

NIEC

NATIONAL INTERPRETER
EDUCATION CENTER

UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGES OF INTERPRETERS OF COLOR

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 interpreting experiences and training and educational needs of interpreters of color.

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Understanding the Challenges of Interpreters of Color

Introduction

d/Deaf individuals from minority communities have complex and diverse communication needs and carry with them unique characteristics related to culture, language, family structure, income and socio-economic background, and refugee experiences. Many times, d/Deaf individuals and their families do not have access to timely, accessible information and resources, nor do they possess the advocacy skills that would facilitate participation in early identification and intervention services, appropriate educational and school-to-work transition programming, or access to quality interpreting services. As a result, many of these individuals are at increased risk for language and educational deprivation, low literacy levels, and difficulty in achieving employment (Cogen & Cokely, 2015).

The demographics of the current pool of sign language interpreters does not reflect the diversity of the d/Deaf population, and few interpreters share the same cultural or linguistic background of the individuals they serve. Finding qualified hearing and Deaf interpreters from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds that are fluent in the diverse native languages of the individuals they serve is difficult, and demand far outweighs supply. In addition, often the most effective approach for working with this population includes an individual interpreter with trilingual competence (e.g. ASL, Spanish, English), or a team of interpreters that might include a spoken language interpreter and a Deaf interpreter who can provide a foreign signed language, gestural communication, or other strategies and interventions to or other strategies and interventions to achieve successful communication. Unfortunately, today demand for trilingual interpreting services continues to outpace the availability of trilingual interpreters, Deaf interpreters, or hearing interpreters with the training and experience needed to work effectively on trilingual teams (Cogen & Cokely, 2015).

To meet the needs of linguistic and cultural minorities means having more interpreting practitioners who are not just knowledgeable and sensitive, but who are **of** the communities they serve (Cogen & Cokely, 2015). The purpose of this needs assessment effort was to understand more about the experiences and training needs of interpreters of color. In 2016, the National Interpreter Education Center (NIEC) conducted a survey of 80 interpreters of color from around the country. Respondents provided input regarding their background, education, and experience interpreting. Findings of the survey are presented in this needs assessment report. In addition to the survey, five intensive focus group sessions were conducted involving a total of 23 interpreters of color. The input gathered in the focus group sessions is also presented in this report, and provides a more qualitative perspective regarding the experiences of interpreters of color and the challenges they face.

Demographics and Background of Respondents

The National Interpreter Education Center (NIEC) conducted a survey of interpreters of color. In the survey, 79% of respondents identified as female, and 21% as male. In addition, 59% of survey respondents identified as African American/Black; 21% as Hispanic/Latino; 10% as Asian; 3% as American Indian, and 8% said their race was not listed as an option. The survey also asked respondents how long they had been in the U.S. In response, 78% reported they were native born; 14% reported they were second-generation U.S. citizens, and 6% reported they were a recent immigrant. The focus group sessions also captured demographic information from participants. In the focus group sessions, 19 of the participants were female, and 4 of the participants were male. Of those 23 participants, 13 respondents identified as African American/Black; five as Asian; two as Hispanic/Latino, and one as Mixed Race.

The survey also captured information related to the age of respondents. In the survey, 14% of respondents reported they were between the ages of 21-30; 24% were between the ages of 31-40; 23% between 41-50, and 39% were over the age of 50. If age 40 can be considered generally the mid-point in the average individual's work life, these percentages point to a relatively high number of respondents over the age of 40, or 62% of the respondents. The survey also collected information regarding the educational background of respondents. In the survey, 11% of respondents reported they had completed some college coursework, but did not earn a degree; 21% hold an AA/AS Degree; 30% a BA/BS Degree; 11% have completed some graduate coursework; 26% hold an MA/MS degree, and 2% hold a PhD. The survey further asked respondents to report whether they had attended a formal interpreter education program (IEP). In response, 73% of respondents reported they had attended an IEP. Of those respondents, 9% attended a 1 year or less program; 65% attended a two-year program; 21% a four-year program, and 5% a post-graduate program. Of the respondents that attended an IEP, 79% completed the program.

Survey respondents were also asked to report how many years of experience they had working as an interpreter. Of the respondents, 22% reported they had 1-5 years of experience; 6% of respondents had 6-10 years; 19% had 11-15 years; 14% had 16-20 years, and 39% of respondents had more than 20 years of interpreting experience. These percentages, coupled with data regarding respondent age, indicate that a significant portion of this particular survey pool have established career longevity as interpreters of color.

The survey also asked respondents to report on the credentials they hold: 73% of respondents said they hold national credentials and 27% reported they hold state/local credentials. Note that in some cases interpreters may hold both state and national credentials. Also, 16% of respondents reported they hold no credentials. For those respondents with national credentials, 9% reported they have held their oldest credentials 1-5 years; 27% have held their credentials for 6-10 years; 20% for 11-15 years, and 44% of respondents hold their oldest credentials 16 years or more. In response to another survey question, 98% of respondents reported they belong to RID; 31% reported belonging to NAOBI; 11% Mano-a-Mano, and 6% Manos.

It is interesting to note that in the survey, 14% of respondents reported they were the child of a deaf parent (coda), and in the focus group sessions, 33% of the respondents reported they were a coda. The survey also asked respondents to identify their first language: 67% of respondents identified English as their first language; 14% of respondents identified ASL, and 19% reported they used another language as their first language. When asked which language they preferred to use, 49% of survey respondents selected English; 29% selected ASL, and 22% said another language.

The interactive aspect of the focus group sessions provided a forum for capturing additional, more qualitative, input from participants regarding their experience as an interpreter of color. That input has been aggregated and summarized in the following section of the report.

IEP Experience

More than half of the focus group participants reported they had attended an IEP, although several of those participants did not complete the program. Those participants that had a positive IEP experience typically reported there were either other students of color in the program, or in a few cases, a faculty member from a shared cultural background. However, most of the participants that had an IEP experience expressed feelings of isolation and not fitting in or belonging. A few participants said they felt like they were set up to fail at the outset.

Most of the participants that attended an IEP described the program as designed for white, hearing interpreters, and not well suited for codas, d/Deaf students, or students of color. Several described their IEP experience as 'white, hearing students being taught about white, d/Deaf people by white, hearing instructors'. A few participants reported the community where the IEP is located is very diverse, however all of the students attending the IEP were white. For the most part, participants reported they were the only student of color in the IEP. In some cases, participants were also the only student that did not have English as a first language, and faced the additional hurdle of having to learn two new languages – English and ASL.

A significant number of the focus group participants reported they were discriminated against by faculty. A few reported overt and covert racism. Many participants described cultural clashes with their peers and instructors, and several said they were either directly or indirectly discouraged by their instructors with regard to pursuing a career in interpreting. These individuals were repeatedly told that their English was not appropriate for interpreting, and that their signs were too big, or too expressive. Some were criticized for their work and sign choices, and told their interpreting skills were not advanced enough to be considered professional.

Most of the participants reported that the IEP they attended did not expose students to diverse signing, or provide cultural awareness related to services to d/Deaf individuals from diverse

cultural backgrounds. Several of the participants said they enrolled in an IEP with the goal of becoming a trilingual interpreter. However, these same participants said the IEP did not offer training or education related to trilingual interpreting, and they had to find other avenues for that type of instruction. Several participants pointed out that although they were provided mentorships in the IEP, their mentors were never from the same cultural background. A few of the participants speculated whether they were accepted into the IEP because of their skill sets, or because of a mandate to make the program more diverse.

With regard to future training and education, all of the focus group participants reinforced the need for cultural competency on the part of IEP faculty. Ideally, participants recommended that IEP faculty include instructors from diverse cultural backgrounds; at a minimum, current IEP faculty should be required to complete education and training related to cultural diversity or have life experience in this area. Participants also identified the need to update IEP curriculum and content to include more cultural awareness; education and training related to diverse signing, and videos of interpreters of color working with an array of d/Deaf individuals from diverse backgrounds. Participants also identified a need for more interpreters of color to serve as mentors and role models.

There were also a number of focus group participants that did not attend an IEP. These participants raised issues related to the cost of education as a barrier for many individuals that come from communities of color. It was repeatedly suggested that the field develops different pathways for individuals of color to pursue a career in interpreting.

Interpreting Experience

Several focus group participants pointed to the lack of interpreters of color as role models as a deterrent for individuals of color that might otherwise consider a career in interpreting. Some participants said this plants a seed of doubt regarding the potential for success in the field since they do not see anyone like them doing the work. Many of the participants said they felt disconnected from the Deaf community, and talked about the negative consequences associated with d/Deaf individuals of color not having access to interpreters who share the same cultural background. This can be particularly impactful on d/Deaf youth that are being mainstreamed. All of the focus group participants identified the need for IEP faculty of color, and an interpreting workforce that is more reflective of the population it serves. In the survey, respondents were asked whether the interpreting workforce adequately reflects the diversity of the d/Deaf community it serves: 90% of respondents said no.

A number of the focus group participants shared the view that the field perceives qualified interpreters as white interpreters, and that white interpreters are preferred in professional settings. In addition, several of the participants said they regularly face obstacles related to discrimination and inequality in the agencies where they work, or in the communities where they are assigned. Those participants pointed to differences in pay and professional development opportunities. They said that overall, they are not supported in the same way as

white interpreters working for the same agency. A few of the participants reported they were discouraged from seeking certification rather than mentored to that end.

Focus group participants also discussed the benefits of working in tandem with other interpreters of color. All of the participants that have had this experience described it as positive, authentic, empowering, and enriching. Participants said the interpretation was more effective in these instances because of the opportunity to problem solve and discuss the nuances of the assignment, particularly when the interpretation includes topics related to race, ethnicity, and discrimination. Interpreters of color have a shared schema and experience that can translate into the interpretation, versus an interpreter who has not had that experience.

A few of the focus group participants raised issues related to work in VRS settings. They said the caller often asks to transfer to a white interpreter without giving the interpreter of color the opportunity to demonstrate their skills and competencies. Those decisions appear to be made based solely on the color of the interpreter's skin and the misperception that interpreters of color lack qualifications and are not viewed as professionals.

Summary

The number of d/Deaf individuals who are from minority and immigrant communities has increased at a rate consistent with the trends observed in the general population. In the 2014 Trends Survey (Cogen & Cokely, 2015), 66% of respondents reported that in their provision of services during the last five years, the number of d/Deaf individuals from a household that uses a foreign spoken language had increased or substantially increased, and 35% of respondents reported an increase in the number of d/Deaf individuals that use a foreign signed language. Needs assessments conducted by the NIEC over the past ten years also reinforce the growing demand for trilingual interpreting skills and competencies. In a 2016 survey of interpreters, 73% of respondents reported they needed training for working on Deaf/hearing interpreting teams, and 67% of respondents reported they needed training for services to d/Deaf individuals from minority backgrounds that use English as a second language. It is clear interpreters today are under pressure to develop new skills sets to meet the communication needs of an increasingly diverse d/Deaf population.

As was suggested in the Trend Report (Cogen & Cokely, 2015), large-scale recruitment efforts within diverse communities and funding for scholarships or stipends to attract and support interpreting students from communities of color are urgently needed. In addition, interpreting programs must expand exposure to diverse communities; some may need to offer specialization in interpreting with certain language groups, particularly in geographic pockets of the country where minority populations are already becoming the majority. In-service training for currently practicing interpreters is also essential. For most interpreters, being effective in the future may mean having the ability to quickly assess situational needs, discern what capabilities and knowledge are needed, and, if they are not well-suited to the demands, being equipped to redirect customers to an interpreter or interpreting team that can provide effective communication.

References:

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