An Interpreted Education: Inclusion or Exclusion?

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It is a common misconception that inclusion through interpreting is the solution to improving the education of deaf children. Yet even in an ideal educational setting, there still exist constraints on the types of classroom activities in which deaf students can be effectively included. Furthermore, simply providing interpreting does not adequately address the educational and communicative requirements of deaf children in classrooms. The myths about interpreting need to be exposed before policies of inclusion through interpreting can be considered rationally. In this paper, two important myths are addressed: 1) the myth that interpreting is a simple substitute for direct communication and teaching; and 2) the myth that an interpreted education is an “included” education. A section concerning the nature of interpreting and misunderstandings about how it works will be followed by a section on the nature of classrooms in which deaf students—supposedly included because of an interpreter—are in fact excluded by virtue of inevitable constraints on the interpreting process. A third myth not addressed in this paper is that of the availability of qualified interpreters and the possibilities of preparing such interpreters to meet the needs of full inclusion. The nature of interpreting, the nature of education, and the lack of qualified interpreters all combine to make a policy of full inclusion for deaf students unacceptable as a policy that purports to encourage and support education for everyone.

The Nature of Interpreting

One of the primary tools for implementing “inclusion” for deaf children is interpreting. Interpreting, whether it be signed, oral, or cued speech, is the channel through which deaf children are assumed to gain equal access to the world of education. It is true that interpreting can provide adequate access to much informational content; however, an interpreted education is a second-hand education. No matter how skilled the interpreter, the teacher, and the student, it is still the interpreter who processes the communication between the student and the teacher.

This processing always affects the communication in some way. Although there exists a widely held belief that an “interpreter signs exactly what the teacher says,” interpreting theory and interpreters themselves long ago understood the fallacy of this statement. The very process of taking in material presented in one language, then conveying this material in another language or form makes it not the same. Interpreting in public school classrooms provides an important service only for those deaf students who are linguistically, socially, and academically ready to benefit from it, who are placed in academic settings with excellent interpreters, and whose classrooms have been

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1Parts of this paper have appeared in Winston, 1992 and are reprinted with permission of the Conference of Interpreter Trainers (CIT).
adapted to meet their visual needs. A subtle but important difference to understand is that deaf students are not receiving an education through interpreting; rather, they are receiving an interpreted education, an education processed through the channel of the interpreter before arriving at the student.

**Constraints on Educational Access/Inclusion through Interpreting**

Before choosing a policy of inclusion for deaf children, the goals of inclusion must be clearly understood. Many of the goals of inclusion cannot be achieved through an interpreted education due to the inevitable constraints of interpreting. These constraints are given when interpreting is used; they cannot be removed and should not be ignored, because they directly affect access to classroom activities for deaf children.

*Constraint #1: One must first have linguistic competence before benefiting from interpreting.*

A major constraint on effective interpreting is that each person in the communication setting must already have a language. Many believe that exposing deaf students to language through interpreting will help them achieve language skills. However, interpreting cannot be effective if the deaf student does not have a language already in place. Language acquisition requires interaction and direct communication; interaction occurring through an interpreter is indirect. Anyone who has experience working through an interpreter is aware of how remote one feels from the user(s) of the language to which one has only this indirect and limited access. Thus, in this situation, deaf children who do not already have a language must attempt to acquire one through less than ideal means. In addition, they are expected to acquire that language while also learning class content.

To appreciate how discordant it feels when the language used by the interpreter is also new to you, imagine a scenario in which you are expected to learn Russian and computer technology at the same time. Adults would protest the basic unfairness of such an expectation. "Including" deaf students who are not yet competent in either ASL or English is equally unfair and exclusionary, yet educators and parents alike tend to accept the myth that children can somehow accomplish this arduous, if not impossible, task. Even the U.S. government implicitly recognizes the difficulty of such a task by allowing children who are non-native English speakers to be provided with an educational setting that accommodates their linguistic needs until they are ready to compete in an English-only classroom. Similarly, deaf children should not be expected to succeed in inclusionary settings until they are linguistically ready to process the language presented by the interpreter. Interpreting cannot be effective until *after* the linguistic readiness problem has been conquered.

Many people believe that providing an interpreted education provides a deaf student with exposure to English. As has been demonstrated, interpreting cannot provide a language model for a child's acquisition of any language, neither English nor any other. Interpreters using English signing systems provide only a rough reflection—a sketch—of English. Someone who already knows English (an adult, for example) can fill in the blanks using their "cloze" skills and background knowledge. Someone who does not yet know English cannot fill in the gaps with linguistic knowledge not yet acquired. Again, imagine that you are expected to learn Russian from telegrams. You would be expected to learn the language without having been provided many important parts of the language on a consistent basis. These English signing systems provide few of the paralinguistic cues that English speakers rely on for understanding conversation—cues such as
pacing, intonation, and stress are either deleted or bear little resemblance to what we expect in English. Due to time and pacing constraints, an interpreted message deletes even more linguistic and paralinguistic features that English speakers rely on: pronouns, prefixes and suffixes, for example. Exposure to such incomplete messages does not provide exposure to English.

In addition, interpreters using these systems are encouraged to add ASL features such as directionality and location whenever possible. Inclusion of such features results in a mixture of languages and codes that cannot be described as a "model" of any language, and certainly not English. Thus, these coded systems are far from reflecting English, the language intended to "include" the students in regular classrooms. This failure to reflect English is not a result of any inadequacy in the interpreter's skills; rather, it is a result of constraints related to the process of interpreting itself and of trying to map a spoken language onto a signed code.

Constraint #2: Interpreting affects all social interaction by adding a third party.

Another factor to consider when "including" a deaf student is that the deaf student's experience is completely different from his or her hearing peers'. The deaf child is always "unique" or different and never in the majority. The deaf child is "joined at the hip" to an adult, a situation which precludes regular interaction with both peers and teachers. An interpreted education means that every interaction includes three people, not two: by definition this excludes the deaf child from normal peer interaction. It is not normal to have an adult around when you ask someone for your first date; it is not possible to whisper to another classmate through an interpreter in school. Thus, the "included" deaf student is actually "excluded" from normal peer interaction and from normal interaction with teachers.

Deaf students are sometimes "included" via interpreting in order to learn about the hearing world in the classroom. In many cases, the student is expected to sit and watch, but is not really expected to perform at the level of other students in the class. This "inclusion" is intended to provide the student with the experience of the "hearing" environment without the pressure of performance.

Because interpreting always occurs a few words behind any actual interaction, deaf students relying on interpreting are at best always a few words behind the environment. Thus, they are not learning about how to fit into the hearing world and its interactions, they are learning about how to "just miss" all those interactions. This type of interaction and learning is not conducive to building confidence and self-esteem; rather, it leaves students feeling lost and inadequate. The myth that interpreting enhances interaction and socialization for deaf children must be debunked. It can never replace the normal interaction that occurs between two people on a direct, one-to-one basis. This kind of interaction is a crucial and normal part of any educational experience and is, ironically, a goal of inclusion that is completely circumvented by the process of interpreting.

Constraint #3: Interpreting places additional visual processing and cognitive demands on the deaf student.

Another constraint on interpreting in the classroom is that it adds to the visual processing demands on the deaf student. Often the visual input of interpreting occurs simultaneously with other visual input, such as demonstrations, writing on the board, or movies. At these times,
Interpreting does not provide access; rather, it creates a barrier to access by adding a competing visual message. The constant re-focusing between the interpreter and all other visual input is at the very least fatiguing to the eyes of the deaf child.

The Nature of the Classroom

The typical classroom environment is designed to accommodate learning through both visual and auditory channels. The deaf student, of course, has access to only one of these channels. Even with an interpreter, there are many parts of an auditorily-centered classroom which cannot be made accessible. These are discussed in the next section of this paper.

The teacher's style is also of great importance in an interpreted setting. The interpretability and accessibility of classroom activities is influenced by the teacher's willingness to work with an interpreter. Although it is the interpreter who transmits the accessible form of the message, the teacher must still communicate with the student, in addition to teaching the student via interpreting. This is a task that requires adaptations of most teaching styles.

Learning takes place within the total classroom environment. Interpreting can provide only a part of this environment for the deaf student; much within the environment is not available. The deaf student is required to receive and process all information in a completely different fashion from that of the hearing student. This is required during any interaction which is not a one-to-one interaction with another signer. The deaf student has little access to this one-to-one interaction except in contained classrooms; inclusion policies would eliminate this normal learning environment altogether. The dubious merits of a policy of inclusion need to be weighed carefully against the benefits of direct one-to-one communication in contained classrooms. It appears that the question of a least restrictive environment (LRE) has not been considered carefully enough. The only way to determine the attainment or lack of LRE is to view the environment from the deaf student's perspective; no other perspective can provide an accurate assessment of the setting. It is necessary to observe and analyze those placements which succeed in order to learn which types of setting are truly least restrictive. It is also necessary to learn from deaf teachers of the deaf who understand the visual needs of deaf students. Observing deaf teachers interacting with deaf students provides a much clearer understanding of what a least restrictive environment means when learning is visual.

Accessibility to an Education through Interpreting

There exist factors in the classroom which cannot be effectively accessed via interpreting. Several types of presentation styles occur in classrooms; these vary among teachers and within any one teacher's classroom, but several styles appear fairly consistently through many classes. These include lectures, question-and-answer periods, and independent work. Types that vary somewhat include reading aloud with the class and group work. There are many other types of activities as well. The five types discussed here are simply some examples that demonstrate some serious barriers to inclusion through interpreting.

1. Lectures. This type of presentation has generally been considered accessible through interpreting, given adequate language and academic skills in the student. The deaf student receiving information during this type of presentation is required to perform only one task—that of processing information presented visually through the interpreter. (The question of the practical difference
between visual and auditory processing is not considered here. It is, however, a very important consideration to make in terms of an included placement.) This type of presentation is used in different amounts by different teachers; seldom does it continue through an entire class.

A lecture-style class may seem easily accessible to a deaf student through interpreting. The hearing students in the class access most of the information through their ears, listening to the teacher; it may seem to follow that deaf students should be able to access the same information by "listening" through their eyes via interpreting. However, a closer look at lectures reveals that the teacher not only talks, but also presents demonstrations that require the students to watch an activity or to read notes from the board while listening to the teacher. Any activity or presentation that requires the hearing students to use both their eyes and ears simultaneously is an activity that partially excludes deaf students. Although interpreters can interpret the spoken message, they cannot re-do the demonstration; nor can they effectively present information while the teacher is demonstrating.

An important aspect of many lecture-style classes is that students take notes while listening. This task is difficult for deaf students—they must choose whether to watch the interpreting or to write the notes. Full access is rendered impossible by this choice. Some schools attempt to remedy this problem by providing note-takers for deaf students. However, note-taking is in itself a learning activity; it provides reinforcement for what students learn. Deaf students, by being provided with notes from others, are excluded from an activity that helps most students learn. Lectures, in other words, while seemingly representing the most interpretable and accessible teaching method, actually present a number of barriers to inclusion for deaf students.

2. Question and Answer Sessions. Teachers often use question and answer sessions (Q&A) for presenting information. Two basic types of Q&A often occur—the kind that is based on the lecture and the kind that is based on paperwork, such as homework, tests, or information from reading materials. Effective interpreting for either of these is dependent on the teacher's style; in order for the deaf student to participate, the teacher must control the speed of the interchange to allow for the extra time required for interpreting. If the deaf student is to participate, this time lag cannot be ignored. An interpreter can ask the teacher to allow for this time, but such requests do not usually have any lasting effect on the teacher's style. The teacher must be willing to monitor and adjust his or her style in order for the deaf student to participate. An interpreter can shorten this time and can even occasionally anticipate questions or answers, but this is rare. Anticipation can also lead to incorrect interpretations, causing more confusion.

Given this general difficulty with interpreting Q&A, the two types mentioned above present differing degrees of interpretability and accessibility for included students. Q&A based on previously presented information requires only that the student recall this information from memory. This type is accessible to both the deaf and hearing students. Each must process the question and try to recall the answer (that is, if we wish to ignore the fact that the deaf student is always behind because of the interpreting process). Q&A based on paperwork presents a different situation. Whenever the deaf student is required to retrieve information from a written source while simultaneously receiving information from a signed source, the student is immediately excluded from part of the information. The hearing students perform the task of reading and listening at the same time, using their eyes and their ears simultaneously. An example of this during a classroom observation (Winston, 1992) was the correction of homework papers in a class.
Implications and Complications for Deaf Students of the Full Inclusion Movement

The students were expected to correct their own answers by reading their papers and listening to the correct answers being read by the teacher. The deaf student in this situation was expected to watch the interpreter for the correct answer, find the matching question, and correct errors in a previously written response. It is physically impossible for any deaf student to perform these tasks simultaneously.

Effectively interpreting this type of presentation requires either a change of style by the teacher or some sort of deletion in the information conveyed to the deaf student. The change in teacher's style might include writing answers on the board, waiting for the deaf student after each answer, or using an overhead. If the teacher does not change her style, the interpreter must choose between simply continuing to sign, whether the student is watching or not, in order to keep up with the teacher, or deleting the bulk of the information and providing only the most vital information—the question number and the answer perhaps, and waiting for the student to correct the paper before proceeding to the next question. This deletion results in a loss of most of the information that teachers provide when they explain the questions and answers. Either choice by the interpreter results in a situation which is less than that provided for the hearing students. This type of information presentation includes deaf students only to the extent that the teacher's style can be adjusted.

3. Independent Work. This type of activity appears on the surface to be ideal for the deaf student. Little interpreting is required, and the student can have one-on-one (although actually two-on-one) interaction with the teacher. However, analyzing this setting more closely shows that it is not the ideal it appears to be. It is true that the work at the desk is comparable to that of the hearing students. It is usually visual for all. The difference is in the incidental information which is being provided throughout this independent work time. This incidental information includes such things as interruptions by outsiders, during which the hearing children can continue working while overhearing the interruption. Although it may seem that not having to pay attention to this type of interruption would be helpful, it is this type of interaction that provides the hearing children with models for language use and social interaction in everyday settings. They learn from this how to interact appropriately in the hearing world. Other incidental information includes comments such as 'Bless you,' when someone sneezes, teacher's jokes with one or another student, and even brief language lessons. Once, during a classroom observation, the teacher asked a student if he knew what 'Por favor' meant. The teacher then explained it, providing information about Spanish that could be overheard by the entire class. This type of interaction and exposure to language use in natural settings is one of the stated goals of inclusion. Yet it is often during independent work time that interpreters are taken from classrooms or are asked to perform other duties.

Even when an interpreter is present, such situations are more exclusive than inclusive. If the student is working at his desk, it is necessary to interrupt that work to interpret the information or the interactions. It is not possible for the deaf student to continue working and "overlook" this incidental information in the same way that hearing students overhear it. This constant interruption is not usually helpful to the student in terms of completing desk work. The other choice is for the interpreter to not interpret this type of information, depriving the student of this important exposure to language and socialization. During one classroom observation (Winston, 1992), the interpreter usually interpreted when the deaf student looked up, but not otherwise. The student was aware that he was not required to watch the interpreter at this time unless he wanted to. He
was, however, being forced to decide between two aspects of the classroom, a choice which hearing students are not asked to make.

4. Reading Aloud. This type of presentation does not occur in all classes, but when it does, it can present major problems for interpreting. Reading aloud forces the deaf student to choose between watching the interpreting or reading from the book and ignoring the interpreter. The student cannot, as is expected of the hearing students, read along and listen to the reader at the same time. Either choice presents problems. If the student watches the interpreting, the signed message does not match the reading—never in form and often not fully in content. If the student chooses to read, any incidental information the teacher adds to supplement the reading is missed. Even if the interpreter interrupts the student to interpret this, the information may not be relevant to the section that the student is reading at the time of the interruption. This type of presentation is not effectively interpretable.

5. Group Work. Group work occurs frequently in classrooms. It is often difficult for the group to communicate with the addition of an interpreter and the processing time that constrains interpreting. For this reason, deaf students are often left out of these discussions, segregated from the start to work alone with the interpreter/aide. Even if the deaf student participates in a group, because he or she does not communicate on an equal basis with the other students, this inclusion is often superficial and physical. This type of activity can be made more accessible depending on the dynamics of the group and the willingness of everyone to work at communication. However, for the reasons indicated, it is always less equal for the deaf student than for the hearing students.

As demonstrated by the discussion of these five typical classroom activities, the type of classroom presentation has a direct bearing on the accessibility of classrooms and on the inclusion of deaf students. The deaf student's visual and learning needs must be given the highest priority, with the understanding that meeting these needs through the use of interpreting results in an interpreted, second-hand education. Interpreting does not remove barriers to inclusion; it often brings additional barriers with it that are easily overlooked by everyone but the deaf student.

Concerns About the Availability of Qualified Interpreters

The decision to include deaf students through an interpreted education has been the central point of this discussion thus far. However, another very important concern must be the nationwide lack of skilled, qualified interpreters to work in educational settings. Given the nature of interpreting and the nature of classrooms and interpreted educations, it is clear that, even with all the factors being ideal, inclusion can succeed, at best, in providing an alternative educational experience. When all factors are not ideal, placement in an "included" setting for the purpose of providing an education must be seriously questioned. The skills, knowledge, and experience of interpreters working in educational settings are often much less than required to provide even minimally satisfactory interpreting for deaf students.

Interpreters in educational settings should be more skilled than community interpreters, but most often education attracts inexperienced, unskilled interpreters. Bernhardt Jones (1993) presents a thorough review of the history of interpreters and interpreting in education. He investigates the status of educational interpreting in three mid-western states in order "...to address some of the
weaknesses of the notion known as ‘full inclusion’ of deaf and hard of hearing elementary and secondary students” (p. 123). He comments,

Without qualified interpreters, these children are not allowed access to the mainstream. Without qualified interpreters, “full inclusion” is a myth for these children. (p. 123).

Because the effect of interpreting on education is so poorly understood, interpreters are often hired without consideration of their skills and qualifications. School systems all over the country hire interpreters without even evaluating their signing and interpreting skills, let alone ensuring that they meet the standards and qualifications set forth in the Model Standards for the Certification of Educational Interpreters for Deaf Students that has been presented by the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) and the Council on Education of the Deaf (CED). These school systems require little or no certification or other evidence that interpreters are qualified to be the main access to education for deaf students. Thus, poor interpreting exacerbates the inherent problems associated with interpreted educations.

Conclusion

The discussion of the meanings of LRE and of inclusion must be re-examined in light of the constraints of interpreting and the limits to accessibility for deaf students in any system of “inclusion.” Education in an included classroom is a learning experience that, for the deaf student, is different from that of hearing students from the moment the student enters the school until the moment the day ends. It is not, as has been assumed, the same type of experience with the simple addition of an interpreter and sign language. This difference is not merely a superficial difference, it is a difference of both quality and quantity.

From the original focus of this discussion—interpreting as a tool for providing inclusion of deaf students in regular classroom settings—to the broader question of LRE and the education of deaf children, it is clear that the primary focus of study and research on this issue must be the deaf student’s experience in the setting. With this perspective as the primary one, the question of the appropriateness of the environment to visual learning becomes salient. The possibility of providing this visual learning solely through an interpreted message must be seriously questioned and honestly answered. As long as inclusion means an interpreted education for deaf children, a policy of full inclusion as a means of providing equal access to education presents a true paradox: being included in an interpreted education equals being excluded from a full, equal education.

REFERENCES
