

Myth Busters: Working in K-12 is Isolating

By: Taylor Gjesdahl

Is working in the K-12 setting as an interpreter isolating?

As in all matters of interpreting, the best answer to this question would be, it depends. But, because I despise that response, I will share my personal experience in K-12 interpreting to hopefully shed some light on the situation. I need to preface this by saying that this experience is personal, it is my own, it is unique, and cannot be standardized across all settings and situations.

Often when you think about a “traditional” K-12 interpreting experience you may think of one student and one interpreter together all day. The two split up during the lunch hour where the interpreter may eat alone in the staff lounge or politely engage in small talk about the happenings at the school. THIS WAS NOT MY EXPERIENCE.

I was placed at a school with four consumers who are all the same age, I had a team interpreter, two D/HH teachers in the building, and I had previously attended the school I was working at. Isolation was not an option. However, I can see how K-12 interpreting could become an isolating experience. I developed a few suggestions on how to prevent isolation in the workplace.

Say Hi: It seems like a silly suggestion but often it feels easier to just enter a situation, do your job, and leave. That may be an effective approach in other settings but as an educational interpreter you are part of an educational team. Occasionally, your job role will require more than just facilitating communication and it would be beneficial for other staff members to know who you are. Secondly, some staff may feel taken aback when they learn another staff member will be in their classroom everyday. Introducing yourself is a nice icebreaker and can start the team building process early. After all, you can't do your job without them and vice versa.

Explain Your Work: Talk with your D/HH teacher and your school administration about setting up a short period of time during staff workshop week to briefly explain your role, how you will help them, and how they can help you. Trust me, there is nothing worse than the first time a video about the American Revolution is played and the teacher was never briefed on the importance of captioned materials so you are stuck interpreting George Washington's battle plans for 3 days.

Get Involved: My most cherished memories from the last year were when I had the opportunity to get involved in extra-curricular activities at school. I interpreted both a fall sport and a spring sport. I was able to meet more staff, see a different side of my consumers, and exercise a totally different set of interpreter skills. Honestly, I think the students mostly enjoyed watching me run from flying tennis balls and getting stuck in a pre-game huddle. Yes, my role is to be an interpreter, and set my professional boundaries, but it was also a time to be a silent cheerleader and allow my students to show me something about themselves that doesn't often shine through in a traditional classroom setting. It made me more personable to both students and staff and I was often being acknowledged in the hallway by hearing students with a “Hey Ms. G!”, and my students thought it was pretty awesome that I was seen as an actual person as opposed to the weird lady that follows them around all day.

Leave the Nest: One of the job perks about working in K-12 is having summer break. I encourage everyone to use this time to be active in the professional interpreting community. Attend a workshop that you didn't have time for during the school year, find a network of other educational interpreters and start a book club, visit the MRID webpage and find a committee that could benefit from your experience and knowledge and go for it! The feeling of isolation is not just prevalent in the educational field, there are people in the medical, legal, and freelance field and share the same feelings. We can diminish this feeling in our professional community as a whole by connecting across our respective professional fields and reaching out to each other.

Expand Your Horizons: In case you didn't know, there are MANY specialties within the interpreting field. Cruises, sporting events, college lectures, hospital visits, and business meetings galore! Find an area of interest that matches your skill set and give it a try. Not only will this add extra money to your bank account, expanded vocabulary to your ELK, but it opens a whole new world of interpreter colleagues to connect with.

While I know that not everyone will have the same experience in an educational setting as I did, based on my first year as an educational interpreter I would answer the above question by saying that it doesn't have to be isolating. There may be plenty in the interpreting field that is out of our control, there are still some things that are and I believe that you have the power to shape your experience to be the best it can be for you!



Taylor graduated from the ITP program at Saint Paul College in 2015. Since graduating she has been working as an educational interpreter in a K-12 setting. In addition to her interpreting work she is also a co-leader of MERGE and a member of the EIC committee. In her free time she enjoys cuddling her dog and studying for the NIC exam of course!