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Teachers, Parents, and—Above All—Students "Buy In" to Raise Expectations

By Christopher Hayes

"Throughout history, deaf people have faced a gamut of perceptions and attitudes that have influenced the quality of educational opportunities" (Lang, 2003), and too often this influence has been negative. For the deaf or hard of hearing student in the mainstream—today's environment in which all children are expected to learn more, produce more, and be assessed more—the high pressure coupled with low expectations can be overwhelming. Without the right team and the right attitude, the risk of each student not achieving his or her full academic promise mounts.

We, the teachers of deaf and hard of hearing students, are thus at a point where it is crucial to establish high expectations both for ourselves and for our students—and to encourage parents to support these high expectations as well. Since many students with hearing loss have difficulty speaking and using English, administrators and mainstream teachers sometimes misunderstand their academic potential. According to Antia, Stinson, & Gaustad (2002):

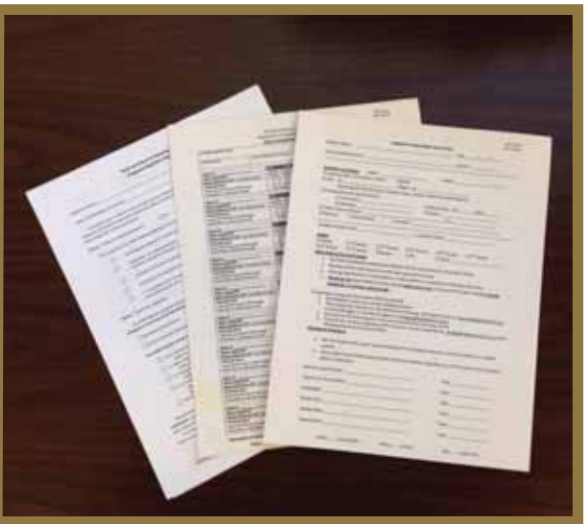
> General academic classroom teachers might have low academic and behavioral expectations for [deaf and hard of hearing students] because they see them as "special" and consequently may ignore misbehavior and missed homework. They also may not hold [these students] accountable for content knowledge and academic skills that they expect from other students. (p. 220)

As an itinerant teacher working to secure effectiveness and consistency among all the teachers with whom my students interact, including some who lack the skill set to effectively support deaf and hard of hearing students, I find myself in a "big sell" to alleviate the low expectations that can be so crippling to deaf and hard of hearing students in academic environments. What is necessary is "teacher and parental buy-in" to the idea that deaf and hard of hearing students can and will succeed.

The idea of "teacher buy-in" came to me recently when I was trying to describe to our school audiologist the importance of training staff to work with deaf and hard of hearing students. As we talked, I felt I faced the lingering and dated idea of the "poor deaf student"—

Photos by Christopher Hayes

Right and below: Empowering those who work the closest with students will help the impact of buy-in across the board.



to be pitied, to be seen as automatically disadvantaged and treated with concern. In this fortunately outdated model, expectations are typically very low and levels of academic achievement follow suit. The challenge lies in getting school staff, especially teachers, to look at the students with hearing loss in a new way and helping them to understand that they must expect more. Antia, Jones, Reed, & Kreimeyer (2009) argue that students with hearing loss "in general education classrooms can achieve at a higher level than reported by previous researchers and also can make adequate progress in these classrooms."

This speaks directly to the idea of educating teachers to buy into the education of the deaf and hard of hearing children in their classes, to see these children's potential, and, with the right accommodations, to support their ability to succeed. The remnants of the model of the "disadvantaged deaf student" must be expelled, and teachers must change their perspective in order to see potential and create realistic expectations. According to Cross (2008), teachers, in general, who hold high expectations for their students:

- explicitly state their expectations for achievement to students;
- spend equal amounts of time interacting with high- and low-achieving students; and
- teach students about the relationship between effort and achievement and what it means to be smart in their classes.

Although educating teachers is important, it is also critical that parents buy into and maintain a high level of expectation for their deaf or hard of hearing child. Bodner-Johnson (1986) noted that acceptance of a child's hearing loss and high expectations for his or her academic success are the two best ways to predict deaf students' academic achievement. I find this often in my own teaching: children of parents who maintain close contact with me as well as with their child's classroom teacher seem to do better academically and with the continuity of services they receive throughout their entire day. Maintaining a good rapport with parents allows us, as

educators, to develop a strong education plan based on high expectations. Reed, Antia, & Kreimeyer (2008) listed the characteristics of families for deaf and hard of hearing children who achieve above-average results:

- The family has high expectations.
- The parents are very involved in all aspects of the child's life.
- The parents are knowledgeable of all received and needed services for the child.
- The parents are in frequent communication with the child's teacher of the deaf.

The Route Changes, Not the Destination

High expectations mean that deaf and hard of hearing students learn to the best of their ability on par with their hearing peers; high expectations do not mean that deaf, hard of hearing, and hearing students should be expected to learn in the same way.

Teachers, including general education teachers, need to be aware that visual learning means that the teaching approach for deaf and hard of hearing students must be different as all material must be presented visually. This may mean writing consistently on the board and collaborating with an interpreter and the teacher of the deaf in class. It may also mean accommodating the swift-moving spoken dynamics of the classroom that can result in students who are dependent on vision being overlooked. The proliferation of high stakes education testing has increased the importance of understanding how to respect the educational needs of deaf and hard of hearing children and implement a visual approach for them in the classroom.

The nature of visual learning also means that while it is important for us, as teachers, to have high expectations for our students, it is even more important that our students learn that they have the same right to access information as their hearing peers (Anderson & Arnoldi, 2011). Once they understand this, students with hearing loss are able to advocate for their needs. Knowledge of their right to access and confidence in their potential for high academic achievement enables students to support their own learning by helping the teacher set up the classroom environment necessary for them to be successful.

Self-advocacy may include the use of "strategies for using interpreters effectively, participating in classroom discussions, repairing communication breakdowns, and self-advocating to improve communication environments" (Antia et al., 2009). For this reason, after driving from school to school, checking in on students and training teachers and staff, transporting equipment, taking equipment for repair, troubleshooting, meeting with teachers about progress, and directly teaching content, I spend a majority of my time encouraging students to develop self-advocacy skills and self-determination.

Self-advocacy skills and a belief in self-determination empower our students to function as independently as possible and to exert control over the environment around them. As a result, the level of expectation from their teachers increases, and it becomes obvious to parents and teachers that students are capable of controlling their own lives. Luckner and Muir (2002) argue that students who possess effective self-advocacy skills are aware of their strengths and weaknesses, and the potential impact of their strengths and weaknesses on their performance. They are able to identify the support they need to succeed and to advocate for this support in a positive and assertive manner. As noted by Smith (2008), "Once we have given 'the spoon' back to deaf children and expect them to use it like any other child, we will find that they can effectively 'feed themselves' and live fuller and more independent lives." When students are able to take control of their hearing loss and their education, it "can result in teachers making appropriate academic demands on students and also taking responsibility for adjusting the environment to allow the … student to participate fully in classroom activities" (Antia et al., 2002).

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Finally, I think it is crucial to keep three messages (Saphier, Haley-Speca, & Gower, 1997) in mind. In all our interactions with students, we must convey the high expectations that we have for them. Do this by telling the student:

- **"This is important."** Students must know that the teacher believes the content is essential.
- **"You can do it."** Students must know that the teacher believes in their abilities.
- **"I won't give up on you."** Students must know that the teacher will not abandon them.

If teachers and parents buy in to achieve their children's success, deaf and hard of hearing children will buy in as well, and this, above all, will ensure they receive the education they deserve.

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