dynamics and impact of his interactions with others.

Rebecca

In her first interview Rebecca shares examples of her friends at school helping each other in lessons; a sense of being able to rely on each other was evoked.

“*Well we helped a lot with revision and a lot in lessons to be honest. Like I had a few friends help, like help me in media and sometimes in English but sometimes I’d help them out*” (Rebecca 1, 4, 109-111).

During the second interview Rebecca describes how there was a process that she experienced for getting to know her peers, this was viewed as ‘weird’ for Rebecca but something that she was not alone in.

“*Yeah it’s been alright like erm the first day like they told us to have a little chat for FIFTEEN MINUTES we sat in silence because we didn’t know what to say to each other but now we’re just perfectly fine [giggle]”* (Rebecca 2, 2, 39-41).

### Super-ordinate theme 3) College as enabling

The young people conveyed a sense of their transitions to college as providing a positive step towards achieving their personal goals and becoming who they hoped to be in the future. This was reflected upon through their consideration of their chosen college course and the college environment as a whole.

#### Course centred opportunity

Perhaps unsurprisingly the courses that the young people have chosen are particularly important to them, for these three young people their courses have provided the opportunity for growth that they desired.

Sam

Sam expressed that he feels really positive about his college course, “*it’s a brilliant course*” (Sam 2, 9, 282), highlighting that it is providing him with not only the knowledge and experience to become a professional but equally a chance to develop skills in a subject which he is passionate about.

“*It’s all the production I’ve really enjoyed, it’s learning the knife skills I’d say I have learnt so much with the knife skills already*” (Sam 2, 3, 93-95).

Bill

Across both interviews Bill expresses that the Life skills course is helping him to achieve his personal goal of becoming more independent.

“it will give me a chance to be more*… more independent*” (Bill 1, 9, 225… -230).

“*this course will help me a lot*” (Bill 2, 4, 117).

Bill reflects on the options that he can pursue both as part of the course “*they’ve got all of it*” (Bill 1, 2, 48), as well as looking to the future, however Bill indicates that this is a hard decision to make in the second interview because there are so many options, “*I don’t know what to pick for my future*” (Bill 2, 9, 277-278).

Bill explains that he finds the flexible nature of the course, for example when breaks are set, as contributing to the supportive environment he is experiencing. It can be seen that Bill is experiencing the course as closely tailored to his perception of his needs which is therefore enabling him to develop the skills that are important to him.

Rebecca

Across the interviews Rebecca presented her enthusiasm for Art the subject she chose to study and experience more of at college.

“*I do hope I can do something with art, so be creative all the way*” (Rebecca 1, 4, 122-123).

“*it’s like all bits I like to do so it’s quite an enjoyable day, for me*” (Rebecca 2, 3, 73).

There is a sense of Art being how Rebecca expresses herself, “*it’s all in my section*” (Rebecca 2, 5, 127), “*I do Art at home*” (Rebecca 2, 2, 49) and how she sees herself in the future. Therefore it can be seen that by completing the Art course at college Rebecca is becoming closer to this ideal. Rebecca recognises the opportunities to extend her knowledge and skills and reflects on the increased autonomy the students are given.

“*there’s also erm textiles, graphics, 3D work, erm 2D work and photography other stuff like that*” (Rebecca 2, 1, 19-20).

“*they have just been showing us what to do and how to do it and then on your way, like go and do it, go on*” (Rebecca 2, 6, 157-158). This expectation for increasing independence can be seen as a welcome challenge for Rebecca to further her proficiency.

#### The college environment

The young people referred to their hopes for what college would provide which can be summarised as a fresh start and new opportunities. For Sam and Rebecca this was explored from a perspective of leaving behind the negative experiences of school.

Sam

Sam hoped that going to college would be a more positive experience than school.

“*I’m really hoping that I’d sort of light up a little bit*” (Sam 1, 5, 144-145).

“*it’s been a bit sad for me unfortunately*” (Sam 1, 11, 358-359).

Sam shared that people at school saw him as different which they acted on by reinforcing this view of him. College therefore is considered by Sam as an opportunity to have a fresh start and be the friendly person he feels he can be.

In the second interview Sam is able to share how his experience of college is living up to this aspiration and arguably providing a contrast to his experience of school.

“*I: how does college compare to what you expected it to be like?*

*R: It’s fantastic, it’s exactly how I wanted it at the minute really, I don’t think they could make it any better really*” (Sam 2, 7, 213-216).

Sam also sees going to college as a means to gaining the qualifications and skills he needs for his future.

“*skills and qualities and whatever you get*” (Sam 1, 6, 172-173).

Bill

Bill was extremely positive about college both in his preconceptions of what it could offer him and his experiences once he had been there a few weeks.

“*it will be life changing*” (Bill 1, 3, 85-86).

“*Better than I thought*” (Bill 2, 9, 254).

“*like you are entering a new dimension*” (Bill, 2, 4, 103).

Bill explained that college was somewhere that he felt he could learn new things and have new experiences such as meeting a girlfriend, “*hoping that I might find the very girl just for me*” (Bill 1, 3, 72-73).

Bill is not only positive about his experiences but equally what college symbolises for him, as evidence of how far he has come, “*now look where I am*” (Bill 2, 11, 341).

Rebecca

Rebecca believes that by going to college she will be able to surround herself with like minded people who want to learn, this is a contrast to Rebecca’s experience of the school environment.

“*Well at the first off there won’t be loonies who just won’t do anything that they’re supposed to do*” (Rebecca 1, 9, 300-301).

College is providing a space for Rebecca that she considers to be her own, “*I’ve got a whole block to myself so YEY!”* (Rebecca 1, 6, 184-185). In addition, Rebecca identifies how she plans to spend her time, in the library, “*so yeah I’ll be stuck reading information and stuff like that*” (Rebecca 1, 9, 311-312), arguably this refers to ‘stuck’ in a positive sense of growing roots in a place where she can be herself.

### Super-ordinate theme 4) The experience of change

Understandably transition represents a time of change; the young people reflected on their experience of this change through a sense of feeling like they were prepared and how they managed this process.

#### Being prepared

There was a sense of the young people feeling that they were both ready and prepared for their transition to college, they expressed a feeling of being aware of what to expect and equipped to be successful.

Sam

Sam expresses a feeling of being prepared for transitioning to college in the following ways: his desire to have a new start, a realistic reflection on what to expect, clarifying that he can be successful and experiencing the positive impact of attending annual review meetings (collaborative planning).

“*I was happy to say goodbye to students*” (Sam 2, 9, 263). Sam looked forward to the opportunity for a fresh start. There is a sense of the opportunity having come at the right time for him, as indicated in the first interview, he feels he has grown in confidence.

Expectations: “*It’ll be a lot different because obviously it’s bigger and you don’t have a set routine*” (Sam 1, 9, 269-270).

“*I asked about, erm, is it hard?*” (Sam 1, 6, 201). Hearing from college staff that if he is interested in the subject then he will not find the course too challenging seeks to reassure Sam that he will be able to be successful and achieve at college.

Annual reviews: “*It’s when everyone’s together, even me mum and dad were together and we could actually discuss what me plans could be in the future, give them ideas as well as me*” (Sam 2, 6, 192-194).

Sam equally identifies that there is an element of sadness to leaving school and leaving behind the adults who have supported him over the last five years however it can be viewed that he comforts himself in this being part of the process.

“*yeah it’s sad to say goodbye to a lot of the staff actually*” (Sam 1, 13, 411-412).

Bill

Bill reflects on the steps he feels he needs to take to ensure he will be ready for college which includes: becoming more independent in executing his morning routine, “*I don’t want my dad to come in while I am still in my pyjamas*” (Bill 1, 7, 172-173) and visiting college again, “*I might pop in, in the summer holidays*” (Bill 1, 11, 286-287).

Bill frames the transition as a positive opportunity, “*upgrade my life*” (Bill 1, 4, 83) this can be seen to represent a defined move for Bill, an ‘upgrade’ in the sense of a new environment providing new opportunities and a move closer to becoming the adult that he hopes to be.

Even with the possibility that a taxi may not be organised, Bill remains positive.

“*We are hoping that that will be all sorted in September*” (Bill 1, 6, 164).

Rebecca

Rebecca portrays her experience of being prepared for college as something she experienced as a matter of fact. There is a sense that by the time she had decided that she was going to college she was as prepared as she could be, when asked if there were any questions she had about college before she arrives she said,

*R: Not really like they did make me ask all the questions and told us mostly what we’re gonna do and they said that sometimes they do… they get trips on so to museums and stuff like that so that’d be good and … yeah... they just basically said what you need, there would be some time for trips and sometimes we’d be helping out in this and then you get maths and English and yeah… so no not really*” (Rebecca 1, 12-13, 428-436).

“*I thought it would be like, what I thought it would be*” (Rebecca 2, 6, 160).

Equally Rebecca expresses a feeling of having the necessary skills that prepare her for being able to achieve at college.

“*Well I’ve been practising drawing things and erm if they ask me to design something I could just say here you are I’ve just done this already (giggle) like erm… I’ve got tons of art stuff*” (Rebecca 1, 5, 140-142).

#### Managing change

There is a positive sense of how the young people approached making their transitions to college which at the time of the second interviews were revealed as successful.

Sam

In the first interview Sam describes how different he thinks college will be however as part of this dialogue he reassures himself that it won’t actually be that different and reflects on how he managed to cope when he came to secondary school.

“*It’ll be a lot different because obviously it’s bigger and you don’t have a set routine you don’t you know come in for Maths, then Science or whatever your just for one thing. You’ve got that one thing every day, that ongoing thing so, it will be big and it’s obviously got all these different people*” (Sam 1, 9, 269-273)

“*I think it won’t be that much different from school*” (Sam 1, 9, 279-280).

“*To me it seems huge, this school seemed huge to me when I first came up*” (Sam 1, 9, 285-286).

In the second interview Sam explains that although he was nervous when he first arrived at college in September after time he felt more settled and confident.

“*come in and out every day you just get used to it*” (Sam 2, 5, 161-162).

Bill

In the first interview Bill expressed his concerns about transitioning to college and the things that he felt unsure and worried about.

“*my card things for going into rooms I might leave it behind or something like that*” (Bill 1, 1, 8-9).

“*different people that’s all, that might be a little bit worrying*” (Bill 1, 7, 201-202).

Bill also expresses a feeling of loss through moving away from the security of school.

“*like loads of friends at School even LSAs you’ve got loads of friends I didn’t I didn’t want to leave them, it’s like a baby with a cuddly toy trying to pry them apart you can’t, that’s a bit like me*” (Bill 1, 10, 255-258).

It can be viewed therefore that during the summer Bill perhaps wondered whether he would cope and manage the transition to college.

In the second interview Bill shared that he had experienced some of his worries first hand for example explaining, “*I did get lost once*” (Bill 2, 9, 260) however he managed to cope in this situation by thinking positive. “*I just used my guts and said come on don’t get lost, you will find it, you will find life skills*” (Bill 2, 9, 268-269). Bill also shares that having made the transition he is equipped to overcome obstacles, “*I just power through it like a bulldozer. I mean things come at me but I just go straight through it*” (Bill 2, 6, 171-173).

The sense of worry has not completely been removed however and Bill explains that he is now apprehensive about what he will choose to do in the future. The sense of worry may be part of Bill’s own approach to coping with change however he was able to share a positive experience of facing and managing challenges at college which can also be seen as part of his identity.

Rebecca

Rebecca’s experience of managing change through her transition to college was evoked through the following: a sense of being open to new experiences, experiencing change as a process and feeling secure in the decision she had made.

“*It was quite fun, like meeting new people*” (Rebecca 2, 1, 7).

“*It has been alright at the moment”* (Rebecca 2, 7, 189-190).

“*if I was in sixth form I guess it would be a different story*” (Rebecca 2, 2, 59).

In addition Rebecca reflects on her experience of working things out and managing situations as they arise which can equally be linked to the idea that change takes time to get adjust to.

“*now I have got my bus pass it’s a bit easier*” (Rebecca 2, 5, 131).

“*If you forget your pass it is fine*” (Rebecca 2, 8, 232).

# Chapter Five: Discussion and Conclusion

## Overview of chapter

This chapter aims to explore how the interpretative analysis relates to wider literature and addresses the research questions. The relevant literature that was highlighted in chapter two is reflected on in respect of three of the super-ordinate themes, before focussing on the super-ordinate theme of self-determination. The construct of self-determination is explored, considering how the young people demonstrated a sense of being self-determined as part of their post-16 transition and corresponding implications for educational professionals highlighted. Additional literature was drawn out as a consequence of the directions revealed through the analysis process. Incorporating new literature at this stage is considered common within IPA studies (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). The identified limitations and reflections of completing the research will then be detailed before suggesting possible recommendations for school, college, EP practice and future research directions.

## Summary of super-ordinate themes two, three and four

The young people’s experiences of supportive relationships were viewed as important throughout the transition process, in their decision making, preparing for transition and once at college. On a personal level the support of family members, specifically parents, was experienced by all the young people (Aston et al, 2005; Palikara, Lindsay & Dockrell, 2009 and Carroll & Dockrell, 2012). There were differences in how the supportive role of parents was perceived and experienced by each young person however, this included helping to make decisions, take the next steps to pursue these goals and practical support throughout their transition. Personal support was also received from friends (Palikara, Lindsay & Dockrell, 2009) and key support staff (Aston et al, 2005). Peers and key adults in school were described as less supportive in different contexts which contributed to a reflection on the systemic support experienced by the young people in school and in college. Having the opportunity to develop friendships (Aston et al, 2005) and experience belonging were revealed as an integral aspect of their experience of post-16 transition. The drive to experience belonging is supported by Deci and Ryan (2000) who consider that ‘relatedness’ makes up one of the three innate psychological needs that individuals possess.

There was a sense of the transition to FE College being experienced as enabling by the young people interviewed. The courses they had chosen to study can be seen to closely match their interests and aspirations indicating that effective decisions had been made (SEND Code of Practice, 2014). Moreover, the college environment as a whole was valued for providing a motivated learning culture, goal orientated opportunities, safety, belonging and the chance to develop new relationships. Allodi (2010) found that these factors had been identified in literature reviews as important for quality learning environments.

The young people all expressed a feeling of being prepared for their transition to college. There were a range of activities which may have contributed to this perception, including finding out about their courses, visiting college and making personal plans, however it is considered that at the time of the interviews the young people had already reached a level of security about what to expect. Annual reviews for example also evoked a mixed experience for the young people suggesting a difference in both the approach schools may take and the degree to which individuals can be supported to find this effective (SEND Code of Practice, 2014). Kaehne & Beyer (2014) found that having the relevant people present to share their perspectives at person centred transition reviews is essential. An integral part of this is having the young person and their parents present, which was similar to Sam’s experience; however Kaehne & Beyer (2014) also consider that the attendance of external agencies can have a positive impact on developing the transition plan and considering a wider array of options. The extent to which the young people demonstrated their use of coping strategies, such as social support and cognitive strategies (Cicognani 2011), to manage their experience of transition were explored and found to be effectively utilised. In addition a couple of the young people expressed sadness at leaving school and all the young people described the process of getting used to a new environment. This was reflected in an initial feeling of being nervous and followed by a period of time where they became more familiar with people and the environment.

Overall it can be seen that at this stage in their journey the young people reflected on their experiences of transitioning to FE College as successful. They described how they had felt prepared for the transition and once at college their expectations were being met, particularly in relation to their course enjoyment and developing new relationships.

## Self-determination

Wehmeyer (2004) provides a definition of self-determination which highlights the importance of the individual possessing,

‘an understanding of one’s strengths and limitations together with a belief in oneself as capable and effective’ (p24).

In addition it is suggested that self-determined individuals will apply this self knowledge to independently strive towards achieving their goals. As presented in chapter four, the young people interviewed as part of this research project demonstrated a sense of their developing: self-understanding, active role in decision making and self-belief, such traits can be viewed as fundamental to self-determination. The notion of self-determination will first be considered in relation to the literature reviewed in chapter two before framing this within additional literature consulted to further illuminate this super-ordinate theme as well as the implications for EPs and educational professionals.

Firstly, as highlighted in chapter two, Palikara, Lindsay & Dockrell (2009) and Madriaga & Goodley (2010) argued for the importance of young people having the opportunity to have their voices heard during times of transition in education. In support of recognised good practice (The Children Act, 1987; The SEND Code of Practice 2014) these authors consider that young people with SEN have the right to express their views as part of the decision making process and reflect on the nature of the support they receive. All the young people interviewed in this study indicated a sense of ownership in making their decision to go to college. They were clear in how they felt their chosen courses matched their interests and aspirations for the future, for instance, Sam in his passion for Cooking, Rebecca through her pursuit of Art and Bill in striving to become more independent. Palikara, Lindsay & Dockrell (2009) also found that the young people they interviewed had a good understanding of their SEN, although this was not explicitly explored in the current study both Sam and Bill made reference to having SEN and their reflection on the type of support that they found most helpful.

Carroll & Dockrell (2012) found that personal characteristics including: taking an active role in applying for a college course, recognising one’s own skills and talents and displaying self belief when faced with challenges were factors that enabled successful post-16 transitions for the young people interviewed in their study. This was considered by the authors as demonstrating self-determination. Similarly to Carroll & Dockrell (2012) the young people in this study expressed their active involvement in planning their transitions; although this differed slightly in the extent to which they experienced autonomy in this process. Rebecca reports that she looked online to find out about the options available to her whereas Sam perceived his role to be making the final decision on the options presented by his parents and Bill suggested that he had known for years that the local college and the Life Skills course were perfect for him. As indicated above the young people interviewed were confident in sharing their strengths and interests and exhibited a sense of self-belief. Arguably Bill demonstrated the most heightened sense of self belief as he outlined examples of overcoming difficulties at college, such as getting lost and losing his ID badge, as well as portraying a view that his success had been down to him.

Through the analysis, the super-ordinate theme of self-determination became more prominent. This led to a deeper reflection of the literature pertaining to self-determination, its emergence, the proposed understanding for ‘being self-determined’ and implications for practice.

Wehmeyer (2015) purports that:

‘Self-determination is a dispositional characteristic manifested as acting as the causal

agent in one’s life’ (p20).

The origin of this concept within disability literature was first developed by Wehmeyer in the 1990s as part of numerous projects funded by the U.S Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs with the aim of promoting self-determination as a curriculum for young people with disabilities (Wehmeyer, 2015; Shogren et al 2015). Through the work of Wehmeyer and others the understanding below was developed.

As highlighted by Cho et al (2012), based on Wehmeyer (1996):

‘An act or event is self-determined if the individual’s action reflects four essential characteristics: (a) the individual acted autonomously; (b) the behaviours were self-regulated; (c) the person acted in a “psychologically empowered manner,” that is, the person acted in the belief that he or she has control over circumstances that are important to him or her; and (d) the person acted in a self-realizing manner, that is, they used reasonably accurate knowledge of themselves and their strengths and limitations to act in such a manner as to capitalize on this knowledge’ (p19).

Wehmeyer (2005) explained that self-determination is not a process or an outcome which can be achieved but a characteristic and disposition which a person possesses and applies through their motivation and behaviour.

A clear example that can be seen as a self-determined act revealed within this research was demonstrated by Sam in his approach to requesting the kind of support he would like at college. Sam explained how he went to see his mentor at college and asked to have more private and less visible help from Teaching Assistants. This can be seen as Sam applying his knowledge about himself, his strengths and needs and feeling empowered to independently act on this.

The four essential characteristics of self-determination can be seen on reflection of the analysis of the data gathered, firstly, being autonomous was a core attribute expressed in the interviews. Sam described how he had independently explored a number of options in relation to his next steps, including speaking to the lady at school who coordinated apprenticeships and looking for part time work. There is a sense of Sam’s parents helping him in this process however the acknowledgement for him in viewing his future as something which he wants to take ownership of was strongly conveyed. Bill talks explicitly about his goal to become more independent, he perceives that the Life Skills course is providing the opportunity for him to become more confident and practice this skill within the college environment which he will eventually be able to apply to his wider social life. Rebecca reflected on how she acted autonomously both at school and at college. As referred to above her approach to independently exploring post-16 options herself based on her self- knowledge and her interests demonstrates this.

The young people revealed themselves acting in self-regulated and psychologically empowered ways in their approach to challenges they faced as part of their transitions. Sam explained in the first interview how he planned to develop friendships at college. He recognised that by having the confidence to approach people who had similar interests to him with a smile on his face he would be able to start a conversation and demonstrate himself as a friendly guy. Bill describes himself during the second interview as the reason for his success, having had the opportunity to overcome challenges at college, Bill feels further empowered in his belief that he can overcome future challenges. This was a much more positive portrayal compared to the first interview where Bill highlighted his worries about some of the aspects of his future college life. Through the process of planning and preparing for her transition to college Rebecca demonstrated a strong sense of what was important to her and how she was going to go about getting it. This was seen not only in her pursuit of studying a course closely linked to Art, but in her drive to complete an apprenticeship. Rebecca had applied for one but recognised why she hadn’t been successful and continued to explore other avenues including getting involved in enterprises such as crafting. She identifies herself as the causal agent in getting what she wants.

Finally, as shown within the subordinate theme of ‘self-understanding’ the young people all revealed their perceptions of themselves including their strengths, interests and what is important to them now and in the future. Equally a sense of the areas that they find challenging were also elicited, Rebecca arguably provided a more explicit account of this readily indicating that she perceives herself to struggle with getting lost, remembering things and maths. It is cited above by Cho et al (2012) that this self knowledge should be ‘reasonably accurate’ it is however irrelevant to judge the accuracy of the information expressed within this study as the focus is on the viewpoint of the young person.

To summarise in relation to the research questions it can be seen that for the young people who took part in this study their experiences of preparing, making and reflecting on their post-16 transition provided the opportunity to exhibit traits and beliefs linked to the concept of self-determination. Firstly, through preparing for their transition all the young people exhibited a sense of ownership in making their decision to study at FE College. Equally both Sam and Rebecca described how they explored the options available to them which can be considered part of the process of feeling confident in their chosen path. Sam’s approach to requesting the type of additional support he would like to receive at college demonstrates the impact of young people feeling self-determined about their preparation for post-16 transition. Secondly, the experience that the young people had of making their transition to FE College can be seen as firmly rooted in their own aspirations for what they wanted to achieve at college and how they went about making this possible. It cannot be concluded that the young people were becoming more self-determined through their transition process but the findings support previous literature that preparing and making a post-16 transition is a crucial time for young people to reflect on who they are, their future aspirations and how they are going to achieve their goals.

Self-determination has been widely cited in literature focussed on transitions for young people with disabilities, (Algozzine et al, 2001; Pierson et al, 2008; Cho et al, 2012; Getzel, 2015; Wehmeyer, 2015), such papers suggest a strong evidence base for self-determination leading to more positive outcomes for young people both through transition and into adulthood. As cited by Algozzine et al (2001), Wehmeyer & Schwartz (1997) provide an example of an investigation into the impact of self-determination on adult outcomes for young people with learning disabilities. Wehmeyer & Schwartz (1997) collected a measure of self-determination (The Arc’s self-determination scale; Wehmeyer & Kelchner, 1995) for 80 students aged 17-22 during their final year at school and survey data one year after leaving school. Students who had higher scores of self-determination were found to be more likely to be in employment, have a desire to live independently from their parents and maintain a checking and savings account. Wehmeyer & Schwartz (1997) acknowledge the potential limitations of their study for relying on self report data and not accounting for differences in the school experiences that the students will have had, however the findings support the notion of self-determination leading to positive life outcomes.

Subsequent studies have further confirmed these findings. For example Martorell et al (2008) found that self-determination was a predictor of positive work outcomes of individuals with intellectual disability. In addition, Powers et al (2012) reported increased self-determination was a mediating factor in the quality of life for youth in foster care who had received special educational support in school, as they completed their post school transitions. This study supports the implication of intervention programmes focussing on the development of skills related to self-determination for vulnerable young people such as those in foster care who have special educational needs.

Algozzine et al (2001) reviewed literature focussed on the implementation of interventions set to target self-determination skills for young people with disabilities. There were 51 studies from the period 1972 to 2000 found to meet their inclusion criteria, of which 22 were appropriate for meta-analysis. Single subject research showed larger effects but as a whole the impact of interventions were found to be significant. The majority of the 51 studies were focussed on the specific traits of self-determination such as developing self-advocacy skills and how to make choices and tended to be delivered using direct teaching methods. Some studies, however, investigated the implementation of wider curriculum approaches and the use of person centred planning frameworks. A couple of interesting points were raised by Algozzine et al (2001) in their suggested implications for practice. For instance, the importance of providing opportunities for students to apply the skills related to self-determination, which had been the focus of interventions, within the general school curriculum and environment was highlighted. This suggests an intervention delivered in isolation will not allow young people to transfer and generalise their knowledge into their wider experiences, and consequently form part of their own approach to future challenges and opportunities faced. In addition Algozzine et al (2001) recognised a lack of data collected by researchers to indicate how precisely the interventions had been followed, thus making it difficult to assess what aspect of an intervention or approach had the desired impact.

Additionally, a study by Pierson et al (2008) suggested implications for interventions through investigation of the impact social skills may have on young people’s aptitude to be self-determined. It was considered by the authors that the attributes necessary for skills such as problem solving and agency in decision making have a largely social component. To examine this Teacher’s of young people aged 14-19, who had ‘high-incidence’ disabilities, completed rating scales for self-determination and social skills. It demonstrated young people who were judged to be more skilled socially were also found to have a greater capacity for self-determined behaviours. This can be seen to confirm the importance of incorporating social skills as part of interventions focussed on self-determination. Similarly to Algozzine et al (2001), Pierson et al (2008) suggest that such approaches should not be applied in isolation as part of transition planning activities but be incorporated into wider school experiences with an explicit focus on building the skills over time. Furthermore, it is highlighted that for such an approach to be effective, it needs to fit within a whole school perspective allowing teachers to practically include it in their teaching.

One approach to incorporating a self-determination skills intervention within other aspects of learning and development is outlined by Korinek (2015). In their article Korinek (2015) puts forward a framework whereby Functional Behavioural Assessment (FBA) or Behaviour Intervention Plans can be paired with elements of self-determination and delivered using an individualised approach with young people. For instance, the stage within FBA that seeks to find out about the individual’s strengths, interests, difficulties and impacting factors is paired with self-awareness exercises and developing a behaviour change plan linked with decision making and goal setting activities. This approach recognises the importance of actively involving young people in their intervention plans and the opportunity to develop skills related to self-determination throughout this process. Echoing previous literature Korinek (2015) acknowledges that teachers are stretched and any new approaches need to be both practical and easy to implement, for example having available resources. I agree that for educators who were planning on following a FBA approach this kind of framework would be helpful, however, it doesn’t apply to more general teaching or intervention approaches.

Shogren, Wehmeyer & Lane (2016) acknowledge self-determination is important for all ages and abilities and highlight that more profound effects can be seen from intervention over time. Consequently, Shogren, Wehmeyer & Lane (2016) suggest an approach which includes intervention to develop self-determination across the three tiers in schools would be beneficial. At the first tier, a universal approach would be applied through direct teaching and providing opportunities for self-directed learning across the curriculum. The second tier would then focus on targeted support for individuals to break down the key skills further. For the third tier an individualised approach for those that need it is suggested. Shogren, Wehmeyer & Lane (2016) propose models which can be used for each tier, however, they suggest that further research would be needed to determine the application within a whole school approach.

It can be seen that there is considerable research evidence indicating the positive impact of developing educational practice to include self-determination. However, Wehmeyer (2015) points out that there has not been the take up that would have been expected in schools. He suggests that the main reasons for this are: more research evidence and tools needed to measure the impact of applying self-determination approaches across school systems; a lack of progression towards strengths based models of disability; and lack of understanding about self-determination. Moreover, the majority of the research evidence around self-determination has been completed in the United States of America, yet the traits and the skills referred to in this chapter are arguably universal, and therefore applicable within education in the United Kingdom. The lack of research conducted in the United Kingdom is surprising, especially in light of recent legislative developments (SEND Code of Practice, 2014) championing the inclusion of young people as active agents in planning for their futures. Equally, as highlighted by literature, student involvement in the decision making about their futures is a vital part of successful transitions (Palikara, Lindsay & Dockrell, 2009; Madriaga & Goodley, 2010; Thygesen, & Cameron, 2015). It is considered therefore that although the importance of supporting young people to be agents of change in their lives, the precise terminology of ‘self-determination’ had not been referred to in these studies. However, one way in which a comparison can be drawn is through the focus on ‘Person Centred Planning’ (PCP) approaches. As outlined by Norwich and Eaton (2015),

‘The new Code of Practice expects that the assessment and planning process should be person centred, defining this as an approach that:

● focuses on the individual;

● enables parents, children and young people to express their views, wishes and feelings and be involved in decisions;

● is easy for them to understand and highlight their strengths and capabilities;

● enables them to communicate their achievements, interests and desired outcomes;

● tailors support to their needs and minimise demands on the family; and

● brings together relevant professionals to deliver an outcomes-focused and coordinated plan’ (p121).

The first five bullet points above clearly demonstrate the need for young people to be involved in decision making about their lives, as well as to understand and communicate their self knowledge and goals to others. In other words, PCP approaches are providing the opportunity for young people to act as agents of change in their lives. As referred to in the current research study, it could be seen that Sam and Bill experienced aspects of the above through their involvement in annual review and personal planning during tutorial sessions.

Norwich and Eaton (2015) refer to tools which can be used to facilitate a PCP approach such as ‘one page profiles’ (Sanderson, Smith, and Wilson 2010) and ‘Essential Lifestyle Plans’ (Smull and Sanderson 2005). This, however, does not take into account the confidence and capacity of young people to engage in such a process. It is acknowledged that through conducting a PCP approach, individual needs are considered and therefore the tools should be adapted accordingly. However, the question remains to what extent have young people been prepared and supported to develop the skills needed to allow them to actively engage in this process. This is where the application of skills related to self-determination would be helpful. As indicated by Pierson (2008), the opportunity to develop these skills over time, rather than in isolation, would enable young people to apply the skills they had acquired and act as agents of change within the PCP approach to planning for their futures.

Supporting schools in their approach to PCP through enabling young people to develop self-determination is highly relevant for EP practice. In my experience, and through discussion with other EPs, it appears that there is a gap in the knowledge about self-determination. Some professionals are aware of Self-Determination Theory (Deci and Ryan, 2002) and the implication for enhancing student motivation through developing autonomy, relatedness and competence, however there is a gap in their understanding of the self-determination construct and how this can be applied to further positive outcomes for young people as they transition through education.

Through consideration of the literature explored in this section there are a number of implications for EPs. Firstly, through working systemically with schools there is the opportunity to review and develop whole school approaches and curriculum linked to self-determination. For instance, considering the opportunities for young people with SEN to develop the traits linked to self-determination, such as: autonomy; self-regulation; feeling psychologically empowered and self-realisation (Cho et al, 2012 and Wehmeyer, 1996); and to act in self-determined ways. As highlighted by Algozzine et al (2001) and Pierson et al (2008) a fundamental part of this is developing self and social awareness and becoming more independent through practising to make decisions. Therefore EPs could support schools and colleges to consider: how such strategies are taught and used within their settings; what young people’s perceptions of this are; and how this would be applied within their wider educational experience. Moreover, as part of a transition process there is a prime opportunity for young people to engage in reflecting on who they are, as well as setting goals and making decisions about their futures. It is suggested that this would be a priority within education from an early age and at the very least, considering how a young person feels about making their own decisions, could be introduced as part of transition planning in year 9. Strategies and interventions to support young people in their journey to becoming more self-determined could be applied as part of this process. EPs have a role in exploring the evidence base and recommending a programme to school, as well as supporting the implementation and reviewing the impact as part of a project. In addition, within individual casework, the importance of EPs not only eliciting and including the voice of the child or young person but reflecting on how comfortable and able the individual was to share their views is recommended. For example, their views about the support they receive. As indicated in this research study, the young people talked about the support they had received in school and whether this had been helpful. It is, however, unknown if their views had been shared with other professionals and certainly in the case of Sam it would have been beneficial for his negative experience of Teaching Assistant support to have been identified sooner. Consequently, as part of the EP involvement, suggestions to build on the child or young person’s skills in this area could be shared and discussed with parents and professionals.

The concept of self-determination can be criticised for the emphasis placed on the individual and the innate disposition they possess to be self-determined. This ‘functional model of self-determination’ has however been revisited to incorporate the role social environment plays on how individuals develop the characteristics associated with self-determination (Shogren et al, 2015). Equally, as demonstrated in this chapter, there is a clear role for schools and professionals working with children and young people to facilitate opportunities to develop the skills related to self-determination. The role of the environment and the relationships that the young people interviewed experienced were summarised at the start of this chapter on page 85 and are highlighted within the conclusion below.

## Conclusion

A summary of the findings that emerged which relate to each research question can be seen in Figure 8.

Figure

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Research question 1** | **Research question 2** |
| How do young people who have an EHCP experience their preparation for a post-16 transition from secondary school to FE college?  | How is this transition experienced by the young people and what does it mean to them? |
| * Ownership in decision making.
* Exploring the options available (R and S).
* Applying self-understanding.
* Recognising what is important to meet own goals (S).
 | * Demonstrating self-belief by overcoming difficulties.
* Opportunity to achieve personal goals.
 |
| * Parental support as part of decision making.
* Friends supporting career exploration (R).
* Developing a course interest through school curriculum options.
* A mixed experience of school based support: careers advice (R) and annual reviews (B) were ineffective, having someone to talk to in school was helpful (S).
 | * Continued parental support.
* Dynamics of family relationships.
* Developing new and supportive relationships (peers and college Tutors).
* Reflection on a sense of belonging.
 |
| * Confidence that the decision made will facilitate personal goals and enable course enjoyment.
 | * Expectations being met.
* Environment facilitating individual goals, including: a shared approach to learning (R), course enjoyment, developing competence, independence (B), experience of a safe environment, developing friendships (S and B) and a sense of belonging.
 |
| * Engaging in activities such as: researching chosen course, visiting college, parental support and annual reviews (S).
* Considering personal next steps and taking action to be prepared.
 | * Active coping strategies applied to overcome potential difficulties.
* Overall experience of transition as positive
 |

*S= Sam, B= Bill and R= Rebecca are used where this was elicited for these participants only*

|  |
| --- |
| *Theme 1* |
| *Theme 2* |
| *Theme 3* |
| *Theme 4* |

As shown in Figure 8, there was a strong sense of the young people knowing their own minds, for example: being confident in their decisions, recognising the support they valued, making sure they were prepared and taking action to facilitate their goals. The young people also valued the support of those around them, especially parents but also the individual relationships they developed with support staff and friends. The role of the environment and context was also a prominent feature of both their experience of education as a whole and on the developing sense of what was important to the young people. For example school systems played a role in shaping young people’s interests and their school experiences influenced their subsequent expectations and hopes for their next steps. These findings can be considered from the perspective of the Bioecological Model of human development (Bronfenbrenner, & Morris 2006; Rosa & Tudge, 2013) through recognising the interaction of the above factors on the developing individual throughout their experience of planning, preparing and making their post-16 transition.

For example, Sam has an interest in cooking, he develops his competence in this through his GCSE catering course and his experiences at home, although Sam has not had friends at schools he feels that through his skills, interest in cooking and a change in the nature of the additional support he receives in a new educational environment he will be able to develop friendships. Sam’s parents and a key individual at school have through their ongoing support and encouragement enabled Sam to develop his self confidence overtime. Sam has reflected on this, researched his options, made his preferences for support known and enquired about how hard the catering course at college will be. A combination of these factors has led to Sam feeling prepared for his transition to FE college. Through both being and feeling prepared Sam was ready to make the most of his initial experience at college and strive to fulfil his personal goals. His developing sense of self-belief and self-knowledge combined with the new and ‘enabling’ environment of college led to a successful experience of transition and the beginning of what Sam felt were his goals being accomplished.

On reflection of the Bioecological Model, it could be considered that there has been an ongoing interaction between the individual and their experiences in the world, which is not confined to this period of time. The model does however provide an important perspective taking into account the various systems that an individual is part of and how their experiences of being within these may impact on their development within the context of planning and making a post-16 transition. Moreover, the illumination of self-determination as central to the young people’s experiences at this time reinforces the importance of professionals exploring opportunities to develop and further skills related to this.

## Limitations

It was the focus of this research to explore the experience of transitioning from secondary school to FE College. Therefore the positive experiences which were elicited from the young people interviewed are based on their initial experiences of being at college for less than one month and are not claiming to reflect their ongoing experience of attending college as a whole. In addition it is important to acknowledge the potential impact of researcher effects, how the young people may have perceived me and the interview situation which may have influenced the way they responded to my questions. To alleviate the impact that this may have had I took the following steps which are highlighted by Willig (2008): ensuring that the participants felt comfortable with the interview location and time which was decided upon in advance to suit them, reflecting on the interview experience (detailed in Appendix four and at the beginning of chapter four) with the support of my research tutor to develop my practice and including any further questions pertinent for each participant within the second interview agenda.

As highlighted in chapter two, Willig (2008) criticises IPA for the reliance on language as a means to communicate the essence of experience. It had been considered that eliciting a rich account from the participants might be a challenge within this research as the participants were identified as having communication difficulties. On reflection, the interviews were shorter than what is typically recommended for IPA studies, a result of the young people not tending to describe their experiences in extensive detail, there was however a clear sense of their personal account evoked. Equally, at any point in the interviews if I felt unsure about what a participant had meant I checked this out with them. For instance, as referred to in Appendix ten, one participant stuttered and slurred on occasions so I made sure I had understood what he had intended. However, it would not be possible within this research design to have incorporated participant views of my interpretation following the analysis phase due to the hermeneutic nature of IPA. The analysis process centres on the researcher engaging in a process of making sense of what the participant has said by adding their own interpretation to the original interview transcript. Consequently more of the researchers understanding is added which may be different to the participants own views however it will be closely aligned to what they have said (Smith and Osborn, 2003; Norreklit, 2006).

Despite the recommended steps being taken throughout the data collection and analysis phases, the participants who took part in this study did not give as rich an account of their experience that is required for IPA. As referred to above, Willig (2008) acknowledges that IPA is reliant on the language that the participant is able to use. Consequently if this account is basic, or lacks the depth needed, then this limits the analysis process. I found I was unable to reach a deeper level of interpretation as the participants had detailed their experiences in a simplistic way. Participants expressed their experiences factually rather than referring to their emotions or reflecting on what this had been like for them. It could be argued that I should have used more probes with the aim of extending the accounts that my participants provided. However, I felt within the interview context the participants would have not been comfortable with this. This was apparent through their body language and tone of voice when I used probes or checked for clarification, and therefore I only used such techniques where appropriate whilst considering their wellbeing. As put forward by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009), within the analysis phase the researcher should conceptually question what the participant has said with the aim to arrive at a more sophisticated depth of understanding which can be directly linked to sections of text. This was difficult to achieve for the accounts my participants provided. It is considered that IPA goes further than a ‘standard thematic analysis’ (Brocki & Wearden, 2006) by revisiting themes and adding a deeper interpretation through the various stages of analysis. It can be argued that if the interpretative element of the analysis is weak it can appear similar to a thematic analysis. Therefore it is important for researchers to think about the depth of the responses they may obtain, whether these will be appropriate for IPA and how this aspect can be strengthened if needed.

The participants who took part in this study were able to answer all the interviews questions asked. The inclusion criteria that were applied, in particular: that the young people were at the onset attending a mainstream secondary school, planning to attend the FE College and interested in taking part, may have facilitated a sample of young people who were able to communicate to a functional level. This research can therefore be criticised for not including the voices of individuals who may have found it more difficult to communicate verbally in a face to face interview with an unfamiliar adult. The use of alternative methods such as visuals (Talking Mats, Cameron & Murphy 2002; Photovoice, Cheak-Zamora, Teti & Maurer-Batjer 2016) would enable other voices to be included in qualitative research methods and, equally, may have added more richness to the data collected in this study. Talking Mats were initially developed to aid individuals with communication difficulties and provides a means to communicate views using picture symbols. Cameron & Murphy (2002) found this approach effective for young people with communication and learning difficulties to express their preferences related to transitions, such as what activities they wanted to do in education. Cameron & Murphy (2002) concluded that Talking Mats could be used as an alternative to speech or to supplement preferred means of communication. Consequently this approach could be used within future research around transitions in education with young people who have SEN. Another method which could have been incorporated into this research is the use of photographs. For instance, Cheak-Zamora, Teti & Maurer-Batjer (2016) utilised a Photovoice approach, taking photographs and talking about these with others, in their study to explore the experiences of youth with ASD as they transitioned into adulthood. Cheak-Zamora, Teti & Maurer-Batjer (2016) found that through providing initial descriptions about their photographs, the participants were able to express their views and experiences in a wider sense. I consider that using technology such as taking photographs would appeal to young people and provide an authentic platform from which to explore their views.

The aim of the study was to elicit the participant’s experience of the phenomena of post-16 transition, although I felt that the young people were comfortable throughout the interviews, taking into account the above reflection on the richness of the data gathered it might have been beneficial to have developed this further. For instance, it had been hoped that I would meet each participant prior to the first interview to go through the participant information sheet (Appendix 1) and answer any questions. This may have enabled a more familiar relationship to have developed over time and consequently enhanced a feeling of being comfortable in each other presence. Unfortunately due to time constraints this was only achieved for one participant and for the others a key adult initially went though this with them before I repeated it at our first meeting.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that being a novice researcher, new to IPA and relatively new to qualitative research methods as a whole, may have limited this research. I took steps to ensure the credibility of my approach, through a thorough planning stage, sharing experiences with fellow IPA researchers and regular supervision. However, as highlighted by Brocki and Wearden (2006) there is little guidance on how to prepare for and conduct the interview phase of an IPA study, an aspect which may be challenging for novice researchers. Brocki and Wearden (2006) refer to brief guidance presented in papers and published articles which failed to report their interview schedules. They suggest this makes it difficult to review the whole context of the research. In addition, Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) suggest researchers should apply IPA in a creative way, but at the same time acknowledge novice researchers tend to be too descriptive in their analysis. I consider that this emphasises a problem for novice researchers in meeting a robust standard in their studies and calls for further guidance on what makes a good IPA study.

## Reflections

I have found the process of engaging in a piece of research of this size thought provoking and rewarding. I have learnt more about the nature of post-16 education through consideration of the literature as well as developing my knowledge of practices both locally and nationally. Through choosing this topic for my thesis the Local Authority where I am based on placement recognised my interest and encouraged me to attend training events and develop this as a specialist area. In addition I have furthered my knowledge about IPA and had a glimpse of the associated community who are applying IPA to a variety of human experiences.

I pride myself on being extremely organised which is predominantly my coping mechanism to ensure I meet all my professional and personal deadlines. This has been challenged at times whilst writing the thesis, however on the whole I was able to break the process of completing doctoral research down into manageable chunks. I developed a personalised timetable (adapted from one provided by Sheffield University) which incorporated the altered timeline which can arise for each year group depending on university processes and could be flexibly applied to suit the individual. This was shared with the rest of my course group which others reported finding helpful. For me personally this enables me to mange my responsibilities and enjoy writing and engaging in each section.

Throughout my work in education to date I have always strived to elicit children’s views and placed a great emphasis on attempting to understand their experiences from their perspective. Despite this I found the extent of my understanding that was evoked from spending time with these young people across two interviews substantially greater than my previous experiences. I wondered to what extent this was uniquely framed within the interview context or transcended their wider experiences. For instance had this information been shared in the same, more or less detail with the key people in their lives?

In addition, through completing this research a couple of things surprised me, firstly that the young people did not describe their experiences of careers activities in much detail. Having worked in secondary schools I recalled examples of young people exploring their future goals through focussed assemblies, small group sessions and individual ‘interviews’ with careers advisors. Such activities were coordinated and delivered by different people and as referred to in chapter two, schools are responsible for how they wish to provide ‘careers’ support. The young people who took part in this research mentioned some related activities, for example speaking to the person in school who organised apprenticeships (Sam) and a careers session with a Health and Social Care Teacher (Rebecca); however I anticipated more discussion about a range of activities school had provided. I was also amazed by the confidence that the young people expressed about their chosen college courses. Having gone through the process of career development myself in the last ten years there were many friends and colleagues who did not feel confident in their own choices at 16 or 17 years of age and older.

## Additional recommendations

As indicated in chapter two the aim of this study was to explore the individual experience of transitioning from secondary school to FE College for three young people who have an EHCP. In doing so however it was considered that their experiences may hold resonance for others (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009), such as young people and individuals working in schools and Colleges and as EPs. This consideration may evoke reflection for professionals both in supporting young people through a similar transition process or in their wider practice (Tracey, 2010). In addition to the recommendations linked to self-determination further areas which may be of significance for professionals are highlighted below.

### School and college practice

* The interpretative analysis revealed the importance of the various systems and support networks that an individual interacts with during the period of time where they are preparing and making a post-16 transition. Therefore it is important to consider such factors and what this might look like for the individual as part of professional’s roles in supporting young people at this stage in their educational journeys.
* Supportive relationships were viewed as important for the young people interviewed. Exploring how young people experience support both at home and in school or college could be essential in developing understanding about the extent of their support networks, for example, identifying any strengths or gaps that could be enhanced and what the young person finds helpful should be highlighted as they transition.
* The experience of friendships was also identified as important to the young people, differences in friendship hopes and expectations were recognised, however there was a strong desire to experience connectedness and belonging through peer relationships. Having the opportunity for young people to explore with a trusted adult what their experience of friendships have been and how they feel about the prospect of developing new friendships at college would be beneficial.
* For the young people in this study their experience of planning and preparing for their post-16 transition was experienced as primarily self-directed, although additional activities and support provided by school and college were outlined. Reflecting on the steps that schools and colleges already take to support young people in planning for their transitions and how to improve them is recommended, for example by considering what young people who have recently gone through the process found helpful. In addition, the role that annual reviews have in this process could be explored further. Two of the young people interviewed had very different experiences of annual reviews, one positive and one less so. This suggests that the perceived strengths in a school’s approach to completing annual reviews could be enhanced further and any weaknesses identified, through liaison with young people and their parents, considered to adapt future approaches.
* The experiences expressed by the young people interviewed can be viewed as positive reflections on transitioning from secondary school to FE College. It might be helpful for colleges to develop such personal stories further which could then be shared with schools, young people and their parents who might be interested in hearing about the nature of post-16 transitions and how this was experienced for young people themselves. These stories could be viewed as celebrations of success, but equally a chance to share with others what they learnt and found helpful as part of the process. For example the young people interviewed expressed that they would advise others to think carefully about what they want to study and pick something they will enjoy.

### Educational Psychology practice

* I consider that EPs can support schools and colleges at a systemic level to develop their knowledge of the above, reflect on how this may impact on their students and take steps to improve their practice. On an individual casework level, which may precede the above in many situations, EPs could seek to highlight the importance of such factors and support professionals to explore these with young people and their parents.
* As explored within the super-ordinate theme of ‘the experience of change’ the coping strategies that young people have available to them and their experience of applying these could be considered within EP consultation sessions and in furthering understanding of the support that might be needed throughout transition.
* In my own future practice as a Trainee Educational Psychologist and once qualified, I aim to draw on the above as well as reflecting on my approach to eliciting young people’s views. I found that the nature of conducting a semi-structured interview, in a space that was dedicated and a time that was practically unconstrained, facilitated a greater depth of response from the young people. I hope to reflect on this further and adapt my approach to working with young people accordingly. In addition as part of my dissemination of this research I will share my findings with the local authority and the FE College that I support. I hope that this will evoke further developments for my own and the EP services’ approach to supporting young people, their parents and settings in understanding the nature of post-16 transitions.

### Future research

Future research directions that could be considered include:

* An alternative approach to eliciting young people’s views about their post-16 transition for individuals who find verbal communication in an interview context more difficult, for example the use of ‘talking mats’ could be explored (Cameron & Murphy, 2002).
* Adding a further interview at another point in the post-16 transition process such as towards the end of the first year at college.
* Exploring a different transition point such as post college transitions into higher education or employment.
* Exploring how parents of young people identified as having SEN experience their children’s transition to post-16 education.
* Investigating the impact of interventions and approaches linked to self-determination on young people’s experience of PCP.

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