What Do Others Think Of Our Work?

Deaf Students, Teachers, Administrators, And Parents Perspectives

On Educational Interpreting

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Abstract

This study investigates the experiences of Deaf children accessing public education via sign language interpreting services. The research incorporates an examination of the interpretation delivered in the classroom context, and interviews with teachers, parents, interpreters and administrators. The preliminary results reveal that there are many issues that impact the Deaf child's ability to meaningfully access education, and that there are multiple perceptions about the work of the interpreter in this setting. These early results are very similar to previous research conducted in several countries, showing a disturbing trend to 'include' deaf students in inclusive settings without understanding for whom and under what circumstances that form of education is best designed.

Objective of the WASLI Presentation

The presentation will report the preliminary results of a research study that is exploring the experiences of Deaf children accessing public education through the services of sign language interpreters. The research project is premised on the desire to look at the complex educational settings from multiple perspectives, incorporating the voices of all stakeholders. The intent is to examine the Canadian context, which has not been well researched as it pertains to Deaf children. The project gathered samples of classroom interpretation, and explored the perceptions of Deaf students, parents, teachers, interpreters and administrators in order to gain a fuller understanding of the reality of a 'mediated education'. The education is 'mediated' because the Deaf students do not have direct access to the teachers who do not know sign language. While the inclusive model is often showcased as a model of social, emotional, and academic progress for students with disabilities, little is known about what Deaf children experience in the inclusive

setting[1]. For the purposes of this presentation, only the data revealing the multiple perceptions of Deaf students, parents, teachers and administrators will be reported.

Introduction

In recent years there has been an increasing trend for Deaf children to be educated the same as their non-deaf peers in general education classrooms that are taught by general education teachers. The majority of these Deaf student use sign language interpreters, thus experiencing a 'mediated education'. Further, the social, linguistic, and academic development of Deaf children has been impeded by myths, assumptions, and general lack of knowledge of the multi-faceted, complex nature of learning through an interpreter.

Most schools assume that once they hire a sign language interpreter that the Deaf child then has a learning experience the same as a non-deaf child. However, research findings of Winston (2004), Locker-McKee et al., (2003) and LaBue (1998) demonstrate that this is not what the vast majority of Deaf students experience in the United States and New Zealand. Their findings point to the lack of qualified interpreters employed by school districts and the ways in which Deaf children appear to have access to the language of instruction, but that much of this linguistic input through interpretation does not allow for meaningful inclusion and nor does it allow for Deaf students to access the learning environment. In effect, Deaf students are physically placed in the inclusive environment, but in terms of creating positive social connections with non-Deaf students, contributing as a learner in the classroom, and having linguistic input that is complete,

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[1] This study was inspired by the work of Dr. Elizabeth Winston, editor of *Educational interpreting: How it can succeed* (2004), who has contributed much to our understanding of interpreters working in educational settings. The Social Sciences and Humanities Council of Canada has provided funding for this three-year study.

Deaf children are more likely to report social isolation, non-participation and academic exclusion.

It is hoped that this national study will bring attention to the key issues shaping the education of Deaf students in inclusive settings, demonstrating effective practices and recommendations for enhancing the education setting in order to provide a meaningful education to Deaf learners. Canadian research thus far has not included the perspectives of students, parents, teachers, interpreters and administrators, and yet these perspectives are critical to understanding the complexity of mediated education. By including these multiple 'voices' of the stakeholders in education, the data can then be contrasted with data from other countries, allowing a more complete international picture to emerge.

Participants

The participants discussed in this paper included thirteen sign language interpreters, two deaf-blind intervenors, fifteen Deaf students, ten parents, ten teachers, and four administrators. Both urban and rural school districts participated, and of the sign language interpreters, ten possessed some form of formal interpreter education (completed a 1 or 2 year program), and two had no formal interpreter education. The teachers working with the students had no additional training in working with deaf or hard of hearing students. The interview data were analyzed for significant themes and emerging insights. This paper reports the themes that emerged from the interview data.

The Research Findings

The following section reports the themes and perceptions that emerged from the stakeholder interviews. Student and teacher perceptions of interpreters are discussed first, followed by parent and administrator opinions.

Student Perceptions

The following themes emerged from the interviews with Deaf students:

Qualifications – No standards in Canada

Students reported that because there is not a consistent approach to hiring of interpreters, students in urban centres have greater access to qualified interpreters, as compared to rural students. Students in high school reported experiences with more qualified interpreters, where younger students in elementary schools and junior high programs spoke of working with assistants who were not qualified. The linguistic data supports this observation, with only 130/280 utterances being interpreted accurately within a humanities class.

Years of experience – Impact of novices

Students reported that when they had to work with novice interpreters, that they could tell that the interpreting was incomplete and that they often felt 'lost' or 'confused.' Even children as young as eight said that there were times when they felt like the interpreter did not 'tell them everything.' All of the students believed that the novices impacted their education in a negative way.

Interpreters education programs – Adult focused

Students suggested that there were times when the interpreters that were hired didn't seem to 'get kids.' The older students suggested that there were times when the

interpreters seemed to be very comfortable working with the teacher's messages, but when it came to understanding the other teens the interpreters struggled to find meaning or ways to convey the message so that it would look and sound like a teenager.

Linguistic skills and interpreting processes

One of the Deaf students in the gifted and talented program reported that the interpreters really struggled to understand the content in the classroom, despite having strong interpreting skills. The teacher in the classroom used a variety of materials and encouraged critical reflection based on linking current events with historical events. The Deaf student could tell when the interpreters were making errors from English to ASL, and reported being frustrated trying to participate in debates where the interpreters did not understand the her message, and were not able to understand the connection the student was making to the content.

Preparation for classes

Students at the junior high school and high school levels reported that when working with interpreters, they could see which interpreters really seemed comfortable with the material and knew the context. For example, the interpreters with a strong science background who were able to read the material and understand it easily were 'much easier to follow'. The interpreters who did not do the preparation seemed to revert to 'signed English' forms of work that were not understandable. Students suggested that there were times the interpreters appeared unprepared and would arrive at class and ask the teacher what the plan for the class was, but had no books with them, and didn't seem interested in preparing for class. Finally, students indicated that when changes of interpreters was needed (regular interpreter ill or schedule changes within the school)

often the interpreter lacked the background or context of what was going on in the classroom, and this affected their participation in the classroom.

Group discussions – Exclusion

Across all interviews, Deaf students reported that they were unable to participate in group discussions and debates. Interpreters reported that they asked teachers to moderate the discussions to allow for Deaf students to have time to respond and did interrupt teachers to try to allow for the Deaf students to participate, but both interpreters and Deaf students reported frustration with this kind of teaching/learning process.

Use of multimedia

Across all fifteen-student interviews, students reported that teachers did not use media that was captioned. Interpreters reported that while they repeatedly asked teachers to let them see films prior to class, most teachers indicated they 'simply forgot' to tell the interpreter in advance. Without any preparation, interpreters are placed in the position of having to provide simultaneous interpretation for material that they may or may not have any background or contextual knowledge. Students also indicated that their own personal schedule prevented them from accessing the materials again, and even if they wanted to see the materials again, no interpreters could be provided for that time period, resulting in them having no meaningful access to the material.

Schedule

For students in urban settings, the theme of competing priorities arose in the interviews. Students in junior high reported that interpreters were taken from their classes in order to offer interpreting services to Deaf high school students enrolled in diploma exams. While the younger students acknowledge that high school students require access to

interpreting services, they also expressed extreme frustration with the lack of interpreting services that would ensure they demonstrated the skills and knowledge needed to pursue the matriculation program.

Boundaries

All fifteen interviews revealed themes of boundaries and independence. Students reported that at times interpreters acted like teachers and/or parents – advising them to pay attention, checking homework completion, correcting behaviour in the classroom and so on. Students reflected that they would like to be allowed to be more independent in inclusive settings, and do not need the interpreter to be acting as a 'pseudo-parent.' As one student said: 'If I chose not to do my homework that is my problem, not the interpreter's.'

Hiring practices

Students as young as ten years of age indicated that they would like to be able to have input into the hiring and release of interpreters. Students questioned what school districts were looking for in an interpreter, and while they acknowledged that they don't get to select the teachers, they can often switch courses to avoid a teacher who is not effective. However, they do not have this same option with interpreters — 'who they get, is who they get!'

Group work

From the earliest years, Deaf students report that they are not sought out as a group partner and they are often the 'last choice' when it comes to membership in any group project. Group projects are also challenging for Deaf students in that much of the work must be completed outside of school time, when interpreting services are not available.

Social connections

The students in this data set reported that after about Grade 3 they did not have friends or meaningful connections to other non-Deaf students. Reflecting back on elementary years, older Deaf students realized that once play became language oriented, that their hearing friends drifted away. Some high school students reported that they had some connection to non-Deaf students through text-based options like sending text messages, or using Instant Messenger programs such as MSN, but when these interactions required face-to-face communication that there was no interaction beyond social greetings such as 'Hi', and 'How are you?'

Placement in a challenging academic program

Interpreters offer a way of participating in a very challenging academic program option, but given that the program is structured on dialogue, the group processes and debating skills are not handled well via interpretation. The Deaf student in that academic program noted that when the debate was quick, and involved all classmates that the interpreter reverted to literal transliteration, with little or no pausing/phrasing strategies, non-manual markers, or facial affect markers. The interpreters reported that they sometimes chose the 'loudest' voices, as the teacher does not manage the debate despite interpreter's request to do so.

Teacher Perceptions

The following themes emerged from the interview with teachers working with Deaf students:

Professionalism

Teachers reported that the level of professionalism varied among the interpreters that they

worked with in the school placements. Some interpreters take the work seriously, seek out preparation from the teacher, and appear genuinely interested in the students. Other interpreters appear to very disinterested in the teaching/learning environment, and just arrive for class, do the work, and leave without any interaction with the teacher or students. All teachers in this sample stressed the importance of preparation for class, and demonstrated positive regard for those interpreters that consistently were prepared for classes.

Role boundaries

Teachers reported that they had experienced interpreters 'lecturing' to them about how to work with the interpreter, with little focus on how best to work with the Deaf student. One teacher commented that the interpreters are sometimes too rigid in their roles, and this interferes with education. This teacher prefers to work with interpreters who view themselves as part of the teaching team, and are willing to support teacher/student interactions in a positive way.

Supervision and scheduling

The teachers in this sample identified that they did not know who supervised the interpreter or how the interpreters were scheduled. One teacher reported that he had very specific preferences of interpreters and made that known to the curriculum leader. The choice was respected, however the teacher reported that the interpreter coordinator was very difficult to work with afterwards, stating that the teachers were in no position to determine which interpreter performed well in what classroom. From this teacher's perception, he knew which interpreters read the novels, understood the teaching processes and could accurately demonstrate his strategies when interacting with students.

Assessment of skills

Many teachers indicated that they did not know any sign language at all, but their overall impression is that most of the interpreters were 'doing a great job!' For some teachers, it would appear that they are more than willing to turn teaching decisions over to the assistants and interpreters as they have more experience with Deaf children.

Need for orientation

The teachers revealed that despite having overall teaching strategies, that none of them had had an effective orientation on how to adapt teaching strategies to support a Deaf student, nor how to effectively work with an interpreter. Teachers recommended that because they may not have a Deaf student each year that there is a need for yearly orientations to be held for those working with Deaf students.

First year teacher challenges

One of the teachers interviewed was in her first year of teaching. She indicated that she was overwhelmed with the 'newness' of teaching, and felt unprepared for the additional stress of working with a Deaf student and an interpreter. Her recommendation was that first year teachers not be assigned any students that require accommodations to allow them to complete the first year of settling into the academic setting.

Direct connections

One of the very experienced teachers in this sample emphasized the need for teachers to learn some basic signs that can allow them to forge a bond with the student, by greeting them, providing positive feedback, and being able to fingerspell. However the other nine teachers did not see this as important.

External supports

Teachers reported a desire to access external consulting services that could provide assistance and guidance in how best to support a Deaf learner. One teacher indicated that she is accessing such services, but can only do so three times in the academic year when what is needed is regular coaching and support. The local school must pay for the external supports and as a result there are restrictions of the amount of money available to teachers.

Administrator Perceptions

The following themes emerged from the interviews with principals and administrators:

Inclusion works

All the administrators reported that the school was completely accessible to the Deaf students and that the students were 'well integrated,' with many friends. When asked about some of the critical issues in creating accessible learning environments for Deaf learners, the principals responded that hiring interpreters was all that was needed. Two out of the four administrators were pleased with the work of interpreters.

Supervision

On the issue of who is in the best position to supervise and mentor interpreters, all administrators indicating that they provide effective supervision to all their staff, regardless of specialized function.

Team interpreting

Administrators in large schools where teams of interpreters are scheduled reported that they don't see the need for two interpreters. None of the principals appeared to have knowledge of incidence levels of repetitive strain injuries among interpreters, or the

issues shaping quality interpretation.

Difficult, expensive helpers

Three out of the four administrators in this study reported that they viewed the interpreters as difficult and demanding. One of the principals suggested that they are 'expensive helpers' and that he doesn't understand why he has to pay them so much when he can hire an assistant for half the wage. Two principals questioned the need for interpreters to be in a separate category per the union agreement, suggesting that the separate category leads to the interpreters seeing their role in rigid parameters. All administrators expressed concern over the inflexibility of some interpreters and how this does not serve educational settings effectively.

Parent Perceptions

The following themes emerged from the interviews with parents:

What do interpreters do anyway?

Parents in this sample did not have a common understanding of what role the interpreter plays in the learning/teaching environment, and how their work supports the work of the teacher. Most parents indicated that they use basic or family-created signs at home and were just trying to learn more sign as they realized they couldn't effectively communicate with their child.

Anyone is better than no one

Parents expressed frustration with the challenges of hiring interpreters and said that in the end, they were prepared to go with anyone who claimed to have some knowledge of interpreting, as 'anyone is better than no one!'

What does qualified mean?

Other parents indicated their unease with understanding the qualifications needed in order to be a successful interpreter in an educational setting. Parents spoke of trusting the school district to hire qualified interpreters, only to realize part way into the school year or at the end of the school year that the interpreter was not qualified to work as an interpreter, and how their incompetence impacted their child's educational experience and performance.

> 'We know the person is not qualified, but the school says that is all they can afford so it is the best that is possible.'

Money and low incidence

Parents who had the experience of lobbying a school or a school district for funding to support their Deaf child indicated that the common response from school was "Deafness is a low incidence disability – we cannot spend that much money on one child!" Parents expressed confusion about the funding arrangements and the school decisions, indicating that such statements put them at odds with other parents who also have children with special needs. As one parent put it:

> How does the number of students take away from what the individual child needs – I don't understand how my child can go without interpreting services so that funds can be diverted to a group of students who share the same form of disability!

What will it take to get a better education for my child?

All of the parents in this preliminary group indicated that they knew the education that their Deaf child was receiving was not adequate; however they also expressed concern

about how to make it better. Those in rural district schools suggested that there is no other choice for their child; those in urban settings reported that when they wrote to their politicians, the responses received all indicated that the state of education for their child was the best in the country. Parents indicated that the tone of the letters was patronizing and gave them the impression that they were to 'remain quiet' and be thankful for the level of service they are currently receiving. The message they took away is that their feedback on how to improve the teaching system for their child was not welcome. Finally, parents commented on feeling that their advocating skills are needed twenty-four hours a day, and this is exhausting for them. 'I worry about what will happen for my child – will they get a job – go to college?'

Intervening services for Deaf-Blind students

Parents who have children who are both Deaf and blind reported that it was recent that the school district employed intervenors and that they were pleased with that positive step. However one parent indicated that the expectations the school district holds for her child are low and that their child is being held back academically. The example offered by the parent was that the two Deaf-Blind children are placed in the same class, even though there is at least 2 years difference in their academic performance. The teachers give both students identical work and keeps them progressing at the pace of the 'slower' student. This increases the frustration for her child, and decreases the child's motivation in the educational climate.

Role models

Parents indicated their Deaf children often viewed the interpreters and intervenors as role models, given that very often, they are the only ones who can have direct communication

with the child during the day. To this end, parents expressed a desire for the interpreters and intervenors to be positive, professional, respectful, and to 'dress well.' The one parent of a Deaf-Blind child said that each time she took her child shopping the child would choose clothing much older than her peers, emulating the style of the intervenor. The child has no real friendships with girls her age and as such lacks peer role models.

Preliminary Conclusions

As an education system, we need to examine what it means to meaningfully include a Deaf child in an inclusive setting, both academically and socially. For whom does inclusion work well? Under what context or conditions does inclusion work best? There appear to be many opportunities for enhancement, including the solid education of interpreters to equip them to work with the demands of the teaching/learning environment designed to serve children from five to eighteen years of age, as well as the recognition of the need to hire qualified interpreters who can provide access to the language of the classroom. It also seems clear that teacher orientation processes are required in order for non-Deaf teachers to understand the adaptations needed in order to facilitate turn taking and group discussions that include Deaf students as participants, not simply observers.

At the base of all education for Deaf children is the need for a language rich environment that is visually accessible for students who cannot hear the auditory messages of teachers. As these divergent opinions show, there is need for dialogue among all stakeholders if we are to address the gaps in interpreter education and the sobering reality of what Deaf children experience in an 'inclusive setting.'