The Impact of the Deaf Diaspora on the Role of Educational Interpreters

By Bob Ayres

In this article, the author, Bob Ayres, applies the foundational information of his book ***Deaf Diaspora: The Third Wave of Deaf Ministry*** (iUniverse, 2004) to the role of the educational interpreter.

Note: Although it is a departure from conventional rules of grammar, the letter "D" in deaf is capitalized when referring to Deaf adults, organizations, and the community in general. The reason is to identify deafness as a cultural experience such as being an African-American or Native-American. The lower case is used in places where the word is referring to a student, physical characteristic (i.e. "He was born deaf.") or not specifically with cultural connections.

Deaf Diaspora

The term **Diaspora** refers to any people group with a similar language and culture who are dispersed or scattered usually through the will of others. Historically, how scattered groups respond to Diaspora determined whether they continue to exist as a viable culture or become extinct as an identifiable people group. The **Deaf Diaspora** is the defining issue confronting the Deaf-World today.

There are two key words relevant to understanding Diaspora: **enculturation** and **acculturation**. *Enculturation* is the process by which one becomes part of his or her own native culture. It involves intentional efforts to keep a culture alive throughout time. *Acculturation* is the process of adopting the cultural patterns of another group. Social change is caused by the interface of diverse cultures. The survival of an identifiable Deaf culture and community depends on the balance of these two variables.

Residential schools for the Deaf have traditionally brought the Deaf community together as an identifiable group. The school represented a type of "homeland" where Deaf language, culture, experiences, stories, arts, humor and history were perpetuated from one generation to the next. Students often developed a strong sense of identity and connection within these schools and regarded other students, faculty and staff as a

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surrogate family. Due to the dramatic shift from institutional to locally based education, a resulting dispersion of deaf students across the country has created a Deaf Diaspora.

Changes in Deaf-World

Boom and Bust – There was a dramatic increase in the numbers of deaf and hard of hearing children born between 1964 and 1969 because of the Rubella epidemic. This created a bulge of deaf individuals, the "Deaf Baby Boomers" who had increased opportunities, improved accessibility, a strong sense of identity, and an almost militant confidence in confronting the challenges of life. These young people would graduate from high school between 1982 and 1987. It is significant to note that the pinnacle of Deaf-pride occurred at a time when the deaf baby boomers were young adults and many were in college. In 1988, the landmark event of Deaf autonomy and strength was the "Gallaudet Revolution" or a movement more popularly known as "Deaf President Now!" A worldwide celebration of Deaf culture called "The Deaf Way" took place the following year, 1989. Following virtually every boom is a vacuum created in the aftermath and known as a bust.

Educational Mainstreaming – During the 1980s, there was a major shift nationally towards establishing deaf education programs in local school districts. In the middle of the 1970s, when the front line of the Rubella babies was approaching later elementary school, two laws were passed on the federal level that would prove to have a significant impact on the Deaf community and all students receiving special services: Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and "Public Law 94-142" in 1975 (later renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act – IDEA). Essentially, these laws

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required school systems to provide a free and appropriate education in the "Least Restrictive Environment." Mainstreaming would prove to be the beginning of the end for the traditional Deaf culture and organizations. The primary problem for the mainstreamed student is social isolation, including separation from deaf and hard of hearing peers.

Secularization – Another dramatic change over the past forty years has been the secularization of the Deaf-World. The Deaf community shares a great spiritual legacy traceable back to the middle of the 18th Century. There were at least twenty-eight Deaf clergy ordained to the ministry before World War I and almost another fifty ordained Deaf ministers by 1981 when "Deaf History: A Narrative History of Deaf America" was published. Religious faith has been a significant part of the Deaf experience for about 200 years until the 1980s when society in general became more secular. Historically, in the residential setting, religious instruction was considered a vital part of raising well-adjusted deaf children who enjoyed many positive Deaf adult role models.

Workplace Changes – There has been a significant shift in the type of education received by most deaf students at the secondary level that includes little vocational training. Traditionally, a large percentage of the Deaf community worked in relatively few trades. The post office, printing companies, factories, shipping companies (handling of packages) and manufacturing companies hired many deaf employees. Many of these companies, including the post office, have become more automated and therefore have fewer job opportunities. The result is a reduction in the overall number of employees and the loss of jobs by many Deaf individuals. The workplace was one of the places for meeting and socializing with other Deaf people. For the most part, this is no longer the case. The scattering of jobs is another significant contributor to the Deaf Diaspora.

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The New Culture of Deafness

All of these rapid changes over the past twenty to thirty years have brought about a crisis in Deaf-World. There has been a crisis of culture, language, relationships, and community particularly for students in the mainstreamed setting. There is clearly still a "Deaf-World" and it is an exciting cultural experience. Deaf children born after 1975 have a completely unique experience of deafness from their predecessors. What are the distinctive traits of this next generation of deaf students? What are the new influences that have created a *New Culture of Deafness*? How will these factors affect interpreters in the educational setting?

It is a culture of technology. Technology is an integral part of the new Deaf-World. Technology brings people together who are scattered and sometimes keeps people apart who may be gathered (i.e. two deaf teens sitting beside each other, each carrying on Instant Message conversations with distant friends). Deaf students' sense of the world is influenced by the quality of software programs, video relay technology, the Internet in general and wireless connections such as the popular Sidekick.

It is a culture of educational diversity. Between pre-school to graduation from high school, this next generation of deaf students may experience a variety of educational settings. In previous generations, people tended to stay in either the residential or the mainstreamed schools for most of their education. Now, with the mobility and educational options available in our society, this has changed. In this generation, there is not the widespread, strong identification with the schools for the Deaf.

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It is a culture influenced by the media. It still catches my eye when I see a deaf teenager wearing a headset connected to a CD that is playing the newest teenage music hits. The next generation is living in a culture driven by the media. They are keenly aware of what's on television, popular culture and they are equally influenced by marketing as are their hearing peers. This generation is more quickly aware of current events and trends than earlier generations.

It is a culture of communication tolerance. Relationships in this generation are the higher priority than loyalty to a particular language preference. English has become more visual (because of technology and the media) and sign language been influenced by contact with spoken, written and signed English. Primary value in this generation is on successful communication and connection between friends and acquaintances. This translates into tolerance of "whatever works" in getting an idea across including signing, speech, gestures, written notes, emails, instant messages, and so forth.

It is a culture of the Diaspora itself. The Deaf Diaspora holds tremendous danger for the Deaf community. How the Deaf-World survives the Diaspora depends on a willingness to accept this reality and adapt to the changes. At the same time, the Diaspora itself is now part of the culture and history of the Deaf community. Every coming together of the scattered Deaf community is a homecoming. The greatest experience for many is being welcomed home; as a member of the *New Culture of Deafness.*

The impact of the Deaf Diaspora on the role of educational interpreters

We need to teach deaf students how to use interpreters properly. In residential settings, it is commonplace for Deaf adults to teach children on the proper use

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of interpreters. One responsibility of educational interpreters is to help deaf students develop good habits in their relationships with interpreters. There are many forces in schools that would draw one out of the interpreter's role for the assumed benefit of the child. Be careful not to "help too much" or else, the student's independence and ability to compete in the hearing world may be weakened. Good habits are formed in childhood.

We need to intervene as little as possible so students develop survival skills. For those who are in the elementary setting, helping students develop survival skills is particularly challenging. Interpreters should rarely interfere with natural consequences in the classroom or playground nor make excuses for the student. At the same time, it may be appropriate to help the classroom teacher distinguish what is cultural behavior and what is simply an immature child pushing the limits.

We need to provide good language models. It is important that educational interpreters provide a positive ASL language model due to the isolation of many deaf students from Deaf adults. There is value in being a source of signing vocabulary for students. Likewise, encouragement of good signing skills may be appropriate, particularly with younger students. There will likely be situations where it is appropriate to provide feedback on signing, word choice, clarity, sign order (for both ASL and English) and style. The absence of quality language role models (not enough Deaf adults in the mainstream setting) necessitates this input.

We need to seize "teachable moments" for explaining social appropriateness. Because of the language barriers inherent in many families and classrooms, the only person who may recognize the social dynamics surrounding the deaf student may be the interpreter. Interpreters are bound by a code of ethics developed for a different setting:

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community interpreting with Deaf adults. Therefore, the child may slip through the system with little effective input regarding social skills from the adults surrounding him or her. There may be occasions where it is appropriate for educational interpreters to transcend the role of interpreter and become (temporarily) an adult mentor.

We need to avoid being manipulated. Interpreters should avoid "needing to be needed" and go to work daily with the goal of being as *invisible* as possible. One of the key ways to accomplish this is to avoid being manipulated by the student. Children, who have inordinate levels of power over adults around them, tend to become insecure within an environment where they perceive that adults are not really in control. Avoiding being manipulated accomplishes two primary objectives: it strengthens the student's level of accountability and assists in the developmental task of developing independence.

We need to not overreact. One of the greatest challenges of mainstreaming is the sense of social isolation that comes with Diaspora. Deaf students in the Diaspora do not generally have the opportunity for regularly expressing emotions with their peers. This naturally puts the educational interpreter in a position where students may share concerns, worries, anger, frustrations, and joys with the interpreter. It is an important skill to learn how to listen attentively without becoming enmeshed. There is always a mixture of reality and perception in emotions. Interpreters need an ability to discern between normal "venting" and more serious problems that require adult intervention.

We need to respect and support the family. The families of deaf students were with them from the beginning and will be with them throughout their lives. Educational interpreters need to avoid undermining the credibility of parents with their children. You may not agree with their choices but must have an inherent trust in their love for their

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own child. No one benefits from an adversarial relationship with parents. During a time of Diaspora, there is no viable Deaf homeland and it is particularly important for students to maintain strong relationships with their families.

We need to recognize the right of individuals to explore faith without bias. Deaf students should have access to information about religious activities in their communities (as hearing students do) just as they would receive information for secular opportunities. The state cannot take a position for or against the religious faith. There must be a clear distinction between one's personal beliefs and their role as an interpreter. Deep conversations about faith should occur in settings *other* than the school campus. The key is to respect the individual process for developing a philosophical framework for life.

The **Deaf Diaspora** has a direct impact on the role of the educational interpreter. There is a *New Culture of Deafness* evolving and educational interpreters play a vital role in helping Deaf adults maintain Deaf culture during this time of dispersion. Because of the Deaf Diaspora, it is recommended that educational interpreters develop a distinct code of ethics for working with deaf and hard of hearing students.

Bob Ayres

Bob Ayres has earned a bachelor's degree in Social Studies Education, a Master of Religious Education and a Master of Education. He is a NAD III certified interpreter and candidate for certification by RID. He is co-founder and president of DeafYouth Ministries, a national, interdenominational ministry with Deaf teenagers under the program name, DTQuest or Deaf Teen Quest (www.dtquest.org). Along with his role in DeafYouth Ministries/DTQuest, he is a substitute educational interpreter and the proud parent of five children, including a Deaf daughter who is at NTID. Bob is also the author of *Real-Life Wisdom: Stories for the Road* published by iUniverse (2004). Both of these books are available through your local bookstore or at www.bobayres.com

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