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## Models of disability as distinguishing factor: a theoretical framework of inclusive education and the application to a literature review

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### ABSTRACT

This study reports on a newly developed framework of inclusive education, which sets out from three distinct models of disability (medical, relational, and social) and incorporates matching learning theory (behaviourist, cognitivist, and constructivist) and the placement of children with disabilities (exclusive, functional inclusive, full inclusive). Central to the framework is the contradiction between functional and full inclusive concepts, which are traced back to the conflict between a deterministic (medical and relational) and social model of disability. Applied to a complementary review of the literature published between 2006 and 2021, the framework sets the basis for structuring content analysis. An analysis of  $N = 685$  reports shows the coherence of the framework as well as an increase in total publications, especially with full inclusive concepts. Additionally, analysis of the applied methodology shows a predominant role of qualitative methods, which is coherent with the constructivist perception of full inclusion. Implications are discussed regarding inconsistencies and barriers to inclusive education.

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## Introduction

Although the idea of inclusive education has been around for decades and early ideas of education for persons with disabilities date back centuries, the topic is still not only a matter of debate but also of great confusion. Definitions are vague, sometimes marginalised, and regularly confused with the dominant political agenda (e.g. Artiles & Dyson, 2005; Dignath et al., 2022; Göransson & Nilholm, 2014; Wilde & Avramidis, 2011; Winzer & Mazurek, 2019).

Therefore, this article aims to develop a sound theoretical framework of inclusive education consisting of three comprehensive concepts for the definition of inclusive education. Instead of depending on abstract demands of social justice or human rights as justification for inclusion (Slee, 2013), the model of disability, the general learning theory, and the concurrent placements of children form comprehensive units (called triads) of preconditions for inclusive education within the framework of inclusive education. These triads consist of the medical model of disability, behaviourist learning theory, exclusion; the relational model of disability, cognitivist learning theory, functional inclusion; the social model of disability, constructivist learning theory, full-inclusion. To signify the union of the three aspects we applied the term triad (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). In particular, the perspective of a call for full inclusion based on human rights is generally accompanied by a non-negotiable standpoint which deems any form of segregation as unjust. The proposed framework functions as a tool to sort the definitions of inclusion into one of the three triads with direct implications for educational practice.

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The matter of why disability remains the anchoring point of inclusive education is considered twofold. Firstly, from a historical perspective, the education of children with disabilities has been the starting point for inclusive education (Ainscow, 2007), and secondly, the framework is also applicable to a wide range of (/all) children.

This is a two-part article. The first part is concerned with the theoretical development of the framework of inclusive education. In the second part, the framework is applied as the basis of a categorical system to conduct and analyse a systematic literature review to qualitatively validate the theoretically developed triads of inclusive education and give an overview of the current distribution of inclusive concepts. The framework functioned as the basis for a structuring content analysis, which allowed its application to a wide range of international articles (Mayring, 2015).

## Theoretical background

Initially, children who were considered disabled were excluded from mandatory formal education (Ellger-Rüttgardt, 2008, 152). Disability was considered an inhibiting factor for children to learn, which led to the assumption that most children with disabilities are uneducable. Children with cognitive disabilities or sensory or physical impairments depended on support from either their family or charity (Ellger-Rüttgardt, 2008, 152). Disability was synonymous with impairment, making the early endeavours for disability solely based on a *medical model* (Shakespeare, 2017). Depending on social status, care for children with disabilities consisted of more or less education (Rotatori et al., 2011, 92). Although the church provided essential care, disability was widely seen as a punishment from God, and this deemed disability a taboo subject (Rotatori et al., 2011, 91ff.).

With few exceptions, children with disabilities were considered uneducable until the late 19th century, when forerunners of special education redefined the perception of disability. Chief among them were Saegert, Séguin and Montessori, who laid the groundwork for special education in the European context (Ellger-Rüttgardt, 2008).

Successively, education was made available and provided for an increasing number of children with disabilities. Institutions specialising in specific impairments provided education for children with physical, sensory, and cognitive disabilities. Fast forward to the 1960s and 1970s, critique against the separate and exclusive education of children with disabilities grew. Concepts of stigma, normalisation and integration theoretically emphasised the growing dissatisfaction with exclusionary practices (Bank-Mikkelsen, 2005; Goffman, 2006). Alongside the upcoming *social model of disability* (Oliver & Barnes, 2010; The Union of the Physically Impaired against Segregation [UPIAS], 1975), political changes can be reconstructed, such as the Warnock Report (1978) in the UK and the Danish Mental Retardation Act (Merrick et al., 2014). Both emphasised the importance of joint education based on the conviction of segregation, rather than the impairment, as *disabling* factor. The social model of disability signifies the counter argument to the medical model by reinterpreting disability as restricting participation, based on social- and environmental barriers (Shakespeare, 2017).

Impairment was thereby disconnected from disability, shifting the responsibility to realise participation from the individual to society.

At this point, in relation to the current debate on inclusive education arises the question: why is joint education for children with and without disabilities, after half a century, still discussed? While the model of disability shifted from a medical to a social perspective, in theory, the former remained the dominant perception in practical implementation (Ainscow et al., 2019; Thomas, 2013). The outcome is what in retrospect can be described as an integration approach (Feuser, 2013). Instead of identifying and reducing barriers to the participation of children with disabilities, the educational system persisted unchanged, and children were expected to adapt (or be adapted) to regular education (Skrtic, 1991). Concepts of integration and mainstreaming were developed that promoted the participation of students with disabilities if they were deemed capable of learning within the frame of general education (Armstrong et al., 2011). Thus the provision of specialised education for children with disabilities within regular education did not solve the issue of stigmatisation but reproduced the existing issues of special education (Skrtic, 1991).

The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) excavated this trench because it was informed by the social model of disability and the negative effects of exclusion but was vague in terms of implementation (Winzer & Mazurek, 2020). It discusses '[...] the need to work towards "schools for all" – institutions which include everybody, celebrate difference, support learning, and respond to individual needs' (UNESCO, 1994, iii). Although the Salamanca Statement states that inclusion must be part of a general reform process ultimately targeted towards all students, consequences remained limited (Winzer & Mazurek, 2020).

Taking a step further, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN-CRPD) (United Nations, 2006) suggested an amicable approach towards inclusion by applying a *relational model of disability*: the bio-psycho-social model (WHO, 2018). Within a relational model, disability is the outcome of interactions between impairment and environment. It legitimises special education on one hand (as specific, disability induced needs) while emphasising the environment on the other hand as a barrier to participation and, therefore, an integral part of disability (Waldschmidt, 2020). Inclusion becomes a process of negotiation between the individual and society.

What can be learned from this historical development is that the modus of education for children with disabilities depends on the predominant model. Although the concepts of the 1960s and 1970s were highly influential, they left a void in terms of their implications for everyday school education and what the barriers to inclusive education environments are. Indications can be derived from the PISA study (OECD, 2020) which provides important implications for how learning and teaching are comprehended on a global scale (Rezai-Rashti et al., 2017; Tomlinson, 2015). Outcomes of education are objectively assessed and hierarchically arranged, and therefore, they pose a barrier to equal participation. For once, summative assessments allow for grouping of children into high- and low performing, which reinforces segregation by ability. Furthermore, in combination with a predominantly neo-liberal approach to education this results in a competition for resources, favouring high-performing students (Rezai-Rashti et al., 2017; Romstein, 2015; Tomlinson, 2015). Students with disability and special educational needs become a liability for the achievement within large-scale assessments like PISA.

Transferred to classrooms, marks and assessments define the success and failure of meeting objective standards. By adopting a *behaviourist perspective* of learning and teaching, these outcomes are determined by the ability of students to show the desired response to a given stimulus/teaching method (Ertmer & Newby, 1993). This matches a medical model of disability, which utilises a treatment in expectation of response. In this context, education for children with disabilities being segregated from mainstream education underscores the perception that educational needs can be deducted from medically assessed impairment. A restriction to this scheme is the appropriate identification of children by special education institutions. While the identification of blind or deaf children appears fairly easy (although various nuances exist) and educational adaptations seem obvious (e.g. braille text), the heterogeneity in learning, developmental, and social/emotional disabilities leads to contradictions, even before consideration of comorbidities (Tomlinson, 2015). For example, appropriate educational adaptations regarding Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder ADHD could be diametrical to those regarding students with depression and anxiety, while assessed with the same special educational need.

To acknowledge the influence of preconditions, environmental factors, preferences, experiences, and interests must be included in learning arrangements. This is consistent with a *cognitivist perspective*, which emphasises the significance of individual and environmental factors for successful learning (Riffert & Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, 2018). As in a relational model, individual and environmental factors determine successful learning outcomes (Ertmer & Newby, 1993). Nevertheless, the outcome is an objective norm that can be assessed inter-individually. Achievement levels can be set, and ability grouping becomes an important step to meet the requirements of students. This is apparent for children with cognitive or learning disabilities. Furthermore, the transfer of specific content knowledge allows for a division of labour in content areas and age groups.

Understood from a social model perspective, exclusion based on any individual factor equals a disabling process: for example, grouping by ability or the hierarchical arrangement of achievement (Oliver & Barnes, 2010). The often-proclaimed paradigm change necessary for full inclusion would require the adaptation of an individualised learning theory as the foundation of inclusive education. An educational system based on a constructivist perspective meets this demand for individualisation (Feuser, 2013).

Based on the assumption of learning as constructivist, knowledge can only be validated by proving itself useful for the subject (Terhart, 2003). Furthermore, learning is seen as constructing and reconstructing in social and situated contexts (Terhart, 2003). Therefore, (radical) constructivism supports an individual approach to learning while considering that the acquired knowledge must be useful in the given social context. What someone learns and how it is constructed, therefore, also depends on the social context. If learning happens in defined and closed social groups (e.g. special education schools or classes), knowledge will only be acquired that proves itself useful within this exclusive context and, therefore, the adoption of knowledge that might be necessary within an inclusive society will be inhibited. Constructivist inclusive education thus becomes a precondition for societal inclusion. If this is applied to the categories of inclusive education by Göransson and Nilholm (2014) (see below), constructivist education can be considered a precondition for the 'community definition [D]' (Göransson & Nilholm, 2014, 268).

### ***The current state of research in inclusive education***

The current state of research can be drawn along the lines of idealist and functional definitions of inclusive education. Synthesising the existing range of inclusive education concepts, Göransson and Nilholm (2014) established four categories that relate hierarchically to each other, from a placement definition (A) to a community definition (D). In short, the definitions of inclusion apply successively more requirements, from (A) inclusion being equal to the placement of children with disabilities in general education to (B) specific support for children with general educational needs and (C) inclusion as general support for all children to (D) inclusion as a way to develop a community (Göransson & Nilholm, 2014, 268).

Similar to these categories is the distinction between narrow and broad definitions of inclusive education (Grosche & Vock, 2018). Both differentiate inclusive education in terms of purpose and target group. While narrow concepts of inclusive education focus on the placement and specific needs of children with disabilities within regular education broad concepts target the social and academic needs of all children and eventual societal change (Ainscow et al., 2004; Göransson & Nilholm, 2014; Grosche & Vock, 2018).

The wide range of conceptualisations causes issues for comparability. For example, relying on competing definitions are studies concerned with attitudes towards inclusion (Lüke & Grosche, 2018). Whereas the 'Teachers' Attitude to Inclusion Scale (TAIS)' (Saloviita, 2015) relies on a relational model of disability by differentiating between forms of disability, the 'Sentiments, Attitudes, and Concerns about Inclusive Education (SACIE)' (Forlin et al., 2011) takes a more social approach but without implications for means of implementation.

Generally, studies report on the importance of positive attitudes towards inclusion, especially in association with self-efficacy and provisions for students with disabilities (Avramidis et al., 2019; Dignath et al., 2022). Although there are relevant meta-reviews/analyses on the effects of inclusive education (e.g. Oh-Young & Filler, 2015; Ruijs & Peetsma, 2009; Van Miegheem et al., 2020), the lack of a universal and integral definition results in the adoption of placement being equal to inclusion, which is insufficient considering the wide range of definitions and implications (Nilholm, 2021). Nonetheless, neutral to positive effects have been reported when comparing the academic achievements as well as negative outcomes of joint and segregated settings on the social position of children with disabilities in joint classrooms (Oh-Young & Filler, 2015; Ruijs & Peetsma, 2009; Szumski et al., 2017).

An emphasis on academic achievement as successful education further solidifies the conflict between functionalist and idealist concepts of inclusive education. The outcome orientation of education is gaining relevance, particularly since PISA (2000). Norwich (2014) reports increasing numbers of children being educated outside of regular education in the UK due to the increased impact of standardisation. Likewise, Armstrong et al. (2011) stress the pressure of neo-liberal and market-driven policies that inhibit inclusive education. Even high-performing countries such as Sweden, which is renowned for an innately inclusive educational system, are adopting forms of exclusion to reach educational objectives (Berhanu, 2011). The inclusive approach that was associated with the success of Swedish education now appears as a threat to compliance with standardised testing.

Lambrecht (2019), based on Luhmann's systems theory (2017), traces the contradiction between general and special education back to two assumptions of the general education system: firstly, the societal pressure to function as a selective institution and, secondly, the categorical differentiation of children with disabilities (Lambrecht, 2019, 105). Luhmann's system theory allows for the assessment of social institutions by investigating the communication between systems (Luhmann, 2017). Central to Luhmann's system theory regarding the education system and the conclusion by Lambrecht (2019) is a conflict between economical demands in terms of prospective workers and the individual right to education as a basis for democracy. Combined, this leads to the construction of differences within general education and in its distinction from special education (Norwich, 2009).

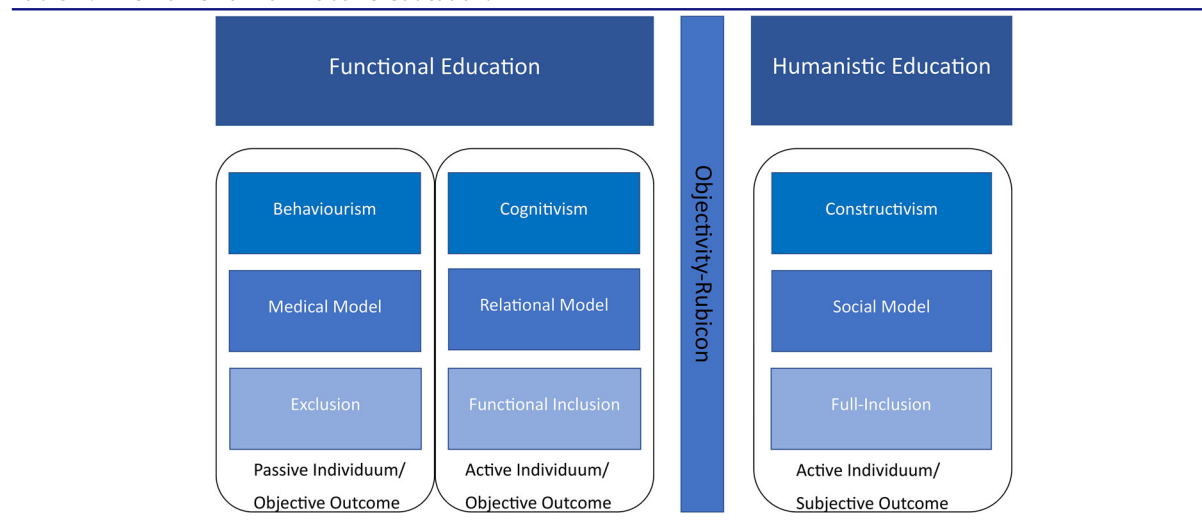
To answer the question of what inclusion is and how it should be accomplished, we, therefore, rely on the perspective of special education and the purpose of education as a whole. Those who can be counted as the *functional* contributors present the educational system and its functionality as a precondition, while *idealists/inclusionists* differentiate an inclusive system from the current system. This reoccurring debate is apparent in the academic literature in how Wilson refers to Ainscow (Wilson, 1999), Wocken refers to Ahrbeck (Wocken, 2010), and in Operti's response to Anastasiou, Kauffman and Di Nuovo (Operti, 2015).

These considerations combined result in a framework of inclusive education which encompasses the form of placement for children with disabilities, the model of disability, and the underlying learning theory. Contrary to previous attempts at theorising inclusive education, this is not a continuum that allows for progress from less to more inclusive education (Ainscow et al., 2004) but a clear distinction between definitions of inclusion based on interconnected preconditions. To realise full inclusion means crossing the Rubicon and leaving behind the objective assessment of disability and learning achievement.

### The framework of inclusive education

The framework of inclusive education (Table 1) can be divided into two broad categories. To the left of the Objectivity-Rubicon, education is understood as a functional-technical process to acquire knowledge; to the right, education is understood as the (social-) construction of knowledge, which can be facilitated or inhibited from the outside (Terhart, 2003). Behaviourism and cognitivism conceptualise knowledge as factual, and, therefore, they establish an objective outcome (Boghossian, 2006; Ertmer & Newby, 1993; Marten & Booth, 1997; Nagowah & Nagowah, 2009). Although it is not expected to find a large amount of exclusive and behaviourist examples within a review on 'inclusive education', the close relationship between behaviourism and the medical model calls for a separate triad (Danforth & Naraian, 2015, 71). The resulting inter-individual standard sets the basis for segregation. The core difference concerning

**Table 1.** The framework of inclusive education.





inclusive education is the perception of how knowledge is acquired. In a behaviourist setting, learning happens on a stimulus-response basis (Ertmer & Newby, 1993; Nagowah & Nagowah, 2009). The individual is understood as a passive recipient of knowledge (Reid, 2005). Cognitivist theory, on the other hand, takes individual internal processes into account and aims for deeper knowledge for example, the application of problem-solving rather than reproduction (Ertmer & Newby, 1993; Malik, 2021; Marten & Booth, 1997). Learning is seen as a process affected by individual activity as well as environmental factors. Therefore, to a certain extent, the inclusion of persons with disabilities can be realised through adjustments to the environment. Nonetheless, the resulting process towards inclusion necessarily involves an argument about the scope of general education (given minimal barriers) and a conflict between optimal learning environments and the inclusion of persons with disabilities. The ongoing discourse on how much inclusion might be possible indicates the underlying cognitivist principle. Concepts such as the least restrictive environment (LRE) (Hyatt & Filler, 2011) can be ascribed to this discussion. Full inclusion is necessarily assessed as a burden to the system, which must accommodate persons who are not able to reach the status quo.

To the right of the 'Objectivity-Rubicon', education is supposed to accommodate the process towards maturity and autonomy. In contrast to a functional understanding of education, humanist education (Whitburn, 2017) focuses on the individual's (subjective) development and experiences. By reinterpreting the educator (teacher) as a facilitator of individual learning, universal, objective, and comparable learning outcomes the aim of education cannot be determined. Due to the close relationship to a human rights perspective and the historical origin of the social model, the full inclusion triad is in line with demands for social justice and equality. Best understood can be the line between functional and full inclusion by comparing Rekus (2016) and Florian and Spratt (2013). The former states that it should be 'one school each' instead of a 'school for all' by posing an overall objective goal of education, while the latter emphasises the importance of (co-) constructing knowledge. One accepts and promotes the differentiation by ability and the other declares the importance of a shared learning experience.

## Research question

The research questions arising from the theoretical considerations are as follows:

1. Can the theoretical categories of inclusive education be reproduced by analysing current literature on inclusive education?
2. Is the distribution of categories internationally stable?
3. Explorative: How did the distribution of inclusive education concepts change since the UN-CRPD?
4. Explorative: Do implications of functional and full inclusion result in different applications of methodology? Quantitative methods, in particular, are assumed to be applied less frequently in reports with a full inclusive perspective due to the constructivist basis.

## Methods

To qualitatively validate the proposed theoretical framework of inclusive education, a complementary systematic literature review was conducted. Following the best practice guide by Siddaway et al. (2019), the process was informed by PRISMA standards (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses; Page et al., 2021).

The previously conducted literature review by Göransson and Nilholm (2014) functioned as a basis and the search term was adopted accordingly:

(Inclusive schools OR Mainstreaming) AND (Culture OR Policy OR Principles OR Effectiveness OR Practice\* OR Development OR Improvement OR Innovation OR Change) AND (Schools OR Teaching methods OR Educational methods OR Classroom environment) AND (Mainstreaming OR Inclusion) AND (special needs students OR disability).

The search was conducted in the literature databases ERIC (Education Resources Information Center) and EBSCO (Elton Bryson Stephens Company). Included in the literature review were all peer-reviewed

reports concerned with inclusive education that had been published in Europe and North America between the publication of the UN-CRPD 2006 (United Nations, 2006) and 2021.

Because the suggested framework expresses a global definition of inclusion, several exclusion criteria were utilised. Excluded were reports concerned with specific, individual types of special educational needs (SEN) or disabilities (e.g. Hughes et al., 2013), specific school subjects (e.g. Greenstein & Baglieri, 2018) or case studies that applied inclusive education to a limited context (e.g. Kuranishi & Oyler, 2017). Due to the nature of the proposed framework, reports concerned with other categories than disability or SEN, such as migration or gender, were also excluded. Although inclusion is not restricted to the context of mandatory schooling, the presented literature review is limited to primary and secondary education. While post-secondary education usually relies on some sort of exclusion by performance, the purpose of early childhood education differs too widely internationally.

Screening was conducted in three rounds: (1) by headline, (2) by abstract, and (3) by full text. Initially  $n = 2768$  articles were identified. After the second round of screening  $n = 1428$  reports were sought for retrieval. The last round of screening was simultaneously utilised for coding. Coding was conducted by two researchers who, in order to ensure intercoder reliability, coded the first  $n = 300$  reports simultaneously and discussed conflicting cases (Mayring, 2015). Ultimately,  $n = 685$  reports were included. Further details can be examined in the PRISMA 2020 flow chart (see Appendix A).

In addition to the overall distribution of inclusive concepts, descriptive analysis was conducted to uncover potential distortions of the data. Influences by the year of publication, country, and applied methodology are expected. Given a sound theoretical framework, categories are stable in a cross-national context and over time. Due to the nature of full-inclusive concepts as constructivist, the data were expected to show a conflict with forms of quantitative research, which traditionally assesses distributions to a given or observed mean.

### **Structuring content analysis**

The coding of the systematic literature review was based on a structuring content analysis (Mayring, 2015). Structuring or deductive content analysis applies a previously developed categorical system to collected data (Mayring, 2015). The applied method is therefore inverse to the inductive process by Göransson and Nilholm (2014).

Based on the proposed theoretical framework of inclusive education, the three triads express distinct concepts of the education of children with special educational needs or disabilities.

- Coded with a 1 were reports that show a predominantly exclusive concept of education based on a medical model of disability and a behaviourist learning theory.
- Coded with a 2 were reports that understand the education of children with special educational needs as functionally inclusive. Joint education of children with and without disabilities is possible if the disability is not too severe and the environment is able and willing to adapt (relational model). Generally, the heterogeneity in learning is acknowledged and considered (cognitivist learning theory).
- Coded with a 3 were reports that show an unconditional support for full inclusion. Disability and learning are socially and individually constructed; therefore, learning differs for all children, regardless of impairments.
- Coded with an 'x' were reports without sufficient definition for coding. These included contradicting statements and *inclusion as placement* definitions.

Accordingly, coding guidelines were developed to ensure an objective assessment. Central to the coding guidelines were anchor examples that demonstrate prototypical cases (Mayring, 2015).

### **Anchor examples**

#### **Exclusion triad**

Medical model: 'They were failing their subject-area courses due to their deficits in studying for and taking tests' (Kauffman et al., 2019, 6).



Behaviourist: 'In the first lesson of each unit, the children practice the rapid recognition of the isolated patterns. The focused orthographic patterns are presented in different colours which are consistently used throughout the programme to have as strong a signal effect as possible' (Mayer & Motsch, 2015, 96).

Exclusion: 'Realistically, some settings may be unable to provide what a child needs, even after considerable effort and accommodations [sic]' (Ahrbeck et al., 2018, 29).

### **Functional inclusion triad**

Relational model: 'Disability, then, according to the ICF [International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health], exists only when limitations in functioning exist, and the focal point for defining disability is not the person, as in previous models, but the degree to which the person is able to successfully function given the demands of any environment or context' (Soresi et al., 2011, 16).

Cognitivist: 'Teachers can use the SDLMI [Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction] across multiple contexts, including core content areas and transition planning, to increase student opportunities to self-direct their learning as they solve problems related to setting and attaining goals' (Raley et al., 2020, 83).

Functional inclusion: 'The practice of inclusion reflects a philosophy that students with disabilities should be educated, to the maximum extent appropriate, in general education classrooms' (Rojewski et al., 2015, 210).

### **Full inclusion triad**

Social Model: 'Indexed in popular culture, displayed in educational settings, and reified in adult life, the redesign challenge must account for deeply ingrained, socially constructed boundaries between ability and dis/ability' (Kozleski, 2020, 9).

Constructivism: 'Social constructivist approaches e.g. providing opportunities for children to participate in co-construction of knowledge (D)' (Florian & Spratt, 2013, 127).

Full inclusion: 'The aim of the school is to provide all pupils with access to the mainstream curriculum and everyone is regarded as a full member of the school community' (Kugelmass & Ainscow, 2004, 136).

Additionally, reoccurring ideas in the reports have been attributed to the following concepts:

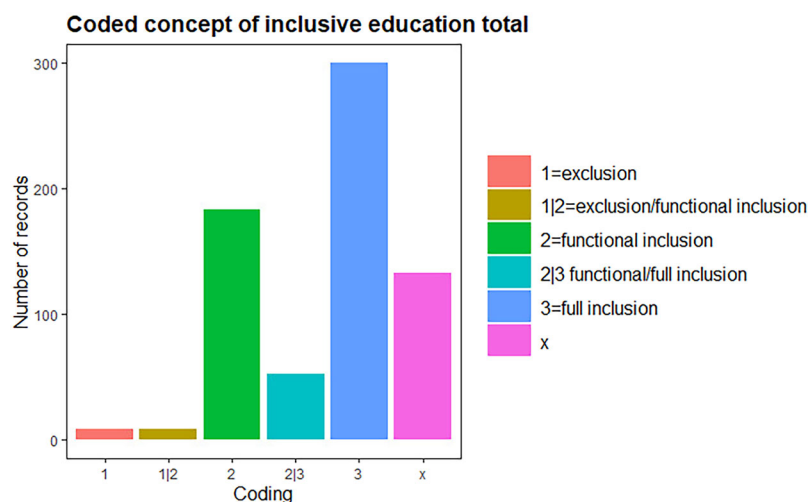
- Universal Design for Learning (UDL) generally refers to a constructivist approach to teaching and learning directed towards all children → full inclusion
- Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), Response to Intervention (RTI), and Positive Behaviour Intervention Support (PBIS) give additional support to children who are not meeting the demands of the environment → functional inclusion

To be coded as either concept, indicators of at least two out of three aspects of a concept must have been found. On one hand, the detailed depiction allowed for a thorough analysis, but on the other hand, reports could qualify for different concepts by disregarding the arising contradictions. Due to the number of reports showing full and functional inclusive aspects (and therefore conflicting aspects), intersecting categories were developed: 1|2 (exclusive/functional) and 2|3 (functional/full).

## **Results**

Overall,  $N=685$  reports have been included into the literature review (Figure 1). Across all reports

- $n = 300$  (43.80%) have been sorted into category 3 (full inclusion),
- $n = 52$  (7.59%) have been sorted into category 2|3 (full/functional inclusion),
- $n = 183$  (26.72%) have been sorted into category 2 (functional inclusion),
- $n = 8$  (1.17%) have been sorted into category 1|2 (exclusion/functional inclusion),
- $n = 8$  (1.17%) have been sorted into category 1 (exclusion),
- $n = 133$  (19.42%) have not been sorted into a category (x).



**Figure 1.** Coded concept of inclusive education: total.

**Table 2.** Coded definition of inclusive education by top 5 countries.

	Top 5 countries <sup>a</sup>									
	USA		UK		Canada		Germany		Ireland	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Coding										
1 <sup>b</sup>	3	1.22	0	0	0	0	2	7.69	1	4.55
1 2	3	1.22	2	1.77	0	0	1	3.85	0	0
2 <sup>c</sup>	86	35.10	25	22.12	10	18.52	4	15.38	8	36.36
2 3	14	5.71	5	4.42	3	5.56	0	0	1	4.55
3 <sup>d</sup>	99	40.41	53	46.90	28	51.85	13	50	8	36.36
x <sup>e</sup>	40	16.33	28	24.78	13	24.07	6	23.08	4	18.18

Note. *N* = 460 reports. <sup>a</sup>Top 5 countries by total publications. <sup>b</sup>1 = exclusion definition. <sup>c</sup>2 = functional- inclusion definition. <sup>d</sup>3 = full-inclusion definition. <sup>e</sup>x = insufficient definition.

As you can see in [Table 2](#), the top five countries by number of reports are the USA: *n* = 245 (35.77%); the UK: *n* = 113 (16.50%); Canada: *n* = 54 (7.88%); Germany: *n* = 26 (3.80%); Ireland: *n* = 22 (3.21%). In total, reports from 42 countries have been included in the analysis.

The top five countries account for 67.15% of all included reports. Examining the distribution by definition of inclusive education reproduces the assumption of two contradicting positions regarding a functional and full inclusion definition. Furthermore, the reports from the USA and Ireland show a higher proportion of functional inclusion than reports from the UK, Canada, and Germany.

Since the UN-CRPD, a continuous increase in reports has been found.

[Figure 2](#) shows that the overall increase of reports within the field of inclusive education is predominantly due to an increase of reports with a full inclusion definition.

Additionally to information about location and year of publication, the applied methodology was examined and distinguished in qualitative, quantitative, mixed method, and theoretical contributions (see [Figure 3](#)). In reports with a full inclusion concept, quantitative methods were applied less frequently than in reports with other definitions of inclusive education. Neglecting the small number of reports with an exclusive perception (*n* = 16), qualitative methods are the predominant form of research in the field of inclusive education, regardless of definition.

## Discussion

The manifold definitions of inclusive education are currently complicating a constructive scientific discourse (Göransson & Nilholm, 2014). The rift between traditional, special education, and full inclusion perspective is apparent. The purpose of this article was to establish a framework that allows the allocation of specific inclusion concepts while providing implications for its implementation as well as its limits.

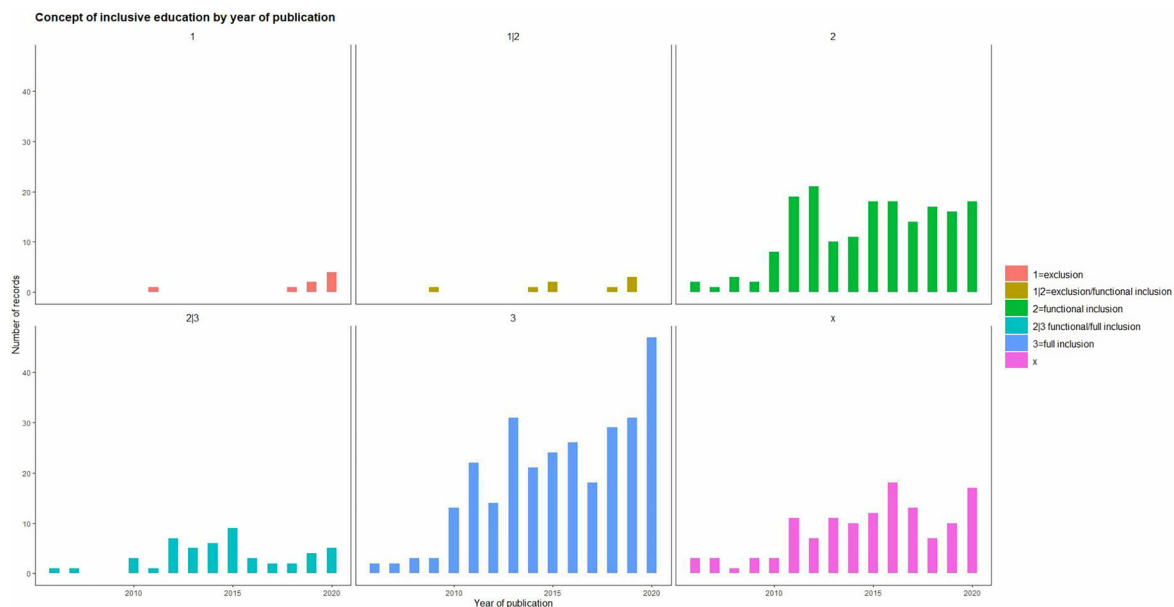


Figure 2. Concept of inclusive education by year of publication.

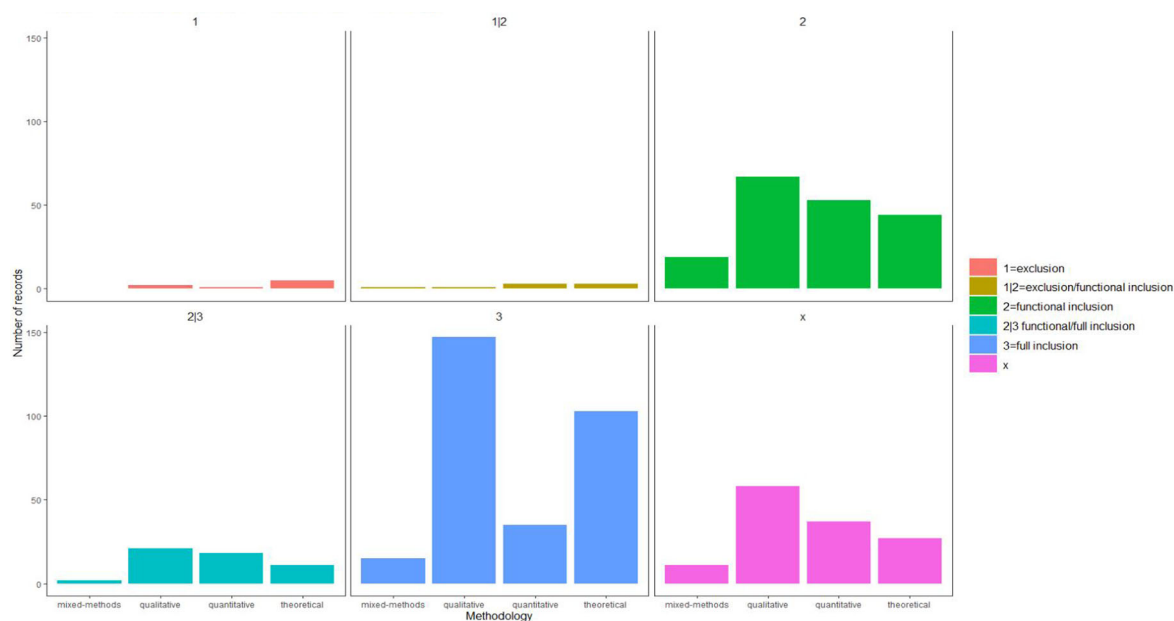


Figure 3. Concept of inclusive education by methodology.

Based on considerations encompassing the target group, placement and purpose of education, the developed framework of inclusive education set the background for the evaluation of current conflict within the discourse. The model of disability applied as a starting point allowed for conclusions regarding the historical as well as theoretical standpoints of inclusive education. A central achievement is the reproduction of the conflict between functional and full inclusion concepts.

Following the theoretical development, a systematic literature review was conducted. Deducted from the framework of inclusive education, the three categories exclusive (1), functional inclusion (2), and full inclusion (3) were applied to differentiate definitions of inclusive education.

Analysis showed that the theoretical considerations underpinning the developed categories of the proposed framework can be applied to the broad existing literature. The small number of reports categorised within the intersecting categories of exclusion and functional inclusion (1|2) and functional- and full inclusion (2|3) emphasises the conflict established in the framework.

Noteworthy are the number of reports with insufficient definitions (coded as x). Although these can be largely accounted to defining inclusion solely as placement (Göransson & Nilholm, 2014), they reflect the consistent uncertainty in the field.

Since the UN-CRPD (2006) publications applying a full inclusion concept have increased, while publications with other concepts remained relatively stable (see Figure 2). Although the UN-CRPD lacks specifications regarding the implementation of inclusive education and relies on a relational model of disability, the overall increase of attention caused specifically an increase of efforts toward full inclusion.

Across definitions of inclusive education, the applied methodology is predominantly qualitative (see Figure 3). The distribution differs considerably between publications with functional and full inclusion definitions, especially in the proportion of quantitative research. Articles with a full inclusion definition apply less regularly quantitative methods than articles with a functional inclusion definition. This relation coincides with the constructivist conviction within the full inclusion concept and therefore with the consideration of research question four.

Full inclusion is frequently associated with a wide definition of inclusive education (Ainscow, 2007; Göransson & Nilholm, 2014), but has advanced beyond the category of disability. Although the developed framework is not necessarily concerned with categories other than disability, both functional and full inclusion provide a basis for argument. Functional inclusion, then, signifies the consideration of certain preconditions likely to influence learning and adapts the materials accordingly (e.g. representations in textbooks or additional support). Due to the constructivist approach within full inclusion, learning is considered individually, and other characteristics that might influence learning would need to be likewise considered, which makes the subsummation of children by certain characteristics obsolete.

Across national and international contexts, the inclusion of children identified as having intellectual or social/behavioural disabilities is being viewed more critically than the inclusion of children with sensory or physical disabilities/impairments (Moberg et al., 2020). For the framework of inclusive education, this implies a generally deterministic perception of disability (medical or relational), although the model of disability could change depending on the context of inclusion. Further analysis regarding potential adaptations is needed. Based on the framework, hypothetically, the concept of inclusive education could be based on the type of impairment. While the lack of participation in academic contexts for children with physical impairments is attributed to physical barriers, cognitive impairments are attributed individually. The matter of participation and disability, then, would depend on the assessment of the context from different points of view.

While studies acknowledge that the aspirations of high standardised outcomes interfere with the objective of fully inclusive education, only a few ascribe the necessary implication for the educational system (Berhanu 2019; Norwich, 2014).

This not only relates to the matter of what inclusion means but also what the purpose of education is. Inclusive education and educational institutions as a whole fulfil certain purposes on a societal level, for example, qualification for vocational positions and integration into society (Fend, 2006; Luhmann, 2012). Complementary to the definition of inclusion must be an agreement on the purpose of education, because they both relate to each other (Reindal, 2010). In terms of the framework, if the purpose of education is centred around the potential of the individual child in society, it can be described as humanistic because it needs to '[...] prioritise the value of human dignity – including freedom of thought, moral autonomy and personal authenticity [...]' (Aloni, 2011, 36). If the focus is on the potential performance for society, it is functional (Whitburn, 2017).

Criticism of functionalism sets out from a perspective that questions the objectivity of assessment in terms of disability and education: 'As such, the functionalist worldview institutionalized the mutually reinforcing theories of *organizational rationality* and *human pathology* in society and in public education' (Skrtic, 1991, 152). In other words, the relation between functionality in terms of fixed and objective learning goals and individual ability reinforces the barrier to full and equal participation, that is full inclusion.

The adoption of a social model of disability, although appealing through its simplicity, has consequences for the organisational side of learning. Currently, support is granted based on (special educational) need, which requires assessment and identification. The question arises of how resources can be distributed without labelling individual children (Sturm & Wagner-Willi, 2016). A Universal Design for Learning system gives points of reference to provide support for all children (Capp, 2017). However,

given the perspective of children with extensive support needs, provision without individual identification appears impracticable.

### Concluding remarks

The categories stated by the framework of inclusive education are sound and can be reproduced within the current body of literature. Especially functional and full inclusion concepts are predominant within the discourse, while the call for exclusion is hardly apparent. Internationally, the distribution appears stable with minor differences which could be attributed to the dominant educational policy (e.g. the least restrictive environment approach in the USA).

Since the UN-CRPD there was a rapid increase of publications regarding inclusive education, especially with a full inclusive definition. In line with the expectations, these full inclusive publications are predominantly qualitative and theoretical articles, while functional inclusive publications applied quantitative methods more regularly.

Functional and full inclusion can be seen as two sides of the same coin. The shared goal is the development of children's potential. Yet, they cannot be applied simultaneously. It must be either through full inclusion, which means that the education would be individualised, or functional inclusion, meaning the person would be educated within a certain status quo. Due to the heterogeneity in the student body, ability grouping, segregation, and a hierarchical order are highly functional. Overcoming the perception of functionality appears to be the greatest barrier to reaching a fully inclusive education system.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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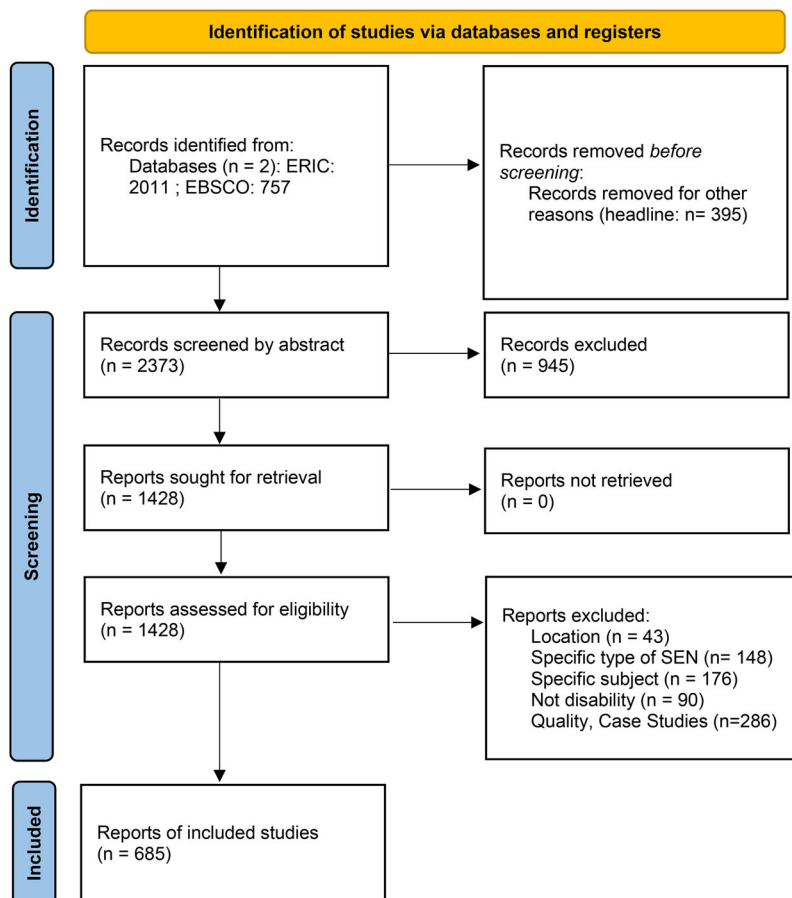


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## Appendix A: Flow diagram V2

From: Page MJ, McKenzie JE, Bossuyt PM, Boutron I, Hoffmann TC, Mulrow CD, et al. The PRISMA 2020 statement: an updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews. *BMJ* 2021;372:n71. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n71



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