



Special needs students in vocational education and training in Norway - A longitudinal study

Introduction

Since the sweeping reform of upper secondary education in Norway in 1994 all young Norwegians have been entitled to 13 years' education (cf. Skårbrevik and Båtevik 2000:16 -17). Children start school at the age of six and complete ten years of compulsory education at primary and lower secondary levels. They then have the option of three years at upper secondary level. Students with various kinds of problems of a physical, psychological or social nature are entitled to special educational provisions, and may therefore receive an additional two years of upper secondary education.

Young people avail themselves of this entitlement. Approximately 95% of lower secondary school leavers start upper secondary education in the autumn of the same year. Almost one tenth of these - approximately 6 000 - are special needs students, the overwhelming majority of whom start on vocational training courses. The question, however, is how these students fare in upper secondary education: How well do they flow through the system? What kinds of special provisions result in the best qualification for those receiving special needs education?

These problems will be discussed in this article, which is based on a longitudinal study of special needs students who started upper secondary education in the autumn of 1995. *Reform 94 - særskilt tilrettelagt opplæring* (Reform 94 - special needs education) was funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Church, Education and Research, and was carried out by Møre Research and Volda University College in the period 1995 - 2000.

This research project started out as an evaluation of the major restructuring of upper secondary education that took place in 1994

- a package of changes known collectively as Reform 94. The main purpose of this reform was to increase flow through the educational system. Among other things, this entailed a structural reform of the courses offered. The number of foundation courses was reduced from 109 to just 13 (subsequently increased to 15) and the degree of specialisation in the advanced courses was reduced considerably. Courses of study that did not lead to any vocational qualification or qualification for admission to higher education were discontinued. This had the greatest impact on the half of the cohort studying vocational subjects, since the main model following the reform was one of two years' education in school followed by a further two years in an external educational enterprise.

These measures have definitely been instrumental in helping more students to achieve a vocational or higher-education admission qualification. This becomes obvious when we compare the admission cohort of 1991 with the reform cohorts of 1994 and 1995. According to Støren and Skjersli (1999:109) this improvement is due to an increase in the number of places and a better course-offer structure. The fact that the students now have a statutory right to upper secondary education is also important.

The progress made is confirmed without doubt if we look at whole cohorts through comprehensive registration studies. The situation is less clear in the case of sub-categories that are difficult to identify in such studies. Special needs students are an example of such a category.

The empirical data in the article have been obtained from a sample of special needs students from the 1995 admission cohort, i.e. the second cohort of students following the implementation of the major educational re-



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In Norway almost all young people start upper secondary education. This means that the student population in upper secondary education is very diverse and many of the students have difficulty completing their education. This applies not least to the tenth of the students entitled to special educational provisions. This article is based on a longitudinal study in which special needs students were followed for four years through their upper secondary education. The study focused on students taking vocational courses, documenting how many students were on schedule at different points in time, how many were falling behind and how many had dropped out. An analysis was also performed to find out which conditions help vocational students to achieve a qualification. The conclusion was that making special provisions within the framework of mainstream classes rather than in small groups or special classes is a decisive factor in whether the students achieve a qualification.



forms. The flow through the system and achievement of qualifications is described for students who started upper secondary level vocational courses, which is where we find most of the special needs students. This applies to almost three quarters of the students in the study on which this article is based. One eighth of the students started courses which would prepare them for higher education studies, while an equal proportion received unspecified special education without reference to any specific course of study. The latter are those with the greatest functional difficulties.

A life-course perspective on special needs education

In order to understand the flow through upper secondary education, it was decided that life-course theory and social transitions should be used as the framework. These are particularly useful perspectives when studying people who are out of step with the great majority in their journey through the educational system.

The term life course refers to the biological ageing process. But this is just one aspect. In the social sciences, life in society is the focus of attention. Individual life courses are influenced by past events and actions and by present framework conditions, and can often be understood on the basis of future expectations. A life course may be viewed as the sum of those trajectories, for instance in education, work and family life, which individuals and groups follow through frequently changing contexts. Different aspects of life-course theory are reviewed in Settersten (2002) and Elder and Johnson (2002). Hagestad and Dannefer (2001) are also adherents of the same life-course tradition. What is special about their contribution is that they warn against excessive focusing on agency perspectives in life-course studies at the expense of structural perspectives. In their view, this can lead to undesirable microfication.

A life-course approach combining an agency perspective and a structural perspective forms the theoretical basis for the research project which provided the empirical data for this article. This is elaborated in Kvalsund and Myklebust (1996), who outline an approach to life-course research which clearly dis-

tances itself from pure structural focusing and extreme agency orientation. In this perspective there is room for individual agency within the limits set by structural constraints.

A life-course perspective is fruitful when analysing the long lines followed by individuals and cohorts through varying geographical environments and shifting historical contexts. A life course, however, evolves not merely in the long term but also in the short term, in which case transition is the most useful concept. This concept is particularly helpful in flow studies since students' problems often come to light when they drop out or fail to move up to the next level at the normal time. The problems of special needs students often manifest themselves in their inability to keep up with their peers - the transition comes at the wrong time (off time).

A course of education typically forms a chain consisting of a series of transitions. Examples of these are leaving lower secondary school, starting upper secondary education and progressing through upper secondary school. It may, however, also be a question of dropping out, which for some may mean a transition to work, but for most will mean unemployment. Dropping out may be influenced by exclusion factors in the school environment or motivated by more attractive provisions outside school. The actual dropping out is, however, often preceded by a long process during which the drop-outs gradually distance themselves from school. Blaug (2001:40) expresses this as follows: 'they are not so much drop-outs or push-outs as fade outs'.

Norwegian research into dropping out among special needs students in upper secondary education emphasises the same point. Myklebust (1999: 173) documents that two thirds of the students who rejected offers of special provisions in their first six months, had left the upper secondary education system by the end of the third year. There is also a marked tendency for those with high rates of absence in the first six months subsequently to turn their backs on upper secondary education. It may thus be said that partially distancing oneself from school in the initial period gradually develops into total rejection, as a result of which a final break is made.

With regard to upper secondary educa-



tion, dropping out of a course of education is an external transition. There are also internal transitions. A typical example is moving from one course level to the next, for example from a foundation course to a more advanced course. This may be called a vertical transition as opposed to switching to a different course of study at the same level, which is a typically horizontal transition.

Method and material

There are good reasons for employing a longitudinal research method. Longitudinal data are required when studying careers, for instance with respect to training or occupation. It is important to note that prospective designs, where the same individuals are followed forward in time, are particularly well suited to the study of social transitions. The follow-up studies in the *Reform 94 - særskilt tilrettelagt opplæring* (Reform 94 - special needs education) are therefore largely prospective.

It is easiest to study flow through the system when one particular cohort is used as the starting point. We have chosen to follow the autumn 1995 admission cohort in six counties: Finnmark, Rogaland, Oslo, Møre og Romsdal, Nord-Trøndelag and Hedmark. (In the three latter counties we also have information about the 1994 cohort, but these data will not be used in this article.)

In the first data collection round in the spring of 1996 we used a detailed questionnaire to obtain information about 438 special needs students who had started vocational courses in 1995. We then received information from the schools about these students up to the spring of 1999, in five more data collection rounds. The table below is a schematic presentation of the data collected⁽¹⁾.

Statistics obtained from the six counties indicated that we fell far short of receiving information about all the special needs students in the 1995 cohort. We therefore sent a simplified questionnaire to the schools and requested that its completion be given higher priority than previously. This resulted in information about a further 581 vocational students from the 1995 cohort for whom special provisions had been made at the end of the first school year. These students are in

Outline of the data collection method for the 1995 admission cohort

Autumn 1995	Start upper secondary education	
Spring 1996	First school year	Wave 1
Autumn 1996	Second school year	Wave 2
Spring 1997	Second school year	Wave 3
Autumn 1997	Third school year	Wave 4
Spring 1998	Third school year	Wave 5
Autumn 1998	Fourth school year	
Spring 1999	Fourth school year	Wave 6

addition to the 438 about whom we had already received data. The total of 1019 is assumed to include nearly all special needs students who started at upper secondary school in 1995 and who were still in upper secondary education at the end of the first school year. Response in the follow-up study was only 43 per cent. In view of this it is important to know whether the material is biased and, if so, how.

There are two variables that can be compared directly for both the follow-up and the total material, namely gender and class type. The gender distribution is approximately the same in the follow-up sample and population - about 65% are boys. Students attending mainstream classes all or part of the time are, however, underrepresented in the follow-up sample. The reason for this is that this sample has a degree of overrepresentation of students with severe functional problems, who are more often placed in special classes. These factors should be taken into consideration when evaluating the results of the study. Kvalsund and Myklebust (1998) describe the data collection in more detail and present a thorough assessment of the representativeness of the complete follow-up material, in which also special needs students taking general studies and those following unspecified courses of studies are included.

Flow through the system

A given pattern of progression at a specific point is the sum of all the individual adjustments for and choices made by the students. Through a series of transitions - in

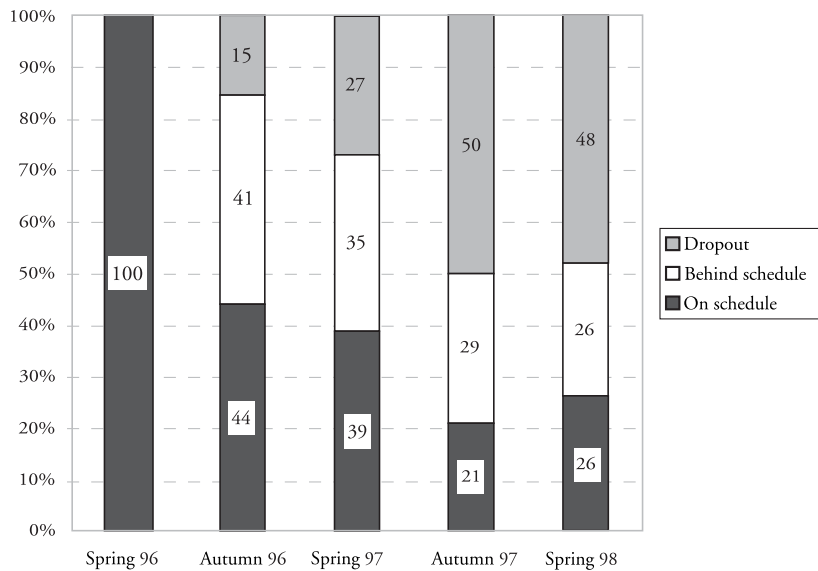
Figure 1

⁽¹⁾ The registration continued after the schools had submitted material for the last time in the spring of 1999, but current work is being financed mainly by The Research Council of Norway. The students and their parents have been interviewed, but these data will be reported in future publications.



Figure 2

Progression from spring 1996 to spring 1998 for special needs students who started upper secondary vocational courses. The 1995 admission cohort in six Norwegian counties. N=438



ternal and external, horizontal and vertical - specific patterns are created, which, in this research project, have been registered every six months. Here, we shall only briefly document the progression from the first to the third year of upper secondary school. We shall note the proportion of the cohort whose educational progress is on schedule, the proportion that has fallen behind and the proportion that has dropped out. This is not the place to document detailed flows between different levels and different courses of study. Nor is the relationship shown between dropping out and subsequent return to upper secondary education. It is however important to remember that many of the students change courses, which means that flows are not only in one direction.

We received data on these students for the first time in the spring of 1996, when they were taking the foundation course in one of the vocational study programmes. At that time they were, by definition, on schedule in their education.

However, many of these students had already had substantial problems at the primary and lower secondary level, and the problems continued in the first year of up-

per secondary school. It is therefore no surprise that the figure below shows that a large number did not progress to the first level of the advanced course when they started their second year in the autumn of 1996.

In the autumn of 1996, half-way through the second school year, less than half were on schedule, two-fifths were behind schedule and almost a seventh had dropped out. The situation worsened, with an increasing incidence of students dropping out and a smaller percentage on schedule, up to the autumn of 1997. There was, however, some improvement during the third year, when a greater percentage were on schedule in their education. This was due to a considerable incidence of students returning to education after a dropping out for a short time. At the same time there was a somewhat smaller flow from behind schedule to dropout.

We see therefore that vocational students with special needs often fail to progress satisfactorily and many drop out of upper secondary school education. It must, however, not be forgotten that previously this type of student received little education at this level. Nor do all ordinary students progress straight through upper secondary school. Thus in Norway only around two thirds of the whole admission cohort from autumn 1994 were on schedule at the end of the third school year (Edvardsen et al.1998: 83). However, there was a great difference in this cohort between students pursuing different types of studies. More than 80% of those pursuing academic studies were on schedule, while the same applied to only 52% of vocational training students (Støren, Skjersli and Aamodt 1999: 77). Of the students leaving lower secondary school in spring 1995 and starting upper secondary school in the autumn of the same year, only 58.5% completed and passed the courses in the normal time (Statistics Norway 2001). We should always bear this in mind when assessing the performance of special needs students.

Qualification attainment after four years

So far we have seen how various transitions throughout a course of education form definite patterns of progression in a cohort of vocational students receiving special needs education. We have seen what proportion



is on schedule after three years, what proportion is behind schedule and what the proportion of dropouts is. The qualification status of these students the following year can be summed up as follows:

Four years after starting upper secondary school, we note firstly that almost half (45%) of the 1995 cohort left school without our being able to determine with any certainty whether they obtained qualifications, and secondly that over a third (37%) are still in upper secondary education. However, special needs students are entitled to up to five years upper secondary education. Therefore, most certainly more students will eventually complete their education with some form of qualification. Furthermore there are 6% who have received a certificate of qualification (partial qualification), i.e. the students have passed some subjects, but not all.⁽²⁾ Just over 12% of vocational students obtained a vocational qualification within the normal time of four years, and barely 1% obtained the entrance qualification required for higher education. However the really interesting question here concerns the conditions that contribute to qualification attainment. That is the topic of the rest of the article.

What role does the students' functional level play for qualification attainment?

It is probable that the extent of the students' functional difficulties affects their chances of achieving a qualification. This is the first aspect we need to discuss. We will start with the first data collection in spring 1996, which gave an overview of how the class teachers and school counsellors assessed the various problem conditions concerning students with special educational needs. This survey provided us with insight into the basis for the special provisions for each pupil.⁽³⁾

These problems were registered using thirteen different indicators which encompass difficulties of a physical, psychological or social nature. Counsellors and class teachers placed each student in one of four categories - ranging from none to very great difficulties - for each of the problem indicators. The four categories for each indicator were explained in more precise terms in the registration form (cf. appendix in Båtevik, Kvalsund and Myklebust 1997). However, in the present analysis individual problem

conditions are not used but rather an additive index, based on the thirteen indicators, as the measure of functional level.

This index can then be subdivided in different ways, for example into quartiles.⁽⁴⁾ We then discover that there is a dividing line between the weakest quartile and the rest of the students. Students in the fourth quartile (those with the lowest functional level) are clearly worst, with only 6% of them achieving a qualification. In the third quartile 15% achieved a qualification, the result for the second quartile was 12% and for the first quartile (those with the highest functional level) 16%. Since there is hardly any difference between students in the three best quartiles, functional level is presumably not a decisive factor in qualification attainment.

What promotes greater qualification attainment - special or mainstream classes?

The purpose of special provisions is to help the students on their way through upper secondary education. It is therefore important to know what kind of provisions help to achieve this goal. The types of provisions for special needs students can, however, vary a great deal. Help and support may be given in mainstream classes, in groups of eight or groups of four, as individual lessons outside the class or remedial lessons within the class. A personal assistant or the use of various technical aids are also possible. These remedial measures can also be combined. This great variation is documented by Kvalsund and Myklebust (1998:62 - 64).

This diversity makes the picture rather vague when analysing the relationship between special provisions and qualification attainment. This article therefore takes one fundamental distinction as its starting point, namely whether special provisions in the first year were made exclusively within the framework of a mainstream class or whether they were made in various types of small groups. We then obtain two equally sized groups. Slightly less than half (49%) of the vocational students are provided for exclusively within the framework of mainstream classes while the remainder (51%) are provided for in other ways, primarily in different types of special classes. These groups also display very different degrees of qualification attainment.

Of the students for whom provisions are

⁽²⁾ The Norwegian system of qualification certificates is described in more detail by Skårbrevik and Båtevik (2000).

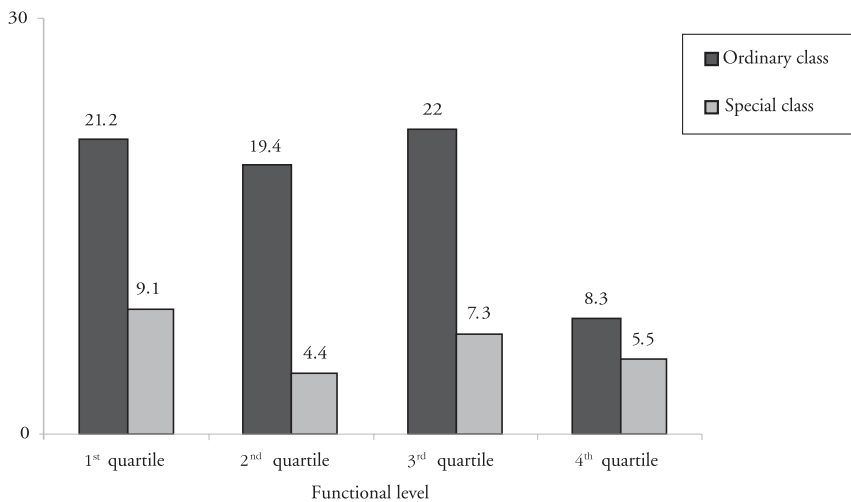
⁽³⁾ However, we should bear in mind that a diagnosis is not an indisputable fact, but rather a vague indication of the problems the students have to cope with. It may often be a "thin description" (cf. Gillman et al. 2000: 396) based on fleeting consultations with experts. Moreover, it must be stressed that these diagnoses are often social constructs rather than objective categorisations (Kvalsund and Myklebust 1996:106). Such diagnosis is more a registration of what is lacking than a mapping of resources. It is unfortunate if classification becomes more important than prevention and treatment (cf. Parmenter 2001:274-275).

⁽⁴⁾ The basis for the division into quartiles is not the 438 vocational students from the 1995 cohort but the total number of special needs students (760) included in the follow-up material from both the 1995 and the 1994 cohorts.



Figure 3

Percentage achieving a vocational qualification or the entrance qualification for higher education after four years. Distribution according to functional level and class type in the first school year. 438 special needs students starting vocational education courses in autumn 1995.



made exclusively in mainstream classes during the first school year, just over 19% achieve a qualification after four years. The corresponding figure for students for whom provisions are made in special classes is 6%. This is a marked difference and would seem to suggest that the greatest possible number of special needs students should receive help in mainstream classes. However, there are several factors that must be included in the analysis.

Control for other variables - are mainstream classes still best?

It would be easy to assume that the use of different types of classes is due to students with severe functional disabilities being placed in special classes and students with less severe functional difficulties in mainstream classes. And there is in fact a tendency to do this, but the difference between the types of class is not so great. Only about 60% of the students in the first quartile (with the least overall functional difficulties) attend mainstream classes exclusively. The same applies to 30% of the pupils in the fourth quartile. The pupils in both the second and the third quartiles divide almost equally between

main-stream and special classes. The small extent to which functional level determines class placement may be due to several factors. Firstly, the idea of inclusion is considered important in many places, which means that provisions are made in main-stream classes for as many as possible, regardless of functional level. Secondly, demographic factors limit the number of special classes possible in each school. In addition, both diagnosis and class placement may naturally be somewhat random in individual schools.

This variation makes some interesting analyses possible. It allows us to compare student categories with almost the same functional level, but with different types of provisions. This comparison is shown in the figure below:

In the case of students at the lowest functional level (fourth quartile) it does not seem to matter much whether they are provided for in mainstream or in special classes. For the others, however, the class placement in the first year is crucial. At every functional level students for whom provisions are made within the framework of mainstream classes clearly fare best in respect of qualification achievement. However, before drawing the final conclusions, we must look at how other variables affect the interaction between functional level and class placement. The form of analysis best suited to this is logistic regression.⁽⁵⁾ The table below shows the variables included in the analysis:

Some of these variables have been presented earlier in the article. The new variables will be considered only briefly: Intensive measures are an indicator of help and support over and above placement in a specific class or group. The progression variable is relevant in this context because qualification is an end-product after many years schooling, in the course of which students from time to time move up a class, fall behind or drop out. This progression pattern is documented in figure 1. The chances of achieving a qualification must be greatest for those who at any given time are on schedule in their education, i.e. those who keep pace with students having a normal progression. Myklebust (2002) has thus shown that it is much easier to remain on schedule for those for whom all special provisions are made within the framework of a main-stream class. This variable has also been included

⁽⁵⁾ This form of analysis is most suitable when the dependent variable is a dichotomous nominal level variable, such as qualification attainment.



in the analysis in an attempt to avoid what Hagestad and Dannefer (2001:7) refer to as 'the time 1 problem', i.e. including independent variables from the first phase only in longitudinal studies. It is important to include the gender variable since the distribution among special needs students is biased, only a third being girls. On the other hand, the girls for whom special provisions are made have greater problems than the boys.

If we concentrate on the two columns on the right, we see that class type is the only variable to have a significant effect on qualification attainment after four years. The students for whom provisions in the first year were made exclusively in mainstream classes are almost three times (2.774) as likely to achieve vocational or higher-education qualification as those for whom provisions were made in special classes.⁽⁶⁾ This also applies when we control for the effect of the four other independent variables using logistic regression.

Discussion and conclusion

Even if we control for other relevant variables the significance of class type is not lessened as regards qualification attainment by special needs students. Those for whom provisions are made exclusively in mainstream classes in the first school year⁽⁷⁾ achieve a vocational or higher-education admission qualification more often than other special needs students.

These results are very similar to the pattern documented by Markussen for a sample of Norwegian special needs students who started upper secondary education in 1994. After controlling for social background, gender, diagnosis, primary and lower secondary school grades and age on starting school, the conclusion is that special provisions in mainstream classes gives the best results as regards qualification attainment (Markussen 1999:216). Similar findings have been reported from lower-level education in other countries, for example the Netherlands (cf. Karsten, Peetsma, Roeleveld and Vergeer 2001) and the USA (cf. Waldron and McLeskey 1998).

There is thus a great deal to indicate that far more students with functional difficulties

List of variables included in the logistic regression analysis.

Table 2	
Dependent variable: Qualification achieved after 4 years by vocational students:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 0. No vocational or higher-education qualification 1. Vocational or higher-education qualification
Independent variables: Class type 1 st year:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 0. Students for whom provisions are made in special classes 1. Students for whom all special provisions are made in mainstream classes
Functional level 1 st year:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 0. Quartile with the lowest functional level 1. Quartile with next lowest functional level 2. Quartile with next best functional level 3. Quartile with best functional level
Intensive measures:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 0. No remedial measures other than group/class placement 1. One remedial measure 2. Two remedial measures 3. At least three remedial measures
Progression:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 0. Not on schedule halfway through second school year 1. On schedule halfway through second school year
Gender:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 0. Girls 1. Boys

achieve a qualification when special provisions are made within the framework of mainstream classes.

This can tentatively be explained by a so-called context stimulation hypothesis. The hypothesis postulates that the best qualification result will be achieved by special needs students in mainstream classes because in such classes they can more easily compare themselves with ordinary students. The group with whom they compare themselves, the reference group, consists of other pupils for whom qualification for a vocational or for higher education is the natural goal of the education. The class context will therefore stimulate the special needs students to perform better. If the reference group consists only of other special needs students in one small class, academic ambitions will rapidly fall off. Close teacher follow-up is therefore of little help in such classes. Blaug (2001:41) reasons along

⁽⁶⁾ The result is the same if we use single indicators in the analysis - for example reading and writing difficulties - instead of an additive index for functional level. Students for whom provisions are made exclusively in mainstream classes are almost three times as likely to achieve a qualification as the others.

⁽⁷⁾ The class placement in the first year has a great effect on subsequent placing. Approximately 90% of the special needs students in the 1995 cohort for whom provisions were made exclusively in a mainstream class in the first year continued in a mainstream class in the second year.



Table 3

How five independent variables influence the chance of achieving a vocational or higher-education qualification after four years. Special needs students who started vocational education courses in 1995. N=438.

	B	S.E.	Wald	Sig.	Exp(B)
Class type in 1 st year	1,009	0,349	8,355	0,004	2,744
Functional level in 1 st year	0,056	0,154	0,133	0,715	1,058
Progression halfway through 2 nd year	0,519	0,327	2,511	0,113	1,680
Intensive measures in 1 st year	-0,207	0,201	1,062	0,303	0,813
Gender	0,201	0,319	0,397	0,529	1,222

the same lines:

One thing learned from the famous Coleman Report ... it is that individual educational achievement is almost as much affected by the attitudes and achievements of other students in the class as by teachers, parents and general school resources.

Blaug (2001:42 -43) also argues against splitting the students into groups: '... anything

which divides pupils in a school, particularly in terms of cognitive abilities, is virtually guaranteed to produce school failures.'

Grouping according to ability has gradually come to be regarded as a measure that creates inequality rather than levelling. Kerckhoff (1995: 483) is among those who claim this: '... grouping results in students in "high" ability groups moving ahead and those in "low" ability groups falling back in terms of academic achievement.' We thus achieve the opposite of what was intended. The manifest function is to create greater equality. But the latent function leads to a sorting that increases inequality. Kerckhoff supports his claim by referring to research in primary, lower secondary and upper secondary education.

This is an argument for inclusion in mainstream classes. The results presented in this article point in the same direction. The structural arrangements, such as placement in specific types of classes, seem to have a channelling effect that has a major impact on the qualification achievement of special needs students. An effective way of improving qualification is therefore to provide for as many as possible of the special needs students in mainstream classes. This will, however, also require the provision of greater resources for such classes.

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