

A Paradigm Shift in Educational Interpreting:

Acknowledging the Power and Responsibilities of Related Service Providers (RSPs)

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How many times have you heard the phrase, *just an educational interpreter*? Perhaps a colleague has said it about another interpreter, a teacher has said it in a planning meeting, or maybe you have even thought this about yourself. Fifteen years after educational interpreters were legally-designated as fully participatory members of Individualized Educational Program (IEP) teams, the perspective of being *less than* is still far too common.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) is the overarching federal law that mandates specialized education for d/Deaf and hard of hearing (DHH) students. In its 2004 reauthorization, educational interpreters were specifically designated as Related Service Providers (RSPs), thus extending an unprecedented level of power to those in the position. This designation inherently expanded the roles and responsibilities of educational interpreters to parallel those of other educational professionals who are RSPs, such as speech language pathologists, audiologists, and therapists.

However, with this great power comes great responsibility! IDEA also mandates that all RSPs be professionally qualified to fulfill such positions. Both ethically and legally,

educational interpreters must possess the skills and knowledge to serve as fully contributing educational team members. They must be knowledgeable regarding each student's overarching needs and address them comprehensively within the provision of their own interpreting services (IDEA, 2004; Jones, 2004; Patrie & Taylor, 2008; Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, 2010; Schick, 2007). As RSPs, expanded roles of educational interpreters may include, but are certainly not limited to, facilitating language development, assisting in the implementation of appropriate accommodations, and supporting the utilization of hearing assistive technology.

Conflicting Codes of Conduct?

Before we move forward, perhaps your first thought is how these expanded roles and responsibilities might conflict with the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID)'s overarching Code of Professional Conduct (CPC, 2005) for all sign language interpreters. Fear not, for it does not! Part B of the Applicability subsection, clearly gives way to IDEA:

“Federal, state or other statutes or regulations may supersede this Code of Professional Conduct. When there is a conflict between this code and local, state, or

federal laws and regulations, the interpreter obeys the rule of the law.” (p.2)

Fulfilling Expanded Roles

Delving into these expanded roles might feel overwhelming, particularly if you, your colleagues, or even your supervisors have subscribed to the long-held notion that *just an educational interpreter* exists. Under the IDEA however, educational interpreters can and should appropriately fulfill a range of roles and responsibilities **for which they are qualified**. A commonly acknowledged responsibility of an educational interpreter is to present language at a level most accessible to the individual student. A simple example of this could be using a conceptually-known sign, such as “DON’T-KNOW” followed by the fingerspelling of a more advanced English word, such as C-L-U-E-L-E-S-S, before introducing the more advanced sign, which might be new to the student. Perhaps a bit of a supplementary explanation of the context is also needed, such as an example of a situation in which someone might feel clueless. Someone unfamiliar with this obligation of an educational interpreter could argue that the he or she has strayed from the task of faithful interpretation, as would often be expected in community settings for adults. However, one could more easily argue that the student would not have adequate educational access to the content without the aforementioned adjustment and explanation. The educational interpreter in this case has made a professional and qualified decision within the provision of his or her interpreting services, as required to meet the educational needs of the student, just as all other educational professionals are expected to do.

Another widely acknowledged responsibility of the educational interpreter is to assist in the provision of appropriate accommodations. Luckner & Muir (2001) found that DHH students experience greater success when one

team member takes the lead on facilitating their accommodations, which could most appropriately fall to the educational interpreter. Once again, the educational interpreter is required to use professional judgement to determine what this assistance looks like in any specific situation. In the case of a student whose educational programming is being highly overseen by a qualified teacher of DHH students, the educational interpreter’s responsibility will likely be contained to classroom assistance regarding issues specific to interpretation. However, for the all-too-common situations in which the educational interpreter serves as the only team member knowledgeable regarding deafness, more extensive resource-sharing regarding accommodations might be required. According to IDEA, all educational professionals, including interpreters, have a responsibility to promote the comprehensive needs of students. For example, an educational interpreter’s gentle reminder that a teacher needs to wear an FM system, if prescribed by the IEP, will increase educational access for the student and contribute to IEP compliance.

Educational Audiology

One service area that has been historically overlooked in the field of educational interpreting is that of educational audiology. When we think of educational audiology, the first ideas that often come to mind are the prescription and programming of hearing assistive devices, which requires a qualified audiological professional. However, many professionals are unfamiliar with IDEA’s broad definition of what educational audiology actually entails. It extends far beyond what is often assumed, outlining several essential and supportive tasks that can be appropriately implemented by professionals other than audiologists (Johnson, 2006; IDEA, 2004). For example, best practices in educational audiology

require *daily listening checks* to ensure that students have fully functioning hearing equipment and to identify potential changes in listening aptitude immediately (Schafer & Sweeny, 2012). Most DHH students are utilizing hearing assistive technology, such as hearing aids, cochlear implants, and FM systems, to some extent, in their educational settings. In these cases, it is recommended that one primary and one secondary staff member be identified to carry out this essential daily process (Boston Center for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children, 2003). Because educational interpreters are often the team members most familiar with students' daily use of audiological equipment, and the first to notice potential concerns (Smith, 2010), listening checks, battery replacement, and basic FM troubleshooting can be appropriately assigned (Boston Center for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children, 2003; Smith, 2010). Of course, qualified audiologists must retain responsibility for the diagnosis and determination of hearing loss, prescription of hearing assistive technology, provision of training other educational professionals, and oversight across all audiological-related services.

Qualified Decision-Making

The potential roles and responsibilities of educational interpreters are far-reaching and wavering, depending on many inherently-variable characteristics which are beyond the scope of this brief article. Making such determinations requires qualified decision-making on a daily basis. Therefore, after emphasizing the parallels in legal responsibilities of educational interpreters and other educational professionals, we would be remiss to avoid addressing a glaring disparity between among them.

To date, educational interpreters stand out as legally-designated RSPs who have not yet been nationally-mandated to demonstrate

skills and competencies through a standardized degree, training, or certification program (Jones, 2004; Patrie & Taylor, 2008; Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, 2009). Meanwhile, other RSPs such as speech language pathologists (SLPs), educational audiologists, occupational, and physical therapists, for example, must complete standardized preparation programs, a specific number of supervised clinical hours, and pass knowledge-based competency assessments prior to obtaining licensure which deems them eligible to provide educational services (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2015; American Physical Therapy Association, 2013; American Speech Language and Hearing Association, 2014). Additionally, to *maintain* such credentials, other RSPs are required to continuously engage in relevant professional development and meet continuing education requirements on an annual or cyclic basis. Given the relative newness of educational interpreting as a profession, and the challenging scenarios that occur daily, such ongoing training and professional development is beyond crucial in our field.

In Summary

In summary, your position as an educational interpreter is powerful in ways unique to the professions of both interpreting and education. Students are counting on you to make the big picture clear alongside all the subtleties of the entire educational day. Your colleagues are counting on you to contribute positively to a challenging yet rewarding professional environment. Administration is counting on you to be tactfully informative regarding your areas of expertise. The law has provided you with great power, but your field is counting on you to use that power to expect and demonstrate more in terms of qualifications and performance. Only then can we realistically expect greater outcomes for the students with whom we work.

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