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# Reflections on Expectations

*By Joseph Santini*

In the late 1960s, researchers Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson began to explore experimental ways to test a revolutionary concept: that people's expectations could influence other people in the world around them. Rosenthal and Jacobson suggested, for example, that if people in society believe that people in Group X are lazy, those expectations result in people in Group X doing very little work.

Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) conducted what became a well-known experiment to measure the power of expectations in school environments. As the school year began, teachers were given phony results for their incoming students' aptitude tests. The researchers randomly assigned some students to the status of high achievers and others to the status of merely average. Teachers taught for a year with this baseline of false assumptions. When their students were retested, 80 percent of those who had been labeled "high achieving" showed a statistically greater amount of achievement than their peers. The researchers concluded that teachers' expectations had become self-fulfilling prophecies and had led them to behave in ways that made their expectations a reality.

Rosenthal and Jacobson called this the "Pygmalion effect," in a nod to the play in which a professor managed to fool the upper crust of British society into thinking a woman from what the Brits call "the lower classes" was a duchess; he did so by teaching her to imitate the behaviors they expected from such nobility. The study gained instant fame. Many studies began to replicate the work, and researchers continued to explore the implications of those initial findings; they affirmed expectations powerfully affected student learning, positively and negatively.

Dee (2006) later explored the relationship between expectations and gender in the classroom. The National Educational Longitudinal Study (Ingels, Scott, Taylor, Owings, & Quinn, 1998) had shown that on standardized tests eighth-grade boys performed consistently behind girls in subjects such as reading, while girls performed consistently behind boys in math and science. Dee suggested a role-model effect had come into play; students observed the gender of their teachers in math and language classes, drew conclusions about gender expectations for themselves, and this affected their performance.

McGrew and Evans (2004), in a review of the literature on classroom interactions among teachers, paraprofessionals, and students with disabilities, found consistent negative patterns of the Pygmalion effect. Their review pointed out the following patterns in the

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way that school staff handled the students with disabilities in class:

- They spoke to students with disabilities less in one-on-one situations.
- They gave students with disabilities less wait time to answer questions.
- They changed the nature of their interactions with students with disabilities, using simpler vocabulary, less complex grammar, and easier questions.
- They offered the students with disabilities less cognitively challenging work.
- They made voluntary and involuntary changes in their body language with students with disabilities (e.g., they gave them less eye contact).

McGrew and Evans (2004) pointed to the Pygmalion effect as one of the reasons for these findings: Teachers expected students with disabilities to perform less well than their peers without disabilities and thus acted in ways that contributed to that result. They connected their findings to the work of Cotton (2001), who showed that even when expectations were based on beliefs that accorded with facts, these facts sometimes changed over time—and the beliefs did not. Thus, teachers sometimes would sustain the expectation that a student would struggle with a topic or skill long past the

time when the student had mastered it.

In a third study, Theoharis and Fitzpatrick explored the physical behavior and attitudes of the principals of two schools towards Max, a student who had a disability. In the record of their observations, they described the principals, one who demonstrated the behaviors described by McGrew and Evans (2004), and one who demonstrated the opposite. Principal A's behavior toward Max was negative; he failed to respond to the parents' questions, and he was indifferent to the school environment, to Max's needs, and to the needs of his students. Principal B was well-versed in Max's needs, often stopped meetings to respond to student concerns, and tried to converse with Max, crouching down to his height, and offering Max his hand.

Clearly expectations are at work throughout the school environment. The Pygmalion effect—with adults and students arriving in class with expectations of other students' behavior—relates to the achievement of deaf and hard of hearing students.

### **As a Teacher**

In 2005, when I began teaching, "Pygmalion" was just a play to me. All I knew was that I wanted to give deaf and hard of hearing children who were in the mainstream a fair shake. I chose to teach in an inner city public school environment. This meant I'd have a class of 30 students—one of whom might be deaf or hard of hearing—and no interpreter. I carefully scaffolded the classroom environment with text and

visual supports to help make sure everyone could access the directions and materials. My goal wasn't to treat the occasional deaf or hard of hearing student "specially" but equally, because I believed doing so would give him or her the greatest opportunity.

During my second year of teaching, I began to work with students labeled, often derogatively, "deaf plus" (i.e., deaf children with disabilities). Students in my reading class ranged from 15 to 18 years old, and they consistently tested at the bottom range of every test recorded in our database. I was excited. These deaf students had been labeled failures and segregated by the system. I felt that I could help them succeed.

On the first day, I met the teachers and professionals who had previously worked with these students. I offered ideas for instruction based on what I'd learned about bilingual education and the education of deaf children, and they responded in a negative or cautioning manner. When I look back at that initial meeting through the lens of my knowledge today, I realize I experienced firsthand a literal conjunction of research on the Pygmalion effect (e.g., the previously established expectations of Rosenthal and Jacobson, the sustained expectations of Cotton, and the stereotypes identified in the review of McGrew and Evans). I chose, however, to go against the advice of these experienced teachers, and I was able to convince my fellow faculty to give it a shot—largely because, as one person said, things couldn't get any worse.

I immersed students in a self-selected reading program on par with what other students in the same grade experienced. I chose to have class discussions and group projects instead of worksheets. While I was honest with the students about their initially poor achievement, I also set expectations that they constantly work on improving. Many of the students had at least some skills in American Sign Language (ASL), so I included parts of an ASL curriculum, using modules I found on the Gallaudet University website ([www.gallaudet.edu](http://www.gallaudet.edu)). I felt students needed practice and structure in the language they used daily (i.e., ASL) before they could see those rules emerge in the language they were learning to read and write in class (i.e., English).

I found that low expectations for my students were present not only among faculty but also outside of the classroom, and in insidious ways. For example, I once observed students, deaf and hearing, in the lunchroom using the terms *low-functioning* and *deaf plus* to insult other students. I called the students together for a discussion, asking where they had learned these obviously adult phrases. One student said she'd seen them as early as third grade in another school. We spoke about what the phrases meant, why they were used, and why they were problematic.

Two years later, a student taking a test threw up her hands in despair, cried, and ran out of the room. When I caught up to her in the hallway and we spoke, she told me she was "too low-functioning," "too deaf plus" to take the test. She couldn't do it, she said; everybody knew she couldn't do it. That expectation—that she was "low functioning" and incapable—had been

ingrained in her. It was part of her self-image. She couldn't finish the exam that day, but I had confidence in her, and we continued to work together.

Working with her to externalize "low functioning" took many discussions and a lot of trust. When my student took that test the next time, she passed.

Implementing the curriculum I wanted was not an easy or quick process. The writing assignments took weeks instead of days. My students had less experience than others on which to scaffold understanding of new projects and activities. They often experienced frustration and a lack of support from the outside world. Parents often did not consider the academic work of these students to be as important as other activities, possibly due to assumptions and expectations of their own. E-mail communication helped me provide support outside of the classroom, and surreptitiously work with students on their English.

When students were challenged, I tried to frame their frustrations as a problem of communication or misunderstanding instead of one of ability or effort, with the mantra always being, "Let's try explaining this a different way." Often this framing was effective as students came from a background of struggling to understand what other people, even their families, were saying. For example, I had a student who often refused to write stories in class. Over the course of many discussions, I came to learn that she refused to write stories because, as she told me, "stories were lies." As a teacher I wondered how this misunderstanding had come about. The word *story* is sometimes used as a euphemism for *lie*, so it might have been a linguistic issue. On the other hand, a new signer might have once mistranslated and given the student an idea that persisted for years. It became part of my role to fix this misunderstanding and clarify the role of stories.

I made many mistakes that first year, but our class also had many successes. My students improved their test scores, each at their own rates, and the improvement for each student was relatively consistent. I found students began to enjoy reading. Some students chose very adult works they'd been kept from before, interested in topics appropriate for their age. By the middle of the year, parents were calling to say their child wanted to go to the library. My students weren't magically on grade level, but they were showing signs of being on an independent path to literacy. Clearly by raising expectations, something was going right for my students, both inside and outside of the classroom.



**Left:** Traditionally, we think of the expectations a teacher has as the most powerful influence. **Below:** However, children are greatly influenced by expectations that can come from many different directions.



## As a Student

I may have been especially reflective about the needs of my deaf plus students because when I looked at them, I saw myself. I never had the special challenge of being labeled “deaf plus,” but as a deaf man who grew up in the 1980s and 1990s and experienced many types of school programs, misplaced expectations affected me—frequently and powerfully. In 1993, as an eighth grader, I entered the school’s most advanced mathematics class, proud that I had qualified to be there. I happily sat in the front row with an interpreter and waited for class to begin. When the teacher arrived, she noticed a difference in the class configuration, and my interpreter began to try to explain the reason for her presence; I stood up to say hello and shake the teacher’s hand. While we stood there, my empty hand still outstretched, the teacher said that she “didn’t accept deaf students in her class.” Deaf students couldn’t handle the work, she said. My interpreter, who was uncertified, wasn’t sure how to deal with the teacher’s response or even explain the situation to me. We left. I was assigned to another course, but something in the encounter changed me; my math grades turned from A’s and B’s to C’s and D’s. Expectations only need a moment to be revealed, but they last an exceptionally long time.

I experienced other frustrating problems, which I recognized with a pang when I read the dissertation of Valente (2008), later

republished as the autobiographical *d/Deaf and d/Dumb: A Portrait of a Deaf Kid as a Young Superhero*. Like Valente, I was forced to take the handicapped bus to school despite my home’s close-to-the-bus-stop location. I was often prevented from joining school activities, with the school administration citing safety and deafness as a barrier. Lack of interpreters was constantly an issue, and certainly none were certified. (And does that not reflect the expectations of the city and state?) In class, I was frequently limited to filling out worksheets and rarely involved with group activities. Like Valente, I had family members who believed in me and helped me counter the expectations and pressures of others; my mother was a powerful influence who led me to become involved with the Deaf community. No deaf adults worked in my mainstreamed school; my mother took pains to introduce me to people at the deaf club so I’d have role models. Eventually, frustrated with the mainstream environment, I chose to attend the Model Secondary School for the Deaf (MSSD), the high school for deaf and hard of hearing students in Washington, D.C. With the help of the MSSD community and curriculum, I began to understand the civil and social issues that molded my experiences.

My experiences and those of my students, despite being separated by two decades, were remarkably similar. The expectations of others shaped, at least partly, our academic performance.

## What Can Teachers Do?

As teachers, we are often considered the most important variable in a student’s success. Yet research shows that a teacher is only a quarter of a school’s influence on a student (Cody, 2012). To me this means that we, as teachers, need to be active and aware participants in the school community. We also need to be in touch with the student’s home community. Further, we need to move beyond standardized tests and try to forge a true connection with our students.

We can also address the individual child, acknowledge the expectation/performance cycle, and give the student opportunities to break it. Ware (2001) wrote about using writing classes to get students with disabilities to explore their experiences, and she described the challenges she faced in helping teachers and school administrators to step outside their comfort zones to let the students describe the experiences of their daily lives. As an English teacher, I was uniquely placed to use written assignments in this manner, but the technique can be adapted to other subjects.

As teachers, we can work directly with students to resist the burden of negative expectations. We can help advocate to diversify our schools in terms of gender, race, and ability, and to provide a set of role models who help students form respectful communities of learning colleagues. We can contact parents to help them also recognize their children’s progress. In the mainstream, I was constantly aware that as a deaf person who was a teacher, I was not only a role model for students but also

an image for parents of what their children might become. This knowledge can be a lot of pressure. We teachers are not superheroes and should also remember to take time for self-care so that our efforts have the energy to be fruitful.

Most importantly, we must reject assumptions, including those that are unspoken. In Rosenthal's experiment, over 80 percent of the students identified as "high achievers" exceeded expectations. If we could harness the power of expectations in the education of deaf and hard of hearing students, the effects could be remarkable.

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