

# Prerequisites for Participation for Students with Impairments in Different School Activities

## An Analytic Tool for Identifying Barriers and Positive Factors for Participation in the School Context

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### ABSTRACT

“Prerequisites for participation for students with impairments in different school activities”, is the title of a research project recently conducted by the National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools in Stockholm, Sweden. The overall aim of the project was to create a structural framework for use as a tool for identifying factors for participation, barriers as well as factors in favor of participation. What are the prerequisites for participation for students with impairments in the school arena today? We wanted to develop a tool for assessment and identification of environmental prerequisites for participation. Currently, there is a tendency to explain lack of participation and interplay as depending only on individual qualities such as diagnosis and personal characteristics. In this paper we will present a model for analyzing these students’ everyday experiences of participation and interplay in the classroom, focusing basically on environmental factors. The analytic tool is based on a theoretical model consisting of six aspects of participation that has been developed by Professor Ulf Janson (2004, 2005), Stockholm University. By observation and breakdown of the conception of participation into six aspects such as: affiliation, accessibility, acceptance, co-activity, involvement and autonomy we believe we have found a new way to structure and to understand the prerequisites for participation for students with impairment in different school activities.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The participation of all children with or without disabilities is a fundamental principle in universal human rights legislation – for example, *The Convention on the Rights of the Child* (<http://www.unicef.org>), adopted by the Assembly of the United Nations in 1989, and the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (<http://www.un.org>), adopted by the United Nations in 2006. These conventions have strongly influenced

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national legislation regulating the school system in Sweden, as in many other countries.

For many years in Sweden, the majority of students with impairments of some kind, have been attending mainstream schools. There are still special schools, but most parents choose a local school close to where they live. The obvious gain is to give these children the same right to go to school in their home area as everyone else and hopefully increased social contacts between students with and without disabilities. Unfortunately, recent studies concerning inclusive education in many countries have shown that many schools fail in creating an inclusive environment for all children. Students with impairments of some kind often feel lonely and left out from the group, some of them also find it hard to participate in activities with peers in school. Many of these studies have also shown that the main reason for this failure is *not* due to these students lack of interest in participating. (Janson, Nordström & Thunstrom 2007, Söderqvist Dunkers, 2011). Possible environmental explanations are structural barriers in the mainstream curriculum, inadequate adaptations or non-working assistive technology, but also lack of access and /or recognition from others. “Prerequisites for participation for students with impairments in different school activities” is the title of a recent study at the National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools in Sweden. The overall aim of the study was to create a framework for use as a tool in identifying factors for participation, positive factors as well as barriers. The theory of aspects of participation is developed by Professor Ulf Janson (2004, 2005) of the Department of Pedagogy and Didactics at Stockholm University. The aspects for participation have earlier been tried in studies dealing with preschool environment (Melin, 2013). The six aspects of participation are three objective aspects: *Belonging*, *Accessibility* and *Co-activity*, and three subjective aspects: *Recognition*, *Involvement* and *Autonomy*. One of the research questions of the present study was: Would the model be useful in understanding the factors for participation in primary and secondary school arenas?

Another aim of the study was to describe and define the concept of participation. What do we mean when they

talk about participation? Participation in what? A variety of activities take place during an ordinary school day – for example, tuition in the classroom, athletics and games in the gymnasium, play activities with peers during breaks and lunch in the canteen. Some students may be able to participate on fairly equal terms during, for example, structured lessons in the classroom, but not during athletics and games or in play activities in the schoolyard. The prerequisites for participation are therefore likely to be different from one activity to another.

When there are problems concerning participation in school, we often search for answers by analyzing individual factors such as the child’s personal characteristics or medical diagnosis. But do students with impairments in fact have the same chance to participate on equal terms in the classroom and in play activities during breaks in the schoolyard? To what extent are these students taught together with their classmates in the classroom, and to what extent are they taught in a separate room by a teacher’s assistant? Do these students have access to adequate learning materials and assistive technology in the classroom? Furthermore, do they have access to the communicative context in different school arenas? In addition, in what way do these prerequisites influence the student’s participation and social interaction with peers?

We have been asking ourselves these questions for many years. What we needed were analytic tools to broaden our knowledge of the environmental perspective and to identify barriers for and positive factors of participation. We also considered that a vital source of information was to listen to the students’ own voices and to highlight their opinions on possible ways of participating in different school arenas.

## 2. THE MODEL OF PARTICIPATION

How can we use the aspects of participation as a structural tool to get a better understanding of the prerequisites for participation? Is it possible to use a model to make the concept of participation appear more visible and distinct in different school activities? The concept of participation in our study comprises of the six aspects of participation – *Belonging*, *Accessibility*, *Co-activity*, *Recognition*, *Involvement* and *Autonomy*. The first three are objective aspects, or what can be observed by others, and the next three are subjective aspects, what individuals can feel or experience themselves (Janson, 2004, 2005).

Objective aspects (what can be observed by others):

- **Belonging:** To formally belong to a school, or a certain group.
- **Accessibility:** To have both *physical access* to adapted learning materials, assistive technology and access to the environment, and *communicative access* – access to communication in the classroom and access to the verbal instructions given by the teacher.

- **Co-activity:** To be part of and to participate in the same activity together with others. Co-activity does not mean that individuals have to do things in exactly the same way, but they are involved in the same activity as everyone else.

Subjective aspects (what individuals can feel or experience themselves):

- **Recognition:** To be and to feel accepted by others.
- **Involvement:** To experience a feeling of belonging. Asking individuals themselves will indicate whether they feel involved.
- **Autonomy:** To be able to have an influence on their own situation, as their classmates have.

What we wanted to explore was whether Professor Janson’s aspects would make it easier to identify barriers and to discover positive factors for participation.

We wanted to try Janson’s six aspects of participation in our study. But the prerequisites for participation can also vary in different situations during the school day. A variety of activities take place during an ordinary school day. In some situations when student is for example interacting with the teacher under a structured lesson in the classroom, some students may be able to participate on fairly equal terms, but the situation can be quite different during athletics and games or in spare time with peers. The prerequisites for participation are therefore likely to be different from one activity to another. A structural model for understanding the concept of participation better was developed.

### 2.1 A Model for Understanding the Prerequisites for Participation

	Teaching culture	Peer culture	Care culture
Belonging			
Accessibility <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Physical</li> <li>• Commu nicative</li> </ul>			
Co-activity			
Recognition			
Involvement			
Autonomy			

**Figure 1.** Model for participation. Szönyi & Söderqvist Dunkers (2012).

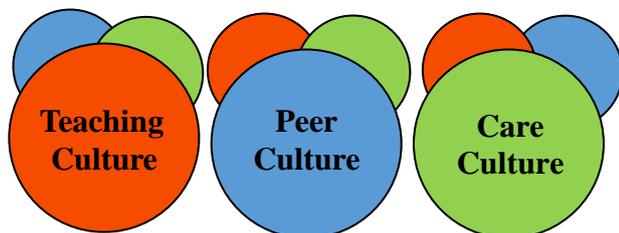
## 2.2 The Aspects

The aspects listed in the left-hand column in Figure 1 can be helpful to identify barriers, and positive factors, for participation. The model may look like a spreadsheet in Excel or a similar program, but it is not meant to be used as a chart where notations should be made in every cell. The function is intended to be more of a structure for thinking about participation in different school activities.

## 2.3 The Cultures

The cultures, given as column heads in Figure 1, pictures different arenas in school. Both preschool and school arenas are to be seen as intercultural arenas, consisting of different cultures that exist side by side and continuously interact in an ongoing process. The cultures that can be identified in the school environment are teaching culture, peer culture and care culture, as shown in Figure 2.

## 2.4 The School Context Consists of Different Cultures



**Figure 2.** School context consists of different cultures  
Source: Melin (2009, 2013) Janson (2005) Szönyi & Söderqvist Dunkers (2012).

- Teaching culture describes the relationship between the teacher and the student. The relationship is vertical and is based on the fact that the teacher possesses a higher authority due to age and mastery.
- Peer culture is different, though, in the sense that it is a horizontal relationship and its criterion and premises are ruled basically by lust. Participation in a peer group cannot be taken for granted; it has to be earned every day (Corsaro, 1990, 1997).
- Care culture is another vertical relationship and resembles more the relationship between the child and the parent. The focus of the adult is the well-being of the child, and the adult possesses a higher authority.

## 3. METHODS

In our study we aimed to identify the barriers to and positive factors for participation by observing students with different impairments in various school activities. The target group comprised of 29 students (15 boys and 14 girls) who were attending both mainstream schools

and special teaching groups and who had different impairments (intellectual disability, visual impairment or motor disabilities).

We carried out 14 observations and 29 individual interviews with students in the age group of 8-16 years. In the observations we observed the students' everyday activities during a normal school day. The situations where we observed the students were normal activities that takes place during a school day, for example lessons in the classroom, lunchtime in the school canteen and playtime in the schoolyard. The observations were not videotaped, but descriptions of what each student was doing and/or saying in each situation was written down and analysed. We also carried out semi-structured interviews with all 29 students.

We then analysed the data gathered from observations and interviews using the model for participation. By observing and interviewing the students in different activities and then use them in different aspects of participation in the analysis process, we believe we have found a way to focus both on objective factors (what can be observed by others) and on subjective factors (what the students feel and experience themselves). This turned out to be a successful way to distinguish important information of the barriers for and the positive factors for participation.

## 4. THE MODEL OF PARTICIPATION IN PRACTICE

Throughout the school day, the students are moving in and out of different cultures within the school arena many times. The prerequisites for participation in different cultures can be very different, which puts certain demands on the student's ability to be flexible and to adapt in different situations or activities. In addition, to be part of one culture does not necessarily mean that an individual is accepted as a participant in another culture. The model can help us to identify barriers to and positive factors for participation in different cultures. Using the model as a screening tool also proved to be good way to identify in what area interventions should be made.

To illustrate we will give an example from our study, which was based on an observation and an interview carried out at Tim's school. Tim is 10 years old and attends a mainstream school in his home town. He is blind and he loves music, but nevertheless he feels uncomfortable during the music lessons in school. The main barrier for Tim's participation is lack of communicative access during the music lesson, this means that the communication used in the classroom and the instructions given by the teacher contains a great number of very visual concepts that is impossible for him to perceive. This makes it very hard for him to share the same information as his classmates and consequently causes a feeling of being left out of the group. Lack of communicative access is fairly common barrier for students who are visually impaired in a mainstream classroom. This example made it very clear how the participation model can be helpful as a tool to understand

why a student can feel either included or left out of the group during an ordinary lesson.

#### 4.1 Example

The music teacher is giving instructions to the group by making notes on the whiteboard; he is pointing out certain directions for the students and is using a lot of non-verbal body language. Suddenly all the children in the classroom start to laugh when the teacher points at something funny at the whiteboard. For Tim who is blind, this is impossible to follow, because no one is verbalizing what is going on. The children then take out their instruments. The teacher explains: "When I do like this [demonstrates using his hands], everyone has to stop playing immediately". Tim turns to the student next to him to ask him something and the teacher reprimands Tim, saying, "That applies to you, too, Tim". All the students take out their scores, except Tim who does not have a Braille version of the score.

Tim says:

Today, for example, the teacher said, "When I'm doing like this, you should stop playing". It's rather difficult ... don't you think? Maybe he could say "Stop" instead of waving with his arms like that.

Tim, who does not enjoy the music classes in school, feels no enthusiasm for music either. The lack of accessibility during class has affected both his ability to be involved in the same activities as his classmates, his autonomy and also his enthusiasm for participation. The participation aspects influence each other, generating a negative spiral essentially caused by the lack of accessibility and possibly also by the lack of recognition from the teacher.

What became obvious in our study is that a high level of accessibility (both physical and communicative) strongly influenced other aspects like co-activity, recognition and involvement in a positive way. When accessibility was high, students with impairments could participate, which often led to feelings of involvement and recognition, and this is to be seen as positive factors for participation. The six aspects of participation are linked and also influence each other. An intervention made to increase a student's participation in *one* aspect often had a direct influence on other aspects of participation.

#### 4.2 Example

The next example is from Peter's school. Peter is 15 years old and has an intellectual disability. He knows how important it is to be a part of the same activity as his classmates, even if he cannot participate in exactly the same way as they do. Co-activity in the care culture also affects co-activity with his peers in the peer culture.

Peter:

What I want to say to teachers is, not to hang onto that things might be a

bit difficult. Most of the time, I can participate even though I may do things a bit differently. The important thing is not to be left out...

The important thing to be accepted by others is to take part in the same activities. To co-operate ... that makes you feel equal. I think this basically comes from doing things together.

Doing things together and being a part of the same activities were elements that nearly every student pointed out as crucial for participation. Their experience was that it is much harder to be accepted in the peer culture if they do not participate in the same school activities as their classmates

## 5. RESULTS

The most important finding of the study was that the observed aspects of participation interacted with and influenced each other in a continuously on-going process. What also became clear was that a high level of accessibility (both physical and communicative) strongly influenced other aspects like co-activity, recognition and involvement in a positive way.

When the level of accessibility was high, students with impairments could participate. This increased their feelings of involvement and recognition, and can be considered as positive factors for participation. In contrast, students were unable to participate because of barriers like lack of adapted study materials and assistive technology. Another important barrier was lack of access to the communicative context shared by everyone else in the classroom or playground. In the long run this lack of access can cause a feeling of insufficient involvement and acceptance and can sometimes lead to expressions of anger or frustration.

In the study we also found that different cultures in the school arena put different demands on the students. Furthermore, support for creating participation and inclusive environments in different cultures must be framed in different ways to generate the best results.

## 6. DISCUSSION

Participation and being a part of a group or a certain context is important for all children. But prerequisites for participation can be very different for students who have impairment, depending on the context where they are participating. A high level of participation in one culture does not necessarily lead to a high level of participation in another culture. For example, a high level of participation in the teaching culture does not automatically signal a high level of participation in the peer culture. Many factors can impact the outcome of participation (Söderqvist Dunkers, 2011). Does the student have access to assistive technology? Is it possible for students with impairments to participate in the same activity? Is the socio-communicative climate accessible for the student? These are some of the questions needed to be asked to understand the situation for these students. Most of the students did not see their own impairment as a barrier for participation, it was often the character of the activity that was crucial for participation or not.

From the interviews we learned that the aspect that seemed most significant for participation for the students themselves was recognition. If the students experienced a low level of recognition from teachers and peers, it implied exclusion in both the teaching culture and the peer culture.

From the interviews with the students in the study, we also learned that a low level of recognition could result in a feeling of low self-confidence for these students.

Students who experienced a high level of recognition were more self-supporting and less dependent on help from others. They experienced a higher level of autonomy.

What we also learned in our study is that all the participation aspects are linked together and have an influence on each other. They are all part of the same phenomenon. The level of accessibility is also a basic factor for participation. A student who lacks accessibility to what is said and done in the classroom because of a lack in the communicative arena or doesn't have access to assistive technology is excluded from the context in which others are participating, which consequently leads to less involvement and activity.

Together with the participation aspects, in this study we also examined different cultures within the school environment. The cultures and the participation aspects together form a framework that we believe can help in identifying barriers to and positive factors for participation, as well as provide useful information on where any interventions for increasing participation should be made.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Our hope is that this model for participation can be a helpful tool for understanding the prerequisites for participation. We believe that it is crucial to proceed from specific activities and to use the framework consisting of the participation aspects and the different cultures as an analyzing tool. The model make it easier to make "the right" interventions to increase the level of participation for student in the classroom and with peers. It is important to interpret classroom situations or activities correctly. To make the model of participation more a convenient tool to use in schools, the work to develop more of a methodological version is now being initiated. This version is intended to help teachers in everyday school activities to see what and where the interventions should be to create more of a participative environment for all students. It makes it easier for schools to have a more unified concept for participation to understand what we mean when we talk about students participation in different school activities. The most important findings of the study are the following:

- The model for analysing the level of participation that we have used in our study, has proved to be a helpful tool for identifying barriers for and factors in favor of participation.
- The model offers the possibility of shifting focus from viewing problems as the result of personal

characteristics or individual diagnoses, to understanding problems in broader environmental contexts.

- The aspects are all linked to each other and also influence each other in an on-going process.
- Accessibility has a significant impact and influences most of the other aspects.
- Not to be accepted by others influences students' self-concept in the long run.
- Most of the students did not see their own impairment as a barrier to participation.

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