Defining School Inclusion for Students With Moderate to Severe Disabilities: What Do Experts Say?
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Defining School Inclusion for Students With Moderate to Severe Disabilities: What Do Experts Say?

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The term *inclusion* is new to special education and currently has many uses in the literature and in the field. The evolution of the term and its various uses frequently lead to confusion and miscommunication during discussions of school inclusion. This study examined how experts in the field of school inclusion for students with moderate to severe disabilities defined the term for that population at one point in time. As part of a larger study, authors of relevant literature were asked to submit their definition of school inclusion. The content of these definitions was analyzed using qualitative methodology, and 7 themes emerged: (a) placement in natural typical settings; (b) all students together for instruction and learning; (c) supports and modifications within general education to meet appropriate learner outcomes; (d) belongingness, equal membership, acceptance, and being valued; (e) collaborative integrated services by education teams; (f) systemic philosophy or belief system; and (g) meshing general and special education into one unified system. The overwhelming incorporation of the first five themes listed previously indicates that these themes cannot be viewed in isolation when defining school inclusion for students with moderate to severe disabilities. That
is, unless services for students with moderate to severe disabilities reflect all of the first 5 themes, those services cannot be defined as reflecting school inclusion. Descriptive statements expanding each of the 7 themes were developed, and areas for future research and inquiry were offered related to the relation among these themes.

The placement of students with disabilities in general education settings has been increasing over the years (McLeskey & Henry, 1999; McLeskey, Henry, & Hodges, 1999). In referring to educational programs provided for students in these settings, the term *inclusion* frequently is used, and yet there does not appear to be consensus about what the term means. The term *inclusion* has many uses in the literature, although recently researchers have begun to use the term without an explicit definition, leaving the reader to determine the meaning of the word from the content of the article (Baker, 1995a, 1995b, 1995c; Helmstetter, Curry, Brennan, & Sampson-Saul, 1998; Knowlton, 1998).

When researchers choose to define inclusion within their work either explicitly or implicitly, their definitions vary widely. In their definitions of inclusion for students with moderate to severe disabilities, researchers have incorporated one or more of the following components: (a) attending the neighborhood school (Siegel-Causey & Allinder, 1998); (b) being placed in general education classes (Altman & Kanagawa, 1994; Ferguson, Meyers, Jeanchild, Juniper, & Zingo, 1992; Gemmell-Crosby & Hanzlik, 1994; Hamre-Nietupski, Hendrickson, Nietupski, & Shokooshi-Yekta, 1994; Janney & Snell, 1996; Logan & Keefe, 1997; McDonnell, 1998; Moberg, Zumberg, & Reinmaa, 1997; Sale & Carey, 1995; Staub, Spaulding, Peck, Galluci, & Schwartz, 1996); (c) receiving supports within general education classes to allow students to benefit from placement (Coots, Bishop, & Grenot-Scheyer, 1998; Logan & Malone, 1998; Siegel-Causey & Allinder, 1998; Wolery, Werts, Caldwell, Snyder, & Lisowski, 1995); and (d) accessing and participating in the natural community (Biklen, 1992; Kliewer, 1998; Wolery et al., 1995). In addition, these researchers have discussed systemic change as a component of inclusion (Wolery et al., 1995). Each of these components may be used as a complete definition of inclusion (e.g., placement in general education classes) or in conjunction with other components (e.g., placement in neighborhood school general education classes with supports; Ryndak, Morrison, & Sommerstein, 1999).

Similar differences in the definition of inclusion can be found in other areas of expertise in special education. For example, in the introductory article for the special issue of *The Journal of Special Education* related to “full inclusion for students with learning disabilities,” Zigmond (1995) described how

A number of practitioners and policymakers have called for a halt to the long-standing practice of removing students with LD from general education classrooms, and school personnel have responded by developing more inclusive [italics added], or more integrated [italics added] programs, particularly at the elementary level. In most of these new, more fully integrated [italics added] models, substantial changes are made in the mainstream to make it more accommodating to all students’ individual needs. The goal is to provide an accommodating, personalized education for all students, including those with LD, within the context of a general education classroom. (p. 110)
In her continued discussion, Zigmond referred to the research that has been conducted on “these full inclusion models [italics added],” and stated that “little attention has been paid to describing the special education experiences of students who are in a full-time mainstreaming model [italics added]” (p. 110). The reader, therefore, is left to interpret the differences and similarities between the terms inclusion, integration, and mainstreaming models of services, all in relation to only students with learning disabilities.

In addition to the introductory article, this special issue presented six case studies in which students with learning disabilities were “included,” seven reactions to these case studies, and a summary article. The case studies perpetuate the initial confusion of the lead article in their various descriptions of services, all identified as inclusion. The confusion about the meaning of the term inclusion also is clear in the reactions to the case studies, when some authors accepted the services described as inclusive (Gerber, 1995; Martin, 1995) and others discussed additional components of services required for schools to indicate that they are providing inclusion (McLaughlin, 1995; Murphy, 1995; Pugach, 1995; Sindelar, 1995).

When definitions of inclusion are provided, some components of definitions are used frequently (e.g., placement in general education classes), whereas other components rarely appear (e.g., cooperative learning and peer instructional methods used significantly in general instructional practice; Sailor, 1991). The use of the term inclusion in so many different ways, however, results in ongoing confusion and miscommunication (Bennett, Lee, & Lueke, 1998; J. D. Smith & Hilton, 1997). In relation to students with disabilities having access to general education curriculum, some interpretations of inclusion refer to places in which the general education curriculum is presented to students without disabilities (e.g., rooms, settings, environments; Coots et al., 1998; Logan & Malone, 1998; McDonnell, 1998), whereas others refer to the structure through which general education curriculum is presented (e.g., classes, activities, routines; Altman & Kanagawa, 1994; Gemmell-Crosby & Hanzlik, 1994; Siegel-Causey & Allinder, 1998), and still others refer to the role of the student with disabilities within those places and structures (e.g., attends, participates, is a member). In fact, in a summary of pedagogical and research foundations for inclusive schooling practices, McGregor and Vogelsberg (1998) differentiated between inclusion, an inclusive school, and inclusive schooling practices. For their purposes, McGregor and Vogelsberg referenced the definition of inclusion provided by Lipsky and Gartner (1996), including concepts of neighborhood school, age-appropriate general education classes, and necessary supports and supplementary aids for the child and teacher, to assure the child’s success and prepare the child to participate as a full contributing member of society. When discussing an inclusive school, McGregor and Vogelsberg used the definition of Stainback and Stainback (1990): “An inclusive school is a place where everyone belongs, is accepted, supports, and is supported by his or her peers and other members of the school community in the course of having his or her educational needs met” (p. 3). They defined inclusive schooling practices as “those that lead to the creation of supportive educational communities in which services necessary to meet the individual needs of all students are available, [including] services previously available only in specialized settings” (p. 11).
Discussions of inclusion in the literature also have focused around “levels of integration” of students. McDonnell, Hardman, Hightower, and Kiefer-O’Donnell (1991) defined the level of integration achieved by high school students with severe disabilities in relation to the (a) average time they were enrolled in content area classes each day, (b) average time they were scheduled for instruction with peer tutors on personal management and leisure recreation activities, (c) average time they were scheduled to participate in normal school routines each day, (d) total time they were scheduled for contact with nondisabled peers each day, and (e) average monthly contact they had with peer tutors during after-school hours. In addition, McDonnell et al. considered program variables, such as percentage of students served in a program that was not their neighborhood school or school of choice and the percentage of students with severe disabilities enrolled in each class. In contrast, Mills, Cole, Jenkins, and Dale (1998) defined three “levels of inclusion” within a classroom setting, including (a) those that enroll only students with disabilities, (b) those that enroll more students with disabilities than typically developing students, and (c) those that enroll more typically developing students than students with disabilities.

The lack of clarity and inconsistencies in the definition of inclusion evident in the literature are indicative of the confusion related to inclusion faced in the field, as evidenced by various uses in practitioner-oriented publications (Daniels & Vaughn, 1999; Prom, 1999; Stanovich, 1999; Wasta, Scott, Marchand-Martella, & Harris, 1999). The audience of such journals (i.e., parents, general and special education teachers, related services personnel, administrators, and advocates) frequently use the term *inclusion*; individual discussants, however, seldom mean the same thing (Langone, 1998). For instance, some teachers work in school systems that cluster students with disabilities in center-based programs, yet do their best to provide services that approximate some of the components of school inclusion discussed earlier. In so doing, they may refer to the services they provide as “inclusive,” as opposed to services solely in self-contained schools or classes. On the other hand, some school systems use the word *inclusion* to describe the heterogeneous grouping of students with various levels and types of disabilities in a single self-contained class (e.g., students labeled as having “moderate mental retardation” with those labeled as having “autism”), as opposed to homogeneous grouping of students by disability category.

It is possible that various components used in the definition of school inclusion have become relevant as services have evolved for students with moderate to severe disabilities in inclusive settings. The purpose of this study was to determine how experts in the field of school inclusion for students with moderate to severe disabilities define inclusion through a qualitative analysis of definitions submitted at one point in time. It was hoped that there would be sufficient consistency in themes that emerged to allow the field to have a working definition of school inclusion for students with moderate to severe disabilities. Such a definition may promote more effective communication among interested individuals, facilitate the articulation of policies and procedures that are clear and understood widely, and enable research and professional discussions related to school inclusion for students with moderate to severe disabilities to be more focused and productive.
Participants

For the purpose of this study, experts in the field of school inclusion for students with moderate to severe disabilities were identified in two ways. First, experts were considered authors of relevant articles in the *Journal of the Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps*, *Exceptional Children*, and *Teaching Exceptional Children*. These journals were selected specifically because they incorporate the preponderance of articles related to services for students with moderate to severe disabilities. Moreover, these journals target different audiences (i.e., interested specifically in severe disabilities, a broad base of interest in special education, and practitioners), and the sample of experts would incorporate those writing for each of these audiences. Second, experts were considered authors or editors of professional books related to inclusive educational services for students with moderate to severe disabilities. Only articles and books published between 1990 and 1996 that addressed the inclusion of this population in educational settings were included when identifying experts. The specific definition of inclusion within a publication was never used as a rationale for eliminating an author from potentially participating; however, a publication was not included if the researchers collectively agreed that it clearly was related to (a) students with high incidence disabilities, and those with hearing or vision impairments, and (b) supporting students with disabilities in general education classes specifically for the acquisition of grade-level academic content. These articles were eliminated only because they did not address school inclusion of students with moderate to severe disabilities. When authored by more than one person, all co-authors were included in the list of experts. This selection process yielded 140 publications and a total of 181 authors and co-authors.

Instrumentation

As part of a larger investigation, an 11-page questionnaire was developed addressing promising practices in inclusion. Aside from instructions, there were three sections. First, respondents were asked to provide information about their current position, training, and experience related to school inclusion for students with moderate to severe disabilities. Second, respondents were asked to provide their own definition of school inclusion for students with moderate to severe disabilities. Third, respondents were asked to give their opinions on “useful practices” in nine areas associated with school inclusion: (a) promoting inclusive values; (b) scheduling, coordinating, and delivering inclusive services within the school; (c) choosing and planning what to teach (i.e., curriculum and Individual Education Program content); (d) collaboration between general and special educators; (e) collaboration between educators and related service providers; (f) instructional strategies; (g) assessing and reporting student progress on an ongoing basis (i.e., performance evaluation); (h) family involvement; and (i) supporting students with challenging behavior. This investigation focused on the first and second sections of this questionnaire, that is, the respondents and their definitions of school inclusion. Findings from the third
section (i.e., useful practices related to school inclusion) are reported separately in another investigation (Jackson, Ryndak, & Billingsley, in press).

Data Collection

Of the 181 potential respondents identified in the sample, addresses could not be located for 21 individuals. Questionnaires, therefore, initially were mailed to 160 individuals between mid-May and mid-June 1997, accompanied by a cover letter that explained the purpose of the investigation. To provide a system for tracking which surveys had been returned, and to ensure confidentiality, respondents were identified by number. Respondents were requested to either complete the survey by a given date or return it uncompleted if they either felt unqualified or chose not to complete it. Approximately 1 month after initial mailings, a follow-up letter and identical questionnaire were sent to individuals who had not returned a survey.

Of the mailed surveys, 14 were returned as undeliverable. The total number of surveys delivered to individuals on the list of experts, therefore, was 147. Forty-seven respondents returned completed surveys, and another 18 returned their surveys uncompleted or ineligible for use. Because no indication was requested whether a survey was returned because a respondent felt unqualified or because they chose not to complete it, no further interpretation can be made about respondents’ reasons for returning a survey uncompleted. A survey response rate of 37% was calculated by dividing the number of surveys returned and useable by the total number of surveys delivered minus those ineligible for use (Dillman, 1978).

Analysis of Definition Content

Of the 47 respondents, 46 provided a definition of school inclusion. These definitions were analyzed through a content analysis process consistent with qualitative research methodology (Patton, 1987; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). Each definition was read independently by two of the co-authors, and components of each definition were identified. As components were identified, they were listed with the corresponding identifier of the respondent who used the component. If a component was identified by more than one respondent, their corresponding identifiers were all listed with the component. The completed independent analyses then were compared, and any discrepancies were discussed until the reason for each discrepancy was understood. Another round of independent analyses then was completed and once again compared. This process continued until independent analyses were identical. Throughout the analysis process, care was taken to ensure that the meaning intended by each respondent was preserved. Many respondents used definitive terms such as “full time participation in regular K–12 classes” or “regardless of physical or mental ability.” Other respondents, however, used qualifying terms such as “primary placement,” “according to their abilities,” or “greatest extent possible.” As themes were identified, the perceived meanings of each qualifying term were determined from the use within the context of the respondent’s full definition.
Two of the co-authors then jointly grouped the definition components, based on perceived similarity in content, to form general themes. Again, care was taken to preserve the meaning intended by each respondent.

**FINDINGS**

**Respondent Information**

The majority of the 47 respondents who returned completed surveys (n = 34; 72%) characterized themselves as members of university faculty, with 30 indicating their rank as associate or full professor. Individuals also indicated that they were employed in each of the following positions: researcher (3), teacher (3), consultant (4), specialist (1), and doctoral student (2). Doctoral degrees had been earned by 37 respondents (79%), whereas 6 (13%) had earned master’s degrees, and 4 (9%) had earned bachelor’s degrees or “other.” It was reported that degrees had been received from 1964 to 1996, and the average number of years since receiving their last degree was 13.

Respondents were asked to indicate one primary role they fulfilled in relation to inclusion for students with moderate to severe disabilities. They indicated that their primary roles were teacher preparation (n = 19; 40%), research (n = 14; 30%), technical assistance provision (n = 8; 17%), and other (n = 5; 11%). One individual identified two primary roles: teacher educator and researcher. More than 50% of the respondents (n = 27; 57%) reported between 6 and 15 years in their primary role, 10 individuals (21%) reported more than 15 years in that role, and another 10 individuals (21%) reported fewer than 6 years. More than 75% of respondents (n = 37; 79%) reported that they had been involved in special education for 16 or more years, and no respondent indicated less than 3 years of involvement.

Respondents indicated that their views regarding inclusion had been influenced by their special education experiences with students labeled with various disabilities. More than 50% of respondents identified experiences with students having moderate to profound mental retardation (n = 43; 91%), autism (n = 39; 83%), multiple disabilities (n = 37; 79%), mild mental retardation (n = 29; 62%), and motor disabilities (n = 25; 53%). Fewer than 50% indicated that their views had been influenced by experiences with students having emotional or behavioral disorders (n = 23; 49%), learning disabilities (n = 18; 38%), dual sensory impairments (n = 17; 36%), blindness or low vision (n = 11; 23%), and deafness (n = 8; 17%). All respondents reported that they had collaborated with schools and districts to facilitate the inclusion of students with moderate to profound disabilities.

**Themes from Definitions**

Seven themes emerged from the components that comprised the respondents’ definitions of school inclusion. Of these themes, five related to the inclusion of individual students
with moderate to severe disabilities (see Table 1), and the remaining two themes related to inclusion as a systemic concept or philosophy (see Table 2).

**Including Individual Students**

**Placement in natural typical settings.** A predominant theme that emerged from the respondents’ definitions was the concept of placing students with moderate to severe disabilities in natural typical settings. Components that were subsumed under this theme included references to placement in “age appropriate” “general education classes” in the “schools they would attend if they did not have a disability.” Additional components addressed the thought that this placement would occur for “most” or “all of the school day” on an “ongoing daily basis,” for both “instructional and noninstructional activities,” during “classes” as well as other “school activities.” In relation to time not spent in general education environments, components within this theme included the concept that inclusion “does not preclude the use of alternative [environments for instruction] (e.g., the community; work sites)” that may be appropriate for individual students, but that “pull-out” should be consistent with that which “occurs for classmates without disabilities.” Given these parameters, placement would result in the inclusion of “all” children

<p>| TABLE 1 |</p>
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<tr>
<th>Components of a Working Definition of School Inclusion for Students With Moderate to Severe Disabilities Related to Including Individual Students</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Placement in natural typical settings: Placement of all students with disabilities (a) in age-appropriate general education classes, (b) in natural proportions, (c) in schools they would attend if they did not have a disability, (d) for most or all of the school day, (e) on an ongoing daily basis, (f) for instructional and noninstructional activities, (g) during classes and other school activities. Pullout from such placement occurs for community-based instruction or other activities, as it occurs for classmates without disabilities.</td>
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<tr>
<td>All students together for instruction and learning: All students with and without disabilities receive instruction and learn together during the same academic and nonacademic general education activities within general education classes and throughout the school community. Access to nondisabled classmates, and positive interactions between peers with and without disabilities, are maximized throughout educational activities and the school community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supports and modifications within general education to meet appropriate learner outcomes: Supports, services, and modifications, including necessary accommodations related to curriculum and instruction, occur within general education classes and the school community to ensure effective instruction for all students with and without disabilities, such that the learning environments (a) support students’ needs and the diversity of each student’s contribution to the school community, (b) facilitate learning for all students, and (c) optimize each student’s potential. This results in real contributions by all students and instruction on meaningful, individually appropriate learner outcomes for all students. For students with disabilities, those learning outcomes are in accordance with Individual Education Program content, the district curriculum, or both.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belongingness, equal membership, acceptance, and being valued: All classmates with and without disabilities share a sense of belongingness and equal membership in general education environments and activities. Students with disabilities and from other minorities are accepted and valued by both adults and students without disabilities throughout their educational environments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborative integrated services by education teams: Education teams collaboratively plan, implement, and evaluate instruction that is integrated throughout general education activities for each student.</td>
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with “same age” classmates, in “natural proportions,” in the “classes” and “school community” that are “natural” or “typical.”

All students together for instruction and learning. Another predominant theme in respondents’ definitions was the idea that all students should be together for instruction and learning. Components subsumed under this theme included references to “all students,” “both with and without disabilities,” receiving “instruction” and “learning” during the “same academic and nonacademic general education activities,” both in “general education classes” and “throughout the school community.” Additional components addressed the need for students with moderate to severe disabilities to have “maximize[d] access to and positive interactions with” classmates without disabilities and to be “socially, physically, and educationally participating with other students without disabilities.”

Supports and modifications within general education to meet appropriate learner outcomes. A third predominant theme in respondents’ definitions was the use of supports and modifications within general education to meet appropriate learner outcomes. Components subsumed under this theme consistently referred to “supports” and “modifications” within “general education classes” and “the school community,” regardless of who provided those supports and modifications, who benefitted from them, and their form. For example, components of various definitions expressed that supports and modifications should be provided “to the students with disabilities,” “to all students,” or “to the general education teacher.” Components described various sources of support (i.e., special educators and general educators). Finally, various components of definitions described aspects of the learning environment that should be supported or modified, including broad statements such as “necessary accommodations,” and specific references such as “modified curriculum” and “individualized instruction.” Within each component subsumed under this theme, however, was the underlying concept that supplementary supports and services should be provided and modifications should be made to “ensure effective instruction” for “students both with and without disabilities.” To accomplish this, the entire “learning environment support[s] students’ needs” and “the diversity of each student’s contribution” to the school community. The environment, itself, should “facilitate learning” and “optimize each student’s potential.”

A second type of component subsumed under this theme involved the concept of students with moderate to severe disabilities having “meaningful involvement in general
education class activities and routines” “along with their nondisabled classmates” and that their “participation [should] result in a real contribution to activities and routines.” Components incorporated the idea that “meaningful education should be provided for all students,” both with and without disabilities, on “individually appropriate learning outcomes.” For students with moderate to severe disabilities, components incorporated the idea that these learning outcomes should be in accordance with “the content on their individualized education programs,” “the district curriculum,” or both. Additional components addressed the thought that such meaningful education should result in “all students benefitting” from participation in the same activities.

**Belongingness, equal membership, acceptance, and being valued.** A fourth theme that emerged from respondents’ definitions addressed the concepts of belongingness, equal membership, acceptance, and being valued. Components subsumed within this theme referred to students with moderate to severe disabilities “being valued, contributing, and equal members of the [general education] class and school they would naturally attend.” Along with membership, components reflected the idea that students with disabilities should be perceived as “belonging to” the group of students that comprised a class, and that both students with disabilities and students from “other minorities” (e.g., “race, cultural or ethnic backgrounds”) should be “accepted and valued” by both the “adults and students without disabilities” throughout their educational environments. In other words, the overall climate of the educational environment should be one of “appreciating uniqueness” and “valuing diversity,” to the extent that “all are welcome” and “diversity is viewed as normal.”

**Collaborative integrated services by education teams.** A fifth theme that emerged from respondents’ definitions related to collaborative integrated services by education teams in relation to two aspects of service delivery. These included the idea that (a) an “education team collaboratively plans instruction, implements instruction, and evaluates each student’s progress;” and (b) services should be “integrated throughout general education activities” “alongside [instruction for] classmates without disabilities.”

**Themes Related to Systemic Inclusion**

Two themes emerged that went beyond simply including individual students; that is, these themes dealt with inclusion as a systemic philosophy. Specifically, components of definitions related to the thoughts that inclusion (a) is a philosophy or belief system that pervades an educational system and (b) is a process of meshing general and special education into one unified system of public education. Though components related to each of these themes were not as pervasive as those that emerged in relation to the five previously discussed themes, these themes did emerge and are not in conflict with the other themes. Instead, these two themes could be interpreted as extending the first five themes
beyond classroom practices for individual students to school and district policies and procedures.

**DISCUSSION**

In this study, we examined how writers and researchers in the field of moderate to severe disabilities define school inclusion at this point in time, and we found seven themes. As such, the findings provide a snapshot of what most likely is meant when writers and researchers in the field of moderate to severe disabilities currently use the term *school inclusion*. Because of the pervasiveness of the five themes in Table 1 that emerged from respondents’ definitions related to including individual students, we believe these themes could be viewed as a consensus among respondents on components of a definition of school inclusion for students with moderate to severe disabilities. That is, it could be expected that all five of these themes are evident in practice before it can be said that a student with moderate to severe disabilities is included. Moreover, we believe that the placement of students with moderate to severe disabilities in natural typical settings as described in Table 1, in and of itself, is not supported as an operational definition of school inclusion. Rather, our analysis of respondents’ comments indicate that in any operational definition of school inclusion for students with moderate to severe disabilities, the description of “placement in natural typical settings” must be accompanied by the descriptions of the remaining four themes in Table 1: (a) all students together for instruction and learning of individually appropriate learner outcomes; (b) supports and modifications within general education classes and the school community; (c) belongingness, equal membership, acceptance, and being valued; and (d) collaborative integrated services by education teams. Although each theme is represented by a single phrase, we believe that our interpretation of the respondents’ overall intent as described for each theme in Table 1 cannot be eliminated from any working definition of school inclusion for students with moderate to severe disabilities. In combination, these five themes incorporate the concepts of inclusion and inclusive schooling purported by McGregor and Vogelsberg (1998). Our study suggests, however, that implementation of practices, policies, and procedures that facilitate evidence of only some of these themes is insufficient to meet the definition of school inclusion of students with moderate to severe disabilities. It would be helpful for future research to determine whether other writers and researchers in school inclusion for students with moderate to severe disabilities agree with the themes that emerged from this set of writers and researchers, and how this current working definition continues to change with time. Such a quantitative study would be a logical next step in the use of the results from this initial qualitative analysis.

It must be noted that the combination of these five themes into a working definition does not conflict with concepts of best practice for students with moderate to severe disabilities identified in the literature. In fact, we believe that implementation of practices that reflect these themes could maximize the extent to which best practices are implemented. For example, (a) access to chronological age peers and curriculum and structuring distributed training trials using multiple exemplars across variables can occur naturally in typical settings used by nondisabled peers; (b) relevant functional curricu-
lum content can be taught both within general education activities and within pull-out instruction that occurs for all students, whether in the school or in the community; and (c) functional independence can be developed by providing instruction on being independent between and during naturally occurring activities—in the general education settings, in the school, and in the community. The five themes identified from respondents’ comments and delineated in Table 1, taken either individually or as a whole, support current best practices.

In contrast to the pervasiveness of the five themes related to school inclusion of individual students, we found the two themes related to systemic inclusion to be less pervasive in respondents’ comments. The degree to which we perceive that these themes can be viewed as extensions of the five themes in Table 1, however, plus their consistent appearance in the literature as important considerations in school inclusion, suggest they should remain important issues as the field grapples with how to define school inclusion and distinguish it from other approaches to school services.

In our analysis we examined responses by partitioning definitions into component parts, then organizing those components into common themes. It also is possible to compare and contrast the intent of the definitions in their entirety. That is, each definition can be viewed as a whole, and consistencies and discrepancies between and among definitions can be identified. Such an approach provides one way to support and qualify selected conclusions that were derived from the component analysis.

When we examined each definition as a whole, our interpretation of respondents’ comments strongly supported our conclusions that were based on the component analysis. In addition, our interpretation of whole definitions indicated that the first three of the five themes in Table 1 invariably were expressed in conjunction with each other. Specifically, these three themes were (a) placement in natural typical settings, (b) all students together for instruction and learning, and (c) supports and modifications within general education to meet appropriate learner outcomes. Although we believe that our interpretation of the component analysis of respondents’ submissions indicate that all five themes in Table 1 are essential components of the definition of school inclusion for students with moderate to severe disabilities, this particular analysis of each whole definition supports the conclusion that minimally these three themes are inseparable.

When examining the definitions as wholes, it also was noted that many respondents used terms like “all means all” and other language that we interpreted to mean that the concept of school inclusion should not be limited to students with disabilities. Because terminology can be expected to change as a field matures, we wonder whether in the future school inclusion will be viewed increasingly as a broad concept referencing educational access and equity for any and all students or, inversely, whether it will come to mean a specific type of placement coupled with a specific set of services for students who are served by special education. Given that our analysis uncovered components that we interpreted as reflecting values that clearly go beyond disability (e.g., belongingness, equal memberships, acceptance, and being valued), we would anticipate a trend toward the broader application.

The examination of definitions as wholes offered one view of school inclusion that was not revealed in the component analysis. A few respondents used qualifiers in their definitions, such as “with peers as appropriate” and “maximum extent possible.” Quali-
fiers of this kind perhaps are indicative of why students with moderate to severe disabilities continue to be denied placement in neighborhood school general education classes with appropriate supports and services. However, it is our opinion—an opinion supported by our interpretation of the majority of definitions provided by our study’s participants—that although language of this kind may describe how exceptions to school inclusion are justified, it does not help define school inclusion per se. It may instead call for a clear differentiation between school inclusion and school integration.

In sum, there are several aspects of a definition of school inclusion for students with moderate to severe disabilities that emerged from this study. It may be argued that our knowledge of the extent to which these themes are similar to those that may have been obtained from other writers and researchers in moderate to severe disabilities is limited due to the relatively small number of respondents and the narrow population of experts from which the sample was derived. The following, however, should be noted: (a) The intent of the study was to determine how writers and researchers specifically in the field of school inclusion for students with moderate to severe disabilities define inclusion through a qualitative analysis of definitions submitted within a short time and whether sufficient consistency in themes that emerged would allow the field to have one current working definition; (b) the respondents were largely professionals who were experienced in research and teacher preparation, who had many years of involvement in special education, and whose views had been shaped by their experiences with low incidence disabilities; and (c) all respondents had practical experience in facilitating school inclusion for students with moderate to severe disabilities. It was hoped that such a definition may promote more effective communication among interested individuals, facilitate the articulation of policies and procedures that are clear and understood widely, and enable research and professional discussions related to school inclusion for students with moderate to severe disabilities to be more focused and productive.

It also could be argued that this study is limited because it cannot be known how nonrespondents affected the outcomes (see M. L. Smith & Glass, 1987, for a discussion of differences between respondents and nonrespondents). The writers and researchers who received the survey were selected solely because of their expertise and interest in the subject, and those who took the time to complete the survey may be those who were most interested in issues related to school inclusion for students with moderate to severe disabilities. If so, it seems likely that they may comprise the group who most likely would define the parameters of inclusive education through their professional activities. Although the response rate was limited, it should be noted that the response rate we obtained is consistent with that obtained in similar surveys of similar length and from a similar potential response group (Billingsley & Kelley, 1994).

Although replication of our research could strengthen our confidence in our findings, we believe that our respondents expressed a consensus on the concept of school inclusion for students with moderate to severe disabilities that is of value for how our field uses this term in research and practice. Specifically, we believe that the themes that emerged from this work may be viewed as comprising a useful working definition of this concept. Of course, additional research is needed if we are to establish the degree to which this definition is held by additional numbers of practitioners and families both within the field of moderate to severe disabilities and in other disability areas. Moreover,
additional research also is required if we are to clarify how individuals with expertise in other areas of general and special education perceive school inclusion for other student populations.

Although the results of this study provide a conceptual framework for discussing school inclusion for students with moderate to severe disabilities and conducting related research, much work remains to be done with respect to identifying specific educational practices, processes, and policies that either support, or are necessary for, particular themes to be reflected within a setting that is perceived to be inclusive. Whereas some of the seven themes are reflected in clearly identifiable practices, others are nebulous. For example, a theme like “placement in natural typical settings” inherently provides more clear-cut guidelines for educational practices, processes, and policies than a theme like “belongingness, equal membership, acceptance, and being valued.” Once educational practices, processes, and policies that reflect all seven themes have been identified, they then could be used by administrators, parents, and instructional personnel to evaluate current services for individual students, as well as to compare and contrast services within and across schools and districts. In addition, outcomes experienced by graduates of educational programs could be correlated with either the presence or absence of practices, processes, and policies that reflect these themes—themes that emerged from writers and researchers in the field of moderate to severe disabilities and that we believe define the very essence of school inclusion for this population.

REFERENCES


DEFINING INCLUSION


