Christopher Hayes, MA, CED, is an itinerant teacher for deaf and hard of hearing students in Highlands County, Florida. He earned both his bachelor's degree in deaf studies and his master's degree in deaf education from the University of Arizona. Shortly thereafter, he received professional certification from the Council on Education of the Deaf. Hayes has been part of the Florida leadership team for the National Deaf Agenda and helped develop Florida's Communication Plan for deaf and hard of hearing students. His other interests include classroom acoustics and how this impacts not only children with hearing loss but all learners and how to bridge the gap between audiology, parental involvement, and school services in the itinerant setting. Hayes lives in Sebring, Florida, with his wife and three children. He welcomes questions and comments about this article at *hayesc@highlands.k12.fl.us.*

Measuring Success
One (Sight) Syllable at a Time

By Christopher Hayes

"In order to succeed, we must first believe that we can."
~ Nikos Kazantzakis, author

What does success mean for deaf and hard of hearing students? Last fall as I began my twelfth year of teaching children with hearing loss, I reflected—as I always do—on how to evolve to better serve the students with whom I work. As an itinerant teacher in public schools, I work one on one with deaf and hard of hearing students, supporting them in their mainstream classrooms.

For a long time, I felt I was not seeing as much success as I should. However, a few years ago while trying to help a student with profound hearing loss, I had a conversation with a longtime speech therapist and I decided to re-evaluate my work—both my methods and my expectations. The student, who came from an economically and socially disadvantaged home where he experienced little language, was struggling to read and write. Further, the family moved often, causing his educational environment to change quickly and frequently, and he was often absent from school. The challenges were mounting, the resources disappearing, and the student appeared to be falling further and further behind. At such a young age, he was already being "written off" even by those who cared about him.

Bruce Torff, a professor of education at Hofstra University, explored how teacher beliefs can add to the problems of already disadvantaged students like the young boy I was teaching. Noted Torff:

> *A rigor gap emerges in which disadvantaged students are judged to require less rigorous curriculum than that afforded their more privileged peers .... Research shows that disadvantaged students could handle the rigorous curriculum if given the chance.* (2011)

Photos courtesy of Christopher Hayes

Above: Working on word recognition with a student involves modeling, repetition, and identification of key vocabulary.

Students with disabilities also experience what Torff calls a "rigor gap." Like their economically disadvantaged counterparts, these students experience lower expectations and less demand for academic success from their teachers.

My student and all students who experience both disabilities and social and economic disadvantages perhaps endure a "double rigor gap." A student's experience of dual disadvantages—for his or her disability and for the economic weakness of his or her family—may be additive. These students may experience even less rigorous expectations from their teachers than students who experience only one condition or the other. They may be left behind further and faster than students who only have disabilities or who are only economically disadvantaged. I was determined that would not be the case with my
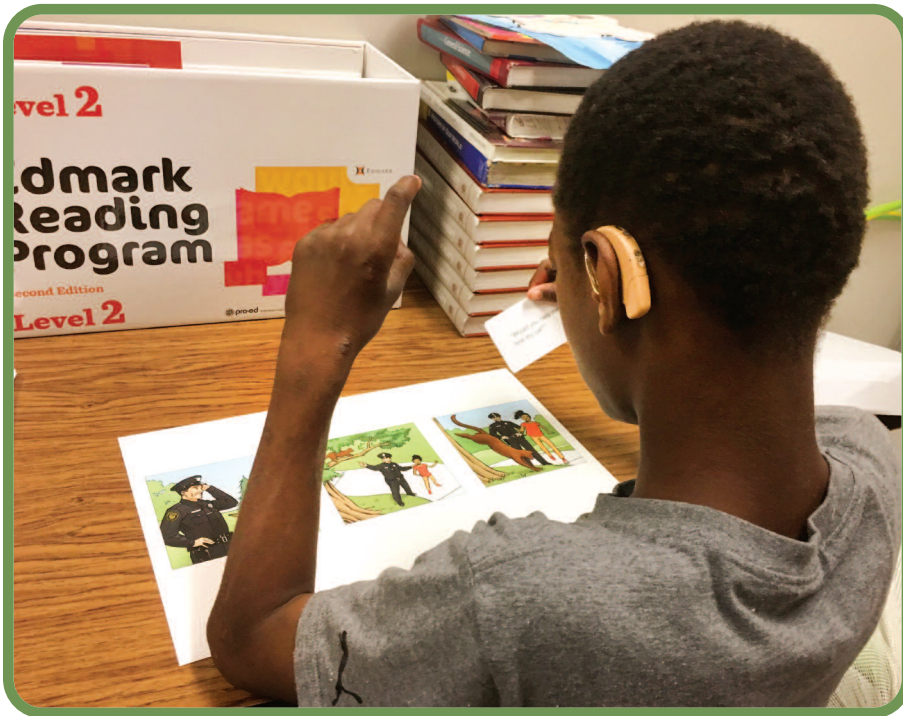
student.

As often happens in itinerant settings, I had been tasked primarily with sign language instruction in an effort to make the general curriculum accessible for my student, but this was not enough. He was not acquiring the necessary skills. A change was required. I was familiar with the Edmark Reading Program (ERP), a program that develops sight reading skills for struggling students, for as long as I had been teaching. It was not widely used across the district, but the student's classroom teacher had just acquired a brand new complete program. I decided to try it.

I was encouraged by research that tracked readers' fluency while utilizing the ERP and showed improvement in student attitudes and engagement (Meeks, Martinez, & Pienta, 2014). Improved engagement can lead to gains in reading fluency, which can lead to gains in

comprehension. Further Mayfield (2000), in her unpublished doctoral dissertation, recommended that "schools which teach reading using a purely phonetic approach should consider teaching sight words as a supplementary intervention for students with low phonemic awareness and phonological decoding skills." Mayfield noted that "[teaching sight reading supports] the special education principal of building on strengths while remediating weakness, and this principle should be considered in the teaching of at-risk students" (2000).

For my student who was not acquiring phonics skills, it would make sense that words be decoded another way or memorized.
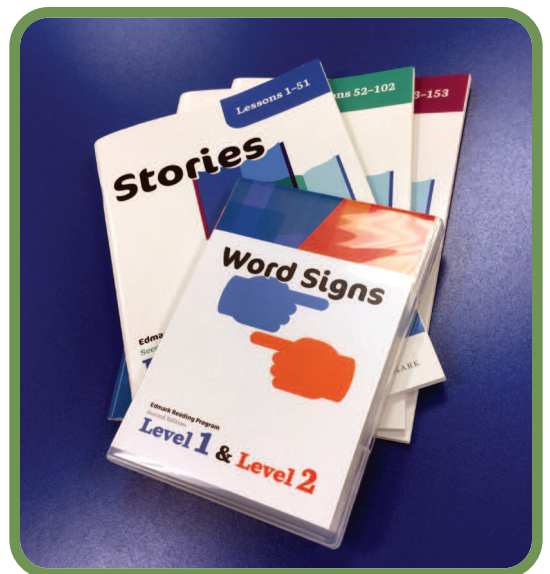
Instruction was going to have to be prescriptive and repetitive. He would have to learn reading vocabulary by sight while we used sign language as a primary means of instruction.

The ERP is a two-level program for beginning readers. At the first level, it focuses on the 150 most-used words in childhood readers—the Dolch words—and the word endings "-s" and "-ing." It begins with words like *horse*, *car*, *yellow*, and *ball*, and introduces the words in a fashion that allows children to use them immediately in sentences. The visual supports that are available help alleviate the challenges that children with hearing loss experience when learning to make sense of text. Students undertake extensive practice with these words. In addition to writing full sentences, they are repeatedly asked to recognize the words individually, in phrases, and in stories. Instead of emphasizing phonics, the program focuses on recognizing words by sight.

The most important component of the ERP is engaging the student in critical thinking and analysis of text to stimulate literary creativity. I began using the program in September 2012. I modified it slightly, beginning with the post-test to see if my student was already familiar with any of the words, if he had used them in class. At first he was resistant. He would try to avoid tasks, sometimes resorting to behavior that could best be described as silly. Consistency was difficult to maintain. His home life remained chaotic, and sometimes my schedule fluctuated as well. At times we would have to change or even miss the sessions we had together. The support of school staff proved critical in keeping the student on track.

We continued working, and we would eventually use almost all aspects of the program, including activities of word recognition, phrase matching, picture matching, and story reading. We would use the take-home readers and activity sheets for homework, spelling practice, and comprehension. We would use the materials for independent reading, and we would use the literacy-integrated game board. As time went on and my student felt a measure of success, his attitude improved. This year as he turned 12 and moved on to Level 2, I felt a complete shift in the way he approached our work together. As the year progressed, he remained on task; he seemed to enjoy our time together.

I attempted to incorporate some of the factors identified by Englert, Tarrant, and Marriage that are strongly associated with academic achievement of children with disabilities (as cited in Silva & Morgado, 2004). These factors include:

- allocating sufficient time to direct teaching of basic skills;

- conducting lessons in such a way that students maintain a high rate of task involvement;

- defining goals, objectives, and expected pupil outcomes;

- designing instruction so that students enjoy both the possibility of experiencing successful task resolution and greater levels of satisfaction and motivation; and

- using a variety of learning models that enable teachers to present problems as tasks to be solved and

encourage students to understand and explain their thinking.

We are continuing forward, and I feel pride in the progress and growth he has made. When he graduated to the second level of the program, we celebrated in royal fashion. I don't think that I have ever seen a bigger smile on his face.

The ERP has provided the consistency that my student needed. It has allowed him to develop his reading proficiency at his own pace, helping him to overcome the challenges that result from spotty attendance and lack of family support. Today I use aspects of the program with other students as well. Although it may not fit everyone, it has helped several

students and made a tremendous impact on at least one of them. My student has developed self-esteem and confidence, and this has enabled him to make

headway in developing literacy.

At the same time, I have learned how profound were the words of a longtime speech therapist, who said that we must learn to celebrate our successes no matter how small. As teachers, we are tasked with assessing, developing, and attaining goals for our students, and the work resumes every year as a new plan is developed. Too often we don't understand that success is not a destination but a journey. We should not fail to celebrate the little successes in each of our students along the way.

Success for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students: The Ingredients

. . . .

The following are important components in ensuring academic success for deaf and hard of hearing students:

- Early identification
- Amplification or implantation
- Early intervention
- Preschool a with focus on children who are deaf or hard of hearing
- Support—emotional, academic, and linguistic—at home
- Regular audiology appointments, mappings
- Proper school placement
- Proper Individualized Education Program or 504 plan goals
- Appropriate accommodations in school
- Appropriate transitional plan and employment goals
- Training/college preparation

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