

Summary

This is a report from a research project concerned with the enrollment of pupils in special needs education based on individual assessment. The background for the project is the documented sharp increase in the number of individual pupils being granted the right to Special Education in recent years. Similar trends have also been observed in other countries.

The aim of the project is to investigate why the enrollment in special needs education is increasing so dramatically and to find out how key/central persons in the schooling sector view and explain this trend. The project was commissioned by the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities (KS) and conducted by the International Research Institute of Stavanger (IRIS).

Two research questions have directed the study:

1. Why is the enrollment in special needs education increasing in both municipalities and counties, and what are the most likely contributing factors (drivers) behind this increase as described by central persons (parties) in primary and secondary education and training?
2. What dilemmas arise when municipal, county and school sector actors try to ensure both the collective good and individual rights within the given economics constraints.

To address the research questions a secondary analysis of 16 research reports and 8 official documents and thereafter an interview study were conducted. The 32 focus group interviews were conducted in five municipalities, one municipality collaboration of three individual municipalities, and two counties representing diverse regions in the North, West and East of the country.

Participants in the focus group interviews were central parties (key players) in the field of special needs education in primary and secondary education: school owners, school principals, representatives from Educational Psychological Services and teachers. The theme for the interviews was the increase in the allocation of special needs education and the interviews elicited the views of the different groups in regard both to the underlying and influencing factors and to the dilemmas associated with this trend.

Findings from research and document analysis

The research literature suggests that changes in school management systems are an important contributing factor. The school reform “Knowledge Promotion” which introduced a new quality control system into primary and secondary education is mentioned especially. The general quality of the teaching and learning environment in schools is obviously seen as important. Some, for example, point to a lack of expertise in managing multi-lingual classrooms and schools. Reference is also made to the structure and organization of special needs education. Changes in Society more generally were also seen to create pressure to increase enrollments in special needs education. Highlighted here was the increased focus in Society on individual rights and the increasing use of diagnosis.

Changes in school management systems and changes in Society are also named in the official documents as important contributors to the increase in enrollment to special needs education. In addition these documents attribute the increase in enrollment to many other and diverse factors naming: economic constraints, limited resources, lack of expertise in managing the multi-lingual classroom/school, the introduction of early intervention programs that identify pupils with special needs earlier, the increased use of performance testing and indicators, an increasing number pupils with behavioral problems, an increasing focus on legal rights, the introduction of new statutory instruments, the emergence of a more active and engaged group of parents and the professional interests of teachers specializing in special needs education.

Findings from the interview study

The analysis of the interview data compared views and experiences as related by four groups; school owners, principals, teachers and representatives from Educational Psychological Services. There was a high level of consensus across these groups as to the factors contributing to the increase in enrollment in special needs education. We noted a similar high level of consensus across the municipalities and counties. The groups identified many of the same factors and conditions already named in the secondary analysis (see over) but also brought forward other causes not previously mentioned. The findings are presented here.

Changes in the school management

Both changes within individual municipalities and schools and changes in National guidelines exert pressure to increase enrollment in Special Need Education. Our informants spoke especially of the issues of: school resources (both financial and other); teachers' skills; the organization of special needs education; and factors related to quality and practice in schools. Our informants were particularly concerned with the introduction of the school reform "Knowledge Promotion" with the increased focus on assessment, performance indicators and testing. Informants also expressed the view that the current emphasis on, and commitment to, early intervention is contributing to the increase in the enrollment to special needs education. Pupils with special needs are identified earlier and interventions set in place.

Changes in Society generally

Changes in Society generally also create pressure to increase enrollment to special needs education. A heightened awareness of their rights and the subsequent demands by parents, in regards to what education should provide, was a factor mentioned by our informants. The respondents also highlighted an increased focus on individual rights and the increasing use of diagnosis as major factors in the trend towards increased Special Needs Education enrollments. The informants further claim that a narrower concept of normality has evolved both within society and within the schooling sector and that more students struggle with anxiety, school avoidance and psychosocial problems. Instability in home situations and a changing labor market which demands higher qualifications are also identified as underlying factors for the increase in the use of special needs education.

Special Education's organizational structure

Pupils are enrolled in special needs education after individual assessment. The final allocation is the result of the actions and decisions of several actors in a formal chain of procedure. Informants were especially concerned with the role of PPT (Educational Psychological Service) and the need for PPT to sustain a balance between the roles of helper/advisor and professional expert/decision maker. The informants strongly suggest that the increased pressure on PPT to assert its authority as decision maker in the granting of resources is a factor in the increasing enrollment to special needs education. Several of the informants suggested that special education teachers had a vested interest in maintaining and increasing the high level of allocation to special needs education. Lack of expertise in managing the multi-lingual classroom meant that Norwegian as a second language (NSL) pupils were often wrongly enrolled in special education.

Of the many factors put forward by informants, five factors stand out in the analysis. These are ranged according to perceived importance:

1. Economic pressures and constraints in the schooling sector
2. Parents demand and expect more from schooling
3. The effects of the introduction of the school reform "Knowledge promotion"
4. Increased use and emphasis on International/National tests and performance indicators
5. An increased focus on the diagnosis of learning difficulties

The underlying factors and influences are regulated by different contexts and settings. There is variation in how these factors affect the enrollment to special needs education in the various municipalities and counties. Changes in School and in Society have a stronger impact on the enrollment to special needs education in some municipalities and counties than in others.

Dilemmas in special needs education

The dilemmas that informants have reported in relation to the granting and implementation of special needs education can be grouped under five main categories in order of importance.

Management dilemma: How to maneuver in relation to different expectations in regards to quality in Education? Informants experience that different groups; teachers, parents, pupils often have differing views and expectations in regards to quality in teaching. Parents have become increasingly engaged in schooling and make more demands. Which group should exert greater influence in regards to individual assessment for enrollment in special needs education? Should enrolment be based on teachers' recommendations or on parental demands?

Political dilemma: How to ensure both collective good and individual rights? The organization and allocation of special needs education lessons is also problematic. Standard solutions are often more cost effective than more flexible solutions. Should pupils be given individual tuition within the classroom or should they be taken out of

the ordinary classroom setting? Many express the view that identifying and labeling pupils as special needs pupils can result in pupils being stigmatized. Non-identification can lead to further and more serious learning difficulties.

Resource allocation dilemma: How to prioritize resource allocation between rights and needs? Informants experience that the resources available to schooling, both financial and other, are scant. It is not possible to service the needs and demands of all the different interest groups.

Organization dilemma: Flexibility versus standard solutions in the organization of special needs education? Deciding the content of special needs education for individual pupils can also pose dilemmas. Special needs education should promote pupils' chances and opportunities for inclusion in society. Balancing between a flexible interpretation of curriculum aims and the demands of standardized tests can be difficult.

Management dilemma: How to prioritize between different Education policy guidelines. This management dilemma concerns the tension between freedom of choice and accountability. District school owners and schools are being given increasing responsibility and freedom of choice in the organization and implementation of primary and secondary education. At the same time they are being held increasingly accountable for their choices through state government control systems. The key actors speak of the many dilemmas that arise when maneuvering between freedom of choice and accountability.

Conclusion

This project has not been able to identify a single most significant cause for the recent increase in the enrollment in special needs education. Rather, this project has identified several likely underlying, contributing and interacting factors that may in part explain the increase in enrollments. The project has also identified several dilemmas associated with the implementation and organization of special needs education. The interview study confirmed the findings from the secondary analysis of research reports and official documents but also identified contributing factors not mentioned in these reports. From the analysis of the interviews with the key persons we emphasize five main contributing factors: economic pressures and constraints, increasing parental demands and expectations, the effects of the introduction of the school reform "Knowledge promotion", an increased use and emphasis on International/National tests and performance indicators and an increased focus on the diagnosis of learning difficulties. Dilemmas faced relate to management, organization, resource allocation and the content of special needs education.

Special needs education plays a crucial role in providing effective and supportive learning environments for all students. A commitment to inclusive education implies that special needs education should not develop as a separate system for a large number of pupils but should as far as possible be integrated into the ordinary schooling system. The analysis in this report may assist in this integration.