

Special education support – extent, forms and effects

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The findings to be presented derive from two studies conducted within the framework of a Swedish longitudinal project termed STOFF, which is part of the ongoing longitudinal project “Evaluation Through Follow-Up” (ETF).

The first study aimed to describe the extent and forms (integrated versus segregated) of special education support offered to pupils in comprehensive schools in Sweden over a period of 29 years and to study relations between support, background variables and goal attainment in Grade 9. The study was based on about 35,000 children born in 1972, 1977, 1982, and 1987 participating in the ETF-project.

The general aim of the second study was to explore how head teachers (N = 683) for older pupils (born in 1992) and head teachers (N = 250) for younger students (born in 1998) in Swedish compulsory schools describe handling procedures of special education issues in their schools. The two pupil cohorts are the two latest participating in the data collections of the ETF-project. Two questionnaire surveys on such issues were conducted during the spring term of 2008 among head teachers in a nationally representative sample of schools. That is, the schools pupils born in 1992 and 1998 attended in 2008.

The findings from the first study reveal that boys and pupils from lower educational home-backgrounds and with non-Swedish backgrounds are over-represented among the groups that have received special education support. The findings also suggest that pupils who have received support, in general, tend to achieve educational goals in core curriculum subjects to a lesser extent than those who have never had any kind of support.

Questionnaire answers from the head teachers show that even though the most common type of special support measure is that pupils are supported by special education teachers in regular classes/groups, the overall picture that emerges is that the ‘old traditional ways’ in special education support giving are still the most common. Social background and context as well as schoolwork content and teaching habits are judged as key factors behind the pupils’ difficulties and need for special education support. In general, however, school problems and students’ difficulties seem still to mainly be seen as caused by student characteristics and disabilities rather than as shortcomings of school and teaching.

In the second study differences in head teacher answer profiles could be identified. Such school profiles are also to be discussed as part of a third study, where they have been related to individual data on school experience, and learning data, which are available from the same schools as the head teachers approached.