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NATIONAL INTERPRETER
EDUCATION CENTER

UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGES OF INTERPRETERS WORKING WITH CHILDREN IN K-12 SETTINGS

Needs Assessment Report

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**Boston, Massachusetts
December 2016**

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The National Consortium centers are funded from 2010 – 2016 by the U.S. Department of Education Rehabilitation Services Administration, CFDA 84.160A and 84.160B, Training of Interpreters for Individuals Who Are Deaf or Hard of Hearing and Individuals Who Are Deaf-Blind.

The contents of this report were developed under a grant from the Department of Education. However, those contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.

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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 interpreting in K-12 educational settings.

Acknowledgments

The National Interpreter Education Center gratefully acknowledges all who took the time for thoughtful engagement in the interviews, focus groups, and surveys conducted over the course of the needs assessment effort. Without their active participation, this report would not have been possible.

We also wish to thank our consultant, Karen Dahms, for her indispensable assistance.

Understanding the Challenges of Interpreters Working with Children in K-12 Settings

Introduction

Today, the majority of d/Deaf children are educated in mainstream settings, often without sufficient language or academic supports. According to the U.S. Department of Education, approximately 87% of d/Deaf children are enrolled in mainstream education. These numbers include d/Deaf children with cochlear implants, who may or may not use sign language, a growing number of d/Deaf children from diverse cultural or linguistic backgrounds, and an ever-increasing number of d/Deaf children with other disabilities. The communication needs of all these children are complex and vary widely, and their success in mainstream education is often tied to the quality of the support services they receive. Mainstreamed education is inherently a high-risk area of interpreting and should be undertaken only by the most fluent and experienced practitioners. For the d/Deaf student that relies on sign language, the capabilities of the educational interpreter can have a major impact on the student's linguistic competence, academic achievement, and social outcomes (Cogen & Cokely, 2015).

Currently, there are inadequate federal and state guidelines governing the quality of interpreting services that are provided in the mainstream setting. Interpreter qualification requirements are often left to the determination of individual school districts, which generally know little about what is needed for effective communication with d/Deaf students. Low pay combined with the lack of qualification standards have resulted in many interpreters working in mainstream settings that are recent IEP graduates with little or no experience interpreting and limited fluency in ASL. Under-qualified interpreters inadvertently undermine development of language competence and contribute to idiosyncratic use of sign language, low literacy rates, and poor academic and social outcomes for many d/Deaf students (Cogen & Cokely, 2015).

The purpose of this needs assessment effort was to understand more about the experiences and training needs of interpreters working in mainstream settings. In 2016, the National Interpreter Education Center (NIEC) conducted a K-12 Interpreter Survey of practitioners that work in mainstream K-12 settings in urban, suburban, and rural locations. Through that survey, 189 interpreters provided input regarding their background, education, and experience interpreting in mainstream K-12 settings. 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 22 interpreters that work in these settings. The input gathered in the focus group sessions is also presented in this report, providing a more qualitative perspective

regarding the experiences of interpreters in mainstream education.

Demographics and Background of Respondents

The demographics of the interpreters that responded to the K-12 Interpreters Survey closely mirror the demographics of the overall pool of interpreters. Ninety percent of respondents were female, and only 10% were male. In the focus group sessions, 20 of the participants were female; only 2 of the participants were male. In the survey, 83% of respondents identified as White/Caucasian; 5% as Hispanic/Latino, and 3% as African American/Black. In the focus group sessions, 20 of the participants identified as White/Caucasian, and two as African American/Black. Despite dramatic multi-cultural growth in the general population, the demographics of the interpreting workforce have changed very little over the years, including among the interpreters who work in mainstream settings. There continues to be a shortage of interpreter who are 'of' the communities they serve, and who would be best suited to communicate with d/Deaf individuals from a shared cultural background.

The survey also captured information related to the age of respondents. In the survey, 22% of respondents reported they were between the ages of 21 and 30; 24% were between the ages of 31 and 40; 25% between 41 and 50, and 28% 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 53% of the K-12 respondents. The survey also collected information regarding the educational background of respondents. In the survey, 9% of respondents reported they had completed some college coursework, but did not earn a degree; 27% hold a AA/AS Degree; 45% a BA/BS Degree; 9% have completed some graduate coursework, and 8% hold a MA/MS degree. The survey further asked respondents to report whether they had attended a formal interpreter education program (IEP). In response, 72% of respondents reported they had attended an IEP. Of those respondents, 57% attended a two-year program, and 40% a four-year program. Of the respondents that attended an IEP, 70% reported that the IEP did not have a focus specifically on interpreting in K-12 educational settings.

Survey respondents were also asked to report how many years of experience they had working as an educational interpreter. Of the respondents, 36% reported they had 1 to 5 years of experience; 17% of respondents had 1 to 10 years; 17% had 11 to 15 years; 13% had 16 to 20 years, and 17% of respondents had more than 20 years of educational interpreting experience. These percentages, coupled with data regarding respondent age, indicate that a significant portion of this particular survey pool have established career longevity in the educational setting.

The survey also asked respondents to report on the credentials they hold: 70% of respondents said they hold national credentials and 35% reported that they hold state/local credentials. Note that in some cases interpreters may hold both state and national credentials. Fifteen percent of respondents reported holding no credentials. For those respondents with national credentials, 32% reported they have held their oldest credentials 1 to 5 years; 39% have held

their oldest credentials for 6 to 10 years; 12%, for 11 to 15 years, and 17% of respondents hold their oldest credentials 16 years or more. In response to another survey question, 90% of respondents reported they belong to RID at the national level, and 67% of respondents belong to RID state chapters.

The interactive aspect of the K-12 interpreter focus group sessions provided a forum for capturing additional, more qualitative, input from participants regarding work in K-12 settings. That input has been aggregated and summarized in the following section of the report to provide a more in-depth snapshot of the interpreting experience in the mainstream.

Interpreting in Mainstream Settings

In the introductory portion of the focus group sessions, participants were asked to broadly describe their work in mainstream settings. Overall, interpreting in the mainstream was described as both challenging and rewarding. In addition, one theme was evident throughout the discussions: the range of d/Deaf students and the type of communication challenges they present vary widely in mainstream settings. The capacity to be flexible in an environment that is constantly changing and evolving was stressed repeatedly by all of the participants. Many described simultaneously serving as language developer, tutor, and student advocate, in addition to their role as the sign language interpreter.

Focus group participants reported that the majority of students they work with come from hearing households and have little or no language. Many said their students lack of a strong language base, whether English or signed, and present both language and knowledge gaps in comparison to their hearing peers. These students confront a range of challenges in the classroom where they must learn sign language, English, and course content, all at the same time. Many of the focus group participants reported working with students that, lacking full proficiency in either language, use more physical forms of communication, including gestures, touching, pointing, and pushing. Participants also reported challenges that arise with students who prefer to speak for themselves. Often the student's speech is not clear to hearing peers and staff, and the interpreter must clarify what student is saying. Voicing for students with language deficits can be challenging, and participants report they are often not fully confident of what meaning the student intends to convey.

Many of the focus group participants agreed that student signed language is typically very different from what was taught in ASL courses, and that very few students sign 'textbook ASL.' Some participants reported that most students sign with more English grammatical structures and less ASL features, like use of space. Other participants reported working with students that rely on spoken English - even if their speech is not intelligible to the interpreter or their peers and teachers. Many of the focus group participants said their students have stronger receptive skills in sign language than they do expressive. These students can understand signs, but not necessarily features of ASL, like classifiers and non-manual markers. Some of the focus group participants have found that parents of these students often resist their child learning sign language entirely, or are supportive of the child signing in school, but do not support the use of

sign in the home. However, the experiences of those focus group participants who have worked with d/Deaf students who have a d/Deaf parent, and have been exposed to sign language in the home, have been significantly more positive. In those situations, the students come to mainstream with grade-level language and often are in advance of their hearing peers.

The focus group sessions also explored the level of support participants receive from the school districts where they work. Those participants that work in more urban mainstream settings (where there may be several d/Deaf students and hence other interpreters) have found that the needs of the d/Deaf student and their role as an interpreter are understood and supported by administrators and other school personnel. However, many other focus group participants, particularly those working in more suburban and rural locations, did not have the same experience. A number of participants reported that they were the first and only interpreter in their school, and in some cases, in the entire school district. Several said they are assigned to the only d/Deaf student in the district and work largely in isolation with little opportunity for interaction with other interpreters to share ideas or troubleshoot problems. These participants said they are viewed as para-professionals, and as such, receive few resources and limited support. A few said there were no substitutes if they called in sick or had a family emergency, and that the school district had no funding or back up plan to ensure services to the d/Deaf student in their absence. They felt that school administrators and other personnel generally do not understand the communication needs of d/Deaf students or their role as an interpreter. In fact, most of the focus group participants identified a need for in-service training for administrators and other school personnel regarding the role and responsibilities of the interpreters and what constitutes effective services to the d/Deaf and hard of hearing student.

Advances in technology have also impacted the classroom dynamic. Focus group participants all identified iPads, Chromebooks, Smartboards, Google classroom, Smartphones, and computers as important classroom resources and useful communication tools. Some participants use text recognition apps, such as Google Read & Write, to help with literacy skills, and other apps, such as Skype and Glide, to provide communication access. Many of the focus group participants use tablets or smartphones to provide visual resources to support interpretations and student learning in direct interactions.

K-12 Interpreter Qualifications and Pay

The focus group participants also discussed the need for minimum qualification standards for K-12 interpreters. Although standards are important to ensure interpreters are qualified to work in all settings, the lack of standards governing interpreting services in mainstream settings is of particular concern. Today standards governing qualification requirements are often left to the determination of individual school districts, which generally know little about what is needed for effective communication with d/Deaf students. In the focus group sessions, a number of participants raised concerns regarding the impact of underqualified interpreters on d/Deaf student outcomes, pointing to under-qualified interpreters still being hired in the mainstream settings where they work. A few of the participants recommended that IEPs raise their standards and not graduate interpreters who do not have the skills to succeed.

Another factor contributing to the high number of underqualified interpreters working in K-12 settings relates to pay. Interpreter pay in K-12 settings is typically much lower than pay available in other interpreting settings. According to the findings of a 2014 survey of interpreter practitioners conducted by the NIEC, the mean annual pay for full-time interpreters working in K-12 settings was \$28,000. As a point of comparison, in that same 2014 survey, respondents reported a mean annual salary of \$41,000 in vocational rehabilitation settings; \$46,000 in postsecondary-education; \$49,000 through interpreter referral agencies; \$54,000 in VRS/VRI; \$55,000 in private business settings, and \$62,000 in medical settings. This information is particularly troubling considering mainstreamed K-12 education is inherently a high-risk area of interpreting and should be undertaken only by the most fluent and experienced practitioners. Many professionals in the field attribute an increase in idiosyncratic sign language use among transition age and young adult d/Deaf individuals to poor language modeling by interpreters working in K-12 settings.

Characteristics of the Deaf Student

Both the K-12 Interpreter Survey and the focus group sessions sought to understand more about d/Deaf students enrolled in mainstream settings. Today, many d/Deaf students in the mainstream use a cochlear implant. In the survey, 65% of respondents reported they work with students that use a cochlear implant. However, only 29% of those respondents reported that their students with cochlear implants could function independently in the classroom. The misconception that cochlear implants produce normal hearing can often leave the d/Deaf student with little or no support. In reality, children with cochlear implants can have a range of communication needs that are directly related to age at implant, the extent of hearing prior to being implanted, the presence of special needs, and services they received prior to entering the mainstream setting. When an interpreter is provided, the target language form can range from ASL to English-based signing or, in small pockets, oral transliteration or cued speech. Preferences may also vary depending on the nature of the event: academic, extra-curricular, or social (Cogen & Cokely, 2015)

Increasingly, d/Deaf students whose implants have not produced the desired results, and who do not succeed in mainstreamed settings, are sent to self-contained schools and programs as pre-teens. By then, it is already too late to expect full acquisition of a first language. Today, many of these youths are entering adulthood with idiosyncratic sign language and a range of other complex communication needs.

Another growing segment of the population of d/Deaf children in mainstream education is the Deaf Plus child. The term 'Deaf Plus' is used to describe an individual who is d/Deaf or hard of hearing in addition to having significant medical, physical, emotional, cognitive, educational, or social challenges. While some Deaf Plus children are able to learn sign language, many others have idiosyncratic and dysfluent language, and depend on basic hand gestures or alternative modes of expression and reception. Deaf Plus students may benefit by services of a Deaf interpreter, who is often in the best position to offer and respond to unique and complex communication needs. Deaf interpreters have proven to be very adept at reaching and getting at meaning with individuals who are Deaf Plus through a wide variety of targeted

communication strategies and interventions. However, there is shortage of Deaf interpreters in the current interpreting workforce, and the availability of a Deaf interpreter in mainstream educational settings is rare (Cogen & Cokely, 2015). In the K-12 survey sample alone, 97% of interpreter respondents reported they identified as hearing, and 3% as hard of hearing. None of the interpreter respondents were d/Deaf.

Mainstream settings have also become increasingly diverse. In the K-12 Interpreter Survey, 64% of respondents reported they work with d/Deaf students from a diverse ethnic background; 68% of those respondents further reported that those students do not speak English in the home. Focus group participants also reported working with a diverse mix of students, many of which come from homes where English is not used.

d/Deaf students from diverse backgrounds have multifaceted communication needs that can relate to culture, language, family structure, socio-economic background, and refugee experiences (Cogen & Cokely, 2015). Increasingly, these individuals demonstrate idiosyncratic and dysfluent language use. Families of d/Deaf children from minority and immigrant populations often do not have access to important information and resources related to the child's rights and available services, and typically have limited ability to advocate on behalf of their child. In addition, in the mainstream setting, many d/Deaf students from minority populations must rely on the services of an interpreter who does not share the same cultural background, and is not fluent in the native language of the home.

The focus group participants related that different cultural backgrounds often reflect different expectations of what is possible and realistic for the d/Deaf student. They found that many families from diverse communities have low expectations of what the d/Deaf student can achieve, based on the culture of their country of origin. Those families were less concerned with grades and did not help the student complete assignments at home. Adding further complexity, English is often the second language in the home, and communication between school, students, and parents may require the use of a spoken language interpreter, or an English-speaking family member. These and other communication challenges make it difficult for schools to engage families in the educational process.

Interaction with Hearing Peers

Focus group participants agree that the degree to which the d/Deaf student interacts with their hearing peers varies by student, and is influenced by many factors. Several of the participants reported their students prefer to use voice and communicate on their own with peers and teachers, with varying degrees of success. Some students have a wide range of communication strategies depending on who they are communicating with; other students have very limited strategies, which may include short utterances in spoken English or more physical interactions.

Most of the participants reported that the d/Deaf student's interaction with their hearing peers is typically limited or shallow. Some students have multiple disabilities, or lack the confidence to interact with hearing students in the classroom. Peak interaction times, such as recess and

lunch times, were identified as particularly challenging by all of the participants. Sometimes, students advocate for themselves to have an interpreter with them during the lunch period. But more often, students do not want to be perceived as different, and so opt not to have an interpreter present.

For the most part, the d/Deaf student is typically the only d/Deaf child in the school, and is largely socially isolated from students and staff alike. A few of the participants reported that their school district periodically attempts to bring larger groups of d/Deaf students together through field day experiences with other d/Deaf students in the region. In addition, some participants work in schools that have ASL classes or clubs where hearing peers can learn to sign. A few of the focus group participants work in schools where there are several d/Deaf students present. Those participants reported the d/Deaf students gravitate to one another and communication through sign language.

Several of the focus group participants reported that social media apps such as voice recognition, texting, FaceTime, and Snap Chat are increasingly used for interaction between the d/Deaf student and hearing students.

Future Training and Education Needs

Most of the focus group participants identified a need for training and education focused specifically on work in mainstream K-12 settings. This should include training and professional development related to child development, pedagogy, language acquisition, language modeling, and classroom dynamics. All interpreters supported the concept that a greater understanding of how children learn language is vital to being an interpreter in K-12 settings. As one participant stated: “Especially at the lower grades, you are teaching, not interpreting. The student doesn’t have a language to interpret for; you’re teaching them a language.” This statement underscores the importance of ensuring K-12 interpreters have ASL and English fluency and a wide array of strategies available to them to address the gaps in student knowledge and language.

Focus group participants also stressed the importance of understanding how to work effectively within the educational system. This includes understanding how Individualized Education Plans work, and the legal framework for educational interpreting. Interpreters in K-12 also need strategies for building bridges and working in teams with other school personnel to create the most conducive learning environment for the d/Deaf student. Several of the participants reinforced the need for in-service training for school administrators and staff regarding communication access and the role of the sign language interpreter. A number of focus group participants also identified a need for training related to ethical-decision making, and discussed the importance of having a framework to apply in the classroom, such as the Demand-Control Schema. In addition, participants identified a need for repetition and reinforcement strategies, such as intentional fingerspelling and direct interactions in hallways or the lunchroom, as tools to help students retain new vocabulary and concepts.

All of the participants talked about the importance of having trained, qualified mentors and a formal induction program available to new IEP graduates to prepare them for work in the mainstream where they will encounter students with cochlear implants, Deaf Plus students, and students from diverse backgrounds.

Summary

It is evident that for the foreseeable future, the majority of the d/Deaf individuals' interpreters will be working with will come from a mainstream education experience. The needs of this emerging generation of d/Deaf individuals are already proving to be different than the generation before them, many of whom received their early education in residential and segregated settings. In general, the product of K-12 mainstream education will likely be less fluent in ASL. Increasingly, this new generation will include d/Deaf children with cochlear implants, who may or may not use sign language, a growing number of d/Deaf children from diverse cultural or linguistic backgrounds, and an ever-increasing number of Deaf Plus children - all of which have the potential to present unique and complex communication challenges to interpreters.

Unfortunately, as a result of low pay and lax hiring requirements, many interpreters working in K-12 mainstream education are recent graduates with little or no experience interpreting and limited fluency in ASL. Yet these interpreters often serve as the sole language model and bridge to instruction for the deaf student. Many professionals attribute an increase in idiosyncratic sign language use among transition age and young adult d/Deaf individuals to poor language modeling by interpreters in K-12 settings. Minimum qualification standards are urgently needed for educational interpreters working in K-12 mainstream settings (Cogen & Cokely, 2015).

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