

ODYSSEY

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Carrie Lou Garberoglio, PhD, a recent graduate from the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Texas, is a postdoctoral research fellow at the University of Texas (UT) in Austin. She works with the Research and Evidence Synthesis team for pepnet 2, a federally funded center designed to increase the education, career, and lifetime choices available to individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing.



Lisa Hortencia Guerra, BA, a recent history graduate, is an undergraduate research assistant for the Research and Evidence Synthesis team for pepnet 2 at UT Austin.

A Look at National Data: Parental Expectations Shape Student Achievement

By *Carrie Lou Garberoglio, Lisa Hortencia Guerra,
Stephanie Cawthon, and Oscar Ocuto*

The future is not a result of choices among alternative paths offered by the present, but a place that ... is created first in the mind and will, created next in activity.

The future is not some place we are going to, but one we are creating.

~ John Homer Schaar

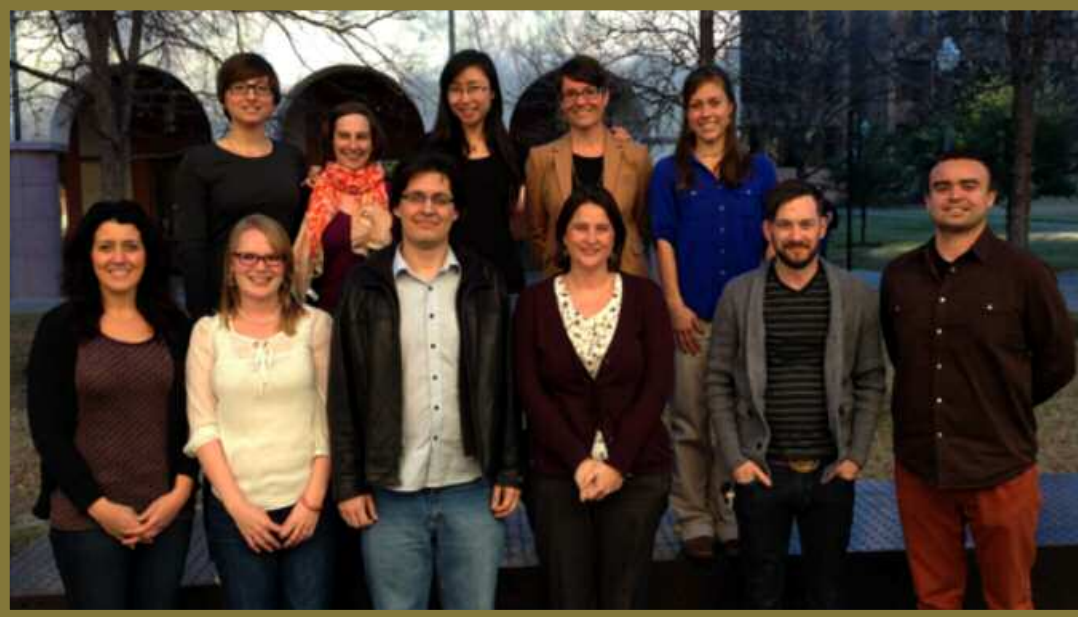
The expectations of parents proved highly predictive of whether their deaf or hard of hearing children would attend and graduate from postsecondary programs, live independently, and work, according to the findings of our team of researchers at the University of Texas in Austin. Working as part of the Research and Evidence Synthesis team within pepnet 2, our team took a first direct look at expectations and achievement for deaf and hard of hearing students as they moved beyond high school to postsecondary settings. We found that while the majority of deaf and hard of hearing students expected to attain a multitude of postsecondary goals, only the expectations of their parents were predictive of whether they would actually do so.

The Power of Belief: We Believe Therefore It Is (or Will Be)

What we believe to be true drives much of our daily decisions and actions. Neurological research demonstrates that mental visualizations and actual physical perceptions activate approximately two-thirds of the same areas in the brain (Kosslyn, Thompson, & Ganis, 2006). Thus what we believe and what we see often overlap, and, at times, are indistinguishable. Indeed, child development research has long demonstrated that what children believe about their abilities can play a greater role in predicting their future achievement than their actual abilities (Dweck & Leggett, 1988).

Beliefs are often tacit and difficult to capture. Yet they can manifest when we are asked to express thoughts about what we expect to achieve in the future. In particular, for young adults leaving high school and entering the world of higher education and employment, expectations of achievement are

Photos courtesy of Carrie Lou Garberoglio



Stephanie Cawthon, PhD, an associate professor in the Department of Educational Psychology at UT Austin, is the associate director for the Research and Evidence Synthesis team for pepnet 2.



Oscar Ocuto, MA, a second year doctoral student in Human Development, Cognition, and Learning Sciences within the Department of Educational Psychology at UT Austin, is a graduate research assistant for the Research and Evidence Synthesis team for pepnet 2.

often grounded in what the young adults themselves believe about their capacities, skills, and abilities. For example, adolescents who see themselves as skilled in mathematics may be more likely to pursue advanced degrees in the fields of science, technology, engineering, or math while adolescents who see themselves as nurturing may be more likely to major in education or social work. In both cases, expectations of achievement can serve as concrete goals to be pursued through daily choices, decisions, and actions.

Research has substantiated that the expectations of adolescents and young adults contribute to their achievements, particularly in academics and the workforce (Beal & Crockett, 2010; Mello, 2008; Schoon & Parsons, 2002). For example, those who expect to go to college are more likely to participate in extracurricular activities as these activities increase the chances of enrollment in the college of their choice (Beal & Crockett, 2010).

Above, clockwise: 1) pepnet 2 Research and Evidence Synthesis team. **Back:** Lisa Hortencia Guerra, Rachel Leppo, Jinjin Ge, Carrie Lou Garberoglio, and Sarah Schoffstall. **Front:** Erica Wendel, Jackie Caemmerer, Mark Bond, Stephanie Cawthon, Duncan Dickson, and Oscar Ocuto. **Not pictured:** Paige Johnson. **2)** Young deaf adult panelists at the Building State Capacity Summit in Austin, Texas, with John Serrano, director of Academic Affairs at the Texas School for the Deaf, give their thumbs up. **3)** Garberoglio asks young deaf adults from Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands to share their stories about transition at the Caribbean Summit held in November 2014.

Beliefs about skills and capacities do not occur in a vacuum but form as a result of multiple experiences that occur throughout everyday life. The expectations of parents play a significant role, particularly for adolescents (Doren, Gau, & Lindstrom, 2012; Newman, 2003). Parents communicate their expectations in multiple ways,

The authors welcome questions and comments about this article at carrielou@utexas.edu, lbguerra@utexas.edu, stephanie.cawthon@austin.utexas.edu, and oscarocuto@utexas.edu.

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both implicit and explicit. They may implicitly demonstrate expectations through their actions, modeling behavior with their own navigation through adult life; they may explicitly demonstrate their expectations through discussions with their children about appropriate goals for the children's own adult lives.

Parents who believe in their children's potential for success may be more likely to encourage their children to pursue opportunities that will serve as building blocks for future achievements and to provide consistent encouragement and positive reinforcement during and after their children's adolescence. Youth with disabilities whose parents had optimistic expectations about their future achievements were more likely to engage in positive behaviors during high school, such as assuming household responsibilities, joining extracurricular activities, earning higher grades, and demonstrating positive classroom engagement (Newman, 2003). Parental expectations related to attending postsecondary education and having a job are significantly and positively correlated with the likelihood that youths with disabilities attain those outcomes (Doren et al., 2012).

The literature in deaf education suggests that parental expectations are important, but insufficient empirical data is available to fully understand the role of parental expectations in the lives of deaf youth. Personal student narratives often revealed that parents played a large role in supporting achievement (Bodner-Johnson, 1986; Toscano, McKee, & Lepoutre, 2002). Tentative relationships emerged between the expectations that deaf youths held about the future and their actual achievements in employment, postsecondary education, and independent living (Bullis, Davis, Bull, & Johnson, 1997).

Exploring the Data

As a part of pepnet 2, a federally funded center designed to increase the education, career, and lifetime choices available to individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing in the United States, we conducted a secondary analysis of data that was previously collected as a part of the second National Longitudinal Transition Study. This study included 11,000 students; over 1,000 of them were deaf or hard of hearing. It began in 2001, when the students were 13 to 16 years old, and ended in 2009, when the students were 23 to 27 years old.

More information about this dataset can be found at www.nlts2.org.

In two separate analyses, we examined the role of expectations—those of deaf adolescents and those of their parents—in predicting the future achievement of these deaf adolescents. We looked at what the deaf adolescents and their parents believed would happen in terms of postsecondary education, employment, and independent living when the adolescents were between the ages of 13 and 16 and how those beliefs correlated with the attainments reached when the same adolescents were between the ages of 23 and 27. The statistical

analyses included academic achievement, family income, parents' educational background, gender, ethnicity, and race to adjust for their influence on the outcomes.

We found that students' expectations about the future did not emerge as predictors of their actual attainments (Garberoglio, Schoffstall, Cawthon, Bond, & Ge, 2014). Students' academic abilities and their socio-economic backgrounds may be better predictors of their adult achievement than their youthful expectations.

In addition, the expectations of parents were critical. In fact, parental expectations emerged as powerful predictors of their children's success. When parents reported that they expected their children to live independently and be employed, the children, once grown, were more likely to have achieved those milestones. Further, these children were also more likely to have enrolled in postsecondary education whether at a university, community college, or other training program. In addition, when parents reported that they expected their child to attend a postsecondary institution, their children not only were more likely to enroll in these programs but they were also more

likely to complete them (Cawthon, Garberoglio, Caemmerer, Bond, & Wendel, in press). Throughout all the studies we conducted—in which we explored factors such as self-determination, extracurricular involvement, and English literacy skills—parental expectations emerged as the only predictor of postsecondary completion (Garberoglio et al., 2014; Garberoglio, Cawthon, & Bond, 2014).

Perhaps equally exciting, a look at the specifics of the relationship between parental expectations and student achievement showed that young deaf adults often surpassed their parents' expectations. For example, if parents had expected their children to live independently, their young deaf adults were more likely to live independently and be employed.

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If parents had expected their children to be employed, their young deaf adults were more likely to be employed and enroll in college. If parents had expected their children to enroll in college, the children were more likely not only to have enrolled but to have graduated. In each case, parental expectations seemed to serve as an important starting point. Their children would capitalize on this starting point as they reached further to attain their own goals.

Exploring the Stories

Our research team has also collected qualitative data about the transition experiences of deaf individuals as well as data from parents and professionals. Our team conducted a number of interviews and focus groups over the last two years, and parents' expectations often emerged as an important theme across all groups of participants. It is our hope that this approach helps deepen understanding of how parental expectations contribute to future achievement beyond the quantitative results of our statistical analyses.

The deaf young adults we interviewed often described how their parents' expectations of their future success contributed to the choices they made during their transitions to postsecondary settings. Deaf young adults acknowledged that their parents encouraged them to pursue better educational opportunities, often moving or transferring schools in the process. One college student explained the current program choice was "because I wanted better educational opportunities ... my parents obviously wanted a better education for me." Another deaf college student, illustrating how parental expectations become internalized, noted, "My parents really expected me to go [to college] ... that's always been what I wanted to do." However, professionals who work in transition and postsecondary settings acknowledged that excessive parental support could actually be counterproductive and limit students' potential for success. One of the professionals we interviewed had this to say: "If the parents are, 'Oh, poor baby, poor baby' and do everything for [their child], that can also be detrimental." This may suggest that parental expectations are a more important factor contributing to success than parental involvement, as substantiated by one of our studies (Cawthon et al., in press).

Connecting the Data and the Stories: Implications for Practice

The quantitative and qualitative data we explored reveals that parents' belief in their deaf children's potential is a strong contributor to the children's future achievement. As a positive implication for practice, the literature suggests that these expectations are not rigid but may change over time as parents respond to what they perceive to be their child's capacities,



abilities, and skills.

The educational setting in which students are enrolled may play a significant role in the development of parents' beliefs about their deaf children's capacities, abilities, and skills. Teacher beliefs and attitudes not only influence children directly but also influence what parents believe about their children's potential (Bozick, Alexander, Entwisle, Dauber, & Kerr, 2010; Mistry, White, Benner, & Huynh, 2009). This is logical as teachers have direct daily access to students and evaluate both their achievement and their potential on an ongoing basis, communicating results to parents. Schools and programs need to be held accountable to ensure that teachers and school personnel communicate optimistic, yet realistic, beliefs and expectations about deaf children's capacities, skills, and abilities to parents.

The knowledge that parental expectations are malleable allows us to recognize that with the appropriate supports, interventions, or services, parents can feel more confident in their deaf children's capacity for success. Parents who are not members of the Deaf community may benefit from more explicit connections with deaf role models, mentors, and professionals who can serve as images of their deaf child's future success. School or agency personnel can ensure that parents understand all the options and opportunities that are available to their deaf children and how pathways can be established that ensure the appropriate resources and accommodations are available.

If parental expectations are unfairly low—that is, if parents do not realize the potential of their deaf children as earlier studies have suggested (e.g., Schroedel & Carnahan, 1991)—the educational community can educate parents on both their children’s potential and the importance of expectations. In addition, role models and mentors, whether in schools or the community, can play a significant role in supporting deaf children’s development and achievement.

It is our hope that our work will reinforce the importance of

ensuring that parents believe in their child’s potential to succeed. It also drives home the importance of strengthening collaboration across parents, schools, and communities.

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The Role of Parents:

A PERSONAL STORY

By Lisa Hortencia Guerra

Lisa Hortencia Guerra, a research assistant and University of Texas graduate—and one of the 90 percent of deaf individuals born to hearing parents—looks back on her experiences.

When my parents found out I was deaf at 6 months old, they were shocked and at a loss. My mother inquired about resources, and the doctors said to wait for the professionals to contact her and my dad. However, she chose not to wait. The very next day, my mother reached out to the deaf program and received the information she sought.

My parents always believed in my potential and fought for me to have the best educational opportunities available, even if professionals and teachers were not in agreement with them. They would not tolerate anyone telling them that their daughter was not capable. Furthermore, my parents instilled in me a belief that education was the most important thing in my life. From the time I was very young, my parents talked about my going to college to get a degree in order to get a good job. When I was 5 years old, I went to a dental appointment and the dentist told me he loved his job because he gave people “pretty smiles.” I loved that idea, and I decided right there that I wanted to become a dentist. I told my mother, and she and my dad took that opportunity to explain more about the concept of college.

My parents encouraged my independence from the very beginning. They always told me that in the future I would be on my own. As my skills developed, my independence developed as well (e.g., once I was old enough to interact with people, I learned how to order my own food at restaurants). My being deaf didn’t affect their view of how I should grow up. They always knew I could do things myself.

During my senior year of high school, my mother was diagnosed with cancer. This was a huge shock, and it changed my college plans. I had been looking at schools around the country, but with my mother so sick I wanted to stay in Texas and be close to her. Two months before I graduated, my mother died. That fall I left home to attend the University of Texas at Austin. The transition was very comfortable and easy. It was like the city and university were waiting for me.

I experienced four wonderful, rewarding years in college, graduating with a bachelor’s degree in history with a minor in government and bearing intentions to continue my education. For this—a major success albeit an expected one—I must thank my parents. They established the foundation on which I was able to build.

Above right: Lisa Hortencia Guerra with her mother during high school.



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