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EXPECTATIONS LEAD TO PERFORMANCE:

The Transformative Power of High Expectations in Preschool

By Ye Wang, Karen S. Engler, and Tara L. Oetting

High expectations are expected at all levels, but ideally are in place in preschool. It is our job as early intervention providers to model for parents what high expectations look like and how to translate those expectations into family experiences. In our preschool program at Missouri State University, where we serve children with all communication modalities and all styles of personal assistive listening devices, we emphasize the importance of high expectations and model them. Here is a look at our program.

It began in 1989 when a Missouri State University professor, Dr. Harold Meyers, was awarded a U.S. Department of Education grant through the Office of Special Education to prepare future educators of students who are deaf or hard of hearing. It was through this grant that our preschool program, housed in the Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders Speech Language and Hearing Clinic, was formed. Our preschool has supported the preparation of teachers while providing direct services to children, ages 3 to 6 years old, who are deaf or hard of hearing. We welcome children into the program regardless of communication modality and the presence of additional disabilities. We provide a family-centered intervention.

Infusing High Expectations into the Classroom

In our program, we immerse deaf and hard of hearing students in expectations that they will become independent and literate from the moment they enter our classroom. We fill our students' environment with language, as language is the basis for all learning, while simultaneously involving them in emergent literacy activities. The development of language,

Photos courtesy of Ye Wang, Karen S. Engler, and Tara L. Oetting



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literacy, social, academic, speech, and auditory skills is interfaced with the development of self-advocacy and independence.

Our language-intensive classroom uses a repetitive approach to vocabulary building. It provides students with multiple means through which they can experience language and build a base for literacy. As with most preschool children, children who are deaf or hard of hearing appear to benefit greatly from repetitive tasks, especially those that are more abstract in nature. The variety of learning styles used in the classroom gives children the opportunity to experience language and build literacy skills. The students constantly receive multiple exposures to signed, spoken, and written language throughout the school day. For example, all items in the classroom have a label, and the label includes a picture of the sign with the printed word beneath it. This maximizes each student's opportunity to connect the printed word with the item itself and with its signed partner.

We use age-appropriate curricula and reading materials with adaptations for preschool. For example, as our curricular base for group reading, we use Section 1 of *Reading Mastery I* (SRA/McGraw-Hill, 2008), a scientifically based reading program that has demonstrated positive outcomes with a wide range of students who are at risk for developing reading problems. Lessons

1-30 of *Early Reading Tutor* (SRA/McGraw-Hill, 2007) provide additional instruction for individuals, including 30 one-on-one, 10-minute supplementary lessons. This also provides additional information and allows the teacher to attend to students' individual needs. Due to the diversity in degrees of hearing loss—many times ranging from mild/moderate to profound—and in language environments in their homes, our students vary significantly in their exposure and access to languages (spoken, signed, and written). Individual instruction, supplementing group instruction, is necessary to meet the needs of these students.

Also, in order to accommodate the unique needs of students who are deaf or hard of hearing, we use multiple instructional strategies and technologies to adapt the mainstream curricula. For example, we use Visual Phonics, a system of 46 unique hand cues and symbols that represent the sounds of English, to supplement the phonics instruction during both group and individual instructions. Second, we use a digitalized Photo Library to demonstrate the range of meanings for each word presented in the word-reading activities in the lessons of *Reading Mastery I*. The extra pictorial representation of vocabulary from the Photo Library provides enhanced opportunities for students who are deaf or hard of



hearing to develop their vocabulary, particularly words with multiple meanings (e.g., the word “bat” has two pictures—one with the animal, one with the baseball equipment). Third, lessons used from *Reading Mastery I* were scanned into a file on a computer and shown on a SMART Board, which enlarges the picture and print. The SMART Board technology allows teachers to have free hands for signing and for signaling students. SMART Boards overcome a limitation of traditional instruction by enabling students to have easy access to both the teacher’s signing and their reading materials; students do not have to look down at the print in their books. With the touch screen function, SMART Boards transform the classroom into an interactive, engaging learning environment. Coupled with wireless microphones and built-in speakers, SMART Boards also increase students’ access to spoken language.

Modeling and Translating Bringing High Expectations Home

We model high expectations for parents of preschool children and help them translate those expectations into their family experiences through weekly take-home DVD reading kits. The primary purpose of the reading kits is to improve the families’ sign language vocabulary.

Although exposed to both signing and speech at school, a majority of the preschoolers are not exposed to signing at home because their parents have little or no signing skills. Free sign language workshops have been offered for the parents, but many parents have not been able to attend. The reading kits are beneficial in improving communication, therefore lessening stress, and perhaps lead to increased language skills for the preschool children.

Each reading kit consists of:

- One storybook appropriate for preschoolers based on the Scholastic website (www.scholastic.com)
- One DVD with two versions of the storybook—one in American Sign Language (ASL), the language that deaf and hard of hearing individuals use within the Deaf community, and one in Conceptually Accurate Sign English (CASE), the system of signing conceptually correct American signs in English word order—both of which are signed by either the classroom teacher or a graduate clinician
- Two vocabulary packets of approximately 20 vocabulary words for each storybook (one in ASL and one in CASE)
- A one-page handout that lists and

briefly explains the materials included in the reading kit as well as instructions on how to use the kit in the most beneficial way

- A two-page handout that includes *Tips for Enhancing Early Literacy in the Home* and *Tips for Parents of Preschoolers*

Parents typically check out one reading kit each week. A pilot investigation found that these teacher-made, DVD-based, take-home reading kits were effective not only in improving sign vocabulary and communication of the two families who participated but also in helping deaf and hard of hearing preschoolers express themselves through signed language.

Measuring and Monitoring Ensuring Expectations Stay High

We measure and monitor the impact of establishing high expectations through various formal and informal assessments. For example, the formal assessments, administered at the beginning and the end of the academic year, are:

- **Test of Preschool Early Literacy (TOPEL)**—The TOPEL is used to test for reading readiness in preschool students and to determine areas of struggle that need extra assistance. There are two tested areas: Print Knowledge, in which students discriminate between letters and other symbols and then move on to identifying letters, and Definitional Vocabulary, in which students identify by name the picture provided and answer a question about what that item does.
- **Word Associations for Syllable Perception (WASP)**—The WASP is an assessment on auditory skill development. It includes 225 child-friendly picture cards representing the English phonemes. It starts with single phonemes and simple syllabus sounds (e.g., /m/, /baa/, and /s/). Then it systematically introduces words with increasingly complex combinations, such as consonant-

vowel-consonant words.

- **Goldman-Fristoe Test of Articulation 2 (GFTA-2)**—The GFTA-2 provides information about a student's articulation ability by sampling both spontaneous and imitative sound production. The student responds to picture plates and verbal cues from the examiner with single-word answers that demonstrate common speech sounds. Additional sections provide further measures of speech production. The GFTA-2 measures articulation of consonant sounds, determines types of misarticulation, and compares individual performance to national, gender-differentiated norms.
- **Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test 4 (PPVT-4)**—The PPVT-4, with 228 stimulus words, quickly evaluates receptive vocabulary and requires no reading or writing skills.
- **Woodcock-Johnson Tests of Achievement-III (WJ-III)**—Four of the WJ-III subtests—Letter-Word Identification, Spelling, Word Attack, and Passage Comprehension—are administered. Matching, identifying, copying, and reading symbols, including some letters and words, are included. A phonetical reading of nonsense words is also a part of the assessment.

In addition, we use many formal and informal assessments throughout the year, monitoring progress monthly. These include:

- **Initial Sounds Fluency**, a subtest from Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills, with letter names and letter sounds assessment;
- **Length of Utterance**, a calculation based on collected language samples;
- **Cottage Acquisition Scales for Listening, Language & Speech**

Analysis, based on a variety of discourse skills, sentence forms, noun phrases, and subordination; and

- **Woodcock-Johnson III**, an assessment used for follow-up of preschool graduates in early elementary schools as well as at the beginning and end of the academic year for all students.

Success for Our Students!

Moving Up with Expectations

A follow-up study was conducted with three of our preschool graduates upon their entering elementary school, and each of the students demonstrated overall reading levels at or above their age levels (Wang, Spychala, Harris, & Oetting, 2013). These three students—who had varying degrees of hearing loss, usage of amplification, and modes of communication—demonstrated at least some use of phonemic awareness and phonics skills, and these skills were sustained in early elementary school, although their elementary school teachers used various reading programs.

For instance, when tested upon entry into preschool, Emily*, who had a mild hearing loss, and Kristen, who used a cochlear implant and a hearing aid, scored above average and/or average on language- and print-based early reading skills compared with their same-age hearing peers, though each performed poorly on sound-based tasks. Both Emily and Kristen made marked improvement and demonstrated reading skills approximately one grade above their grade level in early elementary school.

Nancy, with an unaided central hearing loss and a severe language disorder, started our program with below average and significantly below average scores on language- and print-based tasks, and she could not complete any sound-based tasks. Nancy required a longer time to respond to interventions

than her peers, but eventually she was able to demonstrate an age-appropriate reading level. In early elementary school, she showed evidence of phonemic awareness and phonics skills, and she even performed at a slightly higher level than her hearing peers on some phonics tasks.

High Expectations

An Impact that Continues

The potentially transformative power generated from the expectations of the teachers and parents can have a massive impact on the development of children, particularly those who are deaf or hard of hearing. With high expectations for preschool deaf and hard of hearing children, our program at Missouri State University embraces effective instructional strategies and multi-media technology to meet the individual needs of each child and to ensure age-appropriate academic development on par with that of their hearing peers. This is accomplished in an environment that radiates a belief in the learning potential of all children and embraces high expectations for all. Our experience demonstrates that high expectations lead to high performance.

**All students' names in this article are pseudonyms.*



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