



Academic Thinking in the Context of Education

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Studying the Sense of Membership (Belonging) and the
Role of Schoolwide Events

In the previous lecture

- Differences between research traditions, aims, and procedures
- Importance of defining key concepts
- Different types of data means different types of methods of analysis
- Differences of qualitative and quantitative data

- Today these questions are discussed from the mixed-methods approach

The aims of this presentation

- Scientific aims:
 - Define the key concepts of membership/sense of belonging
 - Present a mixed-methods approach of studying membership in education
 - Propose different ways in which research can be conducted from the same data

- Pedagogical/practical aims:
 - Suggest ways in which studying membership in a particular context can be beneficial for developing school practices
 - Provide guidelines for good practices in schools

- Based on my PhD study "Creating A Sense of Membership in Basic Education: The contributions of Schoolwide Events"

A warm-up task

- Define a research topic that concerns education by answering the questions presented
 - What is the focus/interest of your study?
 - What is the key term/concept of your study?
 - What is the core research question - and sub-questions, if needed, of your study?
 - How will you answer the research questions? (Data and methods)
 - What do you think your study will contribute to research/practice?

Summary: focus of my study

- Do schoolwide events contribute to the creation of membership in basic education? If yes, how? If no, why?
- Data from Finnish teachers and students (14 to 16 year olds) gathered between 2011-2014
- Data collection started from the interest to study students' experiences of school celebrations from an intercultural perspective
 - focus was expanded on the sense of membership during the study process

Multidisciplinary theoretical framework

- Key concepts used to understand the creation of membership were
 - Intercultural education
 - School belonging
 - Social integration
- These main concepts have different theoretical underpinnings -> however, they also have overlapping viewpoints

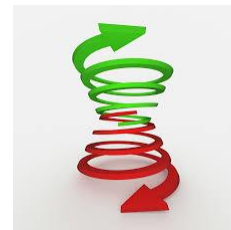
Taking a closer look to the research process:

How to investigate student's sense of membership?

- A case study approach -

- The main stages of research:
 - question -> method -> results -> conclusions
- In the next slides some aspects of these phases are discussed more in detail

Task: During the presentation, reflect your own research topic in relation to the issues discussed



1. Finding the focus/interest of the study

- At the beginning:
 - What should your study investigate?
 - Why is this topic interesting?
- Is it topical?
- Is it under-studied?
- Are there conflicting results?



1. Finding the focus/interest of the study

- Started with the following questions:
 - Why and for what are schoolwide celebrations organized in basic education?
 - What kind of content do they have?
 - What are their educational purposes?
 - How are these events experienced by teacher and students at the lower-secondary level of basic education?
 - Do these events influence students' sense of belonging at their school? How?

1. Finding the focus/interest of the study

- School celebrations are part of the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education in Finland
- Typical events are organized around national and/or historical events
- Many traditional elements and basic idea of these events originate from Christian religions, eg. Christamas, Easter etc.
- Not considered as practicing of religion but in practice problems occur

1. Finding the focus/interest of the study

- Debates about the suitability of religious-based elements within school celebrations have been discussed from the following viewpoints:
 - Schools as secular
 - Schools as multicultural
 - Schools as places for passing on traditions
 - Should schoolwide events be inclusive for all and why?
- Very little research in educational or other sciences has focused on the topic

1. Finding the focus/interest of the study

This study's key interest is

- The role of schoolwide events as possible means for enhancing students' sense of membership/sense of belonging
- Focus was chosen because of societal and pedagogical interest

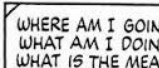
2. Identifying the key concepts used in the field

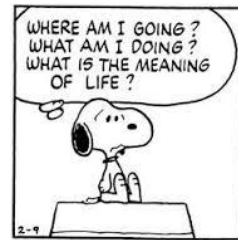
- What are the key terms of your research topic?
 - Eg. Math education? Instruction in classroom? Social relationships among children? Teacher-student interaction? Gifted education?
- How have these key terms been investigated before?

2. Identifying the the reserach traditions related to the key concepts

- For example, "Sense of belonging" has been approached from various research traditions:
 - *(social-)psychology* – mostly quantitative
 - *sociology* – theoretical orientation, qualitative and quantitative approches
 - *education* – theoretical orientation, qualitative and quantitative approches, often mixed methods
 - Eg. intercultural education, special needs education, PISA and other large data sets

2. Identifying the key concepts used in the field and the research tradition related to them

- When studying the sense of membership, is the focus can be, for example, on
 - The school climate
 - The classroom
 - Issues of bullying
 - Exclusive/inclusive practices?
 - Experiences of belonging
 - How can these be "operationalized"?
- 



3. Choosing and defining the key concept

- Defining the main concept you are using to study the phenomenon
 - What does your main concept mean?
 - How does the main concept related to other main concepts in the field?



3. Choosing and defining the key concept:

- In this study the key term is students' sense of membership/sense of belonging
- Sense of belonging is a reciprocal relationship:
 - one is accepted as part of the group by others and
 - one feels connected with the other members of the community
- Simple, right?

3. Choosing and defining the key concept:

- Sense of belonging is often also referred to as "sense of membership", "connectedness", or "social/affective engagement"
 - (eg. Goodenow, 1993; Roffey 2013, Sayer, Beaven, Stringer, & Hermena, 2013)
- Are these the same thing?

3. Choosing and defining the key concept:

- Different traditions bring forward various perspectives about the nature of belonging
 - is "belonging" static or constantly created?
 - is belonging the lack of negative issues, such as bullying?
 - what kinds of practices support belonging?

3. Choosing and defining the key concept

- How is the "sense of belonging" formed at school?
- Include a variety of formal and informal groups and relationships
- Eg.
 - student – student
 - student – teacher
 - student – administration
 - student – parent

3. Choosing and defining the key concept

- According to studies the most important elements of belonging are the relationships among
 - student – student
 - student – teacher
- "Studies from primary to tertiary education have indicated that students' sense of membership is an essential aspect of school life across grade levels and that it is mainly shaped by relationships with teachers and peers (e.g., Bond et al., 2007; Cemalcilar, 2010; Lester et al., 2013; Ma, 2003; Roffey, 2013; Rowe & Stewart, 2011; Tillery, Varjasa, Roachb, Kuperminc, & Mayers, 2013)."

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Käyttätymistieteellinen tiedekunta /
Henkilön nimi / Esityksen nimi

3. Choosing and defining the key concept

Providing a definition:

"The aim of this thesis is to provide new knowledge regarding the ways in which schoolwide events can contribute to the creation of membership in school communities. In the educational context, the sense of membership refers to a situation in which a student is accepted as part of a group by others and feels connected with the other members of the community (Roffey, 2013; Sayer et al., 2013). The experience of membership thus refers to students' emotional and social engagement with their school community (e.g., Gaete, Rojas-Barahona, Olivares, & Araya, 2016; Lam et al., 2012). In contrast, being bullied or otherwise excluded by others hinders a student's sense of membership (Bernstein et al., 2010; Fredrickson, 2007). -

However, as the following sections will show, notions such as the "sense of belonging" (Goodenow, 1994; OECD, 2013) and "connectedness" (e.g., Lam et al., 2012; Rowe & Stewart, 2011) are commonly used as synonyms for membership."

4. Locating the key concept in the theoretical framework(s)

- In addition to the concept, what is the (main) theoretical framework that you use to investigate your topic?
- What are the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of this framework?
 - What does this mean for the way data is collected and analyzed?

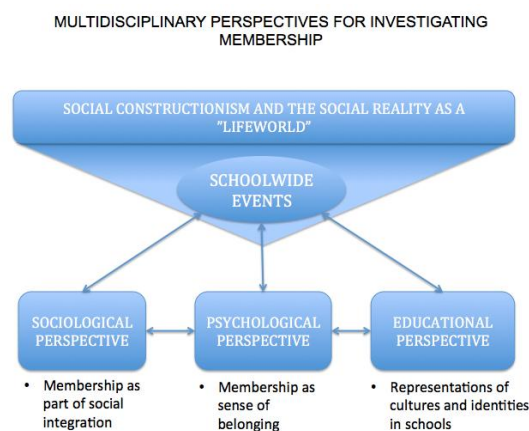
4. Locating the key concept in the theoretical framework(s)

- Sense of belonging has been studied in different fields:
 - Psychological (& biological?) perspective
 - The need to belong is an innate need of humans
 - (Socio-) psychological perspective:
 - Affiliation to groups is central for individual's sense of identity
 - Sociological perspective:
 - Sense of belonging is important for collective identities that maintain group solidarity
- -> familiarizing with the research paradigms behind these

4. Locating the key concept in the theoretical framework(s)

- “This study starts from the argument that membership is a **multifaceted concept that is rooted in various disciplines**. The viewpoints presented in sociological, psychological, and educational studies are used to discuss the aspects of membership in a school community through involvement in schoolwide events.”

4. Locating the key concept in the theoretical framework(s)



Niemi, 2016

5. Finding the core research question/theme - getting back to phase 1!

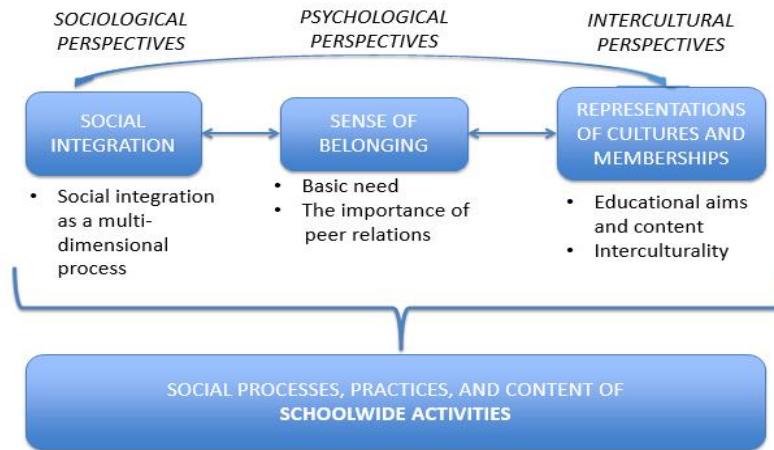
- Clarifying the research aim into a question/theme that can be answered
 - Narrowing the scope
 - Defining the research participants
- Justifying the importance of the topic



5. Finding the core research question/theme – getting back to phase 1!

- Situating the key concept in the research context
- Students' sense of membership/sense of belonging (key concept)
 - AND
- Schoolwide events (context)
- -> and finding out if there are connections between these

THE KEY ELEMENTS OF THE MULTIDISCIPLINARY FRAMEWORK



Niemi, 2016

5. Finding the core research question/theme - getting back to phase 1!

- Why does the sense of membership matter in education?
 - Positively related with students' motivation towards learning, academic achievement, school conduct, health behavior, and future orientation
 - A low sense of belonging has been shown to relate with an increased risk of school dropout and health problems

(eg. Bond et al., 2007; Crespo, Jose, Kielpikowski, & Pryor, 2013; Demanet & Van Houtte, 2012; Gillen-O'Neel & Fuligni, 2013; Korhonen, Linnanmäki, & Aunio, 2013; Langille, Rasic, Kisely, Flowerde, & Cobbett, 2012; Lester, Waters, & Cross, 2013).

- -> evidence shows that the phenomenon is important

5. Finding the core research question/theme - getting back to phase 1!

- "Longitudinal studies, for example, from the US, Australia, and New Zealand, have found that students' sense of school belonging to their school community is related to several academic and non-academic features of their lives, such as their motivation for learning, level of academic achievements, school conduct, health behavior, and general future orientation (cf. Bond et al., 2007; Crespo, Jose, Kielpikowski, & Pryor, 2013; McNeely & Falci, 2004)."

5. Finding the core research question/theme - getting back to phase 1!

- "Previous studies have found that schoolwide events and activities are among the prominent avenues for supporting students' experiences of connectedness with teachers and fellow students in school (Rowe & Stewart, 2009, 2011). - - Despite their prominent importance, the role and contribution of schoolwide events have scarcely been studied in educational sciences"
- -> There is a lack of knowledge
- How this study contributes to that?

5. Finding the core research question/theme

- "The need to gain a better understanding of how school practices can support students' experiences of membership is relevant internationally."
- -> "The aim of this thesis is to provide new knowledge regarding the ways in which schoolwide events can contribute to the creation of membership in school communities."

6. Formulating core research question and sub-questions

- What is the main research question of your study?
 - What are the sub-questions of your study?



6. Formulating core research question and sub-questions

- How do schoolwide events contribute to students' experiences of membership in the school community?

This main research question consists of the following three subquestions:

- A) How do schoolwide events contribute to students' membership through *personal-level experiences*, B) *school community-level practices*, and C) *representations of culture*?

6. Formulating core research question and their sub-questions

- Other examples
- I) How do schoolwide events shape social integration at the a) cultural, b) school community, and c) personal levels, according to students' experiences?
- II) How are students' socio-emotional experiences and educational outcomes of school celebrations related to their sense of school belonging? - If such relationships exist, how are they influenced by experiences of peer connectedness?
- III) How do the three celebrations represent and define Finnish cultural and national traditions, according to the teachers? How do the religious-based elements of the celebrations relate to Finnish traditions, from the teachers' perspective? What kinds of experiences and attitudes have teachers linked to intercultural celebrations or the intercultural content of the Finnish celebrations?

7. Answering the research questions

- What kinds of data do you need for answering the research question?
- How do you analyze the data?

7. Answering the research questions

Mixed-method approach

- Qualitative, semi-structured theme interviews (n = 30)
- Quantitative survey data (n = 696)
- -> analysis procedures from a mixed-method perspective
- Supplementary video recordings and photographs during field observations
- In addition other types of data

7. Answering the research questions

Quantitative data

- Was collected from all of the grade 8 and grade 9 students in three schools
- Survey questionnaire included multiple scales that covered students' experiences of their school community and of their experiences related to school celebrations
- The data collection was quite fast and organized

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M
1	Vastaaja	ID	Koulu	Luokka	k1_k2	k3_k4			k5_k6	Harrastus	k7_k8	k9_k10	
2	1	297	K1	8A	1	2	1		1	1	4	3	2
3	2	298	K1	8A	1	2	1		1	1	1	3	2
4	3	299	K1	8A	1	2	1		1	1;2;3;4		3	2
5	4	300	K1	8A	1	2	1		1	1;2;4		3	2
6	5	301	K1	8A	1	2	1		1	1	4	3	2
7	6	302	K1	8A	1	2	1		1	1	1	3	2
8	7	304	K1	8A	1	1	1		1	1;2;3;		2	2
9	8	305	K1	8A	1	2	1		1	1	1	3	2
10	9	306	K1	8A	1	2	1		1	1	1	3	2
11	10	307	K1	8A	1	1	1		1	1;5		2	2
12	11	308	K1	8A	1	1	1		1	1	6	3	2
13	12	309	K1	8A	1	1	1		1	1		3	2

7. Answering the research questions:



Qualitative data

- Was collected from a targeted group of students -> 30 students from grades 8 and 9 in three schools
- The analysis procedure was multi-level and was conducted in several rounds
- Abductive analysis where the data is analyzed first inductively and then contrasted with existing theoretical viewpoints

7. Answering the research questions:

Quantitative data analysis in a nutshell

- The main phases of the research procedures included:
 - Formulating hypothesis
 - Making the survey questionnaire by combining previously used and tested scales and complementing it with measures for this study's purposes
 - Testing the scales
 - Making preliminary analysis with all the data and all the items
 - Leaving out items that did not work properly
 - Carrying out analysis (eg. correlations, factor loadings, SEM) for testing the hypothesis
 - validity and reliability analyses
 - Reporting the results

7. Answering the research questions:

Qualitative content data analysis in a nutshell

- The main phases of the research procedures included:
 - organizing and conducting the interviews
 - recording of the interviews
 - transcribing the data
 - analysing the interviews one by one
 - analysing all data by questions
 - identifying overlapping/contradicting themes within the the answers
 - contrasting the data with the a theoretical model
 - making the final analysis in relation to research questions
 - validity and credibility analyses
 - reporting the findings

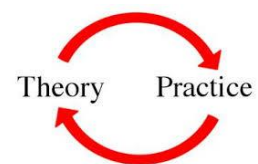
7. Answering the research questions:

Mixed-method analysis

- During the data collection and first phases of the analysis both data sets were contrasted
- After analysing both sets individually, themes were again analysed from both sets for triangulation

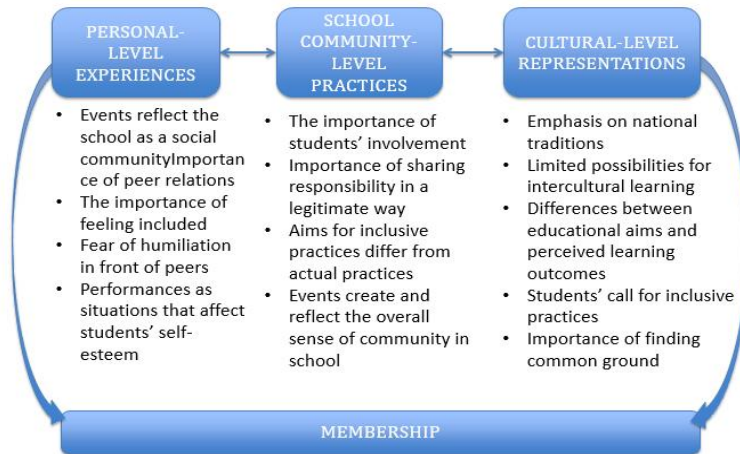
8. Reporting the results and making suggestions for the future

- What are the outcomes of your study?
- How are the relevant for the scientific community?
- How are the relevant for practitioners (teachers, headmasters, Ministry of Education, general public)?



8. Reporting the results and making suggestions for the future

The main findings at the levels of person, school community, and culture



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SUGGESTIONS FOR GOOD PRACTICES BASED ON THE FINDINGS



CREATING GOOD PRACTICES BY:

- Focusing attention on how the school operates as a social community
- Finding practices that suit the needs of the school
- Supporting students' involvement in planning and organizing
- Recognizing the importance of small things
- Focusing on the events overall rather than on single elements
- Aiming for inclusive practices

Niemi, 2016

Thank you!

- Contact: pia-maria.niemi@helsinki.fi
- Publications:
 - Thesis "Creating a Sense of Membership in Basic Education : The Contributions of Schoolwide Events" can be found at the "ethesis"-online portal :
<https://helda.helsinki.fi/bitstream/handle/10138/169078/Creating.pdf?sequence=1>
 - Niemi, P-M. (2016). Students' experiences of social integration in schoolwide activities—an investigation in the Finnish context. *Education Inquiry*.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/20004508.2016.1275184>
 - Niemi, P-M. & Hotulainen, R. (2016). Enhancing students' sense of belonging through school celebrations: A study in Finnish lower-secondary schools. *International Journal of Research Studies in Education*, 5(2), 43–58.
<http://www.consortiacademia.org/index.php/ijrse/article/view/1197/526>
 - Niemi, P-M. Kuusisto, A. & Kallioniemi, A. (2014). Discussing school celebrations from an intercultural perspective – A study in the Finnish context. *Intercultural Education*, 25 (4), 255–268.
 doi: 10.1080/14675986.2014.926143