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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the outcomes of a Finnish study that investigated the school experiences of former special education students with emotional and behavioral disorders. Twenty-three former students, who had attended classes for students with emotional and behavioral disorders were interviewed. The students had been out of special education and compulsory schooling for about ten years. The study found that almost all of the interviewees began their stories of their school experiences with positive memories, and that their overall feelings about being educated in special classes were very positive. The most positive elements centered around the special education teacher and the small teaching group. The teacher's competence and personality also influenced other positive elements, including improved school achievement, a feeling of fair discipline, and the joy of learning. These positive memories provided a strong contrast to the students' former regular class experiences, where these pupils had generally failed behaviorally as well as academically. Only 14 participants expressed a negative experience surrounding special education. The most common and significant negative element was the experience of being labeled. Some pupils also felt that the quality of the instruction in special classes was not always demanding enough. (Contains 31 references.) (CR)

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**Consumer View: What Former Students of Emotional/Behavioral
Disorder (EBD) Classes Say About School in Finland.**

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**Consumer View: What Former Students of Emotional Behavioral/Disorder
(EBD) Classes Say About Schools in Finland.**

Introduction

Recently, there has been rising interest in the elucidation of participant's views on their schooling. This point of view has called *the client-orient perspective* (Wade & Moore, 1993) or *consumer's view* (Guterman, 1995; Habel, Bloom, Ray and Bacon, 1999). The point, however, is that the researchers are mainly interested in the students' perceptions (e.g. Vaughn & Klingner, 1998), preferences (Padeliadu, 1995) and experiences (Wade & Moore, 1993; Kivirauma, 1997) instead of using only teacher evaluations of the meaning of the education. This kind of perspective is especially valuable and radical in considering special education, in which the participants are traditionally considered as having a disability or a handicap. The consumer's view could serve as a tool for empowerment and a small step towards broader acceptance in our society.

One more practical reason for the recent popularity of the consumer view is that this has been seen as an effective tool in evaluating the outcome of education. Further, in evaluation of the effect of special education this has been one of the most useful measures where we need some evidence of the short-term effectiveness. Since in most cases the special education will produce traditional academic gains only in the long run, more comprehensive evaluation needs longitudinal settings and follow-ups where the more stable outcomes can be examined (see Jahnukainen, 1998; 1999a; 1999b; Levine & Nourse, 1998). However, such studies are very expensive and for administrative purposes the results come too late.

Previous studies about the consumer view in special education

There are some classic studies about disaffection and deviance at school like Willis' *Learning to Labour* (Willis, 1977) and Woods' *Divided School* (Woods, 1979) written from the micro-sociological point of view. In these studies the consumer view has not been explicitly present, but the basic attitude is the same: the purpose of the observations and interviews has been to elucidate the missing perspective of the deviant pupils themselves and to highlight the social reality of school life.

In some studies concerning special education the purpose has been more obviously to find answers to certain specific questions (here using open-ended questions) like "I like teachers who..." or "what I dislike most about school is..." (Wade & Moore, 1993). However, in studies where older pupils are interviewed, the results give us a broader picture of being a pupil considered as maladjusted (Kivirauma, 1997), behaviorally disordered (Habel et al, 1999) or learning disabled (Guterman, 1995). Social constructivism and phenomenology are therefore underlying theories. The major idea of this point of view is encapsulated W.I. Thomas's maxim "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Thomas, 1928).

The major finding seems to be that the separate special education is not so bad (Padeliadu, 1995; Vaughn & Klingner, 1998) as strict inclusionists has thought. The satisfaction of students of special education is an interesting phenomenon because there has been rising concern about general disaffection with school (e.g. Kinder, 1997; Antikainen, 1998, p. 224 - 225). One might expect that these pupils would dislike school most if any did. And so they did, but the target of this dislike was not the special education but the regular education in which they experienced most difficulties with teachers.

However the results are somewhat contradictory. For example, according to Guterman's respondents the general education teachers had rarely adjusted curricula or requirements to accommodate their individual needs, but otherwise a majority also said that their special education placement had not helped them academically very much, because of a low level, irrelevant and repetitive curriculum (Guterman, 1995, p. 119 - 120). The paradox is that special education students might value the special education services because they are trying to avoid an unresponsive general education system (Guterman, 1995, p. 111).

Method

The original study had two major aims: 1) to follow-up the life-course of former special class pupils from comprehensive school to early adulthood (Jahnukainen 1997; 1998; 1999a; 1999b); and 2) to search for the meaning of special class treatment from the perspective of former pupils experiences and life-course. This presentation is focused on the second aim.

In this study twenty-three former students of EBD classes (classes for the pupils with behavioral and emotional difficulties) were interviewed about their experiences of schooling. These students have been out of special education and compulsory schooling for about ten years. Since their evaluation is based on their life-course experiences, they have a broader view of the meaning of special education than pupils who are at school right now. At the beginning, the experiences of former students were only one minor aspect of these study, whose major objective was the evaluation of the transition process of this under-studied and hard-to-catch on study special educational subgroup.

The subjects (n = 23; 18 male, 5 female) completed comprehensive schooling in EBD classes in a small town in southern Finland between 1985 and 1987. The qualitative data was gathered in two in-depth interviews by biographical method in 1991 and 1995. After transcription the data was analyzed using the NUD•IST program which is methodologically based on the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, Silvonen & Keso, 1999).

Results

Positive experiences

The pros and cons of special education could be presented as positive and negative elements of special class treatment. Almost all of the interviewees began their stories with positive memories, and the overall picture of the feelings about to be educated at special class seems very positive. The most positive elements were the special teacher and the small teaching group. The teacher's competence and personality have also influenced the other positive elements including improved school achievement, a feeling of fair discipline and joy of learning. These positive memories provide a strong contrast to the former regular class experiences, where these pupils have generally failed behaviorally as well as academically.

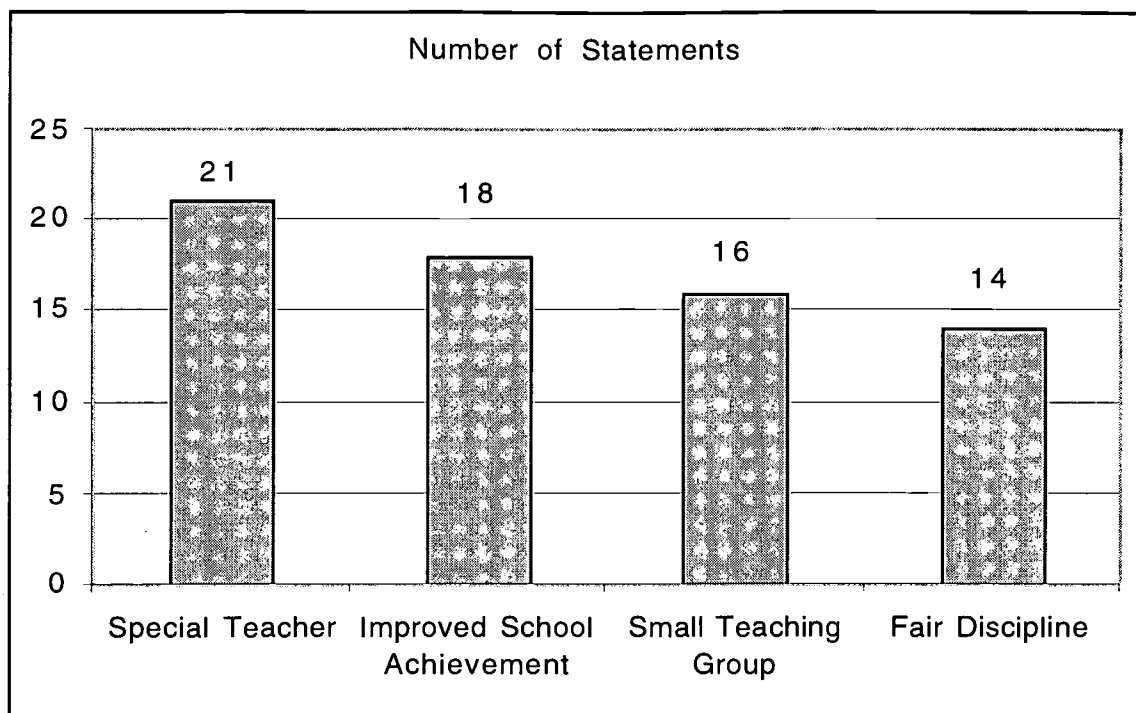


Figure 1. The positive elements of special education experienced by the former EBD students (n = 23)

Teachers

Male 5

“...so, are you going to complete your schooling or not? A lot depends on what kind of teacher you will have. I think that is the crucial factor...”

My respondents’ view is that the characteristics of the teacher are intimately related how these pupils are going to work and behave. If the teacher does not pay attention to interaction with individuals, she or he is doomed to failure as a special teacher. It seems that these pupils need a teacher who is able to function in different roles; as a teacher but also in the less formal role as a model of a normal adult person. The “new” method of teaching is more a process, in which “older citizens” are working with “younger citizens” starting from the individual baseline of each student. The task of a

teacher is to let the students find out what kind of people they are and let them reflect on themselves and the world around them. The teacher is not just a “teaching machine”.

In the next section we will identify these themes. It is very interesting that this interviewee compares the work of the teacher to marketing and selling by his own work experience. Here the client-oriented perspective emerges from the data.

Male 5:

There are good teachers and bad teachers. Not necessarily in terms of their teaching abilities but more as human beings. If you are lucky, you’ll get a good teacher. It could have an effect on your whole life... on the rest of your life. If some teacher doesn’t like you as a person. They should not do that, but if you just don’t like that person. His or her face just doesn’t appeal to you... of course it is hard to be neutral but... and that could have an effect on rest of your life.

MJ:

Could you define a good educator?

Male 5:

I think he has patience, let’s you have time to learn and first of all he will listen to you. listen to you honestly and understands what he hears and teaches on the basis what he has heard. That’s one important characteristic... He makes you understand the things...it is like sales talk: a minute could be the decisive... the pressures of voice and what you get out of yourself... how you conduct yourself... are you nervous and so on. You have to listen to the client. Then you will answer the relevant questions and leave the irrelevant... that’s a kind of psychology...

The key issue seems to be the relationship and interaction between teacher and pupil.

Do they find positive common ground, or not?

MJ:

How do you define a good special teacher?

Male 8A

A teachers have to get down to the level of the pupil, so that he or she is also a human being... after that there are common goals in the classroom... we had free discussions about things and everybody's opinions were wanted on things and so on... and it was possible to express your own opinion honestly... this was the biggest difference compared to regular education...

Improved school achievement

The traditional indicator of the results of learning has been the grades given after a period or a semester (in Finland we use a 7 point scale, where the 4 is lowest = "weak", and 10 is best = "with praise"). However, the numerical evaluation of the learning products seems more exact than it is in reality. As to the numerical evaluation in special education, there has been suspicion about the comparability of these grades with those given in general education, even where the EBD classes use the same academic curriculum as regular classes.

MJ:

How was the academic work during special class?

Male 7A:

I think it was a little bit better than in general education... more individuals at least. In a bigger group studying didn't work. At least my numbers improved during the EBD class years...

It seems clear that most of the respondents have experienced improved school achievement during special class treatment. This is partly due to improved grades and partly the fact that truancy decreased radically after the special education placement. Perhaps more interesting are some stories about the feelings of real learning and the joy of learning experienced. Some had the feeling that finally you “really got something into your head”. This is a strong contrast to the former feelings of stupidity and being learning disabled.

MJ:

How about your school achievements, did you gain anything or what?

Male 8A:

Yes I really did... of course when you were more often in class at you are able to get something into your head... and you do better with the exams and so on... but first of all the general attitude to school work, it really became more positive...I made a lot of progress... not necessarily as much I wanted but the mean grade improvement was over two points...

MJ:

If you compare the grades in special education to the regular education grades, were they adapted or...did you get the same number for the same performance...

Male 8A:

There wasn't any difference...

The crucial finding is that the improved grades are not the one and only gain, but that special education also offered the opportunity to really learn something and attitude changes have taken place at least according some of my respondents. If we think of the

development of the individual from the point of view of a member of life-long learning society, the positive learning experiences in special education could be the most significant results because of their long-standing effects.

Small teaching group

One prerequisite for more individual instruction is the size of the teaching group. Separate special education groups have traditionally been small groups. In Finland this requirement is also stated in the Comprehensive School Act. However, it should be noted that if the teacher doesn't change his instruction technique and methods no real opportunities of a small group will arise. The small group alone is not the cause of the improved instruction, but it does make more effective instruction possible. The small group itself might have a calming effect on pupils with certain behavioral problems like hyperactivity and attention deficit.

Male 1B:

I think that smaller group is always better... at least as regards my learning. I 'm quite sure I won't be able to concentrate in a big group...and the teacher is then able to keep the discipline and control... to see who is busy with work and so on...

MJ:

What do you think about completely individual instruction, just yourself and the teacher?

Male 1B:

I don't know... I think that in a group there are different opinions and points of view, so it makes it more interesting and it's easier to get the point...

MJ:

So you mean that you like discussions?

Male 1B:

Yes. There must be something interesting, so that the story will continue and not just go nowhere...

MJ:

How about your learning, did the special class affect your learning?

Male 4 B:

Yes... you were able to work better and... because of the small group and the teacher had enough time for everybody. If you were slow to learn or something. It could be said that it was really hand-in-hand instruction...

At its best the small group treatment could offer education based on individual instruction, although the IEPs (Individualized Education Plans) were first enacted in the new Comprehensive School Act, which came into force 1st January 1999. However, more individual guidance has been one of the traditional methods of special education.

MJ:

Could you please say something about the instruction in special class?

Male 2A:

At start, during the primary years, I remember it was based on those reasons why we were placed there. So, I was taught to read, because I couldn't even spell after a year of schooling. And I think it was really effective teaching and learning. It wasn't like some have said, that you're just throwing bit of chalk at the others... There was a certain discipline, though we had a woman as a teacher...

Fair discipline

The demand for discipline is interesting because of the nature of this special educational subgroup. At first, you do not expect that pupils placed in special classes because of maladjustment would appreciate discipline. It seems that these pupils don't like nagging and being told what to do, but they appreciate clear rules and fairness as to the punishment. Teachers, who are not able to maintain discipline, are unpopular (Woods, 1990).

MJ:

How about the discipline in special class? Did the teacher do a lot of work with you?

Female 11:

I think that our secondary teacher had a great style. I think that he was also disappointed with some other teachers, because they couldn't be bothered... He was really the authority. He kept the discipline. But he was also really fair and a nice person. But he had clear rules; nobody behaved badly during his lessons.

MJ:

So the discipline means that he was able to keep you working?

Female 11:

Yes. He doesn't tolerate any clowning... He got us back to work quickly. However he was fair and nice and we all really liked him...

-- But when we had certain regular class teachers, in physics for example, it was really too much... I didn't get anything from it...

It seems that male teachers have been better at keeping control and were generally liked. However, there were also some unpopular male special teachers, mostly hired

on an emergency basis. Perhaps men somehow benefited from their masculine gender in teaching pupils considered maladjusted.

Male 4:

In primary school when we had an old woman as a teacher, so I got behind, at least in my English studies... Then we got a man and it improved a lot...

MJ:

Was it really the gender of the teacher?

H 4:

Maybe it was the biggest reason...

MJ:

What do you mean about? Punishments or...?

H 4:

Not necessarily punishment. But he was able to keep control... work progressed more easily when we had a man for some reason. Maybe he was also better at punishing us, harder I think... I think this helped also...

Negative experiences

Though the general opinion seems to be very positive, negative views were also expressed. However, only fourteen interviewees mentioned negative experience whereas all of them had expressed at least one positive view of special education placement.

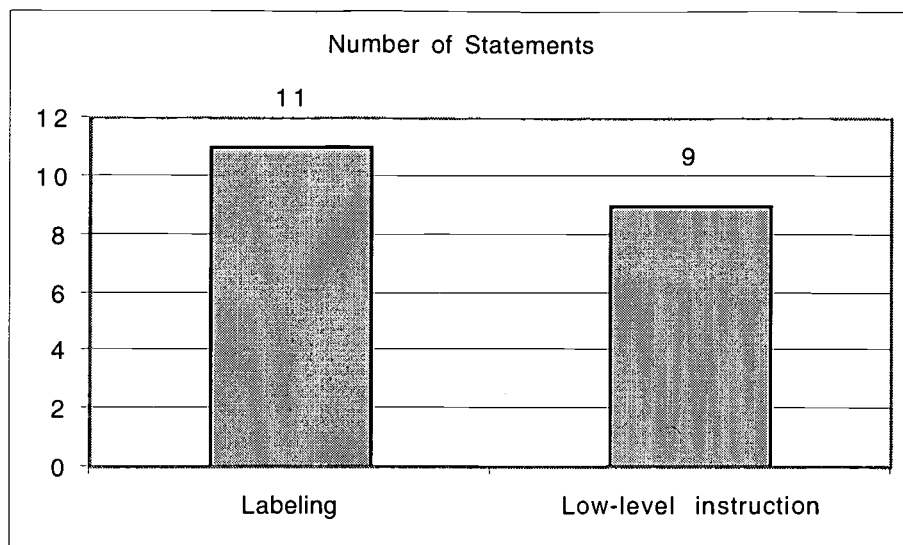


Figure 2. The negative elements of special education experienced by the former EBD students (n = 23)

Labeling

The most common and significant negative element was the experiences of being labeled. The stereotyped labeling was most often committed at school either by some teachers or pupils.

MJ:

How about the other pupils at your school, how did they treat you?

Male 2A:

Do you mean at primary school... when something happened they yelled “ebd boys” and it was the same in secondary. But it could be said that we were restricted at primary school in the end... we weren’t allowed to go into the area of the regular pupils during breaks... we had our own corner and we spent our recesses there.. teasing the janitor...

MJ:

So at first you were there with other pupils and then you were confined to your corner?

Male 2A:

Yeah, when I was put in special education, I didn't know anybody from there, so I used to hang around with regular class kids, but then they began to say, "you're are an ebd kid, go to your corner"...

MJ:

Who said that?

Male 2A:

My old classmates, who I used to study with...

Male 4:

I didn't have any difficulties after that. However, sometimes at school some other teachers... if something was smashed or something... it was always our fault... sometimes for no reason. So regular teachers soon blamed us in situations like this...

One aspect of labeling is the *fear of labeling*. This means that one is afraid that one's reputation as an EBD kid could affect the attitudes of others. This could be an obstacle to integration back to the regular class.

Male 6:

I was ready to go back to regular class... there weren't any obstacles to that and it would have been successful, I think... but first of all I was afraid of the stigma... it comes with you when you go there to the bigger group, everybody knows where you come from. You're there, you're sitting there in the middle of the class and

everybody is watching you... that's what I felt in my mind most often. I thought that I'd have lots of battles there...

Only three respondents mention about problems after leaving compulsory school because of a history of special education. Two of these incidents were committed by employers and one by an ex-girlfriends parents.

MJ:

You said, that you have had some negative feelings about being in special education. That some people has treated you as deviant or something because of that...

Male 2:

In some cases, yes. They thought that you were a kind of lower-class human, a criminal or something...

MJ:

Could you please give an example?

Male 2:

My ex-girlfriend's parents...when they had heard that I had been at EBD class, they said
yuk... don't come here any more...and they always checked after my visit, did I steal something or what...

Low-level instruction

Some pupils felt that the quality of the instruction in special classes was not always demanding enough. It seems that the instruction had been mostly at the mean level despite the idea of more individualized programming. Academic frustration has been

the problem with more advanced pupils in particular. This could be one reason for the failure at further education typical of former EBD pupils (e.g. Neel, Meadows, Levine & Edgar, 1988; Jahnukainen, 1999); the gap between special education in comprehensive school and the vocational schooling at secondary education might be too wide.

MJ:

What were the good and the bad aspects of education in special class?

Male 3A:

Good things were the slower pace of work... if we had ever started to really work. I don't know... the bad things are... you didn't learn anything there. During primary school I didn't learn nothing but drawing and skating and that kind of thing... If the teacher had been different, but she was a childish old woman. I don't know, did she want to just take it easy and let us have some fun for us or what? She wanted to keep everyone at school. It was nice to go there in the mornings anyway... we had Christmas trees and so on... but one example is that I had to bring a Christmas tree [the direct translation from Finnish is Christmas spruce] with me to our class, and I brought a pine. I didn't even know the trees!

Female 8F:

Somehow I felt when the school was over... that it would have been nicer if you had been at regular education, that greater demands would have been made on you... and I felt that although the grades were there on paper, you didn't have to work for them as much as you would have had to do to get such high grades...

Discussion

The stories of former special education students are very interesting. Thomas and Znaniecki (1918 -20) claimed that personal life records constitute “the perfect type of sociological material” (cited in Allport, 1951). I would say that pupil’s stories are at least excellent data for educational researchers who want to get a broader view of “what’s going on at school”. The power of (life) stories is succinctly described by Goodley:

“We understand an official document intellectually, yet the human document is comprehended emotionally. Empathy accompanies insight—we know another’s life because we feel it. As the informal, anecdotal and personalised elements of a story are internalised, then I would argue that these very qualities provide a direct route to social understanding.” (Goodley, 1996, p. 335)

However, the use of narrative stories may have some weaknesses including errors of memory (Allport, 1951) and the possibility that informants could lie (Goodley, 1996). The researcher’s own preoccupations “may lead to highlight some points at the expense of other experiences that hold greater significance for the informant” (Goodley, 1996, p. 344).

I have no reason to suspect that any of my respondents would have lied. However, it could be, that not every detail has been stated. These could include unpleasant experiences forming part of my respondents’ later life-course (like criminality), not the school experiences. I have also tried to avoid the effects of my preoccupations, using grounded theory analysis, where I have built the classifications as inductively as possible from the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Keso & Silvonen,

1999). One detail worth mentioning is that in the first phase of study in 1991, I had myself only very limited experience of special education. It could be said that the interview situations were very close to an anthropological or ethnographic approach in which the researcher focuses on questions like “what is the culture of this group of people?” and “what’s going on here?” (see e.g. Patton, 1990, p. 67 - 68).

However, the findings of my study should be interpreted with caution mainly because of the limitations of the methods used. First, there should be noted that these results are based on stories of study group formed using a purposeful, criterion sampling strategy (Patton, 1990; 182 - 183) which is not representative in the traditional sense. Second, the interviews were done several years after graduation, when retrospectiveness might produce some bias; there could be a “time will gild your memories” effect. However, it is very interesting that my findings are very close to Padeliadus’ and Guterman’s findings, despite the methodological and cultural differences. It should also be mentioned that Kuorelahti’s (1998) survey with 220 EBD students still at school in Finland gave support to these findings.

Implications

A separate special class as a traditional way to arrange special treatment for students with special needs has been criticized during recent years. However, the demands for the least restrictive environment and equal opportunity are still based mainly on ideology, not on scientific evaluation. The findings from studies comparing inclusive and separate settings are contradictory, partly because of methodological limitations (e.g. Carlberg & Kavale, 1980; Salend & Duhaney, 1999).

However, it is clear that segregated special education suffers from some dysfunction. Some of them are expressed again in this study. It seems that at least

some pupils considered as behaviorally disordered and placed in the special class acquired the extra stigma of being deviant in the eyes of other pupils and regular education teachers. This might have an enduring effect on self-image and serve as a self-fulfilling prophecy. However, in this study the negative effects are found to be restricted to school, only a couple of respondents having experienced labeling after completing schooling. From the point of view of labeling theory (e.g. Furlong, 1985, p. 130) it could be said that there is no evidence of “secondary deviance”, which means that the label is accepted by an individual as part of his or her identity. It seems that special class placement with its public label has produced “primary deviance” only. It is, however, important to try to diminish unnecessary labeling in all possible situations. It is also necessary to consider this topic in a broader setting.

As to the outcome of the special education, the criticism concerning the level of instruction may be even more serious. If special education is really not able to produce instruction challenging and relevant enough for its students, there really is a reason for the crisis of the existence of special education. From the Finnish point of view it is evident that instruction based on IEPs is still on the way to our schools in reality, and that this will be one helpful solution in the near future. Further, we should be aware that it is not enough that our students graduate from compulsory school. These days the vocational qualification is even more important than it was and the “low-level, irrelevant curriculum” (see Guterman, 1996) could be one explanation of the failure and dropping out of further education common to the former special education students (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996; Jahnukainen, 1997; 1999b; in press).

However, the positive experiences of former EBD pupils shows that there could still be a need for this kind of small class intervention, at least for some pupils and in certain phase's of their school careers. Separate special education is not all bad. It

seems that the former students considered as maladjusted themselves, as well as disabled (Guterman, 1996), mostly have positive experiences about their schooling in special classes. Because the positive aspects being mentioned were in connection with the smaller group size and the personality and behavior of the teacher, these things must be researched further. For example, we do not know exactly how the special teacher behaves in the classroom situation and how she or he builds a personal relationship to his or her pupils. These are questions, which needed more ethnographic fieldwork and classroom observation. Here we are coming back to the tradition of the British micro-sociologist (e.g. Woods, 1979) and social psychologist (Marsh, Rosser & Harré, 1978). With such inquiries might produce more detail about how our most skillful special educators are able to arrange the kind of instruction not possible for some other teachers. This could also be valuable information in training our general education teachers to confront the special needs in more inclusive settings. This far we have to be satisfied with our major findings cited here from Habel et al:

"When our students speak of experiences that encourage the four spirits of the circle of courage [mastery, belonging, independence, generosity], they refer to adults who are caring and respectful, to teachers who give individual attention and provide learning tasks that are active and relevant, to opportunities for having a voice and making decisions, and to occasions for interacting with peers." (Habel et al, 1999, 103)

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