

Chapter 5

Communication and Competence

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ABSTRACT

Many factors are important when planning and implementing strategies for teaching in the multiple disability/cross-categorical classroom. No two students' needs are alike; however, two areas are invariably a topic of discussion and lead many of the decisions being made in the individual's educational program: communication and presumed competence. The following chapter includes student narratives for a child with multiple disabilities as well as a child with autism spectrum disorder. Each child exhibits a significant communication delay and is considered to be non-verbal. The narratives along with strategies used to support the students have been included. Common misconceptions about augmentative and alternative communication use and presumed competence among students with significant communication needs are examined as well as research and theory concerning these areas.

"I can remember the frustration of not being able to talk. I knew what I wanted to say, but I could not get the words out, so I would just scream." -Temple Grandin

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INTRODUCTION

The past seventeen years of my career have been spent in a multiple disability/cross-categorical unit. Fifteen of those years were in a 6th-12th grade classroom with the last two spent in a k-2nd grade classroom. The common themes of most conversations whether with parents, fellow teachers, paraprofessionals, or administrators seem to always boil down to communication, presumed competence, and behavior. More often than not, the three closely intertwine and simultaneous consideration greatly benefits the child. In this chapter, the focus will be aimed at presumed competence and communication.

Presumed competence can be thought of as the assumption that an individual is capable of learning/understanding and interacting with individuals in various environments. It is understanding these individuals may simply need access to the right support and resources to be successful. In my experience, a student's ability to communicate effectively plays a key role in how educators, peers, and those outside the school setting approach the individual. For example, a child who is considered non-verbal or has significant communication needs is often expected to need continuous assistance with every aspect of their day. While this child may have some very specific needs, they might be quite independent and become frustrated with excessive help. Lowering expectations based mainly on ease of communication for the individual can ultimately mean the difference between independence and learned helplessness.

Communication also directly impacts a student's learning, behavior, and relationships. Expressive, receptive, and pragmatic communication are often areas of concern for students within the multiple disability/cross-categorical classroom. Expressive communication entails the ways an individual expresses their wants, needs, and ideas, receptive communication focuses on receiving and processing communication coming from other individuals, and pragmatic communication involves the social aspect of communicating with others, for example, how to speak to someone depending on who the person is, staying on topic in a conversation, taking turns in conversation, and allowing for personal space.

With expressive communication in mind, finding the right mode of communication is imperative to the student's education and relationships. There are many ways for the student to communicate. They might find great success with American Sign Language, Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), or use of an Augmented and Alternative Communication Device (AAC). No matter what mode of communication is used, it is of utmost importance that it carries over into every aspect of their life both in and out of school.

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