

# NIEC

NATIONAL INTERPRETER  
EDUCATION CENTER

## **UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGES OF HERITAGE SIGNERS**

### **Needs Assessment Report**

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## **Foreword**

Through grants awarded by the U.S. Department of Education Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA), the National Interpreter Education Center (NIEC) and five Regional Interpreter Education Centers (RIEC) work collaboratively to increase the number and availability of qualified interpreters nationwide. The collaborative is widely known in the field as the National Consortium of Interpreter Education Centers (NCIEC).

A funded requirement of the federal grant program is to conduct ongoing activities to assess the communication needs of d/Deaf individuals, and then use that information as the basis for developing interpreter education priorities and strategies. This report is based on the findings of a structured needs assessment activity designed to capture information related to the experiences and needs of interpreters that are heritage signers.

## **Acknowledgments**

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# Understanding the Challenges of Heritage Signers

## Introduction

Heritage signers can bring significant experience and skill to the profession of interpreting. These individuals are typically native ASL users, and have the advantage of having familiarity with d/Deaf individuals and Deaf culture. However, this important resource is largely unrepresented within the current interpreting workforce, and few training and professional development programs exist that focus on their unique learning needs. The purpose of this needs assessment effort was to understand more about the needs of this segment of the interpreting workforce, and identify the challenges and opportunities that are associated with meeting those needs. In 2016, the National Interpreter Education Center (NIEC) conducted a national survey of interpreters that are heritage signers. Through that survey, 313 heritage signers provided input regarding their background, education, and experience as interpreters. Findings of that survey are presented in this needs assessment report. In addition to the survey, five intensive focus group sessions were conducted involving a total of 20 heritage signers. The input gathered in the focus group sessions is also discussed in this report, and provides a more qualitative perspective regarding the experiences of heritage signers and the challenges they face.

## Demographics and Background

The demographics of the heritage signers that responded to the survey closely mirror the demographics of the overall pool of interpreters. In that survey, 85% of respondents identified themselves as Caucasian; 4% as Hispanic/Latino, and 2% as Black/African American. In addition, 82% of the respondents were female, and 17% male. The demographics of the focus group respondents were very similar. In the focus group sessions, 17 of the 20 participants were female, and only three were male. In addition, 16 of the 20 focus group participants identified as Caucasian; two as Black/African American, and two participants as Hispanic/Latino. Despite dramatic multi-cultural growth in the d/Deaf population, the demographics of the interpreting workforce have changed very little over the years, including among the K-12 interpreters represented in the survey and focus group sessions.

When asked to report on their hearing status and how they identify, 87% of the survey respondents reported they identified as a child of a d/Deaf adult (coda), and only 10% of respondents reported they identified as hearing. It is important to note that the majority of children born to d/Deaf parents are hearing, therefore, it is likely that a significant portion of the respondents that reported they identified as a coda, are in fact hearing. This data point highlights the strong ties heritage signers forge with the Deaf community based on their experience as a coda. This bond is further illustrated with regard to native language use. In the survey, 72% of respondents identified ASL as their first language; 37% of respondents identified both ASL and English as their first language, and only 2% of respondents reported English was their first language.

The needs assessment effort also sought to gather input regarding why individuals who are heritage signers decided to enter the interpreting profession. In the survey, 75% of respondents stated that they had become a professional interpreter because of their upbringing. In the focus group sessions, all of the participants stated they had become a professional interpreter in order to maintain ties with the Deaf community, and because work as an interpreter allowed them to give back to that community. It is evident that participants of the focus groups also entered the field of interpreting because of their background and upbringing. All 20 of the participants reported they grew up interpreting for a family member, although several of the participants indicated they didn't realize interpreting was a career choice until they were an adult. Focus group participants further reported they had chosen a career in interpreting to maintain a connection to the Deaf community and because it provided them the opportunity to use ASL as their native language.

The survey also gathered information about the parents of respondents in order to understand more about the backgrounds of those children that grow up in a household with a d/Deaf parent, and as adults, pursue a career as an interpreter. In the survey, 75% of respondents identified their mother as the primary parent with the most significant role in their upbringing. In each of these instances, the respondent's mother was identified as d/Deaf. Of those respondents, 84% reported that their mother understood and signed fluently as a native user. With regard to their mother's education, 19% of those same respondents reported their mother had not completed high school, and 40% reported their mother had completed high school. Another 12% of respondents reported their mother had attended some college courses, but had not attained a degree. Only 15% of those respondents reported their mother had achieved a postsecondary degree.

In the survey, 70% of respondents identified their father as the secondary parental figure in their upbringing. In each of those instances, the father figure was identified as d/Deaf, or hard of hearing but identifying as d/Deaf. Of those same respondents, 79% reported that their father understood and signed fluently as a native user. With regard to their father's education, 17% of those respondents reported their father had not completed high school, and 50% reported their father had completed high school. Another 8% of those same respondents reported their father had attended some college courses, but not attained a degree. Only 22% of the respondents' fathers had attained a postsecondary degree.

### **Educational Background of Respondents**

The needs assessment effort collected input from heritage signers regarding their own educational background. Not surprisingly, the educational achievements of survey respondents far surpassed those of their parents. In the survey, 26% of respondents reported holding an AA/AS Degree; 20% of respondents a BA/BS Degree, and 15% a Master's Degree. However, it is important to point out again that most children of d/Deaf parents are born hearing, therefore, survey respondents would generally not have faced the same communication and/or access barriers that their parents experienced. Survey respondents were also asked if they had attended an interpreter education program (IEP). The majority of respondents, 61%, reported

they had not attended an IEP. Of the 39% of respondents that did attend an IEP, 78% attended a two-year or less program.

The focus group sessions also collected information regarding the educational background of participants. It should be noted that the selection criteria for participation in the focus groups was prior IEP experience. To that end, all 20 focus group participants reported they had completed some level of formal education in an IEP. Several of the participants also reported they had attended coda-only workshops or training events. The focus group participants shared the perspective that obtaining an education in a formal IEP setting was a necessary step with regard to becoming a 'professional' interpreter. They further reported that they believed education in an IEP would help them expand their vocabulary and increase their ASL fluency.

The interactive aspect of the focus group sessions provided a forum for capturing additional, more qualitative, input from heritage signer participants. That input has been aggregated and summarized in the following section of the report to provide a more in-depth snapshot of the IEP experience of heritage signers.

### **The IEP Experience**

Throughout the focus group sessions, IEPs were portrayed by most of the participants as hearing-centric, and not coda-friendly. Participants repeatedly reported that the IEP curriculum did not reflect the coda experience or meet their learning needs as heritage signers. The majority of focus group participants said the IEPs they attended were not nurturing or safe learning environments. The underlying sentiment described by most of the participants was a feeling of isolation and alienation. Many said they didn't fit into the IEP, and felt they didn't belong to either group: student or educator.

All of the participants said they struggled with power and privilege issues in the classroom. Most said they were the first or only coda to participate in the program. In fact, several of the focus group participants reported they had not heard the term coda, or applied that term to themselves, until they entered an IEP. Many encountered misconceptions about heritage signers, and felt that they were being judged for their interpreting skills and style by students and instructors alike. They said that student peers and faculty spoke for the experience of the heritage signer and assigned attributes that were inaccurate – either demeaning or overly glorified. All of the participants felt there was not enough attention given to the skills and knowledge that a heritage signer brings to the field.

The majority of participants felt they were not able to just be a student. Instead, they were thrust into the role of teacher, or expert, or representative of the Deaf community, an expectation that came from both faculty and students. They said their student peers generally viewed them as having an unfair advantage, and that educators either viewed them as a helper or assistant, or in a few cases, as a threat to their role as the classroom expert. Several of the focus group participants experienced being told their use of signs were wrong by faculty, who were often second language learners of ASL. This led to a kind of power and privilege struggle

about who has the authority to determine what is 'right language.' Many of the participants also took this feedback as a personal affront: if their signing is wrong, how did that reflect on their d/Deaf family member?

Most of the focus group members experienced a disconnect between the interpreting they had grown up doing in their home and the Deaf community, and the interpreting practices they were taught in the classroom. Many of these participants reported the IEP experience did not meet their learning needs, and that the other students were not on par with their level of knowledge and experience, especially with regard to receptive skills in sign language. Most of the focus group participants said the ASL courses that were presented were too basic and rudimentary, and not beneficial. However, a few of the participants said the ASL courses did help them expand their vocabulary and that learning about classifiers was beneficial.

Focus group participants generally found linguistics courses beneficial. They said learning about the linguistic features of ASL helped them better understand their heritage language and appreciate the language not only in an intellectual way, but also in a social and emotional way. Participants also valued the opportunity to learn about ethics in interpreting, and many said they had not considered the ethics of interpreting prior to the IEP experience. However, several participants felt the ethics training they received conflicted with some of the experiences they had growing up in a Deaf community.

All of the focus group participants felt it would be beneficial to have either coda peers in the classroom, or coda instructors. This was viewed as important because there was no other ASL or Deaf culture related support in the classroom. Only a few of the participants had another heritage signer in the IEP classroom with them. These individuals had a more positive IEP experience overall, and reported that having a coda peer in the classroom was valuable to their social, emotional, and academic growth. However, one of those participants also pointed out that having another coda student in the classroom created an uncomfortable hierarchy because of their different experiences. The coda that was more ASL-oriented got more respect from students and faculty than the coda who was more signed English-oriented.

Most of the focus group participants said there were d/Deaf instructors in the IEP they attended. However, quite a few of these same participants said that the d/Deaf instructors were not culturally Deaf, and it made them uncomfortable to have more cultural competence and language fluency than their instructor. In addition, while it was positive overall to have d/Deaf instructors, a few participants pointed out that having a d/Deaf instructor didn't always ensure a safe learning environment, and that not all d/Deaf faculty are coda-friendly. Only a few of the focus group participants had coda instructors. None of the focus group participants reported having instructors from diverse ethnic backgrounds.

The majority of participants felt there was not enough interaction and involvement with the Deaf community in the IEP they attended. All of the participants believe the IEP experience should include ongoing structured opportunities for socialization between hearing students and the Deaf community. Some of the participants took it upon themselves to organize

extracurricular activities with d/Deaf individuals in the community for the hearing students in their program. They said their hearing student peers appreciated the opportunity to interface with the Deaf community and 'practice' what they were learning in the IEP.

## **Summary**

Today there are limited educational opportunities that meet the needs of codas and heritage signers. Participants of the focus group sessions repeatedly identified a need for a differentiated learning experience that focused solely on the coda student. They felt a coda-only program would provide these heritage signers an opportunity to come together, in a safe space, to explore their coda identity, and learn ethics-based interpreting practices that are informed by their Deaf community experience. Focus group participants would like to see education that helps them navigate the contradictory roles they face as a coda and member of the Deaf community, and in their role as a professional interpreter. The difficulty of navigating these shifting roles can create a dissonance between what the heritage signer knows is expected of them as a community member, and what is expected of them as an interpreter.

It was also pointed out numerous times that most heritage signers are ASL fluent when they enter the IEP, and the focus should be on honing that fluency rather than starting with the basics. In addition, heritage signers are bilingual/bimodal learners and most IEPs do not address this mode of learning. Many focus group participants found it difficult to access information when it was presented English and in a linear format. They would like to see programs developed that offer content taught in ASL, and more ASL-English support. Participants would also like to see programs that are designed to teach interpreting skills (linguistics, processing skills, consecutive and simultaneous interpreting), rather than focus on teaching ASL. In addition, all of the focus group participants felt there should be more interactive learning experiences and opportunities to practice hearing and d/Deaf discourse. Suggestions were also made to design interpreting practicum courses that provide opportunities for live interaction with d/Deaf individuals instead of video-taped exercises.

All of the focus group participants believe it is very important to engage the Deaf community in program design and delivery. Participants believe that educational programs designed for heritage signers should be taught by experienced heritage signers and d/Deaf instructors, including culturally d/Deaf instructors. The participants also identified a need for a coda cohort for support, and established opportunities for mentoring by heritage signers that are working as professional interpreters.

Finally, the focus group forum brought to the forefront the negative misconceptions heritage signers grapple with, not only in an IEP, but also in the field of interpreting. One area that clearly needs attention is a critical examination of underlying negative attitudes faculty and programs have, instill and re-present about heritage signers as interpreters. The anecdotal experiences shared during the focus group sessions raise the question of whether IEPs are reinforcing and reifying these negative unexamined attitudes about the heritage signer and coda student in the classroom. These stereotypes and unexamined attitudes, when left



unchallenged, will continue to perpetuate negative perceptions which extend into and inform the field of interpreting.