

# The Road to Work for Former Students with Special Educational Needs: Different Paths for Young Men and Young Women?

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**ABSTRACT** *This article focuses on how young people with special educational needs have made the transition into working life. At 23–24 years of age, the young women have, to a lesser extent than the young men, succeeded in finding a permanent job. This finding reflects the fact that young women and young men follow different paths. Many young women with special needs give birth to children at an early stage in their life course, which consequently delays their gaining a foothold in the labour market. However, what occurs during their schooling also affects their adaptation to a job situation. Formal competence improves the young men's chances to get work, whereas the organization of the teaching is more important in the case of the young women. To a large extent, the young women benefit from an education that includes a job placement contract in a company. This article is based on a longitudinal study of 494 former special needs students from six Norwegian counties.*

Work is important in the transition to adult life because it provides an income and financial independence. Even though work is not the only road to adult life, the basis for economic independence is greater for those who manage to establish themselves in the labour market than for those who do not. Great emphasis is also placed on the intrinsic value of having a job and the function work has in creating an identity. Paid labour is an instrument that can help make personal identity visible.

The topic of this article is the transition from school to work. We will discuss circumstances that affect how successful former students with special educational needs are in gaining a foothold in the job market. Why do some succeed in finding work, whereas others have not managed to find a job? Which factors influence the adaptation to the labour market? Are there different paths to work for young men and young women?

Important explanatory variables are related to the adolescents' schooling and education. Gender is also a crucial dimension. The young people we

followed in this study all share one thing in common – they were designated as pupils with special educational needs when they began their upper secondary school education. Most of these students have completed short vocational courses and, thus, belong to a group for whom it was natural to establish themselves in the job market early in their life course.

### **Theoretical Approach**

Students with special educational needs may be faced with particular difficulties in the transition to the job market. Many have experienced a course of study where conditions have not always been adapted to suit their needs. In a society where formal education represents an important passport into the labour market, experiences at school may have a far-reaching effect on the road ahead. The result of such processes is, however, not in any way predetermined. With the help of longitudinal studies, it is possible to examine how these students' educational background influences their adult lives.

### **Life Course Perspective**

Typically, longitudinal studies follow the same individuals over a part of their life. It is therefore pertinent to base such studies on a life course perspective. The individual life course is influenced by many social institutions. For young people, school is the most important one. One of the aims of the study reported in this article is to determine whether the type of education these young people received at upper secondary school has affected their becoming established in the job market.

The transition from school to work is important for most adolescents. The term “transition”, which is a key concept in life course thinking, is defined in the following way: “A transition is a marked and more or less permanent change that is influenced by social norms and expectations. In that way, transitions differ from episodes, events that happen by chance, and which are not regulated by norms” (Myklebust 2002:252–253). The issue of transitions is vital when considering the relationship between different parts of the life course. Different transitions exist within the education system, such as the transition from lower to upper secondary school. Other examples include the transition from school to work, from sharing your parents' home to living on your own, etc.

Various actors may play crucial roles in such transitions, and some of these actors may even function as gatekeepers (c.f. Behrens & Rabe-Kleberg 1992). They may be of assistance during the transition, but they can also block the road ahead. These actors may belong to the adolescents' closest social network, or to the various aid agencies that these adolescents often encounter on the road from education to employment. This fact emphasizes that the life course is not a solo effort, but rather it is embedded in surrounding contexts, where many actors play decisive roles. The principle of linked lives also supports this idea (Elder & Johnson 2003). Various persons influence the life course of each individual. Some of them play a larger role than others do in

deciding which direction the life course takes. They are often referred to as “significant others”. The most central people in the network around adolescents will often be their parents, but siblings and grandparents are important as well. In addition, there are friends and other actors belonging to more informal networks.

### **Transition from School to Work**

Work must be understood as part of a larger social context. Ideas about work are thus dependent on how society is organized and which cultural values are given priority (Wadel 1984). The understanding of the term work has changed as society has changed (Berge, Lichtwarck & Sandvin 1999). The idea that work has a value in its own right has been downgraded. Paid work has, to a greater extent become an instrument by which personal identity can be made apparent. However, work in the sense of paid labour is for many a vital foundation for the process of becoming established in life. As a consequence, the transition from education to work is an important part of becoming an adult.

This transition might be problematic, especially for many young people with disabilities. This problem has been documented in a number of studies, a point that is also confirmed in a review presented in *Handbook of Disability*. Experiences from many countries are summarized in this way:

In Western countries, people with disabilities are chronically underemployed and unemployed. In Britain, two-thirds of people with disabilities do not work, though a government survey found that one-half of these individuals expressed an interest in working . . . Also, people with disabilities were more likely to be employed in manual or unskilled occupations and less likely to hold professional or managerial positions. (Schriner 2001:645)

Norway is no exception. Bø (2003:4) showed that a minority (42%) of those who define themselves as disabled had jobs in 2003. This finding also largely corresponds with similar reports from earlier years (Hem 2000).

Former special needs students will not always consider themselves disabled. They have in common the fact that they required specially adapted teaching programmes in upper secondary school. On the other hand, it is by no means certain that they perceive themselves as disabled in relation to the job market, where they are faced with different circumstances than those they met during their education. In that respect, complete concurrence does not exist between the categories Bø (2003) has studied and those we have examined. Nevertheless, there is reason to believe that a relatively large number of special needs students did not find the transition from school to work straightforward.

### **Work in a Life Course Perspective**

Time is a key variable in life course studies. The first few years after leaving upper secondary school many adolescents experience little stability, both in the labour market and in several other areas of life. Levine and Nourse (1998) emphasize that this is a period of “trial and error”.

There may be many changes in the adolescents' life within the span of a few years. In fact, Levine and Nourse stress that a better understanding of the process of establishment in the job market for adolescents with disabilities could be achieved if their life situation is examined when they are in their late 20s.

Since the present study so far has only been able to follow the adolescents until the age of 23 and 24 years, this assertion is also an objection to our study that must be taken into consideration when our findings are assessed.

### **Different Paths to Adulthood**

Work is not the only path to adult life. One of Levine and Nourse's objections regarding many studies of establishment in the job market is that these studies do not allow for the fact that young men and young women choose different paths. They argue that researchers ought to be more preoccupied with what each individual is engaged in, whether it is work, education, or bringing up one's own children. When one looks at who is "engaged" or "unengaged", as Levine and Nourse chose to call it, the differences between women and men are eliminated. Levine and Nourse (1998:230) observed that "young females with learning disabilities are raising children at a younger age and in greater proportions than their male peers or young females with no disabilities, and often without the advantages of a supportive partner." Levine and Nourse are referring to individuals with learning disabilities in particular. However, this pattern is apparent among the former special needs students as well (Myklebust & Solvang 2005). The females have a fertility pattern in their early 20s that virtually corresponds to the fertility of their mothers' generation.

The differences in the establishment of young men and young women in the job market may still be interesting. There are several reasons for this. First of all, the relationship between early childbirths and later work adaptation is a crucial topic. Secondly, the point has been made that the way the young women adapt to the job market varies greatly and seems to depend on the way they have been educated (Benz, Yovanoff & Doren 1997). Thirdly, it has recently been demonstrated that these young women to a lesser extent than the young men have a job that makes them economically independent (Myklebust & Båtevik 2005).

### **Methodological Approaches**

This study focuses on the situation of a sample of students with special needs. It is based on information about the situation of these young people when they are in upper secondary school as well as later in their life course.

The gathering of information about these students commenced in the spring of 1996. The students who were included in the study had begun their upper secondary education in either 1994 or 1995. Fairly comprehensive information was gathered on 760 young people from six different counties

across Norway. The information was provided twice a year by those responsible for the teaching, mostly class teachers. In the period from 1996 to 1999, they submitted detailed information about the young students so that it was possible to follow them throughout their school careers. This information concerned rather simple facts, such as type of class and educational progress of each student. Information was also given about those who quit school.

Data were gathered from the schools in a total of six rounds (Båtevik 2002, Myklebust 2004). The last main collection of data took place during the winter of 2001/2002. During this final wave of data collection, the informants were mainly the young people themselves, although parents in a few cases had to deliver some facts. Information was gathered about the situation of 494 young people, that is, 65% of the former special needs students.

One of the great challenges of longitudinal studies is securing a good response rate. This challenge can often become even greater when the subjects of the study belong to vulnerable adolescent groups. The retention is often high. A review of a total of eight such surveys reveals a response rate that varies between 25% and 65% (Levine & Nourse 1998:222).

Compared with these studies, the response rate of the present research is satisfactory. However, there is reason to examine the representativity of the data more closely. Information was collected about 2025 special needs students from the six counties that were part of the survey in 1996 (Myklebust 2004). This number represents virtually all the special needs students from the cohorts in question. However, there are some differences between the population and those who were followed up through our study. These differences occurred because of the retention that was produced when the schools reported back on the 760 adolescents in 1996. Among other things, it was discovered that the young people who belonged to ordinary classes and those who were taking matriculation courses were under-represented, whereas those who belonged to special classes and studied unspecified courses were over-represented.

There may also be a possibility that those young adults who did not have a job, to a larger degree than others refused to deliver information. If this is true, former special needs students who have experienced a problematic transition from school to work might be under-represented in our sample.

This article is concerned with 443 adolescents, 163 young women and 280 young men, out of the total of 494 special needs students who answered our questions during the final round of data gathering. The 51 persons who were omitted from these analyses had completed their secondary school education and were involved in some form of continuing education in the winter of 2001/2002. In other words, the issue of a permanent job was not relevant at the time they were interviewed.

This study is being conducted within the framework of two projects: Reform 94 – specially adapted teaching programmes (financed by The Ministry of Church, Education, and Research 1995–2000) and Adult life on special terms (financed by the Welfare Programme of The Norwegian

Research Council 2000–2004). The main results of the former project are discussed in Kvalsund (2004) and in Myklebust (2004).

### **Variables**

Permanent employment, including both full- and part-time work, is the dependent variable of the current analysis. We analyse to what extent young people at the ages of 23 and 24 years have permanent jobs and discuss which factors contribute to success in the labour market. The young people themselves have answered the questions concerning work. In this study, the term permanent work refers to a regular job with regular working hours based on a signed contract.

It should be noted that the term “permanent work” would seem to indicate stability in relation to the labour market. However, many change jobs during their life course, voluntarily or involuntarily. Some drop out after a period of time, whereas others manage to gain a foothold on a more permanent basis. There is also the question of part-time versus full-time job, the degree to which work provides a basis for a life of independence, etc. However, in this article we choose to concentrate on whether these young people have got permanent work.

A number of factors affect the job situation of former students with special needs. Some of the variables are directly linked to the teaching they were offered at upper secondary school; others are not. Frequent explanations include the following: type of disability, social background, network, type of teaching in school, result of the teaching in the form of competence, and the offer of an apprenticeship with a company (Phelps & Hanley-Maxwell 1997). We have chosen to examine nine independent variables in the analysis: (i) functional level, (ii) type of class, (iii) job placement contract in a company as part of upper secondary education, (iv) competence, (v) driving licence, (vi) father working, (vii) mother working (viii) family situation, and (ix) gender. This selection of variables requires further explanation.

Functional level is a key variable, among other things, because people with disabilities often encounter obstacles in the job market. In this analysis, functional level is based on assessments made in the education system. Functional level was registered during the first round of data gathering in the spring of 1996 and was based on 13 different problem indicators that register difficulties of a somatic, psychological, and social nature (c.f. Båtevik, Kvalsund & Myklebust 1997). Counsellors or form teachers placed each student in one of four categories, ranging from no problems at all to very great difficulties, for each indicator. We chose to interpret the diagnoses as rather a vague indication of the problems with which the students have to cope. These diagnoses may often be a “thin description” (c.f. Gillman, Swain & Heyman 2000: 396), based on fleeting consultations with experts. However, such diagnoses are indicators of the functional level of the students, and without such indicators it would be difficult to measure any effect of the special support delivered. To some extent, these diagnostic categories might

be useful because they provide a structure for research, in addition to helping individuals gain access to support and resources (Molloy & Vasil 2002:661).

According to the reports submitted by the schools in the spring of 1996, clearly defined functional difficulties related to eyesight, hearing, movement, and co-ordination affect just a small percentage of students. General learning difficulties are rather common, and many students also struggle with basic skills, such as reading, writing and arithmetic. A large number of them also exhibit psychosocial problems, such as difficulties with human interaction, challenging behaviour, lack of parental care and drug problems. Although some difficulties are over-represented among the young men and others among the young women, these differences are small. The majority of the students are diagnosed with more than one problem, but most of these difficulties are characterized as minor ones. Based on the 13 problem indicators, we have constructed an additive index for functional level. This index has been divided into quartiles in the present analyses.

The adolescents have been offered various forms of specially adapted teaching programmes during their upper secondary education. However, one basic distinction is to what extent the teaching has been organized in regular classes. During the first school year (the 1995 cohort) or the second school year (the 1994 cohort), 43% of the students received specially planned teaching solely within the framework of regular classes. The other students received all their teaching in groups of 8 or 4, attended various types of classes, or had other kinds of special arrangements. It should be noted that the placement at the beginning of upper secondary school seems to influence later assignment. Very few of those being taught solely in regular classes during the first year are found in special classes later.

The majority of the young people in question took vocational courses in upper secondary school, thus providing the opportunity for job placement in a company. As pointed out by Phelps and Hanley-Maxwell (1997), study programmes that include job placement in a company have a positive effect on the students' transition to work.

The most substantial and compelling evidence linking educational practices and positive learning outcomes for young people with disabilities can be found in the literature describing programs making extensive use of instruction in the workplace, direct job placement, and the provision of follow-up services. (Phelps & Hanley-Maxwell 1997: 216)

Companies are used in various ways as part of upper secondary education. In addition to apprenticeships, various other arrangements have been in use. Experience has shown how important it is that these arrangements are organized in a way that is binding to student, school, and company (Skårbrevik & Båtevik 2000, Skårbrevik, Bergem & Båtevik 2003). Thus, there is a distinction between those who have received contracted training in a company and those who have not been offered such training. This contracted job placement may include traditional apprenticeships, but will involve different forms of contracted training for many special needs students.

One of the main aims of upper secondary education is to provide young people with vocational training or qualify them for matriculation. Even

though the findings are not unequivocal, most studies indicate that good results at school lead to success in the job market (Benz et al. 1997). As a way of evaluating school results, we determined to what extent the adolescents successfully completed their course and achieved a vocational or matriculation qualification.

Young people also acquire competence in arenas other than those offered by upper secondary education. Obtaining a driving licence is one such example. Being able to drive can be decisive when young people compete for jobs. For example, obtaining such a licence demonstrates some level of capability. In addition, the possession of a driving licence is actually a prerequisite for some types of work.

In life course research social background is always crucial. Our data on social background is limited; however, we know whether the young adults have parents who are working. We expect that the parents to some degree may be role models for the young men and women.

Gender and the family situation are also thought to influence the adaptation to the labour market. However, being a parent affects young females and males differently. The young mother is often responsible for the greater part of the care of the child, whereas the young father is expected to increase his efforts to achieve gainful employment. As a consequence, gender should always be included as a variable in such analyses.

## **Results**

In the winter of 2002, two-thirds of the former special needs students had permanent full-time or part-time jobs, 58% of the young women and 73% of the young men. A relatively large number of the young women (12%) referred to themselves as “staying at home”. Most of these females were responsible for small children.

There is reason to believe that the adolescents we are studying belong to cohorts with, what we can call “demographic luck” (Myklebust 1995:111). They belong to the small birth cohorts from the late 1970s, which means that they experience less “cohort crowding” than most other post-war cohorts (c.f. Easterlin 1987). Consequently, they have had fewer peers with whom to compete, both in choosing an education and in gaining a foothold in the job market. In addition, it should be observed that these young people cohorts have benefited from favourable conditions in the Norwegian economy.

### *Which Factors Influence the Adaptation to the Labour Market?*

The question is why some of these young people have succeeded in finding work, whereas others have not managed to find a job. Table 1 demonstrates how a successful job adaptation is influenced by the variables discussed previously.

The main finding can be summarized as follows: those students who were registered as having the greatest functional disabilities when they started

**Table 1.** Percentage of adolescents from the admission cohorts of 1994 and 1995 who are in permanent full- or part-time work ( $n = 443$ )

|   | Values                               | Employed (%) | <i>n</i> |
|---|--------------------------------------|--------------|----------|
| Functional level at the start of upper secondary education    | 0. Fourth quartile (lowest level)    | 54           | 101      |
|   | 1. First to third quartile           | 75           | 342      |
| Type of class at the start of upper secondary education       | 0. Special class                     | 64           | 260      |
|   | 1. Regular class                     | 78           | 183      |
| Job placement contract as a part of upper secondary education | 0. No job placement contract         | 66           | 264      |
|   | 1. Job placement contract            | 76           | 179      |
| Present competence  | 0. No competence                     | 61           | 270      |
|   | 1. Academic or vocational competence | 84           | 173      |
| Driving licence   | 0. Do not possess a driving licence  | 59           | 130      |
|   | 1. Possess a driving licence         | 74           | 313      |
| Father  | 0. Not working                       | 71           | 106      |
|   | 1. Working                           | 70           | 337      |
| Mother  | 0. Not working                       | 65           | 150      |
|   | 1. Working                           | 72           | 293      |
| Family situation  | 0. Have children                     | 51           | 74       |
|   | 1. No children                       | 74           | 369      |
| Gender  | 0. Female                            | 63           | 163      |
|   | 1. Male                              | 74           | 280      |

upper secondary school are to a far lesser extent working than those who had minor disabilities. Those belonging to the lowest functional level (fourth quartile) seem to have a far more problematic work adaptation than the others. This is reflected in the analysis, where the first three quartiles are collapsed into one category. Three out of four of the adolescents in the first to

**Table 2.** Logistic regression: how successful work adaptation by the admission cohorts of 1994 and 1995 is affected by various independent variables ( $n = 443$ )

|                        | Exp(B)  |
|------------------------|---------|
| Functional level       | 2.21**  |
| Type of class          | 1.37    |
| Job placement contract | 1.45    |
| Competence             | 2.42*** |
| Driving licence        | 1.64*   |
| Father working         | 0.70    |
| Mother working         | 1.12    |
| Family situation       | 3.48*** |
| Gender                 | 1.20    |

\*\*\*Significant at least at 0.001.

\*\*Significant at least at 0.01.

\*Significant at least at 0.05.

The independent variables are presented in Table 1. The dependent variable is defined in this way: 0 = not permanent work; 1 = permanent work.

the third quartile (those with the highest functional level) had a permanent job 6–7 years after they started their upper secondary education. In the fourth quartile, just over half of these young people had succeeded in obtaining permanent work.

In addition, those special needs students who received all their teaching in regular classes attained permanent work to a larger extent than those taught in special classes. Those who had contracted work placement in a company were working to a somewhat greater degree than those who were not offered such an opportunity. Competence attainment was also important as those with academic or vocational qualifications more frequently held permanent work than those without such competence. In addition, having a driving licence played a role whether or not the adolescents were working. There seems to be little relevance for a successful work adaptation whether or not the young adult's father is working. Those who have a mother working are more likely to have a permanent job. Small children in the family also had an effect. Finally, the gender dimension would appear to be of some importance.

When examined in isolation, these data provide us with limited knowledge about what facilitates the transition to work for former students with special needs. There may be correlations between the variables involved. It is, for example, tempting to assume that those with the greatest functional disabilities are more often placed in special classes. It could also be inferred that those with the greatest functional disabilities are less likely to be offered contracted job placement in a company. If such correlations exist, it is factors other than the teaching programmes in upper secondary education that explain the variations shown in Table 1.

If we are to gain a better understanding of what promotes the transition to permanent work for these adolescents, we must adopt a method of analysis that examines the various explanatory factors simultaneously. Logistic regression is then a useful tool. Then we can, for example, reveal whether competence plays a role in terms of finding work when we simultaneously control for the other variables presented in Table 1.

If we maintain the conventional requirement of a significance level of  $p = 0.05$ , we see that there are four factors that are decisive in determining how successful the former special needs students have been in finding permanent work (Table 2). Permanent work is more frequent among those students: (i) who are not in the lowest quartile of functional ability; (ii) have successfully completed upper secondary school; (iii) have obtained a driving license; and (iv) have no children. The odds-ratios indicate that the likelihood of obtaining permanent work is as follows:

- The chances of a successful transition to permanent work are 2.2 times as great for those who are on the three highest functional levels, compared with those who belong to the lowest level.
- Those who have successfully completed their course and achieved academic or vocational qualifications have a 2.4 times greater chance of having a permanent job than those without such competence.

- The ability to drive increases the chances of being employed. Those with a driving licence have 1.6 times a greater chance of having a permanent job than those who cannot drive.
- Those who do not have children of their own have 3.5 times a greater chance of having permanent work than those with children.

It should be noted that the effects of the other co-variables are not significant. This is also the case with the variable called type of class. However, in an analysis of economic independence Myklebust and Båtevik (2005) demonstrate that adolescents schooled in regular classes obtain full-time work that provides an income sufficient to live on, more often than those educated in special classes.

#### *Different Paths for Young Women and Young Men*

The analysis confirms, in accordance with the claims of Levine and Nourse (1998), that gender alone cannot explain why young women are far less likely than young men to have a permanent job in the first years after upper secondary school. To gain a better insight into what distinguishes the roads of the young men and the young women into the labour market, it may be useful to perform analysis for each gender separately. In previous works from this research project, it has been shown that the effect of class placement is different for young women and young men. The young women in regular classes successfully completed their courses and attained academic or vocational qualifications to a far greater degree than the young women in special classes. However, for the young men, the effect of class type was not as clear (Myklebust 2004). With this in mind, it is therefore important to carry out separate analyses for young men and young women.

In Table 3, the covariates show different outcomes for young women and young men. For the young women, there seem to be four variables of importance. The functional level at the beginning of upper secondary school is significant in deciding whether young women find work. Young women at the three highest functional levels have 6.4 times a greater chance of finding a job compared with those who belong to the lowest quartile. Those young women who received job placements contracts in a company are 3.5 times more likely to have a permanent job than young women who have not been offered such a contract. The importance of being a mother is also very significant. Young women without children are 13.6 times more likely to have a job in comparison to young women with children. The most unexpected result is that young women, whose fathers were working, were less likely to have a job than young women with fathers not working. This may be difficult to explain, but one hypothesis is that young women with non-employed fathers cannot rely on economic help from their parents, to the same degree as young women with working fathers. However, the intriguing question is why this does not also apply to young men.

**Table 3.** Logistic regression: how various independent variables affect the successful work adaptation of women and men from the admission cohorts of 1994 and 1995 (*n* = 443)

|                        | Females ( <i>n</i> = 163)<br>Exp(B) | Males ( <i>n</i> = 280)<br>Exp(B) |
|------------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Functional level       | 6.41***                             | 1.50                              |
| Type of class          | 1.77                                | 1.17                              |
| Job placement contract | 3.47**                              | 0.91                              |
| Competence             | 1.78                                | 2.74**                            |
| Driving licence        | 1.61                                | 1.67                              |
| Father working         | 0.23**                              | 1.10                              |
| Mother working         | 1.15                                | 1.12                              |
| Family situation       | 13.58***                            | 1.27                              |

\*\*\*Significant at least at 0.001.

\*\*Significant at least at 0.01.

The independent variables are presented in Table 1. The dependent variable is defined in this way: 0 = not permanent work; 1 = permanent work.

For the young men, only one of the independent variables clearly influences the chances of a successful transition to work, namely competence attainment. Those young men who had managed to obtain an academic or vocational competence from upper secondary school were 2.7 times more likely to obtain permanent work than those who did not successfully complete their courses. The likelihood of young men with special needs having a permanent job does not seem to be dependent on functional level, type of class, driving licence, family situation, or job placement contracts. No perceived correlation has been found to be statistically significant at the 0.05 level.

The analysis shows that the young women follow other roads into the adult world compared with the young men. The situation for the young women is characterized by a relatively high number giving birth to a child early in their life course, and the responsibility of raising a child does not seem to allow much opportunity for employment. However, it is not simply the family situation that influences the young women’s life course. Both their functional level and how their specially adapted teaching programmes were organized play a role. The analysis clearly shows that being offered job placement contracts as a part of their education had helped many of the young women.

In separate analyses (not documented here), it became apparent that it was the young women who had achieved partial competence that benefited from their experience of having had job placement contracts when they were in upper secondary school. This finding also applied when we controlled for other variables, as we have done elsewhere in our analyses. This makes the job placement contract approach even more interesting. It means that this form of training has had a positive effect on young women whose chances in the labour market were otherwise small.

**Conclusion**

Securing special needs students a course of education that leads to academic or vocational qualifications often requires a determined effort on the part of all involved. The same applies to efforts made in arranging for job placement contracts with companies, which, in many cases, involves actors from both the school and the surrounding neighbourhood or community. Chadsey-Rusch, Rusch, and Phelps (1989) observed that a successful transition to work for persons with a disability depends on the school offering a course of training that includes both social and work experience. They emphasized that follow-up, involving co-operation between and commitment from many parties, is necessary. Experience gained from the evaluation of two projects in the newly reformed upper secondary school in the 1990s confirmed this fact (Skårbrevik & Båtevik 2000, Skårbrevik et al. 2003). One of the conclusions from these evaluations was that close co-operation between school and local business and industry provides a foundation for offering a more flexible and adaptable course of education, which, in turn, also increases the chances of a successful outcome. The importance of close co-operation applies to both pupils who aim to complete their studies with full academic or vocational qualifications and those who are attending a less ambitious course of training.

We have stated that the road to gaining a foothold in the labour market for former special needs students is different for young women and young men. Our findings indicate that a correlation between functional level and the chances of finding permanent work exists, especially for young women. We found that their chances of finding a permanent job are closely linked with whether they have children. Young females with children have a distinctly decreased chance of having permanent work compared to young women without a child. Because a relatively large number of these young women give birth to a child early in their life course, this fact largely explains why young women in their early twenties are less likely than young men to have a permanent job. Our study also revealed that the chances of finding permanent work are increased for young men, in particular, if they have obtained formal qualifications.

These findings are not especially surprising; however, the key role of job placement contracts was interesting. The young women who had received this type of training appeared to have a better chance of obtaining a permanent job than those without such training. Young women who had achieved partial competence, in particular, benefited from this type of training. These young women did not manage to get an ordinary apprenticeship and the work placement in a company had to be organized in other ways. Those adolescents studied here were not entitled to this arrangement by law. As a consequence, this situation required that both the schools and the companies had to commit themselves differently in comparison to what would occur with a more traditional job placement contract in a company (Skårbrevik & Båtevik 2000). Among other things, the schools had to assume the role of transition facilitators in this arrangement.

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