Social Skills Training for Students of Color with Disabilities through the Use of Social Networking

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Introduction

The traditional methods of connectedness between family members, friends, and society—including face-to-face interaction, radio, newspapers, and landline telephones—have evolved into the use of personal computers, the Internet, and advanced mobile phone services and third generation phones (Wei & Lo, 2006).

Cell phone use has grown dramatically over the past 15 years. In 1995, cell phone subscriptions covered only 13% of the the U.S. population; by 2009, that had grown to 91% (CTIA, 2010). According to Lenhart (2010), cell-phone texting has become the preferred method of basic interaction between teens and their friends, with cell calling now the second most popular form of communication.

These patterns have evolved due to the fact that 75% of 12-17 year-olds now own cell phones, an increase from 45% in 2004. Cell phones have become indispensable tools in teen communication patterns. In addition 72% of all teens—or 88% of teen cell phone users—are text-messagers. This is a sharp rise from 51% of teens who were texters in 2006. Lenhart further indicates that more than half of teens, 54%, are daily texters.

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The phenomenon of the use of cell phones as a primary source of communication among teens is having an impact on our society in profound ways. It represents a fundamental seismic shift in the morphological and phonemic understanding of language. Assumptions that have existed since the implementation of educational standards for language learning and the art of communication are being challenged by this new reality. Children are creating and utilizing a different language and mechanism of communication—texting.

These new modes of communication—the cell phone, droids, tablets, and other devices—are collectively described as emergent technologies. While there are deep implications for a rift in communications between generations, these emergent technologies are having a direct and immediate effect upon the manner in which children acquire knowledge in public education. However, a cursory examination of most public schools suggests that these institutions are responding to this historical revolution in communication with the same glacial reaction they did to computers and the digital revolution—somewhere between slowly and not at all.

According to a survey by Lenhart (2010), two-thirds of surveyed teens were more likely to use their cell phones to text their friends rather than talking to them by cell phone. This suggests a revival of the near dormant skill of using written communication for casual and personal conversation. This skill was witnessed centuries ago via the written letter and was perfected over time as letters and letter writing became an art form. Such correspondence, both professional and personal, was often done out of necessity because of the impracticality of face to face conversations because of distance.

Over time the emergence of the telephone greatly reduced the need for such writing skills, which fell into relative disuse until the advent of e-mail. E-mail, however, depends on access to computers, and these machines were not always readily accessible. Thus with the emergence of cell phones that support the use of texting, a new advent of written communication arrived.

In a recent survey we conducted, 40% of male students said that texting was easier than calling. Thirty-four percent said that texting was better than calling based on the time or the place of the interaction, whether in class, church, or some other social gathering, and over 10% said they preferred texting over calling because they often did not feel like talking, yet they were still able to communicate. Among female students over 60% said texting was easier, over 70% said that texting was possible when or where talking was not, and 30% gave other reasons for their preference, most often citing that they would text when they did not feel like talking (see Figure 1).

The results of this survey evoke an endless number of questions about the emergent technology of texting as a social writing tool, questions which go to the heart of human relations. For instance, it is natural to consider why people continue to communicate even when they do not feel like talking. But such questions were not the purpose of this study. Rather, our research was conducted to determine if this cell phone phenomenon is as prevalent among students with special needs as it is with students from the general education population. If so, how do these communication trends impact students with special needs? And finally, with the rise of social networking, do students with special needs require additional training in social media skills?

Study Framework

In this study, 67 students with special needs were surveyed from rural and urban schools in the southeastern region of the United States. Thirty-seven males

were involved, ranging in age from 11-20. The ages were grouped by 10-12, 13-14, 15-16, 17-18, and 19-20. This survey also included 30 females ranging in age from 10-19. Females' ages were also grouped by 10-12, 13-14- 15-16, 17-18, and 19-20. The survey sought to determine if students with special needs used cell phones to text.

Questions included in the survey were as follows:

1. List all of the texting words you know and their meanings.
2. Why do you text instead of calling?
3. How often do you text per hour?
4. How often do you text per day?
5. Do you need help texting?
6. Do you text your parents?
7. Do your parents understand your texts?
8. Do you have a computer at home?
9. Do you have your own phone?
10. Do you text during class time?
11. How many hours a day do you spend studying?
12. Do you text at church or other social gatherings?
13. Do you use text messaging language in school assignments?
14. Have you ever used a texting dictionary?

Focus of Study

The study was conducted with a group of students with special needs to determine the extent to which these students are employing this relatively new form of communication and the extent of its impact upon their social relationships as well as their schoolwork.

We examined the content of their messages and measured the extent to which they were knowledgeable about and familiar with a lexicon of text messaging (see Table 1). Thus the study provides qualitative phenomenological research about how adolescents with learning disabilities' use texting as a social writing tool.

Findings

We found the age of the survey participants had a significant impact on their responses. The top texters were 15 and 16 year old females, with 43% reporting texting 51 times or more in an hour. The next nearest group was 10-to-14 year old females at 32%. The highest male performance was among males aged 15-16 at 23%,which was less than the lowest score of 17-to-20 year old females at 27% (see Figures 2 and 3).

The total performance of males on this "text test" indicated that slightly over 15% of them had a texting frequency of 51 times an hour or more. Females performed somewhat higher with 25% registering at 51 times or more an hour. These numbers suggest a chasm between adult understanding of the language of this emergent technology and the activity of teenagers. This information alone has significant implications for sociological communication moving forward.

One of the purposes of formal education is to create an understanding of the gross meaning and the nuanced meaning of language. It is possible that we are entering a period when the language divide will be not only between different cultures and countries, but also between generations and even regions within the same country.

Our survey conducted with the special education student population was similar to a study on "Teen Cell Phones and Texting" by the Pew Internet and American Life Project undertaken in 2010. According to the Pew findings, texting by teens friend-to-friend has increased rapidly since 2008. Some 38% of teens were daily texters in February 2008, and that has risen to 54% of teens who texted daily in September 2009. In the Pew study boys typically sent and received 30 texts a day; girls typically sent and received 80 messages per day. Teen texters aged 12-13 typically sent and received 20 texts a day, while 14-15 year-old texters typically sent and received 60 text messages a day. Older girls who text were the most active, with 14-17 year-old girls typically sending 100 or more message a day, or more than 3,000 texts a month (Lenhart, 2010).

The findings from our survey indicated that students with special needs text just like their abled peers and that girls

Figure 1
Communications Preferences among Students

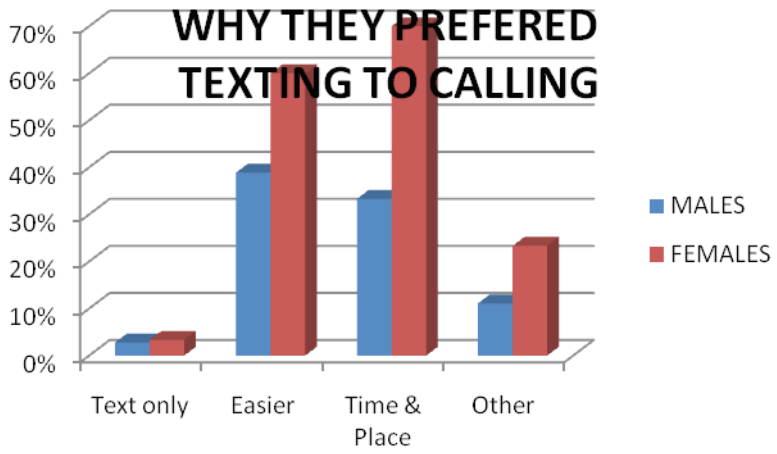


Figure 2
Texing by Female Students

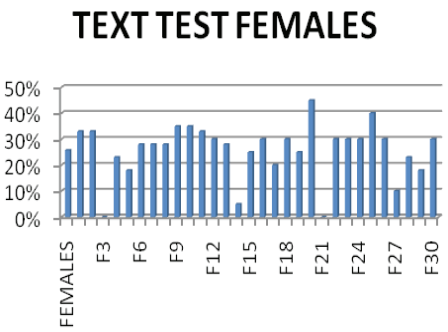
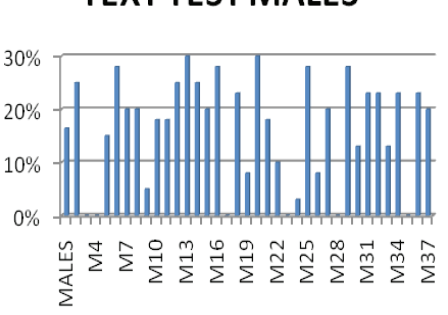


Figure 3
Texing by Male Students



typically text more than boys. Our research also showed that regardless of whether a student is special needs or not, texting is texting when it comes to the language of teenagers and their cell phones.

Inside the Data

However, when we closely examined the data we discovered some very interesting facts concerning comparisons between special needs students and their abled peers. It is possible that the dynamics revealed in this survey might also be applicable to students who have no recognized disability.

Unlike Lenhart's study, our study revealed that 98% of the children surveyed send text messages. Even children who did not own a cell phone send text messages. Several of the children that answered "no" to the question "Do you own your own cell phone?" still claimed to text. One female in the survey, who is between 16-17 years old, claimed to text between five to 20 times an hour and 21 to 40 times a day even though she responded that she did not own a cell phone. Another female also reported that she texted regularly, but was not the owner of a phone. Obviously those teens who have cell phones share them with those who do not.

A previous empirical study suggested that adolescents, for the most part, have a tendency to follow the trends of the times, which make them more likely to embrace new technological devices and assume certain behavioral characteristics (Ling, 2001). This would suggest that parental prohibition of phones does not prevent the phenomenon. The children are finding a way to participate in what is clearly a global communications activity.

The responses from the males were similar. Those that did not own a phone still found a way to text, and they all preferred texting to talking even if for different reasons. Only one male reported that he did not have a cell phone and did not text. Overall 95% of the male survey participants and 100% of the females in the population of students with special needs reported some experience with texting, in contrast to 55% of teens from the earlier Lenhart survey.

Our study looked at several comparative dynamics in an attempt to not only contrast the special needs population with their abled peers, but also to get a feel for the significance of this growing reality and attempt to gain insight into its implications for the future. The focus of our study went beyond the Lenhart study. We wanted to know about the students' competency in texting as it was compared to a given standard (see figures 2 and 3).

Texting Lexicon

We felt it was important to determine what are "acceptable standards of understanding" certain acronyms, abbreviations, truncations, and alterations of words and word phrases used in texting. One would hope that regardless of usage there would be some standard of commonality in this new form of communication. One concern is that the new communications vocabulary will become the standard only for a specific group of users who are insular and unengaged in the broader society. If we were simply referring to a fringe element of society, this would not be a concern; however, we are referring to an entire generation of children with the potential to separate linguistically from previous generations.

Seeking to identify these new language patterns, we asked the children in the survey to provide us with typical text message phrases and their meaning. To create their lists, the students were able to draw from a lexicon developed by Manning (2009). None of the males recognized more than 30% of the acronyms that Manning asserts are regularly used in text messages. Table 1 displays all of the terms listed by the students. This is the product of those who are now called the connecting generation.

Frequency of Texting between Genders

Our study revealed that females were much more likely to text than males. This is similar to previous research results. According to Lenhart's study, "As we see with other communicative technologies and applications, girls are more likely than boys to use both text messaging and voice calling and are likely to do each more frequently" (2010).

> Girls typically send and receive 80 texts a day; boys send and receive 30.
>
> 86% of girls text message friends several times a day; 64% of boys do the same.
>
> 59% of girls call friends on their cell phone every day; 42% of boys call friends daily on their cell phone daily.

Our survey results revealed that 66% of the females texted between 21 to 40 texts or 51 and above texts per hour. Only 26% of the males sent text messages from 21 to 40 and 51 and above texts within an hour. Some 70% of female survey participants reported that they sent over 51 or more text messages in a day compared to only 38% of males (see Figure 4). Also, as shown in Figure 4, 70% of females answered "yes" when asked if they texted during class time, as opposed to less than 50% of males who were asked the same question.

The dominance of females texting is not limited to volume or in-school texting. Females exceeded male texting for every question in which the information was quantifiable. In many cases the disparity was by a wide margin: 100% of the female respondents (even those who did not own a phone) gave a response of "no," when asked "do you need help texting?" Only 75% of males responded "no" to that question. All the female survey participants indicated that they did not need help with technology. What is counter intuitive is the fact that about 25% of males would admit that they needed help with technology.

Twice as many females have access to or have used a texting lexicon. Unlike the low

Table 1
Texting Lexicon Listed by Students

Text Phrase	*Meaning*
OMG	Oh my gosh
OMF	One of my followers
LOL	Laugh out loud
WRU	Where are you
HBW	How about you
LML	Laughing mad loud
TKO	Thank you
BRB	Be right back
TXT	text
WYD	What you doing
TTYL	Talk to you later
ILY	I love you
OML	On my life
HMU	Hit me up
NYEMND	Never mind
U	You
LYAS	Love you as a sis
K	Ok
NXT	next
4	for
2	two
R	Are
WUSSUP	What's up
YO	What's going on
WYD	What you doing
SMH	Shake my head
DTB	Don't text back
TTY	Talk to you later
GOJ	Got Jesus
HB	Happy Birthday
JK	Joking
PLZ	Please
IDC	I don't care
WD	Watcha doing
WAT	What
TBH	To be honest
STFU	Shut the "F" up
RWF	Rollin' with my friends
HME	Home
TKO	Thank you

incidence of males, at least 25% of females intuitively or practically (because they text much more) see a need to connect their texting behavior with existing knowledge. They were also more likely to text their parents. Nearly 90% of the females used text messaging to communicate with their parents. This is significant when compared to just 58% of males who communicated by text with their parents. This result could be a reflection of societal attitudes held by parents about females. It has been indicated by some parents that the reason for their child having a phone is so they will know where their child is at all times.

It may be but a small stretch to draw the conclusion that parents treat their female children more protectively than they do their male children, although there could certainly be other explanations that would account for this 40% disparity.

The students were asked if they used text messaging language for their school assignments and 25% of the females and 22% of the males answered "yes." This was despite the fact that many teachers from the same schools opposed the use of texting lexicon in class assignments and many of the schools do not allow cell phones on campus.

Texting Versus Studying

Questions in our survey also considered time engaged in school-related study, thus allowing a comparison with texting patterns. The students who reported studying the most were males aged 15-16; over 70% reported studying between 30 to 60 minutes a day and 23% reported studying between 90 to 120 minutes a day. The next highest reporting group were females aged 15-16; 65% reported studying 30 to 60 minutes a day, and 33% reported studying 60 to 90 minutes a day.

In a surprising contrast, 60% of males 17-20 studied for 30 to 60 minutes a day, 10% studied 60 to 90 minutes a day, and 17% studied 90 to 120 minutes or more. None of the female respondents reported studying 90 to 120 minutes or more. This is a reversal of their use of text messaging. The females' study habits demonstrated the inverse of their texting prowess (See Figure 5).

While this is not evidence of a correlation, it is cause for seeking further study. Is the possibility that "The more you text the less you study" of significance to schools and teachers? Females text more and report less study minutes. In contrast, the male students in our study text less and report more study minutes (See Figure 6). Additional research is needed to seek explanations for these differences and any impact they may have on schools and classrooms.

Conclusion

Texting by children is a phenomenon that has begun to receive much more interest from researchers. The results of this study may be seen as a beacon for those who are trying to wrap their minds around this texting phenomenon that is potentially profound and far reaching.

All of the findings suggest a need for additional study as well as school-based programs to incorporate new media into the curriculum and assure that all students develop the skills to utilize these new technologies.

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Figure 4
Females Versus Males Texting Responses

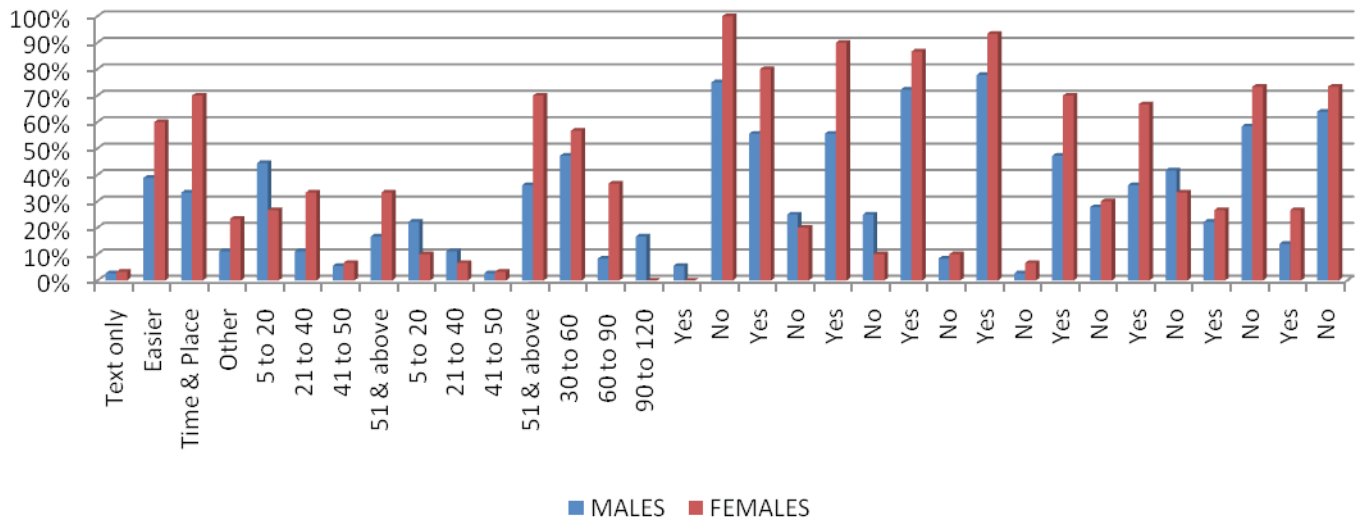

Figure 5
Female Trends According to Age

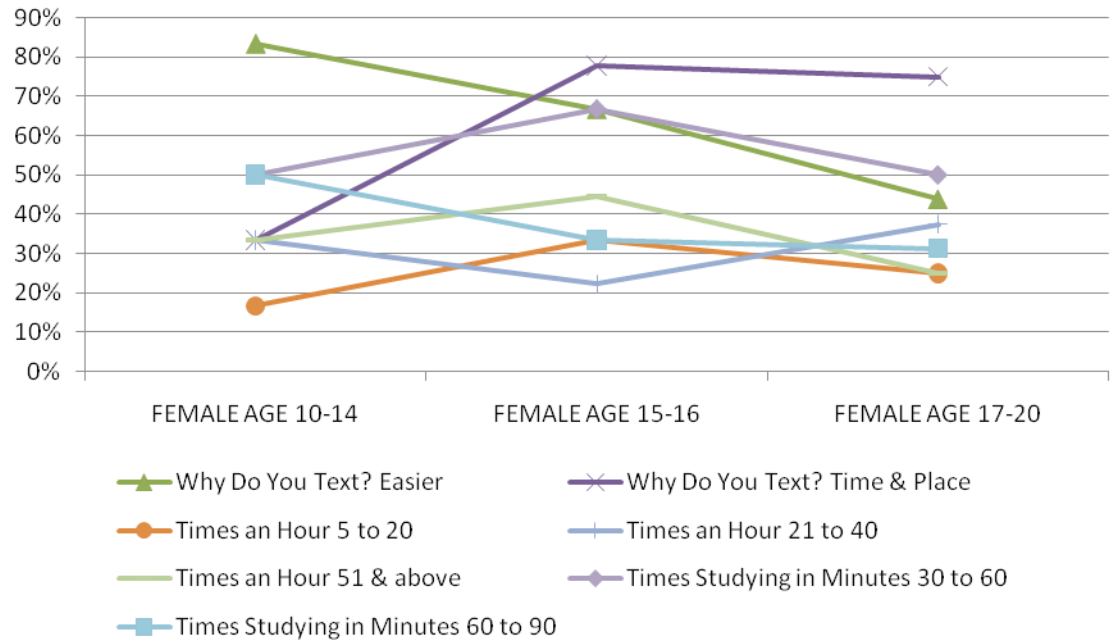

Figure 6
Male Trends According to Age