

Chapter 3

Integrated Technology for Culturally Competent Communication in Urban Schools

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ABSTRACT

A disproportionately high number of students who live in urban centers are found eligible for special education services. For some of these students, teachers and administrators may misinterpret communication and other behaviors. This chapter will provide ideas generated from the literature and lessons learned about interpreting communication and behavior in the urban context. Although the primary focus is face-to-face communication, the authors also discuss ways to integrate technology to support the communication process.

INTRODUCTION

*Michelle said to her calm and gentle teacher:
“You have an attitude problem!”*

*Jamal’s smiling teacher said: “I’m so delighted
you’re here today. I made the Rotel dip you said you*

*like for a celebration today.” Jamal responded:
“Really? Are you serious? I dreamt you were
trying to kill me last night.”*

*Park asked his teacher: “Is it okay to upload
pictures of my girlfriend to our class blog?” The
teacher looked at the pictures to see the student’s
girlfriend had very little underwear on.*

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60960-878-1.ch003

Because of Brittany's angry outbursts, her teacher had taken the teen to the office on multiple occasions, and Brittany complained to the administration about her teacher. On the last day of school, her teacher was trying to keep her distance during the picnic to avoid another student flare-up. To the teacher's surprise, Brittany charged across the student crowd and gave her teacher a huge hug: "Thanks for everything. I'm not used to a teacher who cares so much about me."

These observed conversations suggest how confusing special education can be in the urban context. In the complexities of the city public school, the special education teacher may feel many doubts because of lack of preparation to interact effectively in the culturally diverse environment (Guerra & Nelson, 2007). As Kozol (2005) explained, teachers in the urban core lose confidence in themselves and what they know about children learning (p. 305). To complicate matters further, the disproportionately high percentage of students of different ethnic or racial backgrounds who are referred for special education services suggests that the lack of understanding of language and culture may cause discriminatory practices regarding students receiving special services (Artiles, Rueda, Salazar, & Higuera, 2005).

Regarding urban students diagnosed eligible for special education, the teacher may feel confused about what behaviors are related to a disorder and what behaviors are related to factors such as class, immigration, or cultural language expectations. It is widely recognized that student behaviors may be misinterpreted by teachers because of cultural differences between students and their teachers (Kerr & Nelson, 2006). Thus, two levels or foci exist for the special education teacher in the urban core: (a.) special needs of students and (b.) cultural influences that affect those students. Further, the digital divide may cause problems and offer opportunities for the special education teacher in an urban context (Ching, Basham, & Jang, 2005; Tettegah & Mayo, 2005). Thus, the

purpose of this chapter is to identify communication and instructional behaviors for special education teachers, which may be particularly supportive to students in the urban context.

COMMUNITY BUILDING

There appears to be little research about communication skills specifically of urban students who are diagnosed with disabilities (Loncola & Craig-Unkefer, 2005). Until a clear research base is established, special education teachers can take cues from the research about students in urban schools that seems relevant (Obiakor & Beachum, 2005). In studying urban students, for example, Wasonga, Christman, and Kilmer suggested a lack of home participation in the school and low expectations may be particularly problematic for urban African American and urban Hispanic students. Additionally, poor school relationships may cause learning problems for urban Hispanic students (p. 67). Further, urban males tend to have poorer relationships with teachers (p. 70). To make learning more difficult, students also may experience disability-related relationship problems and isolation from others.

Supportive community building may be one way to support the learning of students diagnosed with special needs in the urban learning context. Children in urban schools are most comfortable and learn best in environments where they are secure, feel safe, and have ownership (Weiss & Gomperts, 2005). Frederick (2007) found that technology could be used in empowering ways for African Americans. Real life experiences can be described through technology, for example. Students may find a sense of community through blogs, social networking through sites such as Facebook, or website construction, which may give urban students an engaging way to apply the curriculum they are learning. Clark (2005) found that computer technologies may be important to use with underserved communities.

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