

# Journal of Interpretation

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Mainstreaming: Like It or Not  
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The issue of mainstreaming has received considerable attention from various professionals in recent years: does it work? can it work? is it in the best interests of deaf students? While the arguments continue, so does mainstreaming. For most people involved, it is no longer a question of whether or not it can or will succeed. The question is how to do it now, in the schools, while waiting for "someone" to decide whether or not it should be done. Like it or not, mainstreaming of deaf children in public schools is happening and the schools are using interpreters. Professional interpreters and educators can no longer ignore mainstreaming as not requiring "real interpreting," nor can they continue to regard educational interpreters as non-professional and non-ethical semi-signers. We, as interpreters, need to address ourselves to the requirements of mainstream interpreting. If we do not, then we are labeling a large group of consumers as inconsequential. If interpreting is to be seen as a profession, then we must serve any and all consumers, not just a few.

As an interpreter in a mainstream setting, one belief that I have often heard expressed concerning mainstream interpreting is that the interpreter cannot follow the R.I.D. Code of Ethics while working in the public schools. Educational interpreters not only can follow the Code of Ethics, they must be more aware of its content and ramifications than most interpreters. The Code was written for the use of informed, adult consumers, both hearing and deaf. Interpreters have taken these rules and applied them to children, expecting them to behave and react as adults. As a classmate recently pointed out, even the government does not expect that, and has modified the laws and regulations accordingly. Children are not expected to know the rules; they are expected to learn them as they grow. The underlying goal of education is to help children learn how to function as responsible, independent adults. Interpreters working in an educational setting must be aware of this. Interpreter training programs must begin to take this into account when educating interpreters. The classroom interpreter must have a strong sense of the meaning of the rules, why they exist, and the ability to show children why the rules are important for them. Interpreters need to learn how to work

with children. The Code of Ethics itself never defines how an interpreter should behave in any given situation; it states that "interpreter/transliterator shall function in a manner appropriate to the situation...conducting oneself in all phases of an assignment in a manner befitting a professional." We should look to other professionals in the field of deaf education to learn what is "appropriate" when dealing with children.

Another belief among many interpreters and educators is that mainstream interpreting is an easy place to start for people trying to improve their signing skills. Schools hire people off the street to interpret because of this belief; interpreter training programs have not trained interpreters for mainstream interpreting because of this belief; and researchers have not investigated the problems of mainstream interpreting because of this belief. The requirements of this job are much more than, not less than, community settings. The interpreter needs to be: fluent in the use of ASL, English, and signed codes for English; skilled and trained as a communicator; trained and experienced in the process of interpreting from one language to another; knowledgeable about deafness; aware of the cultures of both deaf and hearing clients. In addition, the educational interpreter needs to: be a role model and source of information for students and staff in the appropriate use of interpreters; function as the communication expert in the mainstream setting; be specifically trained in child development and language acquisition; meet the communication needs of a variety of deaf students; act as the P.R. person between the mainstream setting and the deaf program (this does not mean going back and forth with messages and student progress reports; it means being a friendly, approachable person with all involved); participate as a member of the educational team. This last requirement is perhaps the most important if classroom interpreters are to be effective. They cannot remain aloof from all situations and problems that occur, using the excuse, "Sorry, that's not my job." The willingness to be a member of the educational team, in conjunction with parents, teachers of the deaf, mainstream teachers, audiologists, etc., is a necessity. Likewise, the other members of the team must respect the interpreter as an equal member. The interpreter can provide valuable information regarding the communication aspects of the mainstream setting, e.g., is the student functioning well with and through an interpreter? Is the linguistic level of the student equal to that of the class? do

certain communication problems occur regularly? These are all questions within the interpreter's expertise: communication. Questions not relevant to the communication process itself, such as student grades and behavior or the teaching methods used by the teacher, should always be referred back to the appropriate person.

A third belief that many interpreters have is that they cannot be expected to fulfill dual roles in school systems, that they must function exclusively as interpreters. The problem has not been the inability to function in two separate roles, but the absence of clearly defined roles and expectations from the schools. When a school hires an interpreter, the primary role is always interpreting, but during those times when interpreting is not required, the interpreter's skills can be applied in several different areas, as: tutor: with added training and/or experience, an interpreter may tutor the deaf students during study periods in specific subjects, in sign vocabulary used in the interpreting situation, and in sign communication; aide: in a resource room or in the mainstream classroom, when interpreting is not required, the interpreter may serve as an aide in that classroom; resource specialist: the interpreter's background and training in sign communication and deafness can be a valuable asset to teachers in search of teaching materials for the deaf, information about sign language, and resources dealing with deafness; media specialist: an interpreter may be able to provide help in locating and using audio-visual equipment, tapes, and captioned films to assist teachers with lessons. As long as everyone is aware of the roles and the boundaries of each role, the interpreter can easily function in this setting.

Mainstream classroom interpreting is something that is here, now. Whether people accept it or reject it personally, it is happening. The people involved -- interpreters and teachers -- need to be skilled professionals with an acute sensitivity to the needs of all concerned. We, as professional interpreters, must be willing to serve anyone who needs an interpreter, "...in a manner appropriate to the situation." We cannot restrict ourselves to situations that we like and ignore the rest. If we do, we will find more and more situations ignoring us. We will also lose the respect of other professionals in the field of deafness.