

A Critical Research Analysis of Membership in Inclusive Education: Issues and Implications



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Significance and Need:

- The concept of membership has long been identified as a critical and guiding principle for effective inclusive education
- There is increased attention on membership issues in general education but students with disabilities are generally not part of the analyses
- There has been steady interest in membership issues in inclusive environments over the years but the knowledge base is fragmented and unclear
- Given the general consensus that membership and belonging are important indicators of successful outcomes for children, there is a limited research base about how this can be successfully achieved

Purpose:

This funded project, which addressed an unmet need in the field, is a critical research review and analysis examining the current state of membership in inclusive education across multiple perspectives

Framework for Research Review and Analysis

- Initial examination of over 100 research and non-research publications over the past 25 years to gain a full understanding of the knowledge base
- Only research studies were included in the final analysis
- Parameters of analysis:
 - Involved children with a range of disabilities
 - Involved children ages 3-18 years
 - Location of study had to be general education classroom
 - Focus of study was within a group context
 - Qualitative or quantitative research methodology
 - ERIC key word descriptors “membership”, “belonging” or related terms found in title or abstract

Narrowing the Parameters of the Analysis

- The Need to Further Define membership
 - Key word descriptors, which had to be more clearly defined, included peer acceptance, social networks, peer culture, peer groups, peer affiliation
 - Excluded studies on attitudes, social skills, peer interactions, friendships
 - Many studies included multiple variables; only findings related to membership were included in this analysis
 - Included studies in which classroom membership was identified as a significant outcome
- Challenges in Defining Inclusive Environments
 - Some studies did not fully describe setting
 - Some studies did not explain classroom composition or ratio
 - Some studies on membership focused on mainstreaming for small parts of the day which may have an impact on results
 - Criteria were determined to define inclusive environments:
 - students with disabilities must spend the majority of time in general education and,
 - general education class must reflect natural proportions of no more than 20% of the class composition were children with disabilities

Method

- Data collection occurred over a 8 month period
 - Electronic and manual searches were conducted
 - ERIC/EBSCO: leading resource and largest education database (U.S. Department of Education was in the process of developing a new database; ERIC was available during transition period)
 - PsycARTICLES (American Psychological Association: more than 25,000 searchable full-text articles from 42 journals)
 - Manual searches included prominent special education journals as well as leading journals in other fields (e.g., general education, sociology, educational psychology)
 - Ancestral search of the reference lists from key studies
 - Searches were conducted using key words, journal titles and authors
 - Identified, collected and xeroxed over 100 articles pertaining to membership
 - Twenty-five research articles met the criteria and were included in the final analysis

- Data Coding

- An organizational system was developed using color coded folders to categorize
- Articles were arranged by key words (e.g., peer acceptance, peer relationships) and by discipline
- A grid was designed which included key information such as author, date, purpose, research design/data sources, study participants, description of inclusive setting, findings
- Eventually separate grids were developed according to age (early childhood, elementary, middle/high school)

- Data analysis

- Reviewed key findings across the body of work and across variables (e.g., age, disability)
- Identified emerging patterns and themes within and across articles
- To verify the accuracy of the themes and impressions, a second reader was asked to review the data, codes, and impressions

General Findings and Impressions:

- Thirty-five percent (35%) of studies on classroom membership were part of a larger investigation
- Forty percent (40%) of studies on membership were conducted outside the United States (i.e., Australia, Belgium, Canada, England, Israel, Spain)
- Eighty percent (80%) of studies used a quantitative research design and only 1 used a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods
- About half of the studies examined culturally or racially diverse school populations
- Seventy-six percent (76%) of studies were published in special education journals
- Children with learning disabilities across the age span generally reported more feelings of loneliness and lower peer acceptance than peers without disabilities or peers with more significant disabilities
- Teacher practices and interventions as well as shared experiences and interests positively influenced social acceptance and membership across the ages

Findings and Impressions (Across the Ages)

○ Early Childhood (Birth – Grade 2)

- Young children with disabilities had positive experiences and relationships in inclusive environments
- Shared experiences and activities, systematically fostered by professionals, contributed to acceptance of peer with disabilities in early childhood
- Young children with disabilities experienced varying degrees of peer acceptance from low to high acceptance
- Young children experienced both inclusion and exclusion within the classroom culture

○ Elementary School (Grades 1-6)

- Social acceptance of peers with disabilities were positively influenced by systematic teacher interventions and practices
- Most children with disabilities were part of a peer network and experienced positive, close relationships
- Children with learning disabilities were lonelier and experienced lower social acceptance than peers without disabilities
- Children labeled with moderate or significant disabilities did not experience more isolation or rejection or lower social status than classmates without disabilities

○ Elementary School (Grades 1-6) continued

- Children with emotional or behavioral disabilities tended to be influenced by the behavior of other children
- During the elementary years, student behavior seemed to be a factor in peer acceptance as opposed to the early years

○ Middle and High School (Grades 7-12)

- Students with various disabilities (e.g., deaf, significant disabilities, learning disabilities) generally were found to be socially accepted and perceived to be members of a classroom or peer network
- Teaching practices and interventions contributed to positive social climate and sense of membership

Future Directions:

- More research is needed on effective intervention and teaching practices that facilitate membership
- More information is needed about specific contexts and conditions under which membership occurs
- Change the focus of classroom membership from a special education issue to a shared issue with general education and other disciplines (e.g., more visibility of membership issues in general education journals, conferences, etc.)
- Better information for all stakeholders on how to support children with learning disabilities particularly during the early childhood and elementary years
- Stronger linkages are needed between school-wide positive behavior support efforts and peer-to-peer networks
- Create stronger research to practice linkages (e.g., participatory action research, children as researchers, etc).

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