

Background & Objectives

- Feeling belonging to a group is a core element of one's social inclusion¹.
- Understanding and monitoring services designed to enhance social inclusion requires measurable indicators, based on transparent and valid definitions of outcomes.
- The literature on “sense of belonging” spans many disciplines and lacks a cohesive definition.
- We reviewed this literature to develop a transdisciplinary conceptualization of belonging to support researchers, policy makers, and service providers design and evaluate services for persons with intellectual disabilities.

Methods

We searched multiple databases, for the term “sense of belonging”; limited to English language publications from 1990 to July 2011.

Inclusion criteria : 1) qualitatively explored the meaning of sense of belonging; 2) the meaning of a sense of belonging emerged as a theme; 3) quantitatively measured sense of belonging as a dependent or independent variable.

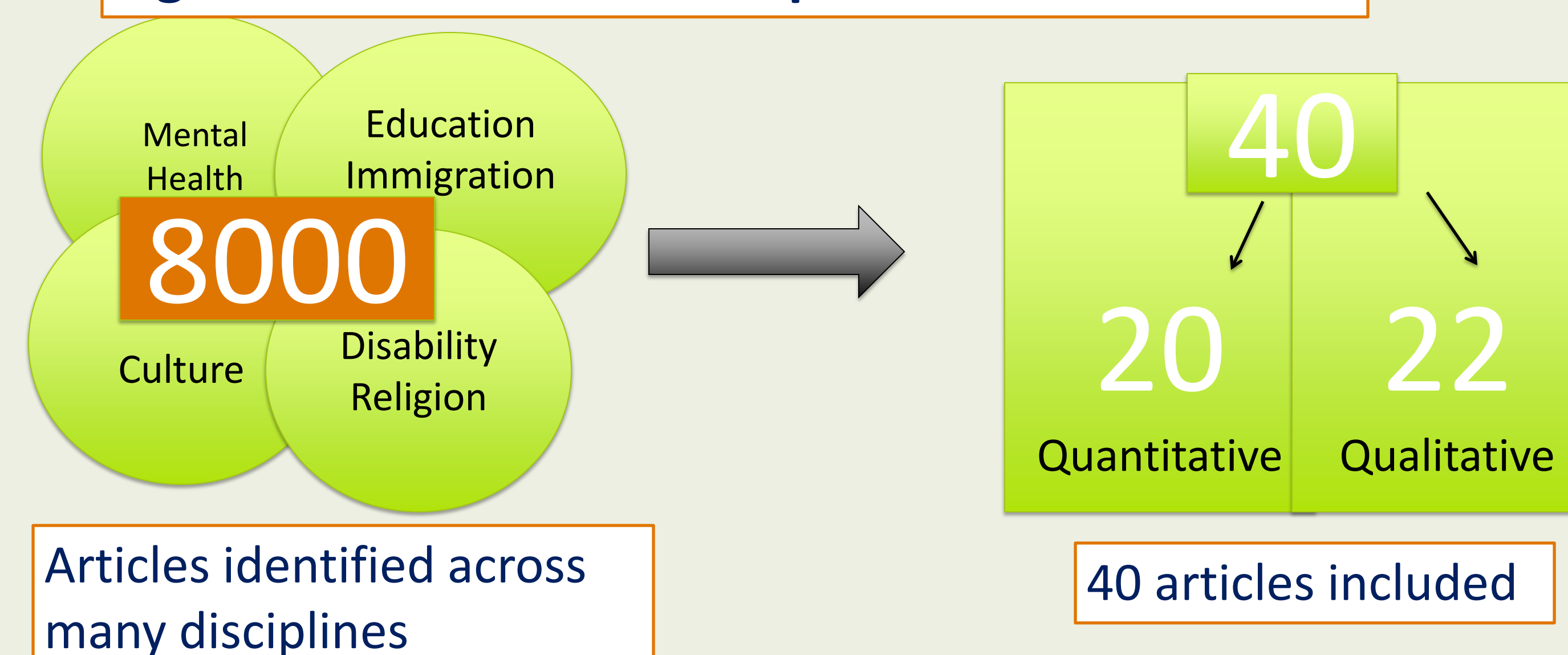
Article Selection

Articles were reviewed until saturation in key concepts to define a sense of belonging was reached.

Definition Development

Existing definitions, main trends, and critical themes were categorized into coherent, meaningful statements.

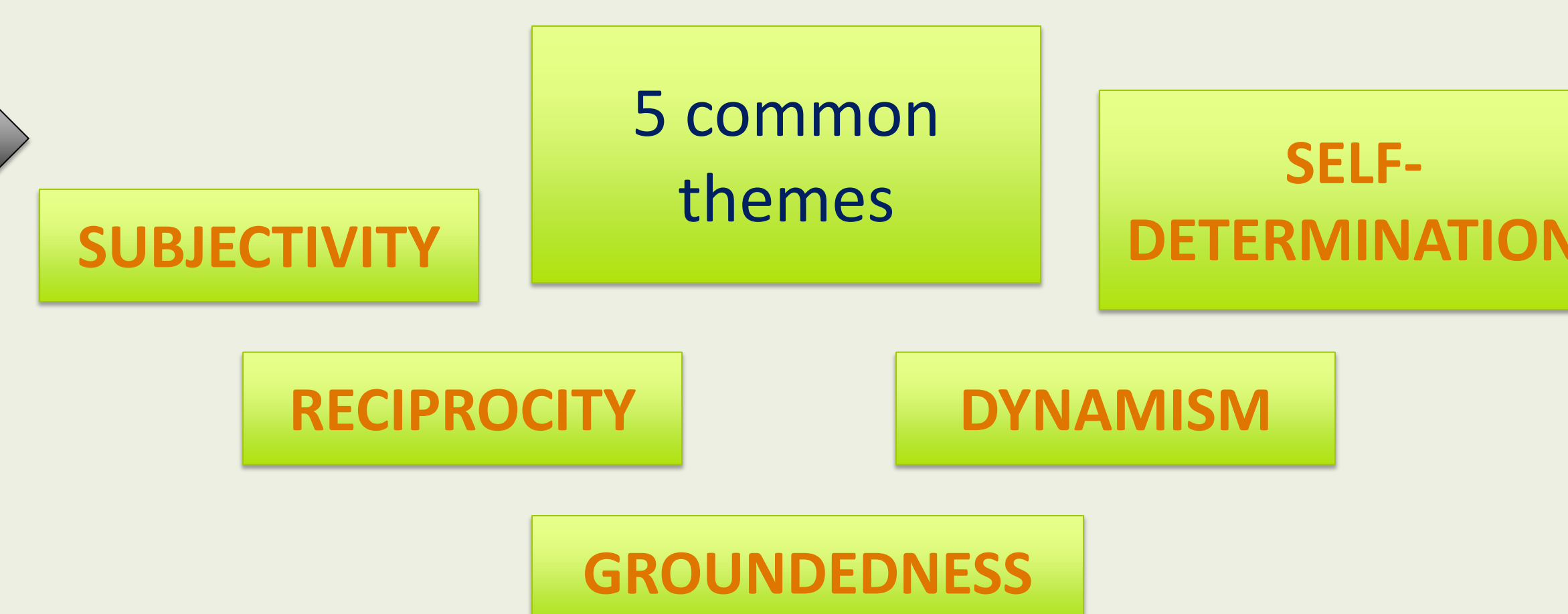
Figure 1. Literature review process and results



Results

Table 1. Describing the thematic concepts of a sense of belonging

Component of Definition	Description
Subjectivity	-Is a perception - Feelings of fit, respect, value
Groundedness	-Referent group anchors the feeling -One belongs to something/someone
Reciprocity	-Sense of relatedness or connectedness -Built on shared experiences, understanding
Dynamism	-Influenced by social and physical environment -Feeling is fluid; may not be permanent
Self-Determination	-Right of the individual to choose to belong -Influenced by perceived power differentials



Final Definition of a Sense of Belonging

A sense of belonging is a **subjective feeling** of value and respect derived from a **reciprocal relationship** to an external referent that is built on a foundation of shared experiences, beliefs, or personal characteristics. These feelings of external connectedness are **grounded** to the context or referent group, **to whom one chooses, wants and feels permission to belong**. This **dynamic phenomenon** may be either hindered or promoted by **complex interactions between environmental and personal factors**.

Future Directions

Effective programs must aim to increase a user's sense of belonging. Developing measurable indicators to capture this service outcome will aid researchers, service providers and policy makers in understanding the impact of services on a users' sense of belonging and improving social inclusion.

References

1. http://www.elaws.gov.on.ca/html/statutes/english/elaws_statutes_08s14_e.htm

Acknowledgements

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