

## **Excerpts from Chapter 4 from *The Beyond Access Model* (pages 55-60)**

### **Membership, Participation, and Learning**

This chapter describes and provides numerous examples of three of the core best practices and ultimate outcomes of the BA Model - membership, participation, and learning. First, we provide an overview of how membership and participation provide the context for enhancing learning. We then describe the importance of, strategies for enhancing, and indicators for membership, participation, and learning.

In our experience, many educators begin their planning for instruction by asking questions about how to modify the curriculum content and materials based on unwarranted lack of confidence in student abilities. These perceptions of student abilities are inaccurate, in part, because of insufficient AAC supports. In doing so, there is a risk of the trap presented in Jay's story in Chapter 1. "How do I modify a lesson on computing addition problems for a student functioning at the 2-year-old level?" or "How do I modify a fourth-grade novel to make sense for a student with low-functioning autism?" These questions lead a teacher to create a version of the curriculum that is different from the one taught to students without disabilities and then to design ways to teach it that also may be different from the instructional plan for students without disabilities.

It is understandable that educators want to prioritize their attention to support student learning. In the instructional planning process, however, prioritizing the content to be learned over the context and the instructional processes through which it will be taught may mislead educators to make changes in educational programming that are not aligned with their vision of inclusive education. For example, follow this teacher's line of thinking: "This book would have to be significantly modified to work for him. The book will be so different from that of his classmates that we will have to pull him aside to provide individualized instruction. Being in the general education classroom appears unnecessary with so much pull-aside instruction. I could teach him this modified book better if he came to my resource room and I pulled in the other two students in the building who are at his level."

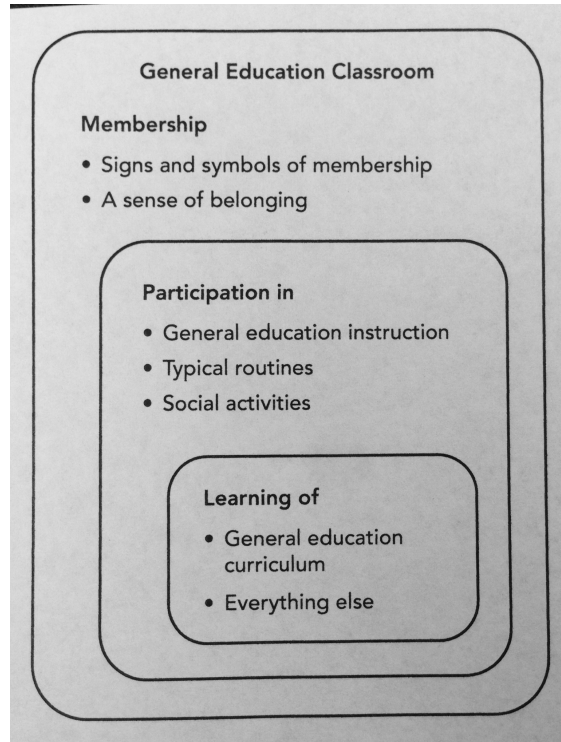


Figure 4.1. Conceptual framework for embedding learning of general education curriculum in the context of membership and participation within the general education classroom for students with intellectual and/or other developmental disabilities.

Figure 4.1 depicts the BA approach to learning in the context of membership and participation. It is apparent in this figure that learning is situated in general education classroom membership and participation is situated in general education instruction. In this model, intensive support planning for students/ learning must ensure that membership and participation are in place in order to maximize the social opportunities in the general education classroom and the academic instruction offered there.

## Membership

Educators and psychologists have reported that students' presence in the classroom as members of the learning community—a member of both social and academic activities—is a requirement for optimal student learning.

In his award-winning film, *Including Samuel*, filmmaker Dan Habib (2007) tells the story of his 8-year-old son Samuel's full inclusion in a second-grade general education classroom in his neighborhood school. Habib recalls the angst that he and his wife Betsy felt when they first learned of the severity of Samuel's disabilities. After a long day of therapy and doctor's appointments when Samuel was a toddler, they would compare notes about how he was doing

with various motor skills and development. Over time, they realized that their focus on Samuel's disabilities; fixing his body and making him conform to a standard of normality— was not only inhibiting their relationship with Samuel but also was frustrating Samuel. As their journey with Samuel continued, Dan and Betsy met and heard the stories of parents of older children with disabilities, as well as adults with disabilities. They realized that accepting Samuel just as he was and fully including him in all aspects of family, school, and community life would be more likely to result in Samuel having a good life than a narrow focus on what Samuel could not do. "More than anything, his mother and I want Samuel to have a deep sense of belonging" (Habib, 2007).

Kunc (1992) asked us to consider how the basic premises of Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs leading to self-actualization have been distorted for people with disabilities. Maslow posited that individuals do not seek the satisfaction of a need at one level until the previous level of need is met. In Maslow's original hierarchy, physiological needs—food, water, shelter, and warmth—form the base of a five-level pyramid. The second level of Maslow's pyramid is safety, and the third level is love and belonging. Maslow stressed that only when we are "anchored in community do we develop self-esteem, the need to assure ourselves of our own worth as individuals" (Kunc, 1992, p. 28). The fourth level represents elements of self-esteem—achievement, mastery, recognition, and respect. And the fifth, or highest level, is self-actualization, characterized by the pursuit of inner talent, creativity, and fulfillment."

When applied to people with disabilities, the order of the third and fourth levels is often switched. That is, people with disabilities are required to demonstrate skill and accomplishment as a prerequisite to belonging. For example, students with disabilities are often required to be able to perform certain academic skills *before* they are included in a general education classroom, even though this requirement violates both the spirit and the letter of special education law (Kluth, Villa, and Thousand, 2001/2002). Or, they are required to demonstrate a certain level of cognitive development before being exposed to general education curricula. Adults with disabilities are told that they must pass vocational evaluations showing that they have mastered particular skills before they can move from a sheltered workshop to a typical work setting.

Researchers have investigated the meaning and interpretation of membership on students with disabilities. Schnorr (1990) found that part-time inclusion had a significant effect on the membership and belonging of a student named Peter. Schnorr used participant observation and in-depth interviews over a 7-month period to study a first-grade class in which Peter, who had a moderate intellectual disability, participated on a part-time basis. Peter spent most of his school day in a self-contained classroom. He joined a first-grade class for a period each morning as well as for classes such as music, art, library, and physical education. Using inductive and ongoing data analysis techniques, Schnorr's observations and interviews revealed three themes that characterized classroom membership: where students belong, what they do, and with whom they play. With respect to Peter's membership in the class, several conclusions were drawn. First, "part-time is different, not just less. Peter's experience differed in kind as well as amount. He did not share in the first grade experience as defined by the students" (Schnorr,

1990, p. 238). A second conclusion was that Peter was not viewed by the other students as a member of the class because he engaged in different activities inside the classroom, often with different materials and instructional methods. A third element that seemed to define Peter as an outsider rather than a member of this classroom was that other students only nominated classmates as friends if they were members of the same class. Peter's membership in the self-contained classroom and his visitor status in the first-grade classroom almost guaranteed that he would not be considered among the pool of potential friends by his classmates (Tashie, Shapiro-Barnard, and Rossetti, 2006).

Williams and Downing (1998) found that middle school students' perceptions of membership incorporated feeling welcomed, wanted, and respected by classmates and teachers; being familiar with classmates and having friends who understand them; feeling as if they belong to a group and/or class as a whole; having fun; and feeling comfortable.

Strully and Strully (1985) described how their daughter Shawntell was one of the first students With IDD to be included in a general education classroom in her neighborhood school. They focused on Shawntell's membership within the classroom and school because they believed that belonging and friendships were essential to Shawntell's quality of life while she was in school and when she became an adult. Many years later, after Shawntell had grown to adulthood, Strully mused:

Now that I am getting older, I sometimes awaken in the middle of the night worrying about what will happen to Shawntell when her mother and I are no longer around to advocate for her. It is at these times when I am sure that it will be more important for Shawntell to have real friends who care about her and want to spend time with her than it will be for her to be able to tie her shoes, or set the table, or make a sandwich. When we have been faced with important decisions about Shawntell's education or adult life, returning to that basic human need for belonging has helped us make decisions that we think will most likely lead to Shawntell's happiness and quality of life. (2006)

Membership in the general education class represents students having access to valued social roles and the symbols of belonging, such as having a desk, being given class jobs, going on field trips, and having one's name called during attendance. In addition, through the lens of presumed competence, the symbols of the student's membership, sense of belonging, and social roles within the classroom would reflect a vision of equity and reciprocity With classmates who do not have disabilities. Working toward this vision would include exploring ways to enhance a student's communication system until he or she has an effective and efficient means through which to communicate socially about the same topics and in a way that is commensurate with same-age peers.

### **Enhancing Membership to Enhance Learning**

During the orientation to the BA Model and in ongoing professional development provided to school teams (including administrators and parents), journal articles, book chapters, videos, and guest presentations from other parents or adults With disabilities are shared to emphasize the importance of membership in general education.

Although a student does not need to be included in general education all day, every day in order for a team to begin using the Model, we suggest that students be included in a general education classroom for at least two core academic subjects (i.e., math, language arts, social studies, science). The team then uses the BA Model to focus on improving instruction and supports (including AAC) to the student during these two periods of the day, prior to expanding the student's inclusion within other classroom lessons and activities. We want to make it clear that we are not advocating for students to be "included part time," but rather suggesting that focusing on two core academic periods a day can provide a place for the team to begin the process of learning to use the BA Model.

McSheehan, Sonnenmeier, Jorgensen, and Turner (2006) investigated perceptions of five students' IEP team members regarding the effect of the first phase of the BA Model (the CASTS, a baseline assessment) on several variables, including students' classroom membership within the general education classroom. Prior to teams' engagement in the CASTS process, we asked them to estimate the student's level of membership (and participation) in the general education classroom at 0%-20%, 20%-40 %, 40%-60%, 60%-80%, or 80%-100%. Across the five students, average team ratings were 0%-20% for two students, 20%-40% for two other students, and 40 %-60% for the fifth student. Six months following the CASTS assessment, the amount of time spent in the general education classroom increased for all of the students. Ratings for one student increased from 0-20% to 20%-40%, and ratings for the remaining four students increased to 60 %-80%. A follow-up inquiry at 9 months revealed that all five students were in the general education classroom for 80% or more of the day. These findings show how using the BA Model can increase the amount of time a student spends within the general education classroom, and thus increase the likelihood that he or she will be perceived by others as a member of that classroom. This is a necessary, though not sufficient, step in fostering the student's learning within the general education classroom.

Membership indicators can be used by teams to plan action steps if certain indicators are absent or partially present (see Table 4.1). Outcome measures of membership are also used to monitor the effect of using the BA Model (see Chapter 7 for a description and sample of the Student and Team Outcomes Survey). A couple of examples that illustrate changes made by teams to improve a student's membership within the classroom are presented next.

Previously, Julie's desk had been placed at the back of class, not alongside other students who sat in groups of four. Her desk was moved up to be alongside her classmates, and the paraprofessional's materials were stored on a table at the back of the classroom.

Jamie consistently arrived 15 minutes late for homeroom, missing calendar time, during which important reading and math skills were learned. It was determined that the cause of his tardiness were special education transportation schedules and his need to do sensory-motor activities to help organize him and increase attention prior to going to classes. Jamie started riding the regular school bus, and his sensory motor activities were integrated into a Whole-class warm-up activity done just prior to sitting down for the calendar activity.

Jimmy's educational team felt that he needed to learn vocational skills in order to prepare him for the world of work after high school. Instead of delivering the attendance sheets during first period when other students were engaged in core academics, Jimmy's team agreed to enroll him in a biology class where all students took turns being responsible for organizing the lab equipment storage cabinet and keeping a terrarium clean.

Table 4.1. Sample indicators of student membership in the general education classroom

- The student attends the school he or she would attend if he or she did not have a disability.
- The student is a member of an age-appropriate general education class.
- The student's name is on all classlists, lists of groups put on the board, job lists, and so forth.
- Related services are delivered primarily through consultation in the classroom.
- The student receives the same materials as students without disabilities, with supports (i.e., accommodations, adaptations) provided as necessary.
- The student passes classes with other students, arriving and leaving at the same time.
- The student has a locker/cubby alongside students without disabilities.
- The student rides the same school bus as his or her peers without disabilities.

From McSheehan, M., Sonnenmeier, R.M., Jorgensen, C.M. (2009). Membership, participation, and learning in the general education classroom for students with autism spectrum disorders who use AAC. In D.R. Beukelman & J. Reichle (Series Eds.) & P. Mirenda & T. Iacono (Vol. Eds), *Augmentative and alternative communication series: Autism spectrum disorders and AAC* (p. 418). Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co; adapted by permission.