

Student Diversity: Culture, Language, Gender, and Exceptionalities



VOICES from the CLASSROOM

"When they tell me they can't do it, I say to them, 'Yes, you can. Look at me; I did it. You can do it, too. So, let's figure this out.'"

FLORIS ORTIZ, 2011 Teacher of the Year, Massachusetts

This I Believe

STUDENT DIVERSITY AND ME

For each of the following statements, circle your choice using the following options:

4 = I strongly believe the statement is true.

3 = I believe the statement is true.

2 = I believe the statement is false.

1 = I strongly believe the statement is false.

1. Culturally sensitive teachers treat all students the same way.

1 2 3 4

2. Students who aren't native English speakers learn English most effectively by hearing the teacher use correct English.

1 2 3 4

3. Boys generally get better grades in school than girls.

1 2 3 4

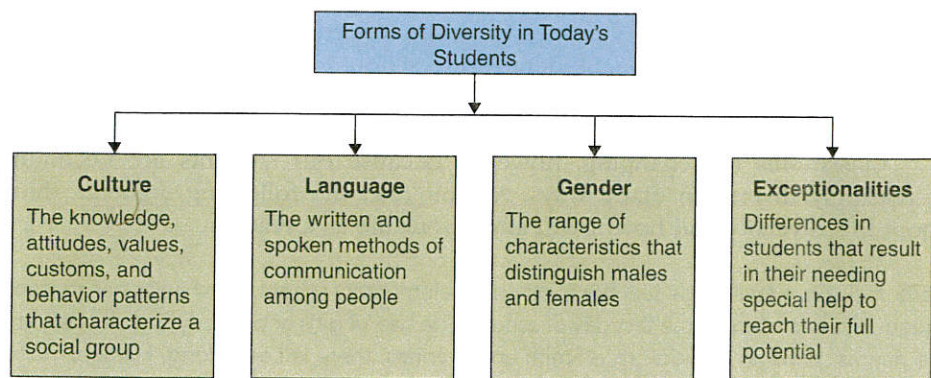
4. It is important for me to adapt my instruction to the individual learning styles of my students.

1 2 3 4

5. Experts in special education advocate the creation of special classrooms to meet the needs of students with exceptionalities.

1 2 3 4

FIGURE 3.1 The Four Dimensions of Student Diversity



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Cultural Diversity

The clothes you wear, the kind of music you like, and even the food you eat, along with other dimensions such as language and religion, are all part of your **culture**, the knowledge, attitudes, values, customs, and behavior patterns that characterize a social group (Banks, 2008). Culture is a powerful force on our lives and will also influence your students' learning as well as your success as a teacher. **Cultural diversity** refers to the different cultures you'll encounter in classrooms and how these differences influence learning.

To see how culture influences us, let's look at eating as a simple example. Do you sit down for dinner at 6:00 in the evening, or do you often wait until 8:00 p.m. or later? Does your family sit down together, or do you "eat on the run"? Do you eat with a knife and fork or perhaps with chopsticks, or even your hands? And if you use a knife and fork, do you cut a piece of meat and then transfer the fork back to your right hand or leave it in your left hand? These patterns are all influenced by culture, and it, of course, influences what we eat as well, as evidenced by the many ethnic restaurants around our country.

Ethnicity, a person's ancestry and the way people identify themselves with the nation from which they or their ancestors came, is an important part of culture. Members of an ethnic group share an identity defined by their history, language (although sometimes not spoken), customs, and traditions. Experts estimate that nearly 300 distinct ethnic groups currently reside in the United States (Gollnick & Chinn, 2013).

Immigration and other demographic shifts have resulted in dramatic changes in our country's school population. Most immigrants during the early 1900s came from Europe, but more recently they have come from Latin America (53%), and Asia (28%), with only 13% having Europe as their point of origin (U.S. Bureau of Census, 2009). U.S. census estimates indicate that members of cultural minorities now make up more than a third of our nation's population (Santa Cruz, 2010), and the 2000 census found, for the first time, that the Hispanic surnames Garcia and Rodriguez are among the 10 most common in our country (S. Roberts, 2007).

This trend is reflected in our classrooms, where more than 4 of 10 students in the P-12 population are members of cultural minorities (Tavernise, 2011). Children of color now make up the majority of school-age youth in 10 states. In Arizona, for example, only 42% of school-age youth are white, compared to 83% of the over-65 population. Experts worry that this generational divide may mean less support from taxpayers who no longer identify with the school population. Further, over 90% of the student population in Detroit, New York, the District of Columbia, Chicago, Houston, and Los Angeles are members of cultural minorities.

For the first time in our history, less than half of 3-year-olds in our country are white (Frey, 2011). This means that white students will no longer be a majority as these children move through our classrooms, and it helps us understand why the backgrounds of Carla's students are so diverse (see Figure 3.2).

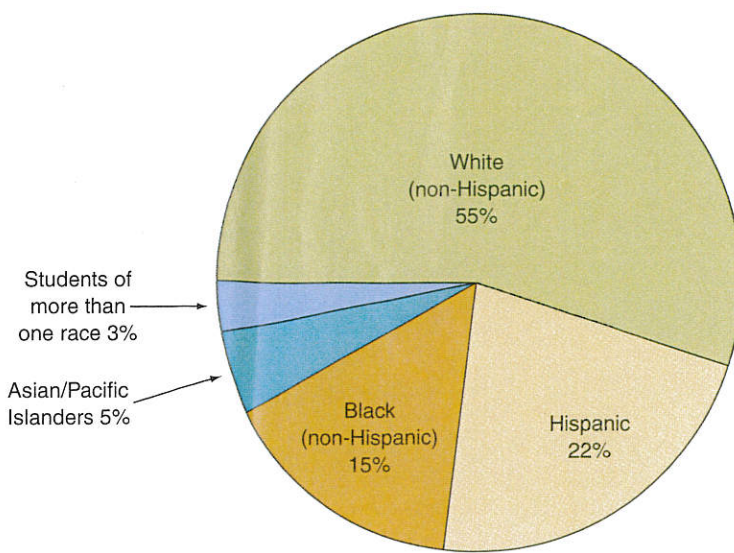
By the year 2050, the U.S. population will see many more changes (see Figure 3.3). Experts predict considerable increases in the percentages of all groups of people except white, non-Hispanic. During this time, the percentage that is white will decrease from 65% to just half of the total population (U.S. Bureau of Census, 2010b). By 2050, no single group will be a majority among adults.

Cultural Attitudes and Values

Our students come to school with a history of learning influenced by the cultures of their homes and neighborhoods. Some of these attitudes and values complement school learning; others do not (Gollnick & Chinn, 2013).

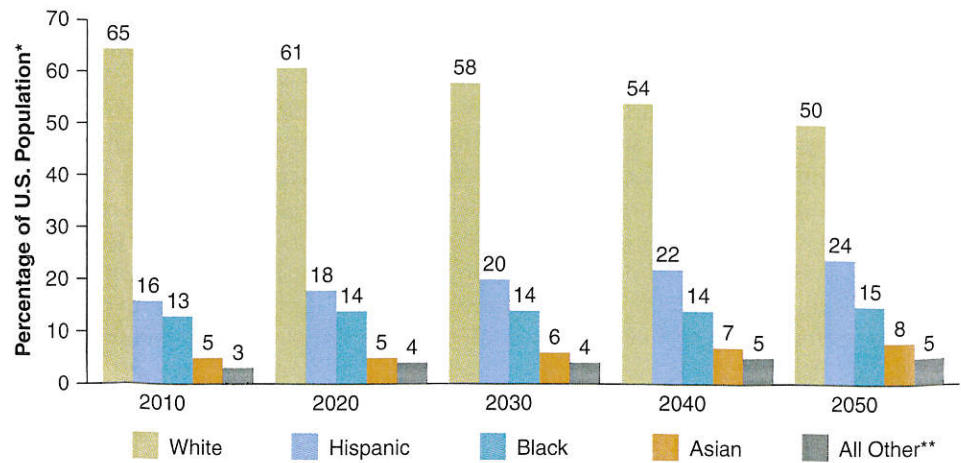
Language is one example. Students are sometimes hesitant to drop the use of nonstandard English dialects in favor of "school English" because doing so might alienate their peers

FIGURE 3.2 Percentages of Public School Students by Race/Ethnicity



Source: National Center for Education Statistics. (2011). *The condition of education 2011*. Washington, DC: Author.

FIGURE 3.3 Projected Changes in U.S. Population, 2010 to 2050



*Totals may not equal 100% due to rounding.

** American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander

Source: U.S. Bureau of Census (2010b).

(Ogbu, 1999). The same problem occurs in classrooms where students are asked to learn English and to quit using the languages of their homes. Programs encouraging students to drop their native languages can distance them from their parents, who often can't speak English (Shankar, 2011).

Even school success can be an issue. Members of minorities sometimes interpret succeeding in school as rejecting their native culture; to become a good student is to become "white"—to embrace and uphold only white cultural values. Members of minorities who study and succeed academically risk losing the friendship of their peers. John Ogbu, an anthropologist who studied the achievement of minority students, found that in many schools students form what he called "resistance cultures," in which peer values either don't support school learning or actually oppose it (Ogbu & Simons, 1998). Low grades, classroom management and motivation problems, truancy, and high dropout rates are symptoms of this conflict.

In other cases, students' attitudes and values can complement learning. For instance, researchers studying the amazing academic success of Vietnamese and other Asian American students found that hard work, perseverance, and pride were heavily emphasized in the home (Kristoff, 2006). In 2005, Asian American students scored highest (an average 1091) on the math and verbal parts of the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), outscoring white students by 23 points and other cultural minorities by an average of 168 points. Willingness to take challenging courses was a factor. For example, 4 of 10 Asian American students took calculus in high school, compared to fewer than 3 of 10 in the general population. One Vietnamese student who became the valedictorian at her high school after only 7 years in the United States commented, "Anybody can be smart, can do great on standardized tests. But unless you work hard, you're not going to do well" (Kristoff, 2006, p. 13).

Research on Indian students' success in U.S. national spelling bees found a similar emphasis on hard work and study (Bracey, 2005). Children of Indian descent consistently place high in these academic contests, winning much more often than other ethnic groups. Experts joke about an Indian "spelling gene," but emphasize instead the hard work and determination instilled by cultural attitudes and values.

Cultural Interaction Patterns

Our students learn to interact with others at home, but cultural conflict can occur when they enter our classrooms. Let's look at an example:

Cynthia Cole, a second-grade teacher in an elementary school in the Southwest, is reading a story. "What do you think is going to happen next? . . . Tony?" Cynthia asks in response to his eagerly waving hand.

"I think the boy is going to meet his friend."

"How do you think the boy feels about meeting his friend?" she continues.

After Tony responds, Cynthia calls on Sharon Nighthawk, one of the Native Americans in her class, even though Sharon has not raised her hand. When Sharon doesn't answer, Cynthia prompts her by rephrasing the question, but Sharon continues to look at her in silence.

Slightly exasperated, Cynthia wonders if Sharon understands her questions, or if she is asking the right kind of questions, because Sharon seems to be enjoying the story and also understands it. Why won't she answer?

Thinking about the lesson after school, Cynthia realizes that this has happened before, and that, in fact, her Native American students rarely answer questions in class. She can't get them to talk.

How might we explain this problem? Some experts suggest that Native American children aren't used to the fast-paced, question-and-answer patterns found in most American classrooms. When involved in discussions, such as the one in Cynthia's class, they are uncomfortable and reluctant to participate (Banks, 2008). Similar issues can exist with students who are members of other cultures.

So, how should you respond? We address this question when we discuss *culturally responsive teaching* later in this section.

Educational Responses to Cultural Diversity

Historically, social commentators have used different metaphors to describe the relationships among the diverse cultures in our country; a "melting pot" was one of the first. Those who saw the United States as a melting pot emphasized **assimilation**, a process of socializing people so that they adopt dominant social norms and patterns of behavior. Assimilation attempted to make members of minority cultural groups "similar" to those belonging to the dominant cultural group in our country—typically, white people of northern European descent.

The melting pot metaphor was especially popular in the early 1900s, when large numbers of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe came to the United States. Society assigned schools the task of teaching immigrants how "Americans" were supposed to think, talk, and act. Immigrants, eager to become "American" and share in this country's economic wealth, generally accepted assimilation efforts.

About the middle of the 20th century, a shift in thinking occurred. People realized that assimilation had never totally worked, as indicated by neighborhoods and groups that continued to speak their home languages, celebrate their unique cultural holidays, and maintain their cultural habits, such as eating ethnic foods from their home countries. In other words, a true "melting pot" never existed. The contributions of different cultural and ethnic groups were increasingly recognized, and leaders began to realize that some educational practices aimed at assimilation were actually counterproductive. For example, in an effort to encourage English language acquisition, schools in the Southwest didn't allow students to speak Spanish, even on playgrounds. Schools became hostile places where students had to choose between family, friends, and school. The policy probably did as much to alienate Hispanic youth as it did to encourage English language development (Spring, 2010).

Multicultural Education

To address these problems, educators began developing new approaches to addressing cultural diversity. **Multicultural education** describes a variety of strategies schools use to accommodate cultural differences in teaching and learning. Instead of trying to create a melting pot, these approaches align with new metaphors that describe the United States as a “mosaic” or a “tossed salad,” in which society recognizes and values each culture’s unique contributions.

Multicultural education is controversial. Critics contend that it’s divisive because it emphasizes differences between cultural groups instead of what we have in common (Lacey, 2011; Zirkel, 2008b). Textbooks have been scrutinized, and a major controversy even erupted over singing the national anthem in Spanish (D. Goldstein, 2006). Critics argued that the national anthem is a symbol of unity for our country and its Constitution. Criticism became so widespread that bills were submitted in Congress mandating English as the exclusive language for the anthem, even though it has historically been translated and sung in a number of languages, including French, Polish, and Italian.

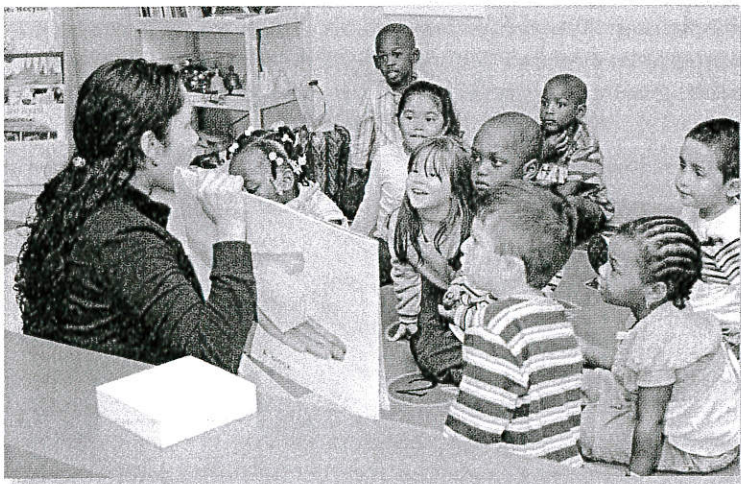
Proponents of multicultural education assert that building on students’ cultures is nothing more than sound teaching. By recognizing, valuing, and utilizing students’ cultures and languages in their instruction, teachers help them link the topics they study to what they already know, a process consistent with effective teaching and learning (Eggen & Kauchak, 2013). Proponents also assert that the United States has always been a nation of immigrants and that diversity has long been recognized. They point out, for example, that our society embraces holidays, such as St. Patrick’s Day, Cinco de Mayo, Hanukkah, and the Chinese New Year, as well as the music and foods of many cultures. Multicultural education continues this tradition by recognizing and building on students’ cultural heritages.

Multicultural education will evolve as educators discover what works and what doesn’t. Culturally responsive teaching is one approach to working with students from diverse backgrounds that appears to have promise.

EXPLORING DIVERSITY: Culturally Responsive Teaching

Shannon Wilson, a fifth-grade teacher in a large urban elementary school, walks around her classroom, helping students as they work on a social studies project. A number of hands are raised, and she feels relieved that she has Maria Arguelas, her special education resource teacher, to help her. Shannon has 27 students, 7 of whom speak a first language other than English. Five are Hispanic, and fortunately, Maria can help them with language-related problems. Shannon often spends extra time with Kwan and Abdul, the other two non-English speakers.

Shannon’s class is preparing for Parents’ Day, an afternoon when parents and other caregivers join the class in celebrating the students’ ancestral countries. The students present information about the countries’ history, geography, and cultures in their projects. The class has already prepared a large world map with pins marking the students’ countries of origin. Although several of the pins are clustered in Mexico and Central and South America, the map shows that students also come from many other parts of the world. Each student is encouraged to invite a family member to come and share a part of the family’s native culture. The parents can bring food, music, and native dress from their different homelands.



Culturally responsive teaching builds on students’ cultural backgrounds, accepts and values differences, and accommodates different cultural learning styles.

Culturally responsive teaching is instruction that acknowledges and capitalizes on cultural diversity (Gay, 2005; Leonard, 2008). It attempts to do this in three ways:

- Accepting and valuing cultural differences
- Accommodating different patterns of cultural interaction
- Building on students' cultural backgrounds

Accepting and Valuing Cultural Differences. Communicating that you recognize and value student diversity is an important first step, and it's particularly important because members of cultural minorities sometimes feel alienated from school. As a simple example, Shannon had her students identify their ethnic homelands on the map; this showed an interest in each student and helped him or her feel accepted and valued.

Genuine caring is essential in making students feel welcome in classrooms. You can communicate caring in several ways:

- Devote time to students—for example, be available before and after school to help with schoolwork and to discuss students' personal concerns.
- Demonstrate interest in students' lives—for example, ask about Jewish, Muslim, Latin American, and African American holidays and festivals.
- Involve all students in learning activities—for example, call on all students as equally as possible.

Each of these suggestions communicates that you welcome and value all students.

Accommodating Cultural Interaction Patterns. Being sensitive to possible differences between interaction patterns of home and school and adapting your instruction to best meet your students' needs is a second important step. For example, you saw earlier that the communication patterns of Native Americans might clash with typical classroom practices. Recognizing that some of your students may not be comfortable in question-and-answer activities that require one specific answer, you can use more open-ended questions, such as "What do you notice?" and "How do these items compare?" that allow a variety of acceptable responses. Questions such as these involve students and encourage them to respond, while simultaneously removing the pressure to give "the" right answer. Effective teachers also use different cooperative-learning activities to complement their question-and-answer sessions and involve all students.

As another example, when a teacher realized that her routines might clash with her students' cultures, she made a simple adaptation.

I traditionally end every day with the students lining up and receiving a hug before they leave. My Vietnamese kids were always the stiff huggers until October. Through my understanding of their cultures, I now give all students the choice of a hug, handshake, or high five. This simple act may make children feel more comfortable interacting with me. (McAllister & Irvine, 2002, p. 440)

Accommodating different interaction patterns can help students from diverse backgrounds adapt to the existing culture of schools, without losing their native identities, a process called "accommodation without assimilation" (Ogbu, 2003). Accommodation without assimilation helps students function comfortably in both cultures, including using different language patterns in school than in the home or their neighborhoods. Your challenge is to help students understand the "culture of schooling"—the norms, procedures, and expectations necessary for success in school—while honoring and valuing their home cultures.

WINDOWS on the Profession

To see an example of culturally responsive teaching in an elementary classroom, click on the video *Culturally Responsive Teaching* (4:16).

Building on Students' Backgrounds. Learning about students' cultures and using this information to promote personal pride and motivation is a third step, as we saw in Shannon's class. Let's look at another example:

Jack Seltzer, a high school biology teacher on the Navajo Nation Reservation, uses his students' background experiences to illustrate hard-to-understand science concepts. He uses Churro sheep, a local breed that Navajos use for food and wool, to illustrate genetic principles. When they study plants, he focuses on local varieties of squash and corn that have been grown by students' ancestors for centuries. He uses geologic formations in nearby Monument Valley to illustrate igneous, sedimentary, and metamorphic rocks. (D. Baker, 2006)

Both students and their parents benefit from building on students' cultural backgrounds. Student achievement increases, and parents become more positive about school, both of which enhance student motivation (Leonard, 2008). Shannon recognized this when she invited parents and other caregivers to share their cultural heritages with her class, and Jack capitalized on this idea by providing examples the students could personally understand and identify with.

URBAN EDUCATION: Cultural Diversity in Urban Schools

The term *cultural minority* is often used to refer to various non-white cultural groups. Based on sheer numbers, this term may soon be obsolete and is already a misnomer in many parts of the country, especially in urban areas. For example, Hispanics, African Americans, and Asians—when combined—now make up the majority of the population in almost half of the 100 largest U.S. cities (Macionis, 2011). In addition, as you saw earlier in the chapter, more than 90% of the students in Detroit, New York, the District of Columbia, Chicago, Houston, and Los Angeles are children of color (Tavernise, 2011).

DIVERSITY AND YOU

Cultural Discontinuities

You've been invited to a community awards ceremony at a local church of Pacific Island immigrants to honor students from your school. (This invitation and the events that followed actually happened to one educator.) You gladly accept, arrive a few minutes early, and are ushered to a seat of honor on the stage. After an uncomfortable (to you) wait of over an hour, the ceremony begins, and the students proudly file to the stage to receive their awards. Each is acknowledged, given an award, and applauded. After this part of the ceremony, you have another eye-opening experience.

The children all go back and sit down in the audience again, and the meeting continues with several more items on the agenda. The kids are fine for a while, but get bored and start to fidget. Fidgeting and whispering turn into poking, prodding, and open chatting. You become a little anxious at the disruption, but none of the other adults appear to even notice, so you ignore it, too. Soon, several of the children are up and out of their seats, strolling about the back and sides of the auditorium. All adult faces continue looking serenely up at

the speaker on the stage. Then the kids start playing tag, running circles around the seating area, and yelling gleefully. No adult response—you are amazed, and struggle to resist the urge to quiet the children. Then some of the kids get up onto the stage, run around the speaker, flick the lights on and off, and open and close the curtain! Still nothing from the Islander parents who seem either unaware or unconcerned about the children's behavior! You are caught in the middle of a conflict of cultures—yours and the Pacific Islanders'. You don't know what to do (Based on Winitzky, 1994).

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. This section discussed two potentially conflicting ideas: accepting and valuing cultural differences and accommodation without assimilation. How do these ideas relate to this dilemma?
2. So, what would you do in this situation, both short-term and long-term?

Go to *Diversity and You* in the MyEducationLab™ Book Resources that accompany this text to log your thoughts and receive feedback from your authors.

The growth of minority student populations in urban areas is the result of immigration coupled with higher birth rates. For example, between 1990 and 2000, Hispanic populations increased 43% and Asian populations surged 40% in urban areas (Lichter & Johnson, 2006). Urban centers are often called “gateway cities” for recently arriving immigrants, and this diversity is reflected in urban schools. Across the United States, minority students currently attend schools with populations that are almost half minority; in one high school in New York City, researchers found that African American and Hispanic students made up 97% of the student population, and only 0.5% were white (Goldsmith, 2011; Kozol, 2005). Many of these students don’t speak English as their first language, which will pose a challenge for you if you teach in an urban school. Teachers skilled in helping students simultaneously learn English and the content of their classes are sorely needed.

Revisiting My Beliefs

This section addresses the first item in *This I Believe*, “Culturally sensitive teachers treat all students the same way.” This statement isn’t true and is, in fact, the opposite of culturally responsive teaching. To be most effective, you’ll need to adapt your instruction to your students’ cultural backgrounds.

TECHNOLOGY and TEACHING: Technology Access Issues

“Technology is everywhere,” has become almost a cliché, but this isn’t true for all students. Many don’t have access to technology, and if they don’t, they obviously can’t use it to learn.

Surveys of educational technology use across the country found that by 2008 virtually all public schools had Internet access and nearly 4 of 10 had wireless network capability (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010c). Between 1998 and 2008, the ratio of students per Internet-connected computer dropped from 12 to slightly more than 3. So, if your school is typical, and you have a class of 30 students, your classroom should have about 10 Internet-connected computers available. This statistic is misleading, however, because many schools cluster computers in labs where they are accessible only once or twice a week. Teachers still need to do instructional juggling to provide computer access to all students when they need it. In a national survey 91% of teachers said they had access to computers in their classrooms, but only 1 in 5 said they had the right level of technology in their classrooms; cost was identified as a major obstacle (PBS LearningMedia, 2012). When we asked teachers about barriers to effective use of technology, they identified insufficient number of computers as a major problem. Research suggests that the number and quality of computers influence teachers’ use of technology (Roblyer & Doering, 2013). When obstacles are too great, teachers tend not to use it, which deprives their students of valuable learning opportunities.

In the past, research revealed disparities in tech access between urban and suburban schools and between schools serving high percentages of students in poverty and those serving more-affluent families (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007). More recent research shows that these differences in tech availability have largely vanished, but there are significant disparities in how technology is actually used in schools. For instance, schools with high concentrations of low-income students are more likely to use computers for practice on basic skills versus for writing essays or developing student-initiated multimedia projects (Gray, Thomas, & Lewis, 2010). These differences become important when students seek entrance to college or jobs in high-skill industries. Home-school communication was also an issue; teachers in high-poverty schools were much less likely to use the Internet to communicate with either parents or students about school-related problems or issues and were less likely to use regular posts to keep parents informed about class progress. These differences create a two-tiered system in which computers are used in very different ways by high- and low-poverty schools.