

# **Sign Language Interpreters in Mainstream Classrooms: Heartbroken and Gagged**

By Gina Oliva

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I am sure that most readers are well aware, that the entire "system" for educating hard of hearing and deaf children in mainstream settings is generally a mess, the kids are suffering, and no one person or entity is really in control. Included in this "system" is the entire state of affairs with regards to sign language interpreters in K-12 classrooms, across the United States as well as elsewhere around the globe. Let's call it the "[illusion of inclusion](#)" as Debra Russell has so aptly put it.

## **Alone in the Mainstream**

My K-12 experiences, along with the things I learned in my 37-year long career at Gallaudet and during my 46-year long relationship with my "deaf" (e.g. "hearing on the forehead") father came together to prompt me to write "[Alone in the Mainstream: A Deaf Woman Remembers Public School](#)" (Gallaudet University Press, 2004). I am now working on a second volume of that book with Linda Lytle, from Gallaudet's Department of Counseling, which will focus on the experiences of younger adults (currently age 18 - 35) as they look back on their mainstream years. Naturally, this book will include comments and probably whole chapters about Educational Interpreting and the role sign language interpreters play in the lives of deaf children.

## **Interpreter on a Megaphone**

This sense of the need for a second edition had been with me for a

while when I found in my inbox the most recent of many letters received. The one quoted below was a serious gem that convicted me of the need for an entire new volume rather than simply a second edition. It was a megaphone so to speak of the dire straits America's (and the world's) hard of hearing and deaf children are finding themselves in. It is used with permission, and serves as the basis for this post.

*Dear Gina,*

*Hello! My name is \_\_\_\_\_ and I am a Sign Language Interpreter. I do some freelance work but mainly I have been an Educational Interpreter in \_\_\_\_\_ for eight years. I attended your book presentation several years ago and am finally getting around to reading your book "Alone in the Mainstream." So far I am only on Chapter 6 but am already greatly impacted by what I have read. I have worked with all ages from Kindergarten up to high school. In all those settings with all different students I have used ASL, PSE, and/or Cued Speech. Some of the kids I have worked with have had mild hearing losses, some profound. These children come from hearing families who sign, hearing families who cue, hearing families who do neither, and a couple of families where the parents are deaf themselves. One thing remains the same with each child I have worked with. I feel inadequate.*

*Even though I am a highly skilled interpreter, I wonder if the mainstream setting is ever a social success, even with an interpreter, and everyday that I see the kids struggling I feel just awful. It is very hard to watch day in and day out.*

*True, I have witnessed a few hard of hearing students who can speak clearly for themselves and are able to follow conversations quite successfully using their hearing alone. I have seen them flourish, feel included, and have high self-esteem. What is much more common however, and is so heartbreaking, is witnessing my students having the "dinner table syndrome" (as you put it), where they fake interest in some task to avoid looking lost. I see a lot of "superficial participation" where onlookers think the d/hoh student is "just fine" (as you also put it) but really they need to look*

*deeper. My point is, this stuff still happens EVEN WITH AN INTERPRETER PRESENT!*

*In fact, what really kills me is how awkward it is when I am in a "social situation"-- it's just a no win kind of thing. For example, I am sure you realize that kids will alter their talk if there is an adult around. So it's really not "normal kid talk" when I am around. And if some brave kid attempts to "talk normal" when I am there (such as swearing or saying something they would never say in front of another adult), then the rest of the kids are uncomfortably giggling. Then, I, the interpreter and the deaf kid by association is in the spotlight - and it is just so ICKY for all involved -- it is not authentic at all! It is tainted and altered by the mere presence of the interpreter.*

*More often than not, the Deaf student only wants to chat WITH the interpreter; not with their peers THROUGH the interpreter. For years I've heard educational interpreters talk about trying to encourage their students to ask the other kids in class what their weekend plans are, or what good movies they've seen lately, but then the D/hoh student either says "no that's fine" and looks crushed as if no one wants to be their friend, not even the interpreter OR they go and ask their classmates a few engaging questions, but the conversation quickly fizzles and nothing comes of it. I think an entire book could be written on the subject of Interpreter/deaf student relationships and how complicated it can get.*

*It never fails that every year I work in education, I say to myself "I can no longer support this. I need to quit and do only freelance and Sorenson work." I especially feel this way after reading your book, but then I remember that a lot of participants [for that book] did not have the "luxury" of an interpreter. Another voice inside me says, "\_\_\_\_\_, you need to stay working in the schools. Parents will always mainstream their kids, so it may as well be someone skilled and competent working with them. "*

*That voice always wins out, and I stay.*

*But today I am not satisfied. I want to do something about this. I think people will read your book and then pause and be*

*reflective, but then resume life thinking "nowadays schools provide more [and] better services than ever before." Well, I firmly believe MORE AND BETTER IS NOT ENOUGH! Right, your subjects didn't have interpreters (except one I think) and today many or most do have interpreters. We need to push forward to ensure a better quality of life for tomorrow's d/hoh students. We need to ask the right questions, find the right people to share their stories, and make suggestions for making things better.*

## **Heartbroken and Gagged**

And so, this is from a "heartbroken and gagged" educational interpreter. I am sure most of you readers have heard similar or perhaps even felt "heartbroken and gagged" yourself. Heartbroken from watching the kids you are "working for" miss this, miss that, day in and day out. Gagged because the dysfunctional system declares you are not to say anything about this to anyone. Perhaps the latter is an exaggeration -- perhaps you can talk to a teacher or some other school personnel. Brenda Schick's work on [professional conduct guidelines](#) state that as "related service providers" interpreters DO have a responsibility to be more than just a conduit of talking.

## **The Road Ahead**

How do we get the school districts to accept this, to recognize the great value of the interpreter's observations, and take these into serious consideration? And perhaps more importantly, how can Educational Interpreters provide not just in-school support to their individual student(s), but how can they "report to the authorities" meaning the professionals who are concerned nationally and globally about the education of deaf and hard of hearing children. It may take a village to educate a child but the villages ought to share information with other villages.

First, please find a way to get your collective observations into print, the media, to the Deaf Education arena, to parents, and to Deaf Professionals who are working to impact the "system." Secondly, think about the [Devil's Bargain](#), as suggested by Dennis Cokely, and consider giving back through local level advocacy work - in the [EHDI](#)

system and in local or regional weekend/summer programs that bring your students together so that their social network can include others who face the same issues.

## **Should Interpreters Address Inadequacy and Neutrality?**

Why is it that sign language interpreters working in mainstream settings feel inadequate? Is it the expectation that h/she be "invisible" as discussed by Anna Witter-Merithew in, [Sign Language Interpreters: Are Acts of Omission a Failure of Duty?](#) Is this "invisibility" what h/she was taught in the ITP attended? Related might be a feeling that she is expected to be "neutral"? I wonder how much of this feeling of inadequacy and or "neutrality" is from some academic knowledge or industry bias and how much is just plain old being a human being and not liking what they see?

If Educational Interpreters could come together to discuss how as a profession they might address this and related issues in K-12 settings, it would do much to boost the confidence and effectiveness of those working in the isolation of educational settings. The collective voice of Educational Interpreters could hold much promise for alleviating the suffering of the children for whom we are concerned. The interpreter who wrote to me has become a colleague and we have exchanged many emails. It is obvious that she is trying her best in her own setting, but there seems to be a dearth of support for taking these concerns and the solutions to a higher level. What should that higher level be and who can lead this effort?

## **Should Interpreters Address the "Diffusion of Responsibility?"**

In the above letter, the writer refers to the concept of "dinner table syndrome," which I refer to in my book, where the hard of hearing or deaf student fakes interest in some task to avoid looking lost. This was my life day in and day out in my K-12 years and several of the 60 adults who wrote essays for *Alone in the Mainstream* extended this concept to another phenomenon I dubbed the "everything is fine" syndrome. Together these two "syndromes" constitute the concept of

"incidental learning," which is the topic of a yet-to-be-published but complete dissertation by a fellow "AITM survivor," Mindy Hopper. In our day, the fact of this missing information was in itself invisible to all except the student. But now, in the modern classroom, the student's interpreter is a daily witness. Not only does the classroom interpreter know the student is missing stuff, h/she knows *what* the student is missing. This is so much more than any hearing parent of a deaf child has known unless she also spent all day in her child's classroom. Talk about power.

As potential partners with teachers and parents, I wonder if the sign language interpreters working in K-12 settings should have as part of their job description to keep a log of conversations or information that they suspect their "charges" (clients) missed. Wouldn't this help the teacher and the parents determine if their student/child is missing so much as to warrant some kind of action? Clearly, this would involve taking to heart Witter-Merithew's lesson in bystander mentality and the "diffusion of responsibility". I wonder if these concepts can find their way into interpreter training programs and standards of practice, and how such could come about?

## **Advocate and Report**

That children in general, especially when they reach adolescence, want and need space to discuss their lives without the presence of adults, is a developmental fact. That an interpreter's presence in K-12 social environments works against the deaf child is an example of how you just can't change city hall. The hard of hearing or deaf child has obviously learned from experience that the "quickly fizzling and nothing comes of it" from conversations with their peers is what "always happens" and they have decided they don't want to experience that again. But, now, here is an adult (the sign language interpreter) actually witnessing and understanding what it might feel like. Now the sign language interpreter is also witnessing the stilted social interactions of their deaf or hard of hearing "charge". How can the interpreter not be expected to be an advocate/reporter?

In my educated and experienced opinion, the collective voice of Educational Interpreters is our only hope that the issues addressed herein could be remedied. We, the Deaf Adults who are concerned for

these children, need your involvement. Two areas where you can help, beyond your in-school advocacy and the already suggested work to bring your collective voice to the forefront in Deaf Education, are in the EHDI arena (early hearing detection and intervention) and in the establishment/management of weekend and summer programs that bring the solitaires together.

## **Elevate Your Voice**

Perhaps you are the heartbroken and feeling like you are under a gag rule, smart and articulate, educational interpreter in the Heartland. Or you know someone who is. If yes, what are your thoughts on this? What do you think would bring about change? What would lead to the day that your insights, observations, and suggestions as sign language interpreters would be taken more seriously? What would elevate the status of interpreters working in educational settings? Your ideas might be simple, complex, seemingly impossible, step-by-step (we like step-by-step), or philosophical. Bring 'em on.