



## What is meant by inclusion? An analysis of European and North American journal articles with high impact

Claes Nilholm & Kerstin Göransson

To cite this article: Claes Nilholm & Kerstin Göransson (2017) What is meant by inclusion? An analysis of European and North American journal articles with high impact, European Journal of Special Needs Education, 32:3, 437-451, DOI: [10.1080/08856257.2017.1295638](https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2017.1295638)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2017.1295638>



Published online: 05 Mar 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 773



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 2 View citing articles [↗](#)

## What is meant by inclusion? An analysis of European and North American journal articles with high impact

Claes Nilholm<sup>a</sup> and Kerstin Göransson<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Education, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden; <sup>b</sup>Department of Education, Karlstad University, Karlstad, Sweden

### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this review is to further our knowledge about what is meant by inclusion in research addressing the topic. While it is common to remark that inclusion is defined in different ways in research, few attempts have been made to map and analyse different types of definitions and whether there are patterns to be found in how the concept is used. The 30 most cited journal articles from a North American and a European research arena were selected for analysis. Each article was analysed in relation to genre, theoretical tradition and inclusion concept used. The review yielded several important results. To name a few, a divide was identified between position articles, with developed discussions about and analyses of the meaning of inclusion, and empirical articles, where inclusion signifies that children with disabilities are placed in the mainstream. In addition, writing within a critical theoretical tradition was much more common among positional papers. Further, both arenas are dominated by Anglo-Saxon researchers. It is argued that the conceptual confusion characterising the field impedes its development.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 20 June 2016  
Accepted 21 October 2015

### KEYWORDS

Inclusion; systematic review; high-impact; genre; theory; conceptual analysis; critical research; journal articles; SMART

Inclusion has emerged as the key word in relation to the education of pupils with disabilities or in other kinds of difficulties in schools and classrooms. In fact, the whole research field is at times defined in terms of inclusion or similar concepts. In a similar vein, inclusion has increasingly come to be used as a key concept in policy and practice in this area (e.g. UNESCO 1994). At the same time, it is common to point out that inclusion is defined in a number of different ways (e.g. Artiles et al. 2006). However, there is a lack of reviews that map and analyse what is meant by inclusion in research in order to discern different definitions and patterns of use. The purpose of the present review is to accomplish this which differentiates this review from prior reviews of research about inclusive education (see e.g. Artiles et al. [2006], Lindsay [2007] and Nakken and Pijl [2002] for a few of several earlier reviews).

There have always been pupils who have had problems fitting into the workings of schools. In the present paper, we will refer to this group as pupils in difficulties, that is, we believe that the difficulties should not be considered as solely characteristics of the pupils but rather as something that arises in the interaction between pupils and schools. This

heterogeneous group of pupils is identified in different ways in different school systems (Ridell 2008). It encompasses children who only need some extra help in learning to decode the alphabet to children with profound disabilities. A system of special education has been established in Western countries to support this group of pupils. Special education has been realised in different ways in different times and countries. The borders between the two systems are constantly negotiated, and there is no clear and uniform way to establish exactly where one system ends and the other begins. Special schools are usually considered an almost archetypical sort of segregated solution that is firmly distinguished from the mainstream system.

During the 1960s, the importance of merging these two systems was voiced. The concept of 'integration' was used as a buzzword for this movement, which was firmly based on a human rights agenda. It was argued that the mainstream should open up in order to make it possible for children with diverse needs to be part of regular education. The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975) in the US and The Warnock Report (1978) in Great Britain were steps taken to merge the two systems. However, there were subsequent disappointments regarding the lack of adequate changes within mainstream education, and several commentators wanted to accelerate the development towards more integrated practices (for an influential example). The word 'inclusion' emerged in the late 1980s (Skrtic 1991) in order to replace its forerunners and to accelerate the process and it has undoubtedly been successful. Thus, internationally, not least through the endorsement by many countries of the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (UNESCO 1994), inclusion is more and more often used to denote what was previously referred to as special education. In a similar vein, inclusive education has emerged as an important research area. Consequently, it has become important to analyse the emergence of the research about inclusive education, given its expansion and importance to (special) educational practice, not least the central aspect of what is meant by inclusive education in this research.

## Approach

Thus, we want to analyse what is meant by inclusion in research. Inclusion is a phenomenon that is studied all over the world. However, we have chosen to focus on North American and European research because this is where the concept emerged. The reason for separating the two arenas is that prior research has observed that North American researchers do not publish a lot in European journals, and vice versa (Nilholm 2006). We are using an approach that we have developed ourselves which we label SMART, which stands for Systematic Mapping and Analysis of Research Topographies. SMART builds upon an analysis of the most influential research in a field (in this case research about inclusive education). A broad mapping of the field is made with some aspects analysed more deeply. Due to limits of space, we will just be able to provide the data from the SMART analysis which has a direct relevance with regard to the overall purpose of this paper, i.e. to analyse what is meant by inclusion and find patterns in how the concept is used (for a more elaborate account of SMART, see Nilholm, 2017, submitted).

To identify the most influential research within each arena, we have chosen to analyse journal articles because they are a form of publication with acknowledged importance and

for which a fairly objective measure of impact can be obtained. Prior research has shown that asking leading researchers in a field for key texts yields to a large extent non-overlapping proposals (Mcleskey 2004). Journals were identified as belonging to a particular arena depending upon the composition of editors and editorial boards/associated editors, as follows: (a) when Europeans constituted more than 50% and North Americans less than 20% of the editor(s) and editorial board/associated editors, they were categorised as European journals; (b) the reverse pattern led to a journal's being classified as North American. Information about the composition of editor(s) and editorial board/associated editors was gathered from each journal's website.

The inclusion criterion was topical relevance: the journal articles were to be about inclusion in educational environments (preschool/school/adult education) and were to concern children/students/adults in school difficulties.

Articles from the North American arena were searched for in Web of Science. We used the single keyword *inclus\** in the abstract, title and keywords in the topic field for WoS. One search was limited to educational research and the second one to special education. The searches were not limited to a particular age range. A first selection of the 40 most cited articles on the North American arena was made by reading the titles and, in cases of uncertainty, also the abstracts. After reading through these, the 30 most cited answering up to the inclusion criterion were chosen for further analysis. The searches were made in the spring of 2015.

We initially searched for articles from the European arena in Web of Science. However, few articles from the European arena were to be found implying that Scopus would be a more appropriate database to search for European articles. The search words we used was *inclus\** AND education in the abstract, title and keywords in the topic field. Using the same strategy, as for the North American arena, a first selection of 40 articles was made. Reading through the list of articles, we found that no articles from European Journal of Special Needs Education were represented in the sample, which seemed a bit surprising. We therefore made another search limiting it by adding European Journal of Special Needs Education in the source title topic field. The 40 most cited articles were chosen and the two lists were combined to get a sample of the 30 most cited articles in the European arena. These searches were made in the spring of 2016. However, the articles were chosen on the basis of number of times cited up till the last of December 2014, to make it comparable to the sample from the North American arena.

The total sample of articles is displayed in Table 1 for the European and in Table 2 for the North American sample.

### **Coding and analysis of articles**

As a first step, background data (number of authors, sex, country, year of publication, name of journal) were extracted and the genres of the articles were determined. Each article was categorised with regard to genre, topic, method, theoretical tradition and inclusion concept used. Due to limitations of space, we will focus on the mapping of genres, theoretical traditions and inclusion concept used. Moreover, the latter aspect will be analysed in depth.

**Table 1.** Most cited articles in the European arena.

Article	Number of times cited in Scopus
Avramidis and Norwich (2002)	225
Lindsay (2007)	101
Norwich and Kelly (2004)	83
Vislie (2003)	78
Barton (1997)	78
Lightfoot, Wright, and Sloper (1999)	78
Slee (2001a)	71
Farrell (2000)	68
Slee (2001b)	61
Terzi (2005)	60
Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson (2004)	58
Croll and Moses (2000)	57
Forlin (2001)	55
Forlin et al. (2009)	55
Carrington (1999)	55
Evans and Lunt (2002)	54
Ferguson (2008)	53
Avramidis and Kalyva (2007)	50
Sharma, Forlin, and Loreman (2008)	49
Norwich (2002)	49
Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson (2006)	48
De Monchy, Pijl, and Zandberg (2004)	48
Ainscow et al. (2003)	47
Romi and Leyser (2006)	47
Frostad and Pijl (2007)	44
Clark et al. (1999)	44
Hemmingson and Borell (2002)	44
Maras and Brown (2000)	41
Humphrey and Symes (2010)	37
Cole (2005)	37

*Genre* was categorised using the following mutually exclusive categories:

- Articles reporting original empirical research.
- Reviews. Articles where the focus is review of research rather than a particular point argued in relation to the field.
- Positional articles. These articles present a normative position. A positional article often encompasses policy analysis and analysis of empirical research, but these aspects are subordinated to the main purpose of arguing an evaluative position vis-à-vis the field. Typically, no explicit format for review of earlier research is presented. It should be noted that articles may have appeared in review journals or may have been labelled as reviews by the author/s (e.g. by using the word *review* in the heading of the article) without being categorised as such here.
- Other. Methodological and theoretical articles (i.e. articles with an explicit theoretical purpose), analysis of policy, etc.

*Theoretical tradition* was coded according to one of three mutually exclusive traditions: functionalism, the interpretative perspective and the critical perspective (cf. Burrell and Morgan 1985; Habermas 1987). Functionalism is the tradition closest to natural science involving attempts to find law-like connections between different variables and often involving, more or less explicitly, organic metaphors. The knowledge interest (cf. Habermas 1987) is technical in the sense that solutions to problems are searched for. Articles within this tradition adhere to a consensus view of society (Burrell and Morgan 1985). The interpretative

**Table 2.** Most cited articles on the North American arena.

Articles	Number of times cited in WoS
Fuchs and Fuchs (1994)	225
Scruggs and Mastropieri (1996)	174
Emmer and Stough (2001)	95
Baker and Zigmund (1995)	79
Brantlinger (1997)	76
Avramidis, Bayliss, and Burden (2000)	74
Haring and Breen (1992)	70
Laushey and Heflin (2000)	69
Riehl (2000)	68
Bricker (1995)	65
Hunt and Goetz (1997)	65
Artiles (2003)	60
Patton et al. (2006)	60
Kavale and Forness (2000)	58
Sale and Carey (1995)	58
Vaughn, Elbaum, and Schumm (1996)	57
Danoff, Harris, and Graham (1993)	56
Marks, Schrader, and Levine (1999)	55
Scruggs, Mastropieri, and McDuffie (2007)	54
Hunt et al. (1994)	52
Odom (2000)	52
Harrower and Dunlap (2001)	51
Salend and Garrick Duhaney (1999)	51
Villa et al. (1996)	51
Lipsky and Gartner (1996)	47
Rea, McLaughlin, and Walther-Thomas (2002)	45
Pivik, McComas, and Laflamme (2002)	44
Waldron and McLeskey (1998)	44
Stanovich and Jordan (1998)	43
Humphrey and Lewis (2008)	40

perspective, on the other hand, rests on qualitative data and has its roots in phenomenology and hermeneutics. The main knowledge interest (cf. Habermas 1987) within this tradition is to understand the meaning that actors ascribe to phenomena. The critical perspective, finally, rests upon a conflictual view of society and a quest for social justice for marginalised groups. The knowledge interest here is emancipatory (cf. Habermas 1987).

*Inclusion concept* was categorised according to which of four definitions dominated in the particular article. The four definitions are based on an analysis of inclusion research literature in which the following four definitions were discerned (Göransson and Nilholm 2014): (a) placement definition – inclusion as the placement of pupils with disabilities/in need of special support in general education classrooms; (b) specified individualised definition – inclusion as meeting the social/academic needs of pupils with disabilities/pupils in need of special support; (c) general individualised definition – inclusion as meeting the social/academic needs of all pupils; and (d) community definition – inclusion as the creation of communities with specific characteristics (which could vary between proposals). Each category subsumes the preceding one. The placement of children with disabilities is part of definitions b and c, but additional criteria are added at the each level. The notion of ‘meeting the social/academic needs’ in definitions 2 and 3 is a rather general formulation that can be operationalised in different ways (see e.g. Nilholm and Alm 2010). The formulation implies that the social/academic situation of pupils is beneficial, e.g. that the pupils state that they feel as a part of the group, feel secure in the class, feel that they are learning and participating in the activities of the class and that they reach the knowledge goals.

There are, of course, other ways to define inclusion. One approach is to define inclusion as something that is beneficial for children in difficulties, regardless of where they get their education. Under such a definition, it can be argued that special schools are inclusive. However, Göransson and Nilholm (2014) proposed that the emergence of the inclusion concept involved the abolishment of segregated educational placements; thus, the placement criterion is part of all four definitions. Three of the articles involved studies in which inclusion did not involve placement of children in difficulties in mainstream settings and thus fell outside of our categories.

Six articles from each arena were randomly selected, and the genre, theoretical tradition and inclusion concept used were categorised independently by two coders. Only three categorisations out of 36 differed between the two coders, one each for genre, theoretical tradition and inclusion concept used. The different codings, none of which appeared in the same article, were discussed. All codings made are available from the authors upon request.

## Results

### *What genres do the articles belong to?*

In the European arena, seven of the articles were categorised as positioning articles. Four articles were categorised as 'other' with regard to genre; these articles were concerned with policy analysis, methodological issues and theoretical issues (2 articles), respectively.

In the North American arena, 22 of the articles are reports of empirical research, of which 6 are reviews. Eight were categorised as positioning-articles. None of the articles on the North American arena fell into the Other category.

### *Categorisation of theoretical tradition*

A striking feature in the sample of articles is the lack of headings such as theory and theoretical points of departure. It should be pointed out that several articles involve a lot of theorizing, even though this may not be marked by a specific heading. As shown in Table 3, functionalism is found within two out of every three articles in the whole sample, and articles written within the interpretative perspective are rare. The critical perspective is to be found in 13 articles considering the entire sample and is clearly more common in the sample from the European arena.

Looking at theoretical tradition in relation to genre is quite revealing (Table 4). The critical perspective dominates the genre of positional papers, where two out of three articles are written within the critical perspective. Empirical articles including reviews are, on the other hand, dominated by functionalism (82%), and only two empirical articles are written from within the critical perspective. The interpretative perspective is found in seven articles, all of them reporting empirical research.

**Table 3.** European and North American articles in different theoretical traditions.

Arena	Tradition		
	Functionalist	Interpretative	Critical
Europe	20	1	9
North America	21	4	5
Total	41	5	14

**Table 4.** Genre in relation to theoretical tradition in the whole sample.

Genre	Tradition		
	Functionalism	The interpretative perspective	The critical perspective
Position	5	–	10
Empirical (including reviews)	33	5	2
Other	3	–	2
Total	41	5	14

### *How is inclusion defined?*

We will first describe how we have categorised different meanings attached to the word inclusion. Such a deep description is necessary when working with qualitative distinctions. Our system makes such distinctions between four different understandings of inclusion, which we will thus exemplify and discuss. We will illustrate how different uses of inclusion involve different logics. Finally, we will show how the meaning of inclusion is related to the genre of the articles.

In several articles, there are shifts in the meaning given to inclusion. In the classification of those articles, the genre of the article played a part. Shifts in meaning in positioning articles could occur, for example, between argumentative parts of the text and in discussions of empirical research. In such cases, more weight was given to the argumentative parts because those were considered the focus of the article. For articles reporting empirical research, the opposite line of reasoning applied. It should be pointed out that the classification of the inclusion concept used in the articles was far from undemanding and involved coordination by two researchers with a great deal of experience within the research field.

We will proceed by illustrating the categories. To begin with, we will present and discuss the articles that are dominated by a community definition of inclusion (D) or definitions that involve the social/educational outcome for all pupils/pupils in problematic situations (C, B). Finally, we will discuss and illustrate category A, which, we will argue, involves a different logic than categories B through D. It should also be noted that three articles fell outside the scope of the classification system since they did not encompass the placement criterion.

Barton (1997), who exemplifies category D, is an early proponent of the view that inclusion is about all pupils' rights to participation:

Inclusive education is about responding to diversity; it is about listening to unfamiliar voices, being open, empowering all members and about celebrating 'difference' in dignified ways. From this perspective, the goal is not to leave anyone out of school. Inclusive experience is about learning to live with one another. (233f)

Barton (1997) writes comparatively at length about what inclusion means (232–235). He points out that inclusion is defined in different ways and argues that the concept has been watered down and used as a new name for old thinking. Barton points out that the way inclusion is defined is not only a semantic issue but also has to do with fundamental political and ideological commitments. Further, he maintains that a linguistic critique of special needs education is necessary because the language within this area reflects outdated thinking. He proposes a radical and encompassing inclusion concept which concerns all pupils but also has implications outside of the educational context. He suggests that inclusion is connected to participatory democracy. In this way, Barton (1997) is almost unique in the sample by linking inclusion to a specific form of democracy. It is clear that inclusion, in Barton's view,



involves much more than moving children with disabilities/in need of extra support into the mainstream.

An elaborated definition of inclusion, which was categorised as C, is provided by Villa et al. (1996). They developed a test, the Heterogeneous Teacher Survey (HETS), to measure attitudes towards inclusive education. The respondents were asked take a stand on whether they considered the following statements to be true or false:

- All children belong (zero reject) in general education classrooms in their neighbourhood schools.
- The needs of all students can be met in general education through technical assistance, team teaching, administrative support and collaboration with parents, students, related service personnel, educators and community members.
- General educators and special educators are coequal partners who share responsibility for the education of all children in their school.
- General educators and special educators acquire new skills through collaboration, training and experience with children who present challenges.
- Everyone benefits from heterogeneous educational practices.
- Schools must be restructured to facilitate role redefinition and make it all right for students to have individual academic and social goals.
- The body of decision-makers in schools must be expanded to include teachers, students and community members.
- Attitudes change over time due to successful experiences (Villa et al. 1996, 36, fig. 1).

This exemplifies a definition in which inclusion means that every child attends a mainstream school and receives adequate support. Important factors that are identified are, for example, team teaching; administrative support; cooperation with parents, pupils and others; integration of regular and special education; and democratic decision-making. It is not altogether clear which factor is considered most important in defining inclusion. Some factors, such as team teaching, seem to be a means to inclusion. The need to create communities is not mentioned; rather, the individual pupil's right to a quality education is foregrounded. Hence, the definition by Villa et al. (1996) is categorised as C. It is also worth noting that the language critique that Barton (1997) endorses does not seem to be subscribed to by Villa et al. (1996), who suggest that words such as 'special educator' can be used within an inclusive school.

The article by Villa et al. (1996) was actually categorised differently by the two coders. One coder put more weight on the research questions as formulated by Villa et al. (31):

- What is the relationship between the teacher role (general or special) and attitude towards the inclusion of children with disabilities in general education classrooms?
- What is the relationship between background and experience and the attitudes of general education teachers and administrators towards the inclusion of children with disabilities in general education classrooms?
- What is the relationship between the background and experience and the attitudes of special education teachers and administrators towards the inclusion of children with disabilities in general education classrooms?

It is obvious that the placement definition (category A) is used here, but since the questionnaire is so central to the data collection, we finally decided to place the article in category C.

Hemmingson and Borell (2002) are concerned with barriers to inclusion for pupils with disabilities. They suggest that the participation in class activities of this group of children is a defining aspect of inclusion, i.e. if there are barriers to participation, the social/academic needs of these pupils are not met and the environment cannot be characterised as inclusive. We thus placed their article in category B. In comparison, the questionnaire by Villa et al. (1996) was concerned not only with children with disabilities but with the situation of all children and thus categorised as C.

The sample is dominated, however, by a placement definition of inclusion. In several articles, inclusion is used synonymously with mainstreaming and/or integration: '... in providing evidence regarding educational practice with particular reference to inclusive education/mainstreaming' (Lindsay 2007, 2), and 'A substantial proportion of the responses to the issue of inclusion or integration could be summarized ...' (Croll and Moses 2000, 5).

If inclusion is considered to indicate only *where* the child receives education, it is then logical to ask what the consequences of inclusion are. This is an important difference in relation to definitions B, C and D, where a placement is considered inclusive only when children's social/academic needs are met. In other words, the well-being of the pupils is a defining characteristic of inclusion under B, C and D, rather than one of several possible effects of inclusion. Sometimes researchers mention factors (such as team teaching or functional support) that should be present in order for a placement to be considered inclusive, and it is not always clear whether these are part of the definition of the concept or are viewed as necessary prerequisites for inclusion to be achieved. However, where such prerequisites are underscored, we have coded the article as category B or C, depending on the other characteristics of the definition employed, since it is obvious that those researchers do not consider placement in itself to be inclusion. When inclusion is defined as placement, however, it becomes reasonable to ask about the effects of inclusion, as is evident in the title of two of the articles: 'Educational psychology and the effectiveness of inclusive education/mainstreaming' (Lindsay 2007), and 'The effects of inclusion on the social functioning of students with learning disabilities' (Vaughn, Elbaum, and Schumm 1996).

It is very important to be clear about what is meant by inclusion when asking for different groups' views of inclusion. Although Villa et al. (1996) used a definition categorised as C when investigating views of different groups, the placement definitions dominates almost entirely in articles asking for views on inclusion: '16 items measured and so on pre-service teachers' attitudes towards including learners with social, physical, academic or behavioral difficulties' (Forlin et al. 2009, 198), 'For example, the scale included statements like: *Inclusion offers mixed group interaction which will foster understanding and acceptance of differences*' (Avramidis, Bayliss, and Burden 2000, 282–283).

Questions about professional groups' views on the inclusion of children in different types of difficulties almost presuppose a placement definition. Avramidis et al., in the citation above, ask whether teachers believe that inclusion will give rise to interaction between different groups of pupils. Thus, it becomes an empirical issue of what effect inclusion (as placement) will have. It would be peculiar to ask about views on inclusion if inclusion is defined by the fulfilling of academic/social needs. Given definitions B–D, it is perfectly reasonable to ask e.g. teachers if childrens' social/academic needs are met in a better way than

**Table 5.** Inclusion concepts in different genres.

Genre	Inclusion concept				Total
	A	B	C	D	
Empirical (including reviews)	32	4	2	–	38
Positional articles	4	2	2	7	15
Total	36	6	4	7	53

Note: Four articles were coded as other for genre, and an additional three articles were not coded with regard to inclusion concept.

**Table 6.** Aspects of inclusion interpreted from different concepts of inclusion.

Aspects	Inclusion concept	
	A (placement)	B, C and D
The effects of inclusion	An empirical issue	Effects are inscribed in the concept
Professional groups' attitudes towards inclusion	An empirical issue	Since inclusion is defined as something generally good (to fulfill social/educational needs), questions concerning attitudes become misplaced
The inclusiveness of environments	An environment is inclusive if children with disabilities/in difficulties are placed within it	The inclusiveness of an environment has to be investigated (are social and academic needs met?)
Level of inclusiveness at the system level	The number of children with disabilities/in difficulties who are placed in regular classrooms	How well social and academic needs are met; absence of segregated education
Level of inclusiveness at the individual level	Talk about levels is misplaced; either-or phenomena	A child can be more or less included depending on how well social/academic needs are met; below a certain point the child cannot be viewed as included

before but strange to ask about their view about something that by definition is something good (meeting social/academic needs).

It is obvious that the way inclusion is understood is related to the genre of the articles (Table 5). Empirical articles dominate the sample, and by far the most common use of inclusion in these articles, including all of the reviews, is placement (A). On the other hand, almost half of the positioning articles use a community definition of inclusion. Nine out of fifteen positioning articles are dominated by an understanding of inclusion as involving the creation of beneficial situations for all children.

One difference between the two arenas is that there are more positioning articles involving a placement definition in the North American arena (three vs. one). One hypothesis which needs further examination is that the inclusion concept tends to glide towards a placement definition (A) when one approaches empirical research. This implies, for example, that we would expect articles classified as positional or that focus on policy analysis to drift towards a placement definition when discussing empirical research (e.g. Artiles et al. 2006; Vislie 2003). The reverse would be the case for empirical research (e.g. Avramidis and Norwich 2002).

## Discussion

It is obvious from the above analysis that there is a lack of clarity concerning the definition of inclusion. This is even more troublesome given that the concept is being used to define

research and practice. Different concepts of inclusion convey different logics with regard to how different aspects of inclusion are viewed (Table 6).

Agreement within a research field concerning how basic concepts are to be understood is, of course, desirable. In the light of this, it seems extraordinary that the definition of inclusion varies so much between articles and at times also within the same article. There is a rather naïve idea that maturity of a research area lies within its ability to discern empirical regularities. We would suggest, contrary to this, that it is more important to have clear definitions of basic concepts and models. We found what could be described as a *conceptual divide* between how the concept is most often used in positional articles and how it is used in articles reporting empirical research. Thus, with a few exceptions, inclusion is not defined at levels B through D in the empirical research but is instead understood as indicating placement, that is, *where* education takes place. In several of these articles, inclusion is used synonymously with its forerunners, mainstreaming and integration, and inclusion becomes just a new name for traditional special-needs research. This should be contrasted to the radical and critical discourse that dominates among the position articles. We want to point out that this lack of conceptual clarity is problematic regardless of which inclusion concept one puts forward. It is unsettling when it appears as if the same phenomenon is analysed when it is not.

It seems that the proposed classification system renders it possible to capture essential characteristics of the material. This is not to suggest that there are no other classification systems available. Also, we believe that an analysis tied to a closer reading of the text than in our more comprehensive analysis might reveal nuances in the material that do not emerge in our approach. For example, it is obvious that it is difficult at times to understand what is meant by inclusion in specific parts of the articles. It would be interesting to do a closer analysis of what purposes such textual vagueness may serve. An additional example of a topic for future analysis concerns the emergence of linguistic variants such as genuine inclusion and 'inclusion'. Moreover, as has already been stated, there are shifts between different conceptual understandings within articles.

The most important conclusion of the present review concerns the necessity to be clearer in research about what is meant by inclusion both more generally but also in specific parts of papers. Even if not studied here, it seems most reasonable to believe that such conceptual confusion is to be found in other contexts. While most educational systems and many schools and teachers aim for more inclusive practices, it seems necessary to specify more exactly what is meant by this. As for now, it even seems reasonable to suggest the possibility that the discourse of inclusive education might have at times turned our attention away from more concrete analyses of how the needs of children with disabilities/in need of special support is best met.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Notes on contributors

*Claes Nilholm* is a professor of education who specializes in research on inclusive education and special needs. His main focus is on theoretical and conceptual issues, but he has also been involved in several empirical studies of inclusive education/special needs in Sweden.

**Kerstin Göransson** is a professor of special educational needs at the Department of Pedagogical Studies at Karlstad University. Her interests center on inclusive education and on education and teaching of pupils with disabilities and pupils in need of special support.

## References

- Ainscow, M., T. Booth, and A. Dyson. 2004. "Understanding and Developing Inclusive Practices in Schools: A Collaborative Action Research Network." *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 8: 125–139. doi:10.1080/1360311032000158015.
- Ainscow, M., T. Booth, and A. Dyson. 2006. "Inclusion and the Standards Agenda: Negotiating Policy Pressures in England." *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 10: 295–308. doi:10.1080/13603110500430633.
- Ainscow, M., A. Howes, P. Farrell, and J. Frankham. 2003. "Making Sense of the Development of Inclusive Practices." *European Journal of Special Needs Education* 18: 227–242. doi:10.1080/0885625032000079005.
- Artiles, A. 2003. "Special Education's Changing Identity: Paradoxes and Dilemmas in Views of Culture and Space." *Harvard Educational Review* 73: 164–202.
- Artiles, A. J., E. B. Kozleski, S. Dorn, and C. Christensen. 2006. "Learning in Inclusive Education Research: Re-mediating Theory and Methods with a Transformative Agenda." *Review of Research in Education* 30: 65–108. doi:10.3102/0091732X030001065.
- Avramidis, E., P. Bayliss, and R. Burden. 2000. "Student Teachers' Attitudes towards the Inclusion of Children with Special Educational Needs in the Ordinary School." *Teaching and Teacher Education* 16: 277–293. doi:10.1016/S0742-051X(99)00062-1.
- Avramidis, E., and E. Kalyva. 2007. "The Influence of Teaching Experience and Professional Development on Greek Teachers' Attitudes towards Inclusion." *European Journal of Special Needs Education* 22: 367–389. doi:10.1080/08856250701649989.
- Avramidis, E., and B. Norwich. 2002. "Teachers' Attitudes towards Integration/Inclusion: A Review of the Literature." *European Journal of Special Needs Education* 17: 129–147. doi:10.1080/08856250210129056.
- Baker, J. M., and N. Zigmond. 1995. "The Meaning and Practice of Inclusion for Students with Learning Disabilities: Themes and Implications from the Five Cases." *The Journal of Special Education* 29: 163–180. doi:10.1177/002246699502900207.
- Barton, L. 1997. "Inclusive Education: Romantic, Subversive or Realistic?" *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 1: 231–242. doi:10.1080/1360311970010301.
- Brantlinger, E. 1997. "Using Ideology: Cases of Nonrecognition of the Politics of Research and Practice in Special Education." *Review of Educational Research* 67 (4): 425–459.
- Bricker, D. 1995. "The Challenge of Inclusion." *Journal of Early Intervention* 19: 179–194. doi:10.1177/105381519501900301.
- Burrell, G., and G. Morgan. 1985. *Sociological Paradigms and Organizational Analysis. Elements of the Sociology of Corporate Life*. Aldershot: Gower.
- Carrington, S. 1999. "Inclusion Needs a Different School Culture." *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 3: 257–268. doi:10.1080/136031199285039.
- Clark, C., A. Dyson, A. Millward, and S. Robson. 1999. "Theories of Inclusion, Theories of Schools: Deconstructing and Reconstructing the 'inclusive school'." *British Educational Research Journal* 25: 157–177. doi:10.1080/0141192990250203.
- Cole, Barbara Ann. 2005. "Mission Impossible? Special Educational Needs, Inclusion and the Re-Conceptualization of the Role of the SENCO in England and Wales." *European Journal of Special Needs Education* 20 (3): 287–307. doi:10.1080/0885620600156020.
- Croll, P., and D. Moses. 2000. "Ideologies and Utopias: Education Professionals' Views of Inclusion." *European Journal of Special Needs Education* 15: 1–12. doi:10.1080/088562500361664.
- Danoff, B. B., K. R. Harris, and S. S. Graham. 1993. "Incorporating Strategy Instruction within the Writing Process in the Regular Classroom: Effects on the Writing of Students with and without Learning Disabilities." *Journal of Literacy Research* 25: 295–322. doi:10.1080/10862969009547819.

- De Monchy, M., S. J. Pijl, and T. Zandberg. 2004. "Discrepancies in Judging Social Inclusion and Bullying of Pupils with Behaviour Problems." *European Journal of Special Needs Education* 19: 317–330. doi:10.1080/0885625042000262488.
- Education for All Handicapped Children Act. (1975). Public law 94-142.
- Emmer, E., and L. Stough. 2001. "Classroom Management: A Critical Part of Educational Psychology, with Implications for Teacher Education." *Educational Psychologist* 36 (2): 103–112.
- Evans, J., and I. Lunt. 2002. "Inclusive Education: Are There Limits?" *European Journal of Special Needs Education* 17: 1–14. doi:10.1080/08856250110098980.
- Farrell, P. 2000. "The Impact of Research on Developments in Inclusive Education." *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 4 (2): 153–162.
- Ferguson, D. L. 2008. "International Trends in Inclusive Education: The Continuing Challenge to Teach Each One and Everyone." *European Journal of Special Needs Education* 23: 109–120. doi:10.1080/08856250801946236.
- Forlin, C. 2001. "Inclusion: Identifying Potential Stressors for Regular Class Teachers." *Educational Research* 43 (3): 235–245. doi:10.1080/001318880110081017.
- Forlin, C., T. Loreman, U. Sharma, and C. Earle. 2009. "Demographic Differences in Changing Pre-service Teachers' Attitudes, Sentiments and Concerns about Inclusive Education." *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 13: 195–209. doi:10.1080/13603110701365356.
- Frostad, P., and S. J. Pijl. 2007. "Does Being Friendly Help in Making Friends? The Relation between the Social Position and Social Skills of Pupils with Special Needs in Mainstream Education." *European Journal of Special Needs Education* 22: 15–30. doi:10.1080/08856250601082224.
- Fuchs, D., and L. S. Fuchs. 1994. "Inclusive Schools Movement and the Radicalization of Special Education Reform." *Exceptional Children* 60: 294–309.
- Göransson, K., and C. Nilholm. 2014. "Conceptual Diversities and Empirical Shortcomings – A Critical Analysis of Research on Inclusive Education." *European Journal of Special Needs Education* 29 (3): 265–280.
- Habermas, J. 1987. *Knowledge and Human Interests*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Haring, T. G., and C. G. Breen. 1992. "A Peer-mediated Social Network Intervention to Enhance the Social Integration of Persons with Moderate and Severe Disabilities." *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis* 25: 319–333. doi:10.1901/jaba.1992.25-319.
- Harrower, J., and G. Dunlap. 2001. "Including Children with Autism in General Education Classrooms." *Behavior Modification* 25: 762–784. doi:10.1177/0145445501255006.
- Hemmingson, H., and L. Borell. 2002. "Environmental Barriers in Mainstream Schools." *Child: Care, Health and Development* 28: 57–63. doi:10.1046/j.1365-2214.2002.00240.x.
- Humphrey, N., and S. Lewis. 2008. "'Make me normal': The Views and Experiences of Pupils on the Autistic Spectrum in Mainstream Secondary Schools." *Autism* 12: 23–46. doi:10.1177/1362361307085267.
- Humphrey, N., and W. Symes. 2010. "Perceptions of Social Support and Experience of Bullying among Pupils with Autistic Spectrum Disorders in Mainstream Secondary Schools." *European Journal of Special Needs Education* 25: 77–91. doi:10.1080/08856250903450855.
- Hunt, P. P., F. F. Farron-Davis, S. S. Beckstead, and D. D. Curtis. 1994. "Evaluating the Effects of Placement of Students with Severe Disabilities in General Education versus Special Classes." *Journal of the Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps* 19: 200–214. doi:10.1177/154079699401900308.
- Hunt, P. P., and L. L. Goetz. 1997. "Research on Inclusive Educational Programs, Practices, and Outcomes for Students with Severe Disabilities." *The Journal of Special Education* 31: 3–29. doi:10.1177/002246699703100102.
- Kavale, K. A., and S. R. Forness. 2000. "History, Rhetoric, and Reality: Analysis of the Inclusion Debate." *Remedial and Special Education* 21: 279–296. doi:10.1177/074193250002100505.
- Laushey, K. M., and L. J. Heflin. 2000. "Enhancing Social Skills of Kindergarten Children with Autism through the Training of Multiple Peers as Tutors." *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 30: 183–193. doi:10.1023/A:1005558101038.
- Lightfoot, J., S. Wright, and P. Sloper. 1999. "Supporting Pupils in Mainstream School with an Illness or Disability: Young People's Views." *Child: Care, Health and Development* 25: 267–283. doi:10.1046/j.1365-2214.1999.00112.x.



- Lindsay, Geoff. 2007. "Educational Psychology and the Effectiveness of Inclusive Education/ Mainstreaming." *British Journal of Educational Psychology* 77: 1–24. doi:10.1348/000709906X156881.
- Lipsky, D., and A. Gartner. 1996. "Inclusion, School Restructuring and the Remaking of American Society." *Harvard Educational Review* 6: 762–796.
- Maras, P., and R. Brown. 2000. "Effects of Different Forms of School Contact on Children's Attitudes toward Disabled and Non-disabled Peers." *British Journal of Educational Psychology* 70: 337–351. doi:10.1348/000709900158164.
- Marks, S., C. Schrader, and M. Levine. 1999. "Paraeducator Experiences in Inclusive Settings: Helping, Hovering, or Holding Their Own?" *Exceptional Children* 65: 315–328.
- Mcleskey, J. 2004. "Classic Articles in Special Education: Articles That Shaped the Field, 1960 to 1996." *Remedial and Special Education* 25 (2): 79–87.
- Nakken, H., and S. J. Pijl. 2002. "Getting along with Classmates in Regular Schools: A Review of the Effects of Integration on the Development of Social Relationships." *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 6: 47–61. doi:10.1080/13603110110051386.
- Nilholm, C. 2006. *Möten? – forskning om specialpedagogik i ett internationellt perspektiv*. Vetenskapsrådets rapportserie [Encounters? – Special Needs Research within an International Perspective/ Report from the Swedish Research Council] 9:2006.
- Nilholm, C. 2017. *SMART – ett sätt att genomföra forskningsöversikter* [SMART – A way to accomplish research reviews]. Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Nilholm, C. Submitted manuscript. *SMART – An inclusive approach for Reviewing Educational Research*.
- Nilholm, C., and B. Alm. 2010. "An Inclusive Classroom? A Case Study of Inclusiveness, Teacher Strategies, and Children's Experiences." *European Journal of Special Needs Education* 25 (3): 239–252.
- Norwich, B. 2002. "Education, Inclusion and Individual Differences: Recognising and Resolving Dilemmas." *British Journal of Educational Studies* 50 (4): 482–502.
- Norwich, B., and N. Kelly. 2004. "Pupils' Views on Inclusion: Moderate Learning Difficulties and Bullying in Mainstream and Special Schools." *British Educational Research Journal* 30: 43–65. doi:10.1080/01411920310001629965.
- Odom, S. L. 2000. "Preschool Inclusion: What We Know and Where We Go from Here." *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education* 20: 20–27. doi:10.1177/027112140002000104.
- Patton, G., L. Bond, J. B. Carlin, L. Thomas, H. Butler, S. Glover, R. Catalano, and G. Bowes. 2006. "Promoting Social Inclusion in Schools: A Group-randomized Trial of Effects on Student Health Risk Behavior and Well-being." *American Journal of Public Health* 96: 1582–1587. doi:10.2105/AJPH.2004.047399.
- Pivik, J., J. McComas, and M. Laflamme. 2002. "Barriers and Facilitators to Inclusive Education." *Exceptional Children* 69: 97–107. doi:10.1177/001440290206900107.
- Rea, P. J., V. L. McLaughlin, and C. Walther-Thomas. 2002. "Outcomes for Students with Learning Disabilities in Inclusive and Pullout Programs." *Exceptional Children* 68: 203–222. doi:10.1177/001440290206800204.
- Ridell, S. 2008. "The Classification of Pupils at the Educational Margins in Scotland: Shifting Categories and Frameworks." In *Disability Classification in Education*, edited by L. Florian and M. J. McLaughlin, 109–128. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Riehl, C. J. 2000. "The Principal's Role in Creating Inclusive Schools for Diverse Students: A Review of Normative, Empirical, and Critical Literature on the Practice of Educational Administration." *Review of Educational Research* 70: 55–81. doi:10.3102/00346543070001055.
- Romi, S., and Y. Leyser. 2006. "Exploring Inclusion Preservice Training Needs: A Study of Variables Associated with Attitudes and Self-efficacy Beliefs." *European Journal of Special Needs Education* 21: 85–105. doi:10.1080/08856250500491880.
- Sale, P. P., and D. M. Carey. 1995. "The Sociometric Status of Students with Disabilities in a Full-inclusion School." *Exceptional Children* 62: 6–19.
- Salend, S., and L. Garrick Duhany. 1999. "The Impact of Inclusion on Students with and without Disabilities and Their Educators." *Remedial and Special Education* 20: 114–126. doi:10.1177/074193259902000209.
- Scruggs, T., and M. Mastropieri. 1996. "Teacher Perceptions of Mainstreaming Inclusion, 1958–1995: A Research Synthesis." *Exceptional Children* 63: 59–74. doi:10.1177/001440299606300106.

- Scruggs, T. E., M. A. Mastropieri, and K. A. McDuffie. 2007. "Co-teaching in Inclusive Classrooms: A Metasynthesis of Qualitative Research." *Exceptional Children* 73: 392–416. doi:10.1177/001440290707300401.
- Sharma, U., C. Forlin, and T. Loreman. 2008. "Impact of Training on Pre-service Teachers' Attitudes and Concerns about Inclusive Education and Sentiments about Persons with Disabilities." *Disability & Society* 23 (7): 773–785.
- Skrtic, T. 1991. *Behind Special Education*. Denver, CO: Love Publishing Company.
- Slee, R. 2001a. "Social Justice and the Changing Directions in Educational Research: The Case of Inclusive Education." *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 5: 167–177. doi:10.1080/13603110010035832.
- Slee, R. 2001b. "Inclusion in practice: Does Practice Make Perfect?" *Educational Review* 53 (2): 113–123. doi:10.1080/00131910120055543.
- Stanovich, P. J., and A. Jordan. 1998. "Canadian Teachers' and Principals' Beliefs about Inclusive Education as Predictors of Effective Teaching in Heterogeneous Classrooms." *The Elementary School Journal* 98: 221–238. doi:10.1086/461892.
- Terzi, L. 2005. "Beyond the Dilemma of Difference: The Capability Approach to Disability and Special Educational Needs." *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 39 (3): 443–459.
- UNESCO. 1994. *The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education*. Paris: UNESCO.
- Vaughn, S., B. Elbaum, and J. Schumm. 1996. "The Effects of Inclusion on the Social Functioning of Students with Learning Disabilities." *Journal of Learning Disabilities* 29: 605–608. doi:10.1177/002221949602900604.
- Villa, R., J. Thousand, H. Meyers, and A. Nevin. 1996. "Teacher and Administrator Perceptions of Heterogeneous Education." *Exceptional Children* 6: 29–45. doi:10.1177/001440299606300103.
- Vislie, L. 2003. "From Integration to Inclusion: Focusing Global Trends and Changes in the Western European Societies." *European Journal of Special Needs Education* 18: 17–35. doi:10.1080/0885625082000042294.
- Waldron, N. L., and J. McLeskey. 1998. "The Effects of an Inclusive School Program on Students with Mild and Severe Learning Disabilities." *Exceptional Children* 64: 395–405. doi:10.1177/001440299806400308.
- Warnock Report. 1978. *The Education of Handicapped Children and Young People*. The Department of Education and Science. London: HMSO.