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Expecting the Best:

THE ESSENTIAL LESSON FOR TEACHERS

By Carl B. Williams

"The beginning is the most important part of the work."
~ *Plato*

Effective teachers possess a repertoire of critical skills associated with student achievement. As one might expect, these skills relate to planning, implementing, and evaluating instruction. However, there is one indispensable component that is not a skill in the traditional sense; nonetheless, it is an essential dimension of the learning process. I am referring to high expectations and ensuring that teachers are able to sustain them as they teach in the classroom. High expectations are significant because teachers' expectations influence their actions and, by extension, student learning. Kauchak and Eggen (2014) describe the impact of teacher expectations in this way:

> Effective teaching begins with who you are—your beliefs about students and learning and how you interact with students as you work with them. Your beliefs about students and learning set the stage for everything else that occurs in your classroom. (p. 349)

For example, a math teacher might feel that his middle school students are unable to handle word problems. Therefore, he focuses primarily on computation and gives short shrift to problems that involve words. At some point, the students take a statewide math examination that contains a sizable number of word problems. Predictably, the students do poorly—not necessarily because they do not have the potential, but because they were not exposed to the concept of word problems and provided with strategies for solving them.

Photos by Susan Flanigan, John T. Consoli, and Heather Lightfoot Withrow
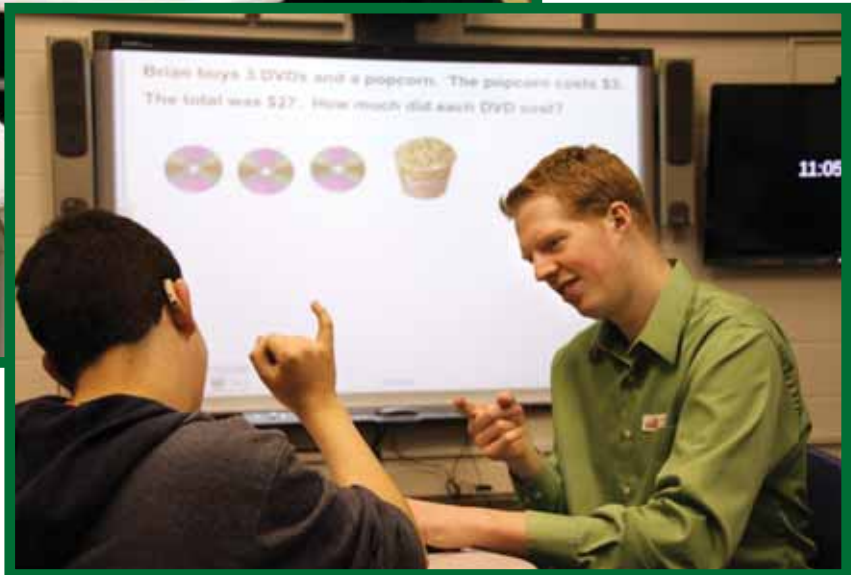
Above and right: Keeping expectations high and working with students on more complex concepts helps them to excel (e.g., math word problems).

Worse, the cycle of low expectations is perpetuated because the poor results serve to reinforce the teacher's initial view that his students could not be successful with word problems, whereupon he continues to omit problem solving from future lesson plans.

Unfortunately, there are some commonly accepted notions that have become part of the narrative of deaf education. These include views that deaf and hard of hearing students are "concrete," they "cannot achieve literacy levels on par with their hearing peers," and they "can compute, but word problems are beyond their ability." Andrews, Leigh, and Weiner (2004) caution against such stereotypes and strongly encourage teachers of deaf and hard of hearing students to plan in ways that are intended to maximize their academic achievement. This admonition is especially notable in light of research indicating that effective teachers communicate positive expectations for students and that these expectations form a strong foundation for student learning (Good & Brophy, 2008; Torff, 2011).

The challenge for teacher education programs is to prepare teachers to have high expectations. To achieve this outcome, teacher education programs can address positive expectations as an integral part of their programs of study.

Discussion of expectations for students—and keeping them high—is a topic I approach every semester. "Giving the Spoon Back: Higher Teacher Expectations for Students Who are Deaf" (Smith, 2008) is a particularly relevant source for initiating discussions because the article is a case study that examines a deaf teacher's beliefs and the behaviors that reflect the high expectations she has for her students. My students are also required to write reaction papers in response to articles such as "A Deaf Child Learns to Read" (Rottenberg, 2001) and "Successful Students Who are Deaf in General Education Settings" (Luckner & Muir, 2001), both of which convey the reality that younger and older deaf and hard of hearing students can achieve age-appropriate learning goals.

These studies are discussed in an attempt to counterbalance the content of quantitative studies that paint a bleak picture of deaf and hard of hearing student achievement. As a teacher, I emphasize that most research findings allow for generalizations based on average group statistics; these studies indicate little about the performance or potential of any individual deaf or hard of hearing child. At the same time, I find it crucial to underscore instructional methods that demand more of deaf and hard of hearing students. Simply having high expectations is only part of the equation. Only to the extent that high-

same and those that are different. In this case, the teacher has used the charts as a scaffold to raise students' participation from low-level responses (i.e., remembering) to higher-level responses (i.e., analyzing).

Educational outcomes that challenge students do not need to involve arduous instructional planning. In fact, many simple, straightforward learning experiences can promote higher order thinking skills. Consider the following three examples of activities that require students to engage in analyzing, evaluating, and creating—the highest levels of cognition. All three strategies can be carried out individually, in small groups, or as a whole class. In addition, they can be used in both language arts and content-area subjects in elementary and secondary classes.

quality expectations are translated into high-quality teaching do they become meaningful. Teachers with high expectations plan learning experiences with rigorous content.

Rigorous content in the deaf education classroom seems especially appropriate in light of the fact that 90 percent of the states have adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), which seek to elevate academic achievement to ensure that students are well prepared for the demands of college and careers. Undeniably, a higher standard of learning necessitates a higher standard of teaching. Since the CCSS challenge students to pursue deeper levels of thought in the learning process, teachers will need to be able to implement instruction that promotes thinking skills. To this end, Bloom's Taxonomy can be of help.

Bloom's Taxonomy, a framework originally developed in 1956 and updated during the 1990s, is a classification system that identifies a hierarchy of six processes associated with learning: remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). While the first three levels are important for establishing fundamental information, higher-order thinking skills are cultivated when teachers create assignments and ask questions at the top three levels: analyzing, evaluating, and creating.

Some teachers may feel that their students are unable to operate at higher cognitive levels. In these situations, teachers should consider scaffolding, building on lower-level knowledge and skills, until the student is able to handle higher-level work. For example, students might be nonresponsive when asked to compare and contrast spiders and bees. However, the teacher can have the students list characteristics of spiders and of bees on separate charts. Placing these charts side by side, the teacher can have the students identify the characteristics that are the

Analyzing—Figuring Out Relationships

Students can do an activity List-Group-Label (Taba, 1967) which requires students to apply critical thinking to recognize the relationships between words. The steps are as follows:

- Select a key concept from an upcoming lesson or unit, and have students brainstorm related words. (List)
  Key concept: Sources of Energy
  Word list: coal, sun, water, natural gas, oil, wind

- Have students classify the words into semantic categories. Challenge them to explain their rationale for words they include or discard. Suggest a "misfit" category for words that do not seem to belong in established categories. (Group)
  coal/natural gas/oil sun/water/wind

- Have students identify a heading for each group of words (Label)

  sun/water/wind: unlimited; continually replenished = renewable
  coal/oil/natural gas: finite; will run out = nonrenewable

renewable energy sources	nonrenewable energy sources
sun	coal
water	oil
wind	natural gas

- Have students revisit their lists at the conclusion of a lesson to modify the lists or category headings.

Evaluating—Reporting on a Character

Students can complete a character report card (Zwiers, 2010) which requires them to use evaluation skills to assess a literary character or historical figure (e.g., explorer, scientist, president) from a content lesson. This process is consistent with the CCSS emphasis on having students provide text-based answers to questions. The procedure is as follows:

- Decide on literary characters or actual people, living or dead.

- Identify four or five traits that the individuals would possess in varying degrees.

- Develop a three-column table, identifying the character trait at the top, with the names in the left column. In columns two and three, place the headings "grade" and "comments." Grades are based on behaviors exhibited throughout the book (for literary characters) or throughout their lives (for real people). There are several possible variations, but the character report card below (shown with information for the book *Holes*) is a basic format.

- Have students complete the grading process, emphasizing the importance of the comments section because this is the space in which they provide evidence from the reading to justify their grades. Also, point out that multiple examples of a trait strengthen their support for a particular grade. Teachers can use the traditional A-B-C-D-F system or any other school-based assessment system with which their students are familiar.

CHARACTER REPORT CARD

BOOK: *Holes* by Louis Sachar

CHARACTER TRAIT: Supportiveness

Characters	Grade	Comments
Stanley	A-	• After initially treating Zero badly, he ignores peer pressure and forms a friendship with him. • When Zero runs away, he follows him to make sure he is safe.
Zero	B	• In the desert, he shares his last jar of sliced peaches with Stanley. • He eventually apologizes for taking the shoes Stanley was accused of stealing.
X-Ray	C	• He stands up for Stanley when the other boys pick on him. • Later, he treats Stanley with hostility when Stanley befriends Zero.

Above: Here is an example of a character report card for the book *Holes*.

Creating—Writing Poetry

Students can use various short poetic formats to compose poetry relatively quickly to represent their knowledge about a topic. Doing so engages them in deeper thinking processes as they move from the role of reader to the more active role of writer. One format is the cinquain, a five-line poem. There are multiple versions of this poem, but the pattern below is a common one.

- Line 1 (noun)
- Line 2 (two adjectives describing line 1)
- Line 3 (three verbs ending in "ing" describing the actions of line 1)
- Line 4 (four-word phrase related to line 1)
- Line 5 (synonym for, reference to, or restatement of line 1)

Here's an example:

Rainforest
Temperate, tropical
Self-watering, evolving, disappearing
Earth's oldest living ecosystem
Biodiversity

For Parents—A Thinking Culture at Home

A culture of thinking can also be fostered and reinforced at home. Like educators, parents can use activities to develop their children's thinking skills. For example, they can allow children to plan a dinner menu for a week—stipulating that it be nutritious. Planning is a cognitive process that involves analyzing, evaluating, and creating. Parents can promote analysis by having their children participate in organizational household tasks, such as arranging table settings, sorting laundry, and putting items into recycling bins.

Moreover, parents can ask their offspring to consider questions that require higher-level thinking skills. If the child is reading a book, for instance, rather than asking, "What is the book about?" parents can ask questions such as, "How is this story similar to a previous book you've read?" or "What do you think about how the main character behaves in the story?" or "What do you think will happen next?" These types of questions raise the level of thinking required for the child to respond.

Opportunities for children to analyze, evaluate, and create at home as well as in school establish the consistency needed to make critical thinking a habitual process for them.

For Teachers—Continuing to Learn

Students thrive in schools in which strong leadership supports teachers' ongoing pursuit of professional development to improve their instruction because continuous learning is the hallmark of effective teachers (Sadker, Sadker, & Zittleman, 2008). For teachers of deaf and hard of hearing students, these learning experiences should not be limited to deafness-related workshops and conferences.

A few years after I began teaching language arts to secondary students, my principal encouraged me to attend a summer writing institute. After reviewing the information, I asked if he realized that this institute did not target deaf or hard of hearing students. I still remember his response: "That's why I want you to attend. If teachers in public schools are learning about writing strategies that help hearing students, we need that information for our students, too." After attending, I implemented many of the strategies I had learned and found them to be successful. After sharing some of my deaf and hard of hearing students' written products with the coordinators of the institute, I was invited to do a workshop under its auspices. In the middle of my presentation, as I was displaying several students' writing samples, the irony of the situation became inescapable. It struck me that I was standing in a filled auditorium in the nation's eighth largest school district using written products composed by deaf and hard of hearing students to exemplify writing techniques that teachers of hearing students could use in their classes.

It is from this vantage point that I have been fortunate to appreciate the capabilities of deaf and hard of hearing students and formulate high expectations for them. And it is this type of narrative that teacher educators can share with their teacher candidates to tide them over until they begin to create success stories of their own with deaf and hard of hearing students whom they will one day teach.

When evaluating the competency of new teachers, objective factors such as grade point average and passing scores on teacher certification examinations are common criteria. What's missing is evaluating the teacher's disposition towards high expectations; this is the disposition that would provide the impetus for actually applying the teacher's knowledge and these skills with vigor and conviction. Since dispositions are not amenable to testing, teacher education programs can provide ongoing opportunities for enabling teacher candidates, before becoming teachers, to reflect on their conceptions—and misconceptions—about deaf and hard of hearing students' ability to learn.

Becoming certified as a professional teacher requires meeting certain core competencies. While these competencies might vary slightly from state to state, there is one standard that is consistent—ethical practice—and ethical practice eschews lowering expectations for students. As Fielstein and Phelps (2001) remind us: "Ethical teachers have high expectations for their students; they believe all children are capable of learning." This is, unquestionably, one of the most valuable lessons that future teachers of deaf and hard of hearing students must learn.

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