International Development of Interpreter Specialization: Assumptions and Principles for Interpreter Educators

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Intentional Development of Interpreter Specialization: Assumptions and Principles for Interpreter Educators

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Abstract

Specialization of interpreting practice exists in the field of interpreting and interpreter education through *de facto* and *de jure* processes. Interpreters are de facto specialists when they self-designate as having specialized competence for working in a particular setting, with certain populations, or within unique functions. Conversely, interpreters may be designated as specialists through external (de jure) processes such as adhering to national standards, completing advanced educational programming in specialty areas, and achieving specialty certification. There are a variety of factors that have shaped the evolution of specialization in the United States—several of which have application to the specialization of practice regardless of locale. This article addresses the implications of specialization for the fields of interpreting and interpreter education with specific attention to necessary elements associated with the preparation of practitioners for specialist practice. These elements are framed within the context of assumptions that currently exist in interpreting literature and/or current practices related to the training and certification of specialist practitioners. This framework offers sound rationale for the establishment of structured mechanisms to guide the intentional development of specializations within signed language interpreting.

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1. Introduction

In its brief history of professional practice in the United States, signed language interpreting has undergone shifts of seismic proportions. Initially an infrequent activity provided primarily by individuals who had familial or social ties to the Deaf community, interpreting today has evolved into a conglomerate of people, programs, conferences, corporations, and certifications. As the professionalization of interpreting unfolded over time, a natural process of maturation occurred in which practitioners, either intentionally or by default, began working in particular settings, within specialized functions, or with specific groups of consumers. It is that narrowing of practice, known as specialization, that is the focus of this article.

In this paper, we argue for a proactive and intentional development of specialization areas within the interpreting profession. We begin by providing a background on specialization as a general phenomenon within professions at large. Next, we examine specialization within signed language interpreting as it manifests through de facto and de jure approaches and in response to societal trends and demands. We assert that a key component of interpreter specialization is deepening the conceptualization of professional acts and practices, which can be evidenced by the decision latitude and autonomy of practitioners. While we argue for the intentional development of interpreter specialization, we describe potential unintended and negative consequences that may result from this action. Essential elements of preparation for interpreting specialists are discussed in the form of a set of assumptions that are drawn from a review of literature, as well as current practices in the preparation and certification of signed language interpreting specialists. Finally, guiding principles that underscore the importance of the intentional development of specializations within interpreting are offered as a means of ensuring the best interests of society, consumers, and practitioners.

2. Specialization as a professional phenomenon

How do specializations emerge within the professions? Historically, as professions grow in stature, they evolve toward developing areas of specialization within their discipline. The assumption is that professions are ever changing in the face of new knowledge and technology, and specialization offers the opportunity to gain the highest levels of competence possible in a specific area of practice. *Specialization* is the deliberate narrowing of practice requiring didactic and experiential preparation that provides the basis for competent service delivery with respect to distinctive patterns of practice in essential domains (Council of Credentialing Organizations in Professional Psychology, 2008). *Patterns of practice* refer to the unique and reoccurring professional acts of specialists that are based on defined standards of practice and involve a high degree of problem-solving expertise (Kasher, 2005). Distinctive patterns of practice may be exemplified in the knowledge of a specialized system, its unique terminology and discourse features, and its norms of professional protocol. As a result, a *specialist* is viewed as a practitioner who, through advanced training, acquisition of specialized skills and knowledge, and

experience, distinguishes himself/herself as being uniquely qualified for the demands of the specialized interpreting work.

One of the central goals of specialization is to provide assurance to consumers that those claiming to hold specialist competence possess the requisite skills, knowledge, and credentials necessary to provide competent and reliable practice (Cheetham & Chivers, 2001; Lewis, 1989; MacDonald, 2002). Specialists possess expertise that exceeds the capacity of generalist practitioners. As a result, efforts of practitioners to specialize will benefit from the field's intentional development of standards for the practice and preparation of specialists. In conceiving such standards, ways in which specialization can be classified is one consideration.

An examination of the literature regarding the professions indicates that specializations can be classified in several ways: by setting, by function, by population served, or other relevant factors (Kasher, 2005; Lewis, 1989; MacDonald, 2002). For example, in the nursing profession the most common specialties can be divided into roughly four categories—by work setting or type of treatment; disease, ailment, or condition; organ or body system type; or population served (Styles, 1989).

3. Specialization within the interpreting profession

3.1 Specialization as "setting"

It is useful to consider how specialization occurs in professions at large in comparison to its development within interpreting. For example, specialization in the field of interpreting is generally regarded as being driven by specific settings. The term *setting* is used to refer to the time, place, and circumstance of the interpreted event, including the context that surrounds it (e.g., backgrounds and characteristics of the consumers). It is commonly acknowledged that a classroom, medical setting, or legal setting each involve a unique set of factors and considerations that impact the patterns of practice of interpreters. Specifically, each of these settings involves unique systems knowledge, subject matter knowledge, specialized terminology, and discourse patterns, among other factors. Further, conflating setting with specialization has been the norm in interpreter education, which is evidenced by course titles in many programs (e.g., "Medical Interpreting," "Educational Interpreting"). We suggest that a framework for classifying specialization that extends beyond setting may prove useful to current trends in the field of signed language interpreting. For example, the incorporation of deaf interpreters into a schema of specialization is best suited to a classification that looks at unique functions and/or populations served, rather than setting. Deaf interpreters frequently interpret for deafblind individuals, or deaf individuals who are not fluent in American Sign Language (ASL). Likewise, the work of interpreters whose working conditions involve technology, such as video relay or video remote interpreting, doesn't meet the definition of a setting per se. We argue that the use of technology for transmission creates unique conditions of work that require certain patterns of practice; however, the interactions that are interpreted include any number of topics tied to a wide range of settings. So a framework that includes specialization around unique functions—such as operation of computer and phone equipment during the interpreting process—would more accurately describe what actually transpires within the field of signed language interpreting. As well, interpreters may also combine more than one area of specialization, for example, interpreting via technology (function) for medical appointments (setting).

3.2 Factors that drive interpreter specialization

Considering alternate ways of classifying specialization also provides insight into the factors that drive specialization in the field of sign language interpreting. These include, but are not be limited to, legislative trends, market trends, needs and demographics of consumers, and practitioner interest.

- **Legislative trends**. When laws are passed, regulations follow. In the United States, federal and state legislative trends have significantly impacted the specialization of interpreters in public schools, legal

settings, and vocational environments. In many instances, laws and regulations specify standards for interpreting practitioners. In turn, these standards drive the need for training programs and the development of systems of credentialing. Often, regulatory bodies maintain and distribute lists of qualified practitioners to entities responsible for providing interpreting services, including a wide range of state agencies such as courts and human services organizations.

- **Market trends**. Entities providing interpreting services to deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals seek practitioners that possess a high degree of specialized competence in a particular setting. Evidence of this can be seen in the rapid growth of the video relay industry. In the inaugural stages of this industry, companies recruited the most qualified interpreters from the local community. Hiring highly qualified interpreters became a necessity in order to be competitive among companies who were establishing their identities as service providers. These highly qualified interpreters were able to learn and contribute to the new patterns of practice required for interpreting via technology. The expectation became that the newly hired interpreters bring or acquire a high degree of specialized competence in a short period of time.

- **Needs and demographics of consumers**. As more deaf immigrants and refugees move to the United States, interpreting demands often exceed the grasp of a generalist practitioner who possesses only a basic understanding of settings and the related discourse and protocol. Further, as deaf people achieve greater degrees of access within society and as services are expanded, practitioners are entering settings for which they have little or no foundation for effective practice. For example, with greater frequency, deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals are becoming "specialists" within their chosen occupations (i.e., accounting, medicine, linguistics, etc). This trend requires that interpreters have the advanced knowledge of a specialist versus the default knowledge of a generalist.

- **Practitioner interest**. Finally, as part of natural career development, practitioners seek out opportunities to advance competence through specialization. It is not uncommon for interpreters to gain specialized expertise in one or more settings as they gain maturity in the field.

These various factors have shaped the development of specialization within interpreting. It may be regarded as a positive outcome that individual interpreters are carving their own paths for specialization. As with any new developments, there are consequences that need to be considered and addressed proactively.

3.3 Potential consequences of specialization

Although the benefits of specialization are inviting, including the possibility of increasing scholarship (Swabey & Nicodemus, 2010), it is important to consider other potential consequences that may negatively impact stakeholders. For example, given the Deaf community's concerns about the changing relationship between deaf people and interpreters (Cokely, 2005), it is critical that any framework for specialization be sensitive to the possibility of further alienation between practitioners and consumers. Further, advancing specialized competence of interpreting practitioners is challenging because of the gap that exists between the readiness of pre-service program graduates to meet the minimum professional standards of certification set by the field (Witter-Merithew & Johnson, 2004, 2005). These sensitive issues would require a proactive approach to problem solving, with collaborative and ongoing action by stakeholders from the Deaf community and interpreter educators.

A further potential consequence is the reality that administering a specialist credentialing system is a costly and labor-intensive process. It is important, therefore, that a sufficient need and critical mass of interpreters for specialized practice is evident before specialist designation and credentialing is undertaken. There is also merit in exploring more efficient ways of creating designation of specialist competence—such as completion of training, supervised induction, and portfolio assessment.

Another possible downside is the potential of practitioners making the investment of time and fiscal resources to specialize only to find themselves in a market that cannot support their expertise. This reality is not unique to

interpreting; the same outcome is evidenced in other professions, particularly in rural areas. Further, specialization may reduce the availability of generalist practitioners in the community. If interpreters work strictly in their area of specialization, the result may be creating shortages in qualified personnel in some areas of generalist practice. The issues of supply and demand could be addressed by first performing a quantitative analysis of the resources available in relation to the needs in the community, followed by developing long-range targets for increasing interpreters in the community. Additionally, local demands could be improved by progressive policies of interpreting agencies and flexibility on the part of practitioners.

Another likely consequence of specialization is the increased cost associated with interpreting services. Typically, specialists charge more, in recognition of the added investment in education, training, and certification necessary to achieve specialist standing. These increased costs can become a significant barrier to accessing the most appropriate and qualified services. Certainly, the need for a more judicious and equitable way of determining and setting the costs of interpreting services must be balanced with the right of practitioners to earn a fair and equitable wage. Therefore, it is in the best interest of consumers, practitioners, and the publicly-funded systems that underwrite the cost of interpreting services (in many instances), to explore cost-effective approaches to service delivery that do not sacrifice quality or integrity.

Although these and other potentially negative consequences of specialization exist, it is likely that further specialization by practitioners will increase. Specialization is a natural result of new knowledge, new technologies, and the advancement of a profession, as well as shifting demands in the marketplace.

3.4 De facto and de jure processes of interpreter specialization

Despite the sensitive issues associated with developing specializations within interpreting, specialist practice already exists through both de facto and de jure processes and, given market trends, specialization within interpreting is likely to increase. The *de facto* process of specialization occurs when interpreters self-designate as specialists in certain settings—such as public school, healthcare, and legal interpreting. Interpreters may also self-designate as specialists working with specific populations—such as the deafblind or immigrants. Ideally, this self-designation, or de facto process, occurs as a result of concentrated practice in an area and through additional training and/or mentoring specific to the setting or population.

Conversely, *de jure* processes of specialization occur through external measures, including the successful completion of targeted education programs and certifications. Several universities in the United States offer additional or advanced sequences of interpreting study in specific settings such as legal, healthcare, and public school education. As well, nationally recognized entities, including (from the United States) the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) and Boys Town National Research Hospital, administer standardized specialist certification systems for signed language interpreters.

Later in the paper, we will argue for an intentional development of specialization within the interpreting profession that will ameliorate and expand the current de facto and de jure processes. First, however, we offer two constructs—decision latitude and professional autonomy—that can be used to assess the degree to which specialization efforts to date have indeed advanced knowledge and expertise within the discipline.

3.5 Decision latitude and professional autonomy

The literature on professional autonomy emphasizes the responsibility of professions to regulate their specialties as a means of recognizing and promoting advanced knowledge and skills and of ensuring orderly development of the field (Cesna & Mosier, 2005; Lewis, 1989; MacDonald, 2002; Sandstrom, 2007; Seago, 2006). One measure of a profession's progress in fulfilling this responsibility is an assessment of the degree of professional autonomy that is afforded and exercised by its practitioners. Professional autonomy does not mean that specialist practitioners can make decisions arbitrarily, based on personal inclinations. Rather, the decision latitude that accompanies professional autonomy is the result of a profession's deep conceptualization of professional acts and professional practices and the agreement of practitioners to act in a manner that is similar to one another (Kasher, 2005). It is adherence to these acts and practices that make professional autonomy possible and assure the public that agreed upon and enforced standards exist within a profession. The emphasis on collective agreement

regarding the acts and practices of specialists highlights the relational nature of autonomy. *Relational autonomy* is the recognition that "autonomy is socially constructed; that is, the capacity and opportunity for autonomous action is dependent upon our particular social relationships and power structures in which professional practice is embedded. It requires that one's professional relationships with particular individuals and institutions be constituted in such a way as to give one genuine opportunities for informed and transparent decision-making" (MacDonald, 2002, p. 197). Put another way, the emphasis of relational autonomy is the "social embeddedness of the self" within social organizations (Westlund, 2009). Within this framework, effective autonomy is achieved when the social conditions are in place that support it. The social conditions allow the practitioner (and the public) to have confidence in the decision latitude afforded to the participants, so that they can each take charge of their choices.

Understanding the conditions that foster informed and transparent decision making by interpreters, as well as those conditions that restrict it, involves recognition of both *internal* elements (i.e., how the interpreter perceives his/her role and work; how each participant views himself/herself), and *external* elements (i.e., how the work of interpreters is perceived by others). An examination of the internal and external elements gives insight into how specialization in signed language interpreting in the US has evolved to date.

Consider, for example, the nature of decision latitude as applied by signed language interpreters in certain areas of specialization. The increase in the demand for interpreters in the U.S. public school setting occurred at such a rapid and dramatic rate that the profession was not prepared to respond. Lacking a formal certification process, having few training options, and with little or no induction into the field, these early public school interpreters were left to carve out their individual patterns of practice without an organized collective to verify and shape their decisions (Hurwitz, 1991; Stuckless, Avery & Hurwitz, 1989). Further, the concerns that exist within the Deaf community and with educators of deaf children around the implications of interpreted versus direct instruction have delayed the interpreting profession's acceptance of public school interpreting practitioners (Marschark, 2007). As a result, many public school interpreters continue to work outside the norms of the profession and have yet to satisfy the standards set by the profession; thus they are relatively uninformed about the profession at large (Witter-Merithew & Johnson, 2004). As de facto specialists, the work of educational interpreters has often been based on individual decisions and/or driven by the external directives from school policies. Their standing within the public school system is also lacking—state standards are set relatively low in terms of academic and certification requirements, and interpreting positions are often part of the para-professional versus professional salary schema (Schick & Williams, 2004; Schick, Williams, & Bolster, 2000). Therefore, applying and sustaining professional autonomy is difficult, making their standing as specialists tenuous at best.

Interpreting in the video relay industry offers yet another example. Significant limitations to decision latitude are imposed on interpreter practitioners working in this industry, both by the government and corporate policies and procedures. As an example, the common practice of interpreters asking consumers about the goal and details of the call prior to making the call (which also serves as an opportunity to become familiar with signing style), is discouraged or prohibited by the industry, as it infringes on billable minute standards and definitions associated with functional equivalency. This leaves interpreters feeling deeply conflicted because they are expected to behave in a manner that is inconsistent with the norms and values of the profession. When the social conditions in which the work of interpreters occurs do not support the application of appropriate degrees of decision latitude, the professional autonomy of practitioners is greatly compromised. When interpreters are unable to forge the relational impact necessary to sustain decision latitude, the entire system of communication access suffers. "If our factual understanding of the preconditions for autonomous action is flawed, so will be our ethical reaction to that autonomy" (MacDonald, 2002).

Yet, there is at least one area of specialization where effective decision latitude and autonomous practice is evidenced. For decades, legal interpreters have experienced a high degree of professional standing when working within the legal system. The pay for the work of interpreters in this setting is set at a premium rate and often involves working in collaborated teams. Interpreters in this setting are viewed as officers of the court and therefore have the accompanying duty of serving the interests of the court (Mathers, 2007). In this role, the interpreter can request to approach the bench to discuss issues impacting the interpretation, request correction to the court record, request assistance of other practitioners and/or experts, and a variety of other practices that constitute patterns of practice unique to legal interpreters (Stewart, Witter-Merithew & Cobb, 2009). The court considers these practitioners experts, expecting them to possess a thorough knowledge of the legal system and its

procedures, terminology, and discourse, along with a high degree of competence and reliability in their interpreting performance. Further, the court expects legal interpreters to report to the court any barriers to effective performance and consumer understanding and to collaborate with the court in resolving issues that may arise. These practices provide interpreters with the social conditions that promote a high degree of decision latitude and relational autonomy.

How has this level of professional standing been achieved? Certainly, in part, it is because the legal profession at large is one of the esteemed professions of society. As well, the interpreting field at large confers a high degree of respect and professional standing to interpreters working in the legal setting. This is evidenced by the fact that in the United States the first specialty certification developed and implemented by the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf was the Special Certificate: Legal, first awarded in 1974 [Registered Interpreters for the Deaf (RID), 2007]. Specialized training programs preparing interpreters to work in the legal setting have existed for decades and now include graduate level programs. Further, there exists an extensive amount of scholarship in both spoken and signed language interpreting related to interpreting in the legal setting. This scholarship evidences the ongoing efforts to deeply conceptualize the work of interpreters in this setting. As a result, interpreters who are specialists in this setting are granted the social capacity to make informed decisions based on discretion derived from standards of professional practice evolved over time and in collaboration with the legal system. Practitioners can use decision latitude to justify and explain professional acts based on a conception of the whole profession and its ethical principles—because the social conditions that support this process are in place within the legal system.

4. In support of the intentional development of specialization

These variations in the professional standing and ability to exercise decision latitude by interpreting practitioners engaged in specialized practice gives insight into why a framework for the intentional development of specialization is needed. Access to public educational institutions, communication access, and legal counsel are all critical human rights for individuals in a democratic society. Each is embedded in highly structured institutions and is protected by legislative mandates in the United States. In the area of education and law, specialty professions (requiring higher education and credentialing) exist. However, within the profession of signed language interpreting, the development of specialization has varied significantly in these areas.

Professions are marked by the degree of autonomy in decision making that reflect society's trust that practitioners share common values and practices. Signed language interpreters in the U.S. share common values and practices in a variety of formal and informal ways, inter alia, the RID Code of Professional Conduct and Standard Practices papers, conference presentations, listserv discussions, and blogs. However, the question of how these mechanisms lead to codification and standardization of profession autonomy is still largely unexplored.

While legal, video relay, and public school interpreting continue to develop professional maturity by standardizing patterns of practice, the process has been less orderly for public school interpreters and those working in the video relay industry. The interpreting profession was simply unprepared for the impact of legislative action that mandated the provision of educational interpreters and video relay interpreters across the country. And, there was no conceptual framework upon which to rely when attempting to address the need once the demand was present.

To insure the successful development of specializations within signed language interpreting, both external and internal issues should be addressed proactively, rather than in reaction to legislative mandates. Establishing an intentional stance for the education and credentialing of specialists will lead to more effective and trustworthy practices within the field. Professional autonomy can be limited and weakened over time by the relationship of one profession to another, the influence of other social institutions, or by the internal disposition or insularity of the profession itself (Sandstrom, 2007). Therefore, it is essential that—while considering market demand and available supply—specializations in interpreting be developed intentionally and with an understanding of the factors and processes that shape its development and maintain its viability. To that end, a conceptual framework has been conceived that is based on current literature and practices in the field of interpreting as well as interpreter education.

5. A conceptual framework: Assumptions and core values

This conceptual framework is based on the work of a group of experts in interpreting and interpreter education from the United States and Canada who were brought together by the Mid-America Regional Interpreter Education Center (MARIE), one of the six members of the National Consortium of Interpreter Education Centers. This expert group reviewed literature, both internal and external to the profession, that addressed specialization and professional autonomy. From this process, the experts identified assumptions and guiding principles that currently exist relating to specialization and the preparation of specialists that can provide useful direction in the development of a conceptual framework.[i]

In research, conceptual frameworks are sometimes offered as an outline to possible courses of action or to present a preferred approach to an idea or thought (Botha, 1989). In this case, the elements of a set of assumptions and guiding principles provide a map that can serve as a foundation for further delineation of a conceptual framework. The elements addressed in this article represent the essential considerations associated with an orderly development of specialization in signed language interpreting.

The assumptions and core values underscore the training and certification patterns that have been successfully applied in the United States, as illustrated in the development of specialization in legal interpreting. Specifically, the assumptions recognize that practitioners make the individual decision to narrow their practice after establishing themselves, first, as generalist practitioners. Then, through a process of additional training and some type of supervised induction, they engage in specialized practice for some portion of their work (Cheetham & Chivers, 2001). It is typical that once a person is recognized as having specialist competence, their fees for service increase, and they begin following the patterns of practice that are unique to the area of specialization involved. These patterns of practice may involve unique staffing patterns, such as interpreting in teams during complex matters to enhance accuracy. When this process is translated into a series of assumptions about specialization, the values that underscore the assumptions become apparent.

Assumption 1: Efforts to recognize and regulate specialties must be sensitive and responsive to the unique relationship between interpreters and the Deaf community.

Core Values: The goal in creating an intentional and orderly development of specialization is to protect the interests of consumers and society from potential harm perpetuated through incompetent practice by unqualified individuals. This goal must be carefully balanced against fiscal constraints associated with the cost of interpreting services and the potential of creating a system of service provision that further alienates interpreters from the communities they serve and/or diminishes the availability of competent generalist interpreters. To this end, specialists must remain deeply rooted in the Deaf community and engage in on-going interaction within the community for the purpose of remaining attuned to changing needs and expectations and accessing the counsel of deaf individuals as part of their ongoing practice (Cokely, 2005; Witter-Merithew & Johnson, 2004, 2005).

Assumption 2: Recognizing the globalization of interpreting, specialists are judicious in recommending staffing patterns and setting fees for service in accordance with established ethical standards.

Core Values: The goal of specialization is to advance knowledge and competence in the interest of the public good. Recognizing that a significant amount of the cost for interpreting services is paid by public tax dollars and that the unique and often ideal staffing patterns sometimes associated with specialty practice (e.g., multiple member teams) can be costly and therefore potentially prohibitive, specialists will consistently seek ways to creatively collaborate with other professionals and entities who are responsible for paying for interpreting services in order to ensure reasonable fees for appropriate services. The goal is balanced with the right of qualified practitioners to secure fair and equitable earnings (Witter-Merithew, 2010).

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Assumption 3: Recognition as a specialist is a voluntary decision for practitioner.

    Core Values: A conceptual framework is not intended to prevent certified and licensed practitioners from practicing in areas for which they are appropriately qualified by education, training, experience, and study. The public uses information about specialist recognition as a way to identify qualified practitioners. As well, colleagues use this recognition for referral, collaboration, and collegial purposes.

Assumption 4: Generalist competence is a prerequisite foundation for specialization.

    Core Values: Mastery of generalist competencies, such as the Entry-to-Practice Competencies (Witter-Merithew & Johnson, 2005), provides the requisite foundation in interpreting competence necessary to support working in a range of low-risk situations not requiring specialist competence. Low-risk situations are those involving routine and predictable activities and allowing sufficient time for the parties involved to negotiate meaning and understanding as necessary. In the U.S., generalist interpreters are defined by professional certification, continuing education, adherence to a Code of Professional Conduct (CPC), and the minimum of a bachelor's degree in interpreting or a related field. Alternative pathways for recognizing academic equivalence may be necessary when considering the readiness of long-established generalists who seek specialist designation.

Assumption 5: Established generalist practice is a prerequisite for specialization

    Core Values: The Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf recommends a period of 3–5 years of well-rounded, practical work experience as a generalist before specialist certification examination. This is considered a sufficient amount of tenure to gain experience in a broad range of low-risk settings with a variety of consumers and to develop a foundation of judgment upon which to recognize unique and complex demands requiring specialized competence.

Assumption 6: A period of supervised work experience is an essential aspect of induction into specialty practice.

    Core Values: A period of practice that is supervised by an experienced and recognized specialist is a long-standing element of specialization in the professions. This period allows for engagement in regular observation-supervision discussion that deepens critical thinking and reflection, enhancing the discretion necessary to work autonomously in specialized settings (Cesna & Mosier, 2005; Cheetham & Chivers, 2001; Lewis, 1989; MacDonald, 2002). It also fosters collegial collaboration, which is central to effective and sustained specialized practice. It is recommended that this period of supervision continue for at least one year after completion of training and entry into specialized practice.

Assumption 7: Specialists regularly engage in collegial exchange and conversation with colleagues and peers for the purpose of ongoing performance reflection and evaluation.

    Core Values: Reflective practice, peer review, self-awareness, and assessment are the cornerstone to advancing ethical practice (Stewart & Witter-Merithew, 2006). Mature practitioners actively seek feedback and interaction with peers and colleagues so their practices and actions are informed by the wisdom, insight, and experiences of mature professionals. These practices are considered routine to specialists (Cesna & Mosier, 2005; Cheetham & Chivers, 2001; Lewis, 1989; MacDonald, 2002).

Assumption 8: Specialists sometimes work in teams—of which one member is often deaf.

  Core Values: In some situations, due to a combination of factors that increase the complexity of an interpreted interaction, there is a need for more than one interpreter. Deaf Interpreters (DIs) are central and essential to the effectiveness of many interpreting teams, particularly when the linguistic and cultural demands require the competence of a native ASL user or specialist in the use of visual-gestural patterns of communication (RID, 2007). The distinctive patterns of practice utilized by DIs often exceed the competence of non-deaf interpreters— even those with specialized knowledge and skills. The formative experiences of deaf interpreters in using language with a wide range of deaf and non-deaf individuals, over long periods of time, and across many settings, provide them with unique formative experiences and a foundation of competence to contribute to interpreting teams (Stewart, Witter-Merithew & Cobb, 2009). It should be noted that there may be appropriate alternatives to a team of interpreters in some situations. For example, in the area of healthcare in Minnesota, deaf individuals are gaining training and becoming Certified Healthcare Workers. In this capacity, these deaf individuals can engage in advocacy and education, while working as members of the healthcare system. Typically, these individuals also possess distinctive patterns of communication that enable them to communicate directly with a wide range of deaf and non-deaf individuals to ensure interpreted information is being received and understood. When such non-interpreting specialists are available, it can result in a more effective and cost efficient approach to addressing unique communication demands.

Assumption 9: Specialists contribute to the body of knowledge about the specialty via research, writing, presenting, and participating in professional organization work.

  Core Values: Specialists are mature practitioners with advanced education, significant formative experiences, and established careers (Kasher, 2005). They are leaders in the practice of interpreting. They are committed to the advancement of the profession of interpreting and their specialization, and to this end will engage in scholarly contribution and leadership to the field. This includes, but is not limited to, participation in communities of inquiry where scholarly reflection on patterns of practice occurs, participation in field-based research, presentation of scholarly work at peer attended conferences, publication of scholarly work in peer reviewed journals, and service to the field through leadership roles on committees and boards of practitioner and/or educator organizations (Witter-Merithew & Johnson, 2004, 2005).

  We suggest that the assumptions can be applied to signed language interpreting in other countries and, with alterations, to spoken language interpreting communities that are seeking to address specialization in the profession. With these assumptions serving as the foundation, the next section will detail a series of guiding principles to apply in creating systems for training and regulating specialist practitioners.

6. A conceptual framework: Guiding principles for education programs

The second part of the framework is a set of guiding principles. The four discussed herein specifically relate to interpreter education and are offered as a starting point for teaching faculty to consider their own belief systems about specialization. These are drawn from a set of fourteen principles that evolved from the expert work group.[ii] Although every effort has been made to anticipate all of the key elements associated with a framework for training, likely elements are missing and will benefit from contribution of a wider audience of stakeholders.

Principle 1: Specialty preparation extends beyond foundational preparation and the competency required of all generalist interpreter practitioners. It includes functional and specialty-distinctive competencies unique to the specialty (Council of Credentialing Organizations in Professional Psychology, 2008). The scholarship

and formative experiences of experts that undergirds the specialty includes theoretical foundations and descriptions of specialty-relevant patterns of practice, and is based on effective and best practices.

Commentary: The specialty knowledge base must be distinguishable from that which characterizes the technical and professional foundations of generalist interpreting (Cesna & Mosier, 2005; Cheetham & Chivers, 2001; Lewis, 1989). Although there may be overlap between recognized specialties in some elements of practice—such as the ability of specialists to engage in research and provide leadership and consultation—each specialty demonstrates distinct patterns of practice.

Principle 2: The functional and specialty-distinctive competencies of any specialty are acquired in an organized and integrated program (Kasher, 2005). They are built upon and integrated with the foundational competencies of generalist practitioners and are acquired through graduate level certificate or degree programs.

Commentary: Competencies for specialization should be acquired as an integrated set of knowledge, skills, attitudes, attributes, and values (Cesna & Mosier, 2005; Cheetham & Chivers, 2001; Lewis, 1989). An appropriate scope and sequence of learning should be defined at a graduate level and implementation managed within a formal academic structure. Currency in the specialization can be maintained through continuing education programs, but mastery of the functional and specialty-distinctive competencies should be acquired through an integrated, competency-based approach to teaching and learning—pre-service versus in-service (Council of Credentialing Organizations in Professional Psychology, 2008).

Principle 3: Education and training requirements are reviewed periodically to assess their continuing effectiveness and relevance.

Commentary: New knowledge, scholarship, and technology continue to advance the specialized practice of interpreters. A systematic process of review is essential for maintaining the most current and cutting-edge curriculum and standards of practice. The review process should be defined by a review board/administrative structure that is established for each specialty.

Principle 4: Professional education and training programs that prepare specialist interpreter practitioners seek accreditation for the benefit of their students and quality assurance for the public.

Commentary: Relevant accrediting bodies, like the Commission on Collegiate Interpreter Education (CCIE) in the United States, support the development and implementation of accreditation of interpreter education programs and can be encouraged to establish appropriate standards that pertain to the preparation of specialist practitioners.

The assumptions and principles that help to form the conceptual framework are not intended to constrain further evolution of approaches to specialization. We assert that they provide a starting point for guiding deliberation about such a process and can lead to productive changes in the curricula.

7. Conclusion

Specialization in signed language interpreting exists, and it is likely to continue, given the ways that technology, trends, and consumer demands are surfacing. The path towards specialization can manifest in distinct ways. The status of legal interpreting benefited from the early creation of education programs, a specific credentialing

system, collaboration with the legal system regarding role and responsibility, and a deep conceptualization of ethical and legal standards impacting the work of interpreters. As a result, patterns of practice emerged in which roles are clearly defined and must interface with one another for success in moving cases forward (Stewart, Witter-Merithew & Cobb, 2009). On the other hand, the proliferation of deaf students integrated in the public school system, as mandated by federal legislation, found the interpreting profession unprepared to meet the demand with trained and certified interpreters. Further, once the demand existed, the field of interpreting failed to promulgate a national standard for interpreters in this setting, leading to a lack of standardization and a significant number of individuals working outside the norms of the profession (Witter-Merithew & Johnson, 2004). These divergent histories present sound rationale for the establishment of structured mechanisms to guide the intentional development of specializations within signed language interpreting. Interpreting can benefit from an examination of other professions who have undergone the development of specializations.

Further, we can examine the current status of interpreting specialization within the framework of de facto and de jure processes and the influence of legislative and market trends, as well as consumer and practitioner demand. The role of decision latitude and professional autonomy can provide a path to understanding how patterns of practice have developed within certain interpreting settings (e.g., public school, legal) and functions (e.g., video interpreting). We suggest that by understanding the assumptions and core principles underlying interpreting practice, interpreter educators can establish curricula that will support the development of specialization in a way that prepares practitioners to more effectively apply decision latitude in light of the social conditions that support or limit professional autonomy. Finally, we suggest that without an orderly development of specialization and the ability of specialists to capture the unique patterns of practice that define specialization in interpreting, it is difficult—perhaps impossible—to protect the interest of consumers who rely on the services of interpreters with specialized competence.

8. References

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Endnotes

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[ii] The complete report from the expert group is contained within *Conceptualizing a Framework for Specialization in ASL-English Interpreting: A Report of Project Findings and Recommendations* by Anna Witter-Merithew. The document may be accessed on the National Consortium of Interpreter Education Centers (NCIEC) website at http://www.nciec.org/projects/legal.html.