



NAETISL

**National Association of Educational
Translators and Interpreters
of Spoken Languages**

Diverse Voices Interview Series: Interview with Ryan Cox

Questions created by Romina Espinosa



Q: Who is Ryan Cox?

I am someone who is learning as I go. I want to make a difference in kids' lives. One of my first jobs out of high school was as a substitute paraprofessional in a classroom. I came back around to it after traveling and doing lots of different jobs. I became a school bus driver. I did that for a while and that's where my love for working with special ed kids came about.

Q: I remember when I came to interpret at your school that you spoke Spanish. How did you learn Spanish?!

I always had an interest and a drive for it. My first exposure was through neighbors and friends. I remember taking a school program for kids that tested high. I started taking Spanish classes in 6th or 7th grade. Then I continued to take Spanish classes in high school. But, it wasn't until I took an immersion class in Cuernavaca, Mexico for a summer that I put it all together! All that vocabulary and slang...I was really able to put all that conversational Spanish together, conjugate verbs, and feel like I could follow a conversation! I was determined to be fluent in Spanish and I had a lot of support! Yeah, then I continued taking classes in college, and then met my wife who is from Guadalajara, Mexico. My Spanish got even better and better. I think I learned more through traveling, through everyday experiences except and through my immersion course in Mexico. That was a great experience!

Q: Can you tell us about your experience in your profession?

At the beginning of the year we get our caseload of students based on looking at different grade levels. Here at Anza Elementary School, we have kids who have mild to moderate needs for reading, writing and math. As their case manager and teacher, I spend a lot of time reaching out to the families, setting up meetings, informing them of the goals that we are working on and progress reports. In order to be able to communicate in an effective way, I am really lucky here at Anza that we have staff who speak Pashto, Arabic, and Chaldean. There have been some needs for Spanish speaking families.

You know, this is only my third year teacher. After being a bus driver, I was a school custodian for many years. At times I would get asked, "Can you jump on the phone? Can you help translate this?" There were times when they wouldn't have an interpreter so I would sit and help at an IEP meeting. I was really aware of my own limitations. I felt like, "Ok, I could communicate effectively with people." In the academic sense we do a lot of testing and assessments. We talk to parents about different disabilities that students might have and how to support them. So, having a professional interpreter that can help us is a way to give families justice. We are sitting at meetings for an hour or more, it's a lot of information to digest! We also have translators who help us translate documents, too.

We always want to ask the parent if they feel more comfortable having an interpreter. The district provides some interpreters, but we only have a couple and we have 26-27 sites in the district. I put the request on the calendar, but a lot of times they are booked! So I reach out to language agencies.





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Q: What is it that makes you passionate about being a special education teacher?

I love when the kids make it to the next reading level, when they are excited to come to groups, ask me for a specific activity or when I hear they want to learn about things! I like to talk about nature, the outdoors, travel and surfing! You know, I bring my own passion into it because part of it is trying to discover their passions and what their possible careers or hobbies might be.

When I reflect and self-assess on how I am doing as a third year teacher...Okay, there is a lot of curriculum and the sequence of what gets taught and what order and for which grade...I have to know a lot about what's going on, what they are learning in those classes at their grade levels. But, then at the same time we are working on individualized goals. That's what the IEP is, it's an individualized educational plan for those students to fill those gaps and catch up to educational level if at all possible. So, in order to get there, we have to make it fun and interesting. We teach in dynamic ways, teach through games, through role play, through group work. There are a lot of different techniques that we try to do to get kids to their reading level or learn their times tables. If you have a teacher who is fun and excited about it, and happy to see them then they get excited and look forward to learning. That's the exciting part!

Q: Can you share a moment when you felt valued, appreciated in your profession?

After having a really long or intense IEP meeting because some of them are. You know, parents want the best for their kids, they are trusting us but at the same time they ask, "is my child getting everything they could?" Maybe parents are just receiving the news of a diagnostic for their child. And, at the end of that when a parent tells you, "Thank you! We love the school. We trust this team." When your principal tells you, "Wow! You handled that really well! I really liked your insight there!" That feels huge! And sometimes the students even come to their own meetings and listen in because it's after school and the kids sit in there. Just to see that the kid can smile and make the most of hanging out at a meeting. They know it's about them and they're listening a little bit. Yeah, it's very rewarding! There's a lot of times when you're just working with the same students throughout the years. Over the course of the years you really get to know the families! I have students who are hard of hearing, need hearing aids and you know, families reach out to us and inform us about what's going on at home, with their health and going to the doctor. You become part of their lives!

Q: What are some of the challenges that you can share with us today?

It feels like there are never enough people to help us. We make due with the people we have. There are some cases where the kids are doing very well, but they might need a little bit more support. It's one thing to get kids set up in groups and depending on what support they need, they just need that guidance in the classroom. It's hard for the district to hire new people for us. I would love to assess all the kids to see what type of devices they might need. For example, a scribe or speech to text. There are also different things that can help kids keep up in their classroom that takes time and money to assess. So, this is the challenging part.





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Q: How is it that you see your role as making a positive impact?

Well, when you see a child you've known for a couple of years and you see that growth and maturity. We have to help with their behavior as well. When they're able to come into the room and they are excited about reading now versus before they avoided it and sat there. We had to force them to read out loud and we don't want to embarrass them or discourage them, but we want to be able to hear how they are reading. It's just amazing to hear how well they're doing, the stories they're writing, the books they're able to read, that they are reading on their own.

Q: Can you tell me what language access means to you?

I think every human being has a right to be understood and express themselves. And it doesn't matter where you come from or what your native language may be. But, when we meet and talk about their children and their futures, it's important that parents get an understanding completely of the information we are giving to them and vice versa. We have to understand their concerns, their hopes and aspirations for their child. What kind of goals would they like to see their child meet? The only way to accomplish that is to have a lingua franca, a common connection where we can understand each other. You know, time is limited, we don't all speak each other's languages, but through services like interpretation it takes the pressure off.

Q: Can you tell me what language justice means to you?

I feel privileged to have been around many diverse cultures and languages and have the opportunity to travel. Maybe my nation doesn't think the same, but in my home it is spoken. My children go to a bilingual school. I wish I could speak more than just Spanish! I am always trying to learn phrases from my students here. I see it as an opportunity to grow even more. It's amazing when you see a group of students coming from four or five different countries and they are going to work together and figure out how to make themselves understood. They find the way to do it! They might not have common words between them, but that desire... I believe very much so that this country was built on immigrants and people from all over the world. They only add to our strength and diversity and broaden our possibilities. So, why not embrace that? I don't want children to lose their native languages or families. I want them to hold on to that culture because that's their background knowledge and enrichment. They bring who they are as people. So if they can hold onto that and master English, that's what we [teachers] are here for.

Q: If you could change something, what is one thing you would change about the profession so that it's better for the next generation of professionals in your field?

It takes a lot of time, a lot of patience. There is not enough time in a day for all the inservices and additional trainings. That's a really hard question to answer. I think more funding, more understanding for what teachers do... How integral teachers are to every part of the kid's lives. This is the place where kids come to eat, some come to rest. There are students that don't have the best home life or don't know where they're going to be sleeping each night. And you see that! It comes out in their behaviors.





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You know anxiety is something that's coming in. They know summer vacation is coming up and school is their sanctuary. I would like to see more support and understanding, emotional support or anything that can help the whole child here at school.

Q: What advice would you give to professionals working with diverse communities in school settings? For example, someone coming to California from another part of the country that is homogeneous.

Leave your preconceived notions out the door. Come with an open mind! Look at the beauty in all the different languages and cultures and backgrounds that people have. Get to know your students, look into their cultures. Read books about their country. Do a read aloud with a story maybe about a person from that country. Look into your school district and see if you can do a home visit. If it's safe to do that, go with a colleague and get to know the families. Families love that! They invite you in. You build that trust, you build that connection. Anything you can do to open your mind and meet people where they're at, and understand where they are coming from. It's going to help students feel that they're cared for and they're comfortable learning and pushing themselves to try new things.

Q: Any additional thoughts that you would like to share about your work?

It's not always easy, but it's very rewarding. I tell people all the time that sometimes I lose track of what time it is. I'm like, "What's next?" There's always something more new to do, another student to check on. Each day is a new challenge, but it's exciting and it's an opportunity to be part of young people's lives. Even before I was a special education teacher, I had students coming back when I was a custodian cleaning up the schools telling me the impact I made in their lives. The fact that they came back and remembered my name, that's really cool! I think parents entrust us to do this.

Education is about students. It's not about me or trying to tell kids that they have to be a certain way. It's about opening up doors and experiencing opportunities for them to find who they are so they can follow their own paths and be successful, be confident enough to speak up, speak in front of people, share who they are. You know, I tell kids all the different jobs I've had in life. I didn't know I wanted to be a teacher until I was around kids long enough that I thought, "I can do more. I want to be more involved in these kids's lives." So I tell kids, "try as many different things." That's for sure one way to know what you don't like and keep learning.





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Interviewee



Ryan Cox is an Education Specialist, working with elementary age students, many of whom are English Language Learners which means that English is their second language. He was born and raised in San Diego and has always been interested in experiencing different cultures and learning the Spanish language. He grew up surfing and enjoying the outdoors camping, hiking, and fishing. Early on he had the opportunity to travel throughout Mexico, Hawaii and even go to Europe as a teenager. His love of working with children began when he worked as a summer camp counselor in Hawaii. He received a bachelor of arts degree in Cultural Anthropology at San Diego State University and received a Paralegal certificate from the University of San Diego. After working first as a school bus driver and school custodian, he returned to San Diego State University to get his Special Education Teaching Credential to work with students with Mild to Moderate Disabilities. He loves working with the community and helping students discover and experience what their passion is and he hopes to instill in them a love of learning.

Interviewer



Romina Espinosa (Lima, Peru) is a professional Spanish<>English interpreter and small business owner based in San Diego, California. She has been providing language services since 2017. Romina holds a BA in International Studies from University of California San Diego, a minor in Spanish Literature completed at the University of Granada, Spain and an MA in Gender and Diversity Studies from University of Oviedo, Spain. She furthered her interdisciplinary studies by completing a Certificate in Translation and Interpretation (Spanish/English) from University of California San Diego Extension. Ms. Espinosa is recognized in the United States as a Certified Healthcare Interpreter-Spanish through the Certification Commission for Healthcare Interpreters (CCHI). Her areas of expertise include conference, community, education, immigration, medical, and mental health interpreting. When Romina is not interpreting, she spends her time running outdoors (she is a five-time international marathon runner), expressing her creativity through acrylic painting and poetry, and being present for her loved ones.

