As I travel around the US, meeting with educational interpreters, presenting workshops on educational interpreting, and consulting with educators of the deaf, I often hear discussions about the applicability of the RID Code of Ethics to educational interpreting. Of course, for years there has been hot debate over whether the RID Code of Ethics applies to educational interpreting. But as I listen to the debate and the arguments, I sometimes find a more disturbing argument beneath. Sometimes, it seems that applying the RID Code of Ethics is irrelevant to these debates. The underlying question is not, "Does the RID Code of Ethics work here?" but rather, "Do I need to have any ethics at all if I work in an educational system? They pay me, they tell me what to do and I should do it. I can’t have ethics if they don’t want me to."

Hmmm, this argument has been used often in the past, and world opinion has consistently found it to be unacceptable. After WW II, Nazis were found guilty of atrocities — exterminating millions because “The boss told me to do it!” The excuse, the shirking of human responsibility, was not to be tolerated!

Let me present a scenario—Dr. Welby is a well-known physician, greatly admired for diagnosing health problems and finding cures—whether they be surgical, medicinal, nutritional or emotional. He is renowned for helping people move from illness to health.

Upon retirement, Dr. Welby is not ready to give up practicing medicine entirely. He accepts the position of a visiting doctor at a hospice care nursing center. The Center has two missions — care for sick patients and earn a profit.

One day, Patient Jones is admitted to the Center. After tests and observation, Dr. Welby discovers that Patient Jones has an operable tumor. With an operation, Patient Jones could be cured, moving from a life of progressively debilitating pain and eventual death, to a life of health and wellness.

What is the choice here? Do you think it is obvious? Is it obvious that Dr. Welby will choose to recommend the operation to make this change in Patient Jones’ life? Would you be outraged if Dr. Welby considered any other decision/action?

My guess is that you would be incensed!

Let me propose other options—after all, Dr. Welby is now paid by the Center. And remember, they have two missions — take care of sick patients and earn a profit.

1. Dr. Welby has been told to take care of sick patients. Recommending that Patient Jones have the operation means that she will no longer be sick. He cannot recommend the operation or he will be in violation of the Center’s “ethics” — he is supposed to take care of sick patients, not cure them. (and, if he keeps curing patients, won’t he risk losing his job???) He chooses to keep on “caring” for Patient Jones, since that is what the Center has hired him to do.

2. Consider the second mission of the Center — earn a profit. The operation will be expensive and would not contribute to the profits of the Center. And, if the patient is cured by the operation, the Center’s profits will decrease because they will lose a paying customer. Thus, recommending the operation is definitely against the Center’s “ethics.”

So, Patient Jones is left to die, slowly and painfully, because Dr. Welby is paid by the Center. He follows their dictates because they pay him and Patient Jones does not.

Outrageous? Unthinkable? Unacceptable? Yes! We expect professionals to adhere to their ethical beliefs because they are right, not because they are paid for by the highest bidder.

But, you may say, this is different. This scenario has to do with a life — a person living or dying. You can’t compare it to me working as an interpreter and following the dictates of a school system! No one is dying here!

No? Ethically, what is the difference between choosing the slow and painful death of a body and choosing the slow and painful death of a mind? Refusal to act ethically as an educational interpreter because “someone else told me” is both outrageous and unacceptable. Allowing a mind to slowly wither and die because of a school’s dictates is at best unethical; at worst it is an example of the child abuse so many believe occurs in mainstreaming.

There is no question that educational interpreters must behave ethically, regardless of the dictates of the “person with the money.” Choosing a course of action based on money at the expense of ethics cannot be tolerated. As you participate in discussions about the applicability of the RID Code of Ethics the next time, I challenge you to assess the real argument — is it about how to behave ethically, or is it about whether ethics are relevant? Are minds dying in your school?
But, you say, you believe that professional ethics are important for educational interpreters. The dilemma is how do they apply to all the things that educational interpreters must do during the day?

I suggest that the confusion lies in the title, Educational Interpreter, and not in applying the Code of Ethics. A review of your job description, or of your daily assignments, may well show that you were not hired to be an interpreter, but rather to be an expert in providing educational access for deaf students.

If you think of yourself as an “interpreter,” it becomes very confusing trying to apply guidelines of impartiality, confidentiality, and so on, especially when you have been assigned to monitor the playground. I recommend that you re-think your role, considering yourself an expert in providing accessibility rather than as an educational interpreter.

As an expert in providing educational access, there is no requirement at all. As the accessibility expert, you have several different roles, each with different responsibilities. When you succeed in clearly defining and separating those roles, it is easy to see where the Code of Ethics applies to the role of interpreting. And, if you have been assigned playground duty (or tutoring duty, or aiding duty) you have responsibilities unrelated to the RID Code of Ethics during those roles.

It is only when you are assigned to interpret that the RID Code of Ethics is relevant to your decision making. If, as so often happens, you have several roles with the same student and teacher, you need to be very clear in your role definition. And you need to make sure that not only you understand the roles, but that the others do, too (isn’t this the essence of behaving professionally?). And that they understand, clearly, that when your role calls for you to interpret you must follow the RID Code of Ethics.

But who decides which role you have when? Probably when you were first hired the school made some arbitrary decision without an understanding of the impact interpreting has on an education. Or, as is more often the case, no one has ever thought about defining and separating your roles. Until now!

But, who are you to define your own roles? Just the interpreter, just the hired help?

No! You are a member of the educational team, and you have contact with the student in many different capacities. When asked about a situation in which you tutor, you respond with information about the tutoring situation—what you tutor, how you tutor, how the teacher provides you with direction in the tutoring, and how the student responds to the tutoring. When asked about a fight on the playground that occurred when your were monitoring the playground, you report the events as a playground monitor.

And, when asked about an interpreted event, you provide input about how interpreting affects the accessibility of that event. Because, you ARE the only person who has contact with the student all day, every day as an interpreter and you are the ONLY person in the setting who sees, clearly and consistently, when, where, and how interpreting provides (and does not provide) accessibility to an education. You are the only person who can address these issues in most schools.

But, you say, the team doesn’t ask me about interpreting, they ask me about teaching and learning. Yes, of course they do. They have no training about interpreting — they have little idea about the tremendous impact that interpreting has on the access to an education. They do not know which questions to ask you, the expert in accessibility. They do not understand that you are NOT a qualified teacher, that you are not qualified to test language acquisition, that you are not the panacea for the deaf student. You are, in your role as interpreter, the expert in providing access to someone else’s expertise in the classroom when possible, and in analyzing those situations that do not allow for adequate access.

You, as a professional interpreter, have a professional responsibility to educate the team about your areas of expertise (and to refrain from pretending to have expertise in areas where you do not have it!). It may be flattering to be asked for input where we are not experts — but responding to this flattery with unqualified input is deceptive and self-aggrandizing.

Let me describe another scenario — you, the expert in educational access for deaf students in the mainstream, are at the IEP meeting. You are there because you work with Susan, a deaf student. You are asked to report on her progress. Some common responses:

“I can’t discuss Susan’s progress because I am an educational interpreter and the RID Code of Ethics says it is wrong.” Or, “Susan is doing great! She is getting As and B’s in most of her classes, she never skips class, and I never have to tell her to pay attention.”

The first response is neither professional nor, more to the point, effective. It is negative and passes judgment on the asker. We can not expect them to know our Code of Ethics nor to respect us for failing to participate as professionals. And by giving this response we have denied the team information that is vital to providing educational access to deaf children.

And the second response? At best deceptive, at worst gross malpractice. While it is true that we are often, by default, the person who has the most contact and communication with the student, this ongoing contact does not automatically turn us into experts in learning and teaching. We are, or should be, experts in interpreting. Yet, it is rare for me to hear “interpreters” offering information about interpreting — it seems so much more appealing to provide unqualified information about teaching and learning.

What might be an effective, professional response? A response that re-directs the question into more specific areas.
For example — "I work with Susan in several different capacities, and I will share with you what I can related to each."

"In Chemistry, I function as an aide in the classroom. In that capacity I work with all the students as well as Susan, and my work with her is the same as with other students. Ms. Peters (the teacher) provides me with directions and materials, and I work with any student who needs help. Ms. Peters will be able to tell you whether Susan is keeping up with the objectives of the class. As far as access to the information, most of the class happens through interactive CD ROM instruction on the computers. These programs are all written in English, and Susan has access to the information to the extent that she understands the English on the screen. She does not ask for this to be interpreted — Ms. Peters can comment about whether she appears to understand the lessons."

"In History, I function as the interpreter, where I transmit the teacher’s information to Susan and vice-versa, and have no function as an aide or tutor. This class is accessible via interpreting about 90% of the time. At the beginning of the semester I analyzed the class for accessibility, both visual and linguistic accessibility, and found that the class itself was only about 50% accessible to Susan through interpreting. Mr. Allen (the teacher), Susan and I have worked together to make the class more accessible. Some of the changes have been:

changing the seating arrangements so that Susan sits in the back of the room. In this way she can see all the interaction of the class without constantly having to turn around and miss part of the interpreting. (The class was too big to consider arranging the desks in a semi-circle.)

Mr. Allen gives Susan a copy of his notes after each class. This allows Susan to focus on the interpretation rather than worry about taking notes. However, since note-taking serves a purpose in learning, Susan is not able to take advantage of the aid to memory that note-taking provides all the other students. Thus, this does not provide full access to the educational activity.

During demonstrations, Mr. Allen has changed his presentation style to accommodate visual access for Susan. Instead of talking while he demonstrates something, he usually describes the demonstration first, then lets the students watch it. This lets Susan have access to both the information and the visual aid. (When he talked and demonstrated at the same time, Susan had to choose between watching the demonstration and watching the interpretation — she always lost access to half of the activity.)

Areas that are still problematic — videotapes in class. When Mr. Allen shows a videotape, the other students watch the tape and listen to the information at the same time. Susan must choose which to watch, the tape or the interpreter. We have tried to work around this problem by letting Susan watch the tape before the class so that she can see the information, but this requires time away from other work. We also try to get captioned videotapes when possible. Since Mr. Allen does not show videotapes very often, the activity is a barrier to access only occasionally."

"Mr. Allen will be able to address whether Susan is progressing satisfactorily in his class."

These responses demonstrate a delineation of roles, an understanding of the type of input appropriate to each role, and a manner that is both effective and professional.

Conclusion

I challenge those who function in the role of interpreter, whether it is your primary role, or a portion of a multi-role position, to respect the goals of the RID Code of Ethics. I also challenge you, in your role as interpreter, to provide input that is related to interpreting — how interpreting provides access to an education, how interpreting is affecting the classroom, how and when interpreting provides access and how and when it poses barriers to access. These are the appropriate professional contributions of an interpreter. Define your roles, understand your responsibilities within each role, and participate as a team member within those boundaries.

Provide an environment where children's minds not only live, but flourish.