

Special needs students in higher education*

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Abstract: The topic in this paper is how former special needs students with academic competence from upper secondary school succeed in education on a higher level. The study concentrates on students who at their start in upper secondary education were registered with problems of concentration, difficulties in reading, writing or mathematics. The main part of this paper will base on qualitative interviews with nine former special needs students. Seven out of the nine informants were registered with reading and writing difficulties. However, it is also possible to compare these informants with longitudinal data from a larger group of students who have been followed prospectively since spring 1996. Theoretically the study is based on life course research with special emphasis on social transitions. In transitional processes between different educational arenas gatekeepers often play important roles. This study will examine how such gatekeepers, e.g. teachers, may facilitate or obstruct these transitions for a vulnerable group like former special needs students.

Key words: special needs students; gatekeepers; higher education

1. Introduction

This paper is the sub-project of the More Research Foundation's project *Adult life on special terms? The way into society among former special needs students in upper secondary education*. The project is a continuation of *Reform 94—Specially adapted teaching*. The target group for this study is youths who started their upper secondary education in 1994 and 1995, required specially adapted teaching programmes. These are the first two reform cohorts under *Reform 94* (Myklebust, Kvalsund & Båtevik, 1999). We will initially present the basic postulate for our study and delimit and define who the study involves. Furthermore, we will refer to what earlier research in the field says about those who succeed in spite of being rather poor qualified with a view to further education. The theoretical framework for the study will also be briefly presented. The methods used will be explained, and thereafter we will present some of the first tendencies that the analysis has revealed so far.

The paper will look at what characterises earlier students with special needs who appear to have succeeded in the education arena insofar as they have embarked on higher education. When it comes to education, completing upper secondary school will for some of the students with special needs provide a springboard to other education. According to Myklebust, et al. (1999), higher education is a very unlikely alternative for the vast majority of these young people. Earlier diagnoses, choice of branch of studies and a sequence of interrupted courses of study are

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indicators of this.

With this as our starting point, we find it's interesting to look more closely at the few who do actually make a start on some form of higher education. Among the students with special needs, this is a special group. Our paper will be based on the following postulate: *What characterises earlier students with special needs who have embarked on higher education?* Characteristics will include both the individual level and the system level. The fact that the postulate concentrates on those students with special needs who have embarked on higher education, means that our study must base on those of them who at upper secondary school qualified for general matriculation. The paper will restrict itself only to those who at the commencement of their upper secondary education were registered as having reading and writing difficulties, difficulties with mathematics and problems in concentrating.

In Solvang's study (1994) of the experiences of the disabled in the arenas of education and work in Scandinavia, he pointed to school as a problem arena when it comes to dyslexia: "... the institution which socially establishes them as disabled" (Solvang, 1994, p. 288). The job market on the other hand is stressed as the arena of opportunity for those suffering from dyslexia. Dyslexics are almost an excluded group when it comes to the education arena, judging by the results of Solvang's study. According to this study, the physically disabled manage well at school, but proportionately poorer in the labour market.

During the transition to adult life, it is probably made apparent that it is in the arena of education one finds the greatest differences between students with special needs and other young people. In *White Paper 27* (2000-2001) from the Norwegian Parliament, entitled *Do your duty—Demand your rights* we can read that "...more than half of the pupils in upper secondary school go on to further education" (p. 14). A follow-up study at NIFU which has followed students with a right to upper secondary education for 6 years after they began at upper secondary school in the autumn of 1994 showed that 44% of these students by the autumn of 2000 were attending colleges and 25% universities. A total of 69% of these students had made the transition to higher education (Grøgaard, et al., 2002). The entry of students with special needs into higher education would appear to be rather modest by comparison with the mainstream pupils. The data collected during the autumn 2001/winter 2002 as part of the project *Adult life on special terms* reveals that just 7% of the informants had completed—or had made a start on—higher education.

In the object clause in the Teaching Act, you can among other things read how the teaching is intended to establish a foundation for further education and lifelong learning. But the aim of the object clause must also apply to students with special needs, in which it will be a vital task to investigate to what extent these students succeed in their education over and above upper secondary school. Such a study can perhaps also show how one can include future students with special needs in higher education.

Education is of great significance in order to achieve other benefits in life, such as job status, work environment and income. Melby and Borgå (1993) emphasize how education has consequences for the individual's participation in the life of society and furthermore for the possibility one that has of influencing one's own life situation. Not least for people with some sort of disability, Melby and Borgå believe that various forms of training will be essential to the development of quality of their life.

2. The Norwegian context

Since the informants belong to the two first cohorts after *Reform 94*, it is interesting to see what rights and terms they have been offered to enable them to leave upper secondary school with a qualification for general matriculation and as such become qualified for higher education. With the introduction of *Reform 94*, all students

were given the legal right to three years' upper secondary education, students with special needs were entitled to extend this training by up to two years over and above the initial three. While the applicants on ordinary terms were entitled to be accepted for one of their three choices, students who applied on special terms had the right to be offered a place on the course of their first choice (Upper Secondary Education Act, § 8; Teaching Act, § 3-1).

Prior to *Reform 94*, a number of application procedures existed for students with special needs. The Upper Secondary Education Act of 1974 (with effect from 1 January 1976) introduced a minimum quota of 2% of places reserved for students who had special needs and who applied on special terms. This 2%-rule was replaced by a different arrangement. The right to precedence, which came into effect from academic years of 1987-88, entitled applicants with a particular need for a specially adapted teaching programme to be given precedence at the intake, but gave them no general right to be offered a place on the course of their choice (Tangen, 1998). The right to precedence did no longer apply when all students were given the right to be accepted for upper secondary education through *Reform 94*.

3. Theoretical framework

3.1 Earlier research in the field

To refer to earlier research in the field, has their limitation since different terminology is often used, at the same time as the contexts can vary, but it will nevertheless be of interest to see the tendencies that are prevailing. In Norway, there is relatively little research that deals with adults with reading and writing difficulties who succeed in higher education, and those studies that do exist, are often based on very small samples. Skaalvik (1999) is one of those who have investigated the situation for adults with reading and writing difficulties. Three of her informants had completed their education as adults, and one had started on higher education but not completed. Skaalvik (1999) emphasizes the point that, even though it was really hard work, and demanded a lot of energy, that they experienced anxiety and uncertainty as to whether they would manage to pass, were faced with a lack of specially adapted teaching programmes, these informants would never give up. Important factors that enabled them to succeed in the education arena, were among other things, the fact that on the basis of their own needs and experiences, the informants had developed various strategies for reaching their goals (Skaalvik, 1999).

Ph.D. Helland's (2002) on the subject of being a student with the diagnosis dyslexia, looks more closely at the study situation of eight students training to become kindergarten-teachers. Since Helland's informants are studying at college level, she believes that they represent a special group of adult dyslectics who said to have enjoyed success in the education context so far (Helland, 2002). Helland's findings are similar to Skaalvik's, since her informants had also developed strategies that helped them to master their difficult study situation. The informants also revealed a high degree of meta-cognitive competence. They knew a great deal about their strong and weak points in relation to the learning process and they acted accordingly in a realistic and pragmatic way. Key coping resources that Helland (2002) points to on the part of the informants (the resources were present in varying degrees) were that they had good social competence and a good social network in which the family played an important role for many of the informants (Helland, 2002).

Internationally, several studies have been carried out in which one has investigated persons with Learning Disabilities (LD) who have succeed in the arenas of education and work. Greenbaum (1996) in his study of young adults with learning disabilities shows that their level of education has been a significant factor in achieving success in the job market. Those with LD who managed to take a degree at college level had far greater chances of

obtaining jobs in good positions than those with LD who did not complete upper secondary school. Similar results are to be found in Reiff, Gerber and Ginsberg (1994), who studied persons with LD who had become successful. They interviewed 71 people of adult age with LD who had achieved success in the form of a moderate (25) or high (46) degree of success. 89% of the informants had higher education that varied from BA (bachelorgrad) to Ph.D. (doctorgrad). For the informants in the study, the way to success began with a desire to succeed. Other characteristics were that they were in control of their own situation and knew what would result in a successful adjustment to the situation, that they were realistic in the goals they set themselves, they accepted and had insight into their own difficulties, strong and weak points. The informants worked longer and harder than their fellow students and ensured a “goodness of fit” by choosing environments and courses of study that could minimize their weak sides and strengthen their strong sides (Reiff, et al., 1994).

Barga’s (1996) study of nine students with LD on university courses quotes all the informants as having “coping strategies” to enable them to tackle the barriers (branding, stigmatising and difficult gatekeepers) that they met at school and in the education context. The coping strategies were divided into two main types, positive and negative. The positive were:

- (1) The use of other significant persons for help and support;
- (2) The development of their own strategies to improve their own skills;
- (3) The use of technical aids and student skills such as being structured.

The negative coping strategies were described as “passing” and involved covering up their difficulties (Barga, 1996).

3.2 Theoretical perspectives

Life course theory will be a key theoretical approach, since the informants in this study have been followed by more research since their first year in upper secondary school and 6-7 years on from there. This is thus a longitudinal research material. The concept of transition is central to life course theory and also in this study, because the informants have actually succeeded in managing the transition to higher education and also the transitions along the way in upper secondary education. By focusing on transitional events, micro-macro relations become clear, as does the relation between action and structure (Solvang, 1994).

The concept of transition is particularly effective when one is studying a course of education and will therefore be described in some detail. The concept of transition refers to a change of condition: “Transitions are woven into all life courses. This gives the transitions particular significance and form; it is the understanding of life courses that gives the transitions meaning” (Elder & Shanahan, 1997, p. 21). Transitions are according to Thorsen (1997) often turning points that we consider as important and significant. When these transitions ought to take place, it is often linked to our existing cultural norms and ideas.

The transitions distinguish themselves from episodes that are regulated more by chance and less by norms (Myklebust, 1999). Solvang (1994) deals with the same phenomenon in his study of disabled persons’ roads to education and work, but makes use of other concepts. Here the term “status passages” refers to the important meeting points between the individual and society.

The theoretical approach to the study will be Elder’s life course theory. In particular his five life course perspectives will be central. The first perspective deals with human development and ageing as lifelong processes. The other perspectives refer to how the life course is placed historically and localized geographically, the ability to act and individual decisions, place in time/timing and interwoven lives. These perspectives consider the individual as an actor who creates his or her own life through choices and actions in relation to other people (Elder &

Johnson, 2000). Within the symbolic, interactional way of thinking, a key concept is to include other peoples' perspectives in one's own self-assessment. In the interplay between human beings, we are observed and evaluated by others, and the way in which one perceives others' assessments, becomes an important source of information about ourselves (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 1996). Related to our study, it is in particular a question of how one assesses oneself and forms an academic self-image in relation to others' assessments—whether that be school staff, the special pedagogical services (PPT), parents and friends. Therefore, we have chosen such an approach to illustrate how the informants can experience that various persons can play a role and influence the choices that they make in the arena of education.

Elder's perspective of interwoven lives emphasizes the fact that the life course—which in this study particularly concentrates on the course of education—is not a solo run, since the individual is a part of social relationships (Elder & Johnson, 2000). The term “other significant persons” refers to the social relations that are important for the individual. Students who have been accepted on special terms, can be more vulnerable in the education arena than other students, so that the social relationships that surround them may be more significant for them. In status passages one can identify other actors than the individual him/herself, which is called “passage agents” by Solvang (1994). They are usually linked to institutions at the meso-level, but Solvang also points to some extent to the family as an example of passage agents. This is in line with Elder's principle of interwoven lives. “Gatekeeping” is another expression for passage agents.

Behrens and Rabe-Kleberg (1992) use the gatekeeper term and point out that the individual's transitions seldom take place without the influence of others. They point out (with Lewin 1951 as starting point) that everyone can be gatekeepers: spouse, employer and professionals who offer expert advice. To clarify the gatekeeper concept, Behrens and Rabe-Kleberg (1992) have chosen to distinguish between four different groups of gatekeepers: primary groups, superiors, representatives and professional experts, of whom the latter two represent the more formal actors. In our presentation, we have chosen to employ the gatekeeper concept only with reference to formal actors such as teachers, counsellors and special pedagogical staff who help to “open and close gates” in the course of the informants' education. More informal actors such as parents and friends are referred to as other significant persons.

3.3 Method

The study bases on qualitative interviews with nine informants. The total sample that satisfied the established sample criteria numbered eleven individuals. The sample criteria were that the informants had started their higher education autumn 2001, plus that they were registered as having reading and writing difficulties, difficulties with mathematics and problems in concentrating at the beginning of upper secondary school. Seven of the nine informants were registered with reading and writing difficulties, one with difficulties on mathematics and one informant with problems in concentrating and with minor motor difficulties.

The interview guide was drawn up in accordance with what Patton (1990) calls “the general interview guide approach” and what Kvale (2001) refers to as semi-structured research interviews. We had concrete themes with suggested questions as the starting point for the interview, but we also had the possibility to follow up as and when new factors turned up. The semi-structured research interview bases on the possibility of following up unexpected leads from the person interviewed by asking questions that have not been formulated in advance.

The interview guide was divided into themes that consisted of one section about the informant's situation today (work, education, possibly other topics). This section also included choice of education and the transition from upper secondary to higher education. Other themes were parents' level of education and their attitude to

higher education. Another focus was the informants experience with secondary school. The conversation touched on type of class, special teaching programmes and possible teaching aids that the pupil had used at upper secondary school. The topic other significant persons focused on other people who had been involved in their choice of education, at upper secondary school and later. The gatekeeper concept was linked especially to this topic. The interviews were held over a period of three weeks. The informants were localized in five large towns in various parts of the country. The interviews were conducted by the same researcher. In order to provide the study with depth, this study also employed Kvale's (2001) proposal for seven interview stages for its analysis. Kvale raises new questions about the interview statements from different interpretation contexts, and the validity of these interpretations is related to different validity communities.

Therefore, as a starting point for addressing such internal validity issues, this study used Kvale's (2001) three contexts for interpretation. These contexts are self-understanding by the interviewee, critical understanding based on common sense by the general public, and theoretical understanding. In the first context, it is essential to have an understanding of each informant's everyday reality and to be faithful to his or her understanding of the same reality. In the second context the interpretation has a broader framework of understanding than the interviewer's own. It means that we as researchers may be critical about what is being said and can focus either on the content of statements or on the people behind them. This study used the third context's understanding to interpret statements within a theoretical framework, using different theoretical lenses and other research studies to handle the issues involved.

The analysis of the interviews started once the first interview was conducted and we used Kvale's (2001) meaning condensation as methodological entry point for the analysis of the interviews.

Thick descriptions is used to report the findings in the study and theoretical generalization (Kvale 2001) is therefore relevant when it comes to generalization limitations.

3.4 Handling of the data

The text analysis programme Nvivo was used to analyze the data. They were transcribed directly into Nvivo and separate documents were registered for each informant. The analysis can resemble what Kvale (2001) calls meaning concentration. All coding of the text material had to be done manually, we decided ourselves which forms of categorising we wished to employ. The coding was registered as free nodes. The coding categories were drawn up in accordance with the interview guide and with the actual findings that became apparent during the processing of the data material.

4. Presentation of the interviews

Before we present excerpts from the interviews, we will briefly provide a little background information about the informants.

4.1 Personalia

The informants consisted of six boys and three girls. This division between the sexes reflects the general division between the sexes in the case of pupils with special needs. Only one of the informants had dropped out of higher education, the remaining eight had either completed or were well on the way to completing their education, with the exception of one informant who had just completed her first year at university. Two of the girls were fully qualified nurses, one had started work and the other was at university. Among the boys, one informant was studying for an M.A. in history. This informant was the only one in the sample who had difficulties with

mathematics. One of the informants was a fully qualified nature environmentalist and was now working, but not in a job that was relevant to his qualifications. Two of the informants were studying at BI (4th year), one was engaged in his studies at NITH 3rd year and another discontinued his engineering studies after one year. In what follows, we shall give the informants we mention fictive names.

4.2 Experiences at upper secondary school

The road to becoming qualified to matriculate was for just three of the informants via vocational subjects, whilst the remaining six had all taken general studies. The three who had taken vocational subjects all had difficulties with reading and writing and were very similar in their reasons for choosing to attend vocational studies. They made their choices on the basis of what they felt they were best equipped to master; they all mentioned that they had to concentrate on something more practical. All three had completed their upper secondary education within the normal time allowed.

Randi felt that it was more usual to choose general studies, but when we asked her whether she considered what other friends had chosen when she was going to apply to upper secondary school, she was very clear about what choice she had to make:

I simply knew that I had to have something more practical, because if things were too theoretical, it would be too difficult for me. So I knew that something more practical was more the thing for me, so I didn't really worry so much about what the others applied for.

Therefore, it just had to be vocational studies for her.

Peter chose electrical subjects in upper secondary school and that was the only option that he considered:

There wasn't much choice when you started on electrical studies the first year. There was general studies of course, but I preferred something where you could get hold of and pull apart. It is easier to understand when you can get hold of things...when you can see something there, something physical, and you understand how it all fits together. I don't think general studies were ever an alternative for me, I understood that pretty soon after lower secondary school.

Jonas chose to concentrate on agricultural studies, he said that most of the others he was with at lower secondary chose general studies at a school they reckoned was the best. He went on:

I chose a vocational course because I'd struggled awfully to pass all the subjects I had at lower secondary school, like German and other foreign languages. So I wormed my way in the other way and did better there. You have to make use of the positive sides you have, you see, then you can try to hide your bad sides.

Of the six informants who had taken general studies, three had spent one to two years longer than normal at upper secondary school. One of the six informants had spent two years in a group of eight, and then started on the three-year general studies course. Siri had some problems with language and communicating, in addition to reading and writing difficulties. Siri had just completed her first year at university. Siri talks about the class she belonged to the first two years. She thought it was great with small groups so that everyone could get the help they needed, but when she describes her class, she says:

...don't know what to say ...but I was the most normal one there, ...and perhaps there should have been another class with people who were a bit more equal when it came to different subjects, so that there weren't people who had to learn the basics of Norwegian grammar. There could have been two different classes. Those who needed most help could belong to one class, and those who didn't need so much help, but some help, could have been in another one.

When it comes to specially adapted teaching programmes, it was the case for almost all the informants that they were partly dissatisfied with what they were offered and did not take advantage of it to any great extent. Siri

was the only one of the informants who mentioned that she was very grateful for the help she had been given throughout all through school. But she was also the only one of the informants who had been in contact with PPT (special pedagogical services) since she started school:

Mummy and Daddy have always fussed about me getting all the help I need, sent letters to the PPT-services. I have been in touch with the PPT ever since my first year at school. I notice now that I am so grateful and pleased for all the help I've been given..., and how much it has meant for getting me to where I am today, so I'm really pleased!.

Other informants say that they did not want to make use of the aids because it made them feel uncomfortable. Peter says:

I suppose I found out that it was easier to get on in life without so much of this extra support. That's what I call stress, you're looked upon as a person who needs extra help and special programmes, which you're rarely interested in.

He had some remedial lessons in mathematics at upper secondary school and goes on:

There were a couple of us that had a bit of extra teaching in maths, who were taken out of the class..., but I was actually pretty good at that particular part of the maths syllabus.

Thomas, who was doing his M.A. in history, and who had had problems with mathematics, also talks about his experiences with remedial lessons:

It was really bad..., an incredibly poor set-up. How shall I describe it then? It was really the same teaching programme as in the ordinary class, just the same except that they talked in a condescending way..., as if we were little kids. It didn't arouse any interest in maths, to put it that way.

Mia, who wasn't diagnosed as having reading and writing difficulties until she started upper secondary school, talks about how she was offered the chance to practise on a computer:

They told me that I was going to get one lesson a week and that I was to come and get the keys myself and let myself in and practise on my own.

4.3 Gatekeepers/other significant persons

Henrik was told by the counsellors that he needed to make a start on the introductory foundation course. He had CP (Cerebral Palsy), but on the form from upper secondary school he was also registered as having slight difficulties with concentration and that was why he was part of my sample. He did not mention this himself. Henrik says this about the counsellor:

The counsellor at lower secondary school said that I needed the introductory foundation course, apparently. What he forgot to say was that the foundation course was mechanical subjects, so when I came in and thought I was going to start general studies and so on, it was mechanical subjects..., so I spent a year learning how to do welding. Then I went on to general studies for three years.

For both Siri and Henrik, the counsellor played a key role as gatekeeper and helped to decide where they ended up after lower secondary school. Henrik was surprised at the introductory foundation course, but completed the year and then completed the three-year general studies course. Siri says she is glad she belonged to a group of eight and got the help she needed, but as she says:

But I don't think it was any more than that.

Other informants also describe how gatekeepers like teachers, counsellors and PPT-specialists gave them advice about what they ought to choose. Randi explains that when she wanted to apply to study to be a nurse –

something she had made up her mind to do— she was actually given “down backing” (her expression):

At the PPT-services I was almost advised against it, because they said to me, ‘do you think you’ll manage it Randi, do you think that’s something for you?’

She says she was very upset, but then she got a lot of support from her mother and the others at home. Mia also experienced gatekeepers who gave her advice that would “close the gate”, in this case to general studies. She refers to a conversation with her former teacher at lower secondary school:

I remember that I wanted to do general studies and then yes...it seemed as though, I felt that he thought it was ok there, but that perhaps I could have tried health and social studies because that would be easier for me.

One of the others who experienced a suggestion from the counsellor at lower secondary school was Jonas. He says:

He (the counsellor) said straight out: Jonas, I don’t think we shall take general studies at... (name of a particular school). And that wasn’t really...there and then it wasn’t much fun to hear that you’re not good enough to do anything.

Jonas says that both his mother and his father agreed with his choice and he adds:

It was the best choice I’ve ever made when it comes to school.

All the informants who wanted to varying degrees and were positive to the idea of starting on a higher education talk about their parents who have supported them in their choice of education. Jonas says that his parents supported him and gave him advice about the choices he made, but not all that much:

There was especially one person who gave me advice—the father of a mate of mine, who I had talked to in an adult sort of way over the years, so we discussed it a bit.

Siri says:

I’ve had masses of backing at home and at school and always had supporters...., I have good girlfriends who support me.

The informants were also asked about the level of education of their parents. Four of the informants had one or both parents with a three-year higher education. Two of the informants had one parent who had taken higher education as an adult. All the informants felt that their parents were positive about them wanting to start a higher education.

5. Summary

This paper studies former students with special needs who have apparently had success in the education arena in as much as they have all started on a higher education.

Especially the informants’ who chose vocational studies, mentioned that they made their choice on the basis of what they felt they were able to manage. Several of the studies we have referred to in the paper emphasize the importance of insight into one’s own difficulties if one is to succeed. Among others Helland’s (2002) informants demonstrated a high degree of meta-cognitive competence and knew a great deal about their own strong and weak points in relation to the learning process and they acted accordingly in a realistic and pragmatic way. Skaalvik’s (1999) informants did not give up even though they experienced a lack of specially adapted teaching programmes. The informants in this study had variety of experiences when it comes to specially adapted teaching programmes, but the majority had had negative experiences on this point.

When it comes to how they experienced gatekeepers and other significant people, almost all the informants felt that their parents had given them good support. Also in Helland's study it was clear that a good social network was an important factor and in particular the family played a vital role for many of the informants. Several of my informants had experienced teachers, counsellors and PPT-specialists as gatekeepers who gave advice that did not always "open gates", whereas others received advice which was considered negative in the shorter term, but they later appreciated. Barga (1996) points out that the informants in her study experienced gatekeepers only in a negative context. Either the informants were refused admission to certain courses of study or they were admitted only on special terms.

On the basis of this paper, it can be claimed that the picture is complex when it comes to explaining what characterises former pupils with special needs who appear to succeed in the education arena. Therefore it is not possible to point to any unambiguous findings in the interim analysis. Even so, it can be claimed that interesting features have been revealed that are especially related to the support that the informants felt that they had been given by their parents. Gatekeepers appear to have played a role both positively and negatively in how the transitions between the various types of school turned out for the informants. In spite of the fact that many of the informants did not feel that their experience of specially adapted teaching programmes in upper secondary was particularly good, they nevertheless chose to go on to higher education. However, this study would also seem to indicate that there are probably many pupils with special needs who have not been offered the specially adapted teaching programme that could have helped them in the transition to higher education.

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