



Legal Seat – Helsinki, Finland

WORLD FEDERATION OF THE DEAF

An International Non-Governmental Organisation in official liaison with ECOSOC, UNESCO, ILO, WHO and the Council of Europe. WFD was established in Rome in 1951.

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WFD Position Paper on Inclusive Education

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1. KEY POINTS

- As a key stakeholder in the drafting and implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)¹, the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) advocates for inclusive education for deaf learners that is of high quality education with direct instruction in sign language, access to deaf teachers and deaf peers who use sign language, and a bilingual curriculum that includes the study of sign language.
- The WFD is concerned that a growing number of countries around the world are implementing a model of inclusive education that is not truly inclusive for deaf learners and does not meet deaf learners' needs.
- The WFD is concerned about how the Article 24 of the CRPD, which deals with education, has been interpreted by states parties and by the 2016 General Comment No. 4 that was issued by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD Committee)².
- The WFD is specifically troubled by the current trend in following an operational definition of inclusion for deaf learners as placement in mainstream schools, as these are environments that often do not provide adequate access to and direct instruction in sign language, including instruction from deaf teachers. For many deaf learners, this type of placement does not support inclusion. This operational definition of inclusion as placement in mainstream schools is contrary to the legislative history of Article 24, where WFD advocated for a broad definition of inclusion where bilingual education for deaf learners is a form of inclusive education.
- The WFD recognizes that inclusive education for deaf learners can take the form of various models and occur in a range of settings.

2. INTRODUCTION

Around the world, deaf children face struggles in education due to inappropriate learning environments. Since the CRPD entered into force in 2006, there has been a continuing trend of placing deaf children in mainstream schools, often without access to or direct instruction in sign language, without instruction by deaf teachers, and without access to bilingual education. In several contexts, this trend has been accompanied by closure of deaf schools that has had a significant impact on the achievement of inclusion for deaf children.

¹ <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html>

² CRPD/C/GC/4.

For example, in a recent study of 39 European Union countries, it was found that in 68% of the countries surveyed, over 50% of deaf and hard of hearing pupils attend mainstream schools.³ In the USA and Canada, the prevalence of mainstreaming ranges from approximately 80-90%.⁴ In these contexts, many deaf schools have closed. A growing number of studies have noted a pronounced discrepancy in educational performance between deaf learners and their peers⁵ as well as a failure by mainstream settings to meet the language learning needs of deaf students.⁶

The WFD has played a central role in drafting the CRPD with special attention paid to Article 24, which mentions sign language in several articles. As part of this process, the WFD took the position that bilingual education for deaf learners is a form of education within an inclusive education system.⁷ In successive drafts of the CRPD, an operational definition took hold where inclusion was defined as placement in mainstream schools. However, throughout this process, a “sensory exception” for deaf, blind, and deafblind learners enjoyed general support in terms of recognising the unique needs of these groups of learners.⁸ This exception and understanding of deaf learners’ needs is also in keeping with previous and current UN instruments, such as the 1994 *Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education* which noted “Owing to the particular communication needs of deaf and deaf/blind persons, their education may be more suitably provided in special schools or special classes and units in mainstream schools” (par. 21)⁹. This perspective was also reflected in the UN Standard Rules on the Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities.¹⁰ More recently, the 2018 CRPD General Comment on Equality and Non-discrimination (par. 65) states, “*To ensure equality and non-discrimination for deaf children in educational settings, they must be provided with sign language learning environments with deaf peers and deaf adult role models.*”¹¹

Deaf learners have a unique need for instruction in sign language, opportunities to study sign language and deaf culture, and opportunities to participate with their peers in congregated settings that allow for linguistic and cultural development. Due to shared ontologies and experiences, deaf learners also have a need for instruction from deaf teachers who can advocate for their students and transmit social and cultural capital.¹² These rights are outlined in Article 24(3[c]) of the CRPD, which states: ‘*the education of persons, and in particular children, who are blind, deaf, or deafblind, is delivered in the most appropriate languages and modes and means of communication for the individual, and in environments which maximize academic and social development.*’ This type of setting appears to be deemed “segregated” in

³ Krausneker, V., Becker, C., Audeoud, M., and D. Tarcsiová. 2017b. “Legal Foundations Supporting the Use of Sign Languages in Schools in Europe.” In *UNCRPD Implementation in Europe: A Deaf Perspective. Article 24: Education*, edited by K. Reuter, 68-84. Brussels, Belgium: European Union of the Deaf.

⁴ Antia, S. 2014, June 24. “Making Inclusion Happen: Factors Leading to Success.” Paper presented at Symposium on Sign Bilingualism and Deaf Education, Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shatin, Hong Kong; Ontario Ministry of Education. (2018). *Provincial and demonstration schools in Ontario: Moving forward*. Retrieved April 9, 2018 from <http://www2.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/parents/robarts.html>.

⁵ Weale, S. 2018, January 8. “Educational Support for Deaf Children in England ‘In Complete Disarray.’” *The Guardian*. Accessed February 13, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/jan/08/educational-support-for-deaf-children-in-england-in-complete-disarray>; Weale, S. 2016, January 4. “UK’s Oldest Deaf School Closes amid Concerns Children Are Being Let Down.” *The Guardian*. Accessed January 8, 2016. <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/jan/04/uks-oldest-deaf-school-closes-concerns-children-being-let-down>.

⁶ Holmström, I. and K. Schönström. 2017. “Resources for Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Students in Mainstream Schools in Sweden: A Survey.” *Deafness and Education International*, 19(1), 29-39. doi: [10.1080/14643154.2017.1292670](https://doi.org/10.1080/14643154.2017.1292670)

⁷ Kauppinen, L. and M. Jokinen. 2014. “Deaf culture and linguistic rights.” In *Human rights and disability advocacy* edited by M. Sabatello and M. Schulze, 131-145. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

⁸ Murray, J., De Meulder, M., and D. le Maire. 2018. “An Education in Sign Language as a Human Right? An Analysis of the Legislative History and on-going Interpretation of Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).” *Human Rights Quarterly*, 40(1), 37-60. doi: [10.1353/hrq.2018.000](https://doi.org/10.1353/hrq.2018.000)

⁹ http://www.unesco.org/education/pdf/SALAMA_E.PDF

¹⁰ Murray et al.

¹¹ CRPD/C/GC/6.

¹² Kusters, M. 2017. “Intergenerational Responsibility in Deaf Pedagogies.” In *Innovations in Deaf Studies: The Role of Deaf Scholars* edited by A. Kusters, M. De Meulder, and D. O’Brien, 241-262. New York: Oxford University Press.

the General Comment,¹³ which works to the detriment of many deaf learners' self-actualisation and educational achievement through access to direct instruction in sign language and to bilingual education, which are most often not effectively supported by mainstream settings. Moreover, Article 24(4) calls for States Parties to "take appropriate measures to employ teachers, including teachers with disabilities, who are qualified in sign language." This means deaf learners' right to have deaf teachers is supported by the CRPD. Although the General Comment no. 4 calls for mainstream schools to provide supports for all learners, there remains a failure to recognise the value of deaf schools and other signing spaces for deaf learners' opportunities to acquire sign language proficiency and literacy, and to reach their potential in terms of educational achievement and cultural identity development. In contrast, the 2018 General Comment on Equality and Non-discrimination (par. 65) specifically mandates provision of sign language environments with deaf teachers.

3. DEFINING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

The WFD recognises that scholars take a range of positions with regard to a definition for inclusion. However, a definition that focuses only on placement does not meet the criteria for inclusion. Inclusion is the learner's right to participate and reach their potential in public institutions such as schools.¹⁴ In other words, inclusion is an experience, not a placement.¹⁵ With regard to deaf learners, educators must pay special attention to the need to support language and social development as outlined in Article 24(3) and (4), and must have awareness of sign language milestones and assessments.¹⁶ Moreover, educators must pay special attention to deaf learners' socio-emotional development needs that are often met by opportunities to participate with a peer group and teachers with a shared sign language and cultural identity.

Article 24 (4) concerns the employment of teachers qualified in sign language. The WFD calls for further teacher education opportunities for deaf adults, who frequently face barriers to tertiary education¹⁷ but who are crucial for enacting bilingual education programs,¹⁸ and for teacher education that supports high levels of sign language proficiency for all teachers. At a minimum, teachers should have near-native levels of proficiency in a sign language as described by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages for sign languages,¹⁹ the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages Proficiency Guidelines, and/or other standard national or regional guidelines used for language assessment in education.²⁰

¹³ Par. 11 of the General Comment No. 4 (2016) on the Right to Inclusive Education states, "Segregation occurs when the education of students with disabilities is provided in separate environments designed or used to respond to a particular impairment or to various impairments, in isolation from students without disabilities."

¹⁴ Snoddon, K. and K. Underwood. 2014. "Toward a social relational model of Deaf childhood." *Disability & Society*, 29(4), 530-542. doi: 10.1080/09687599.2013.823081

¹⁵ Jones, M. 2011. "Inclusion, Social Inclusion, and Participation." In *Critical Perspectives on Human Rights and Disability Law*, edited by M.H. Rioux, L.A. Basser, and M. Jones, 57-82. Leiden, The Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers.

¹⁶ Simms, L., Baker, S. and M.D. Clark. 2013. "The Standardized Visual Communication and Sign Language Checklist for Signing Children." *Sign Language Studies*, 14(1), 101-124. doi: 10.1353/sls.2013.0029

¹⁷ Danielsson, L. and L. Leeson. 2017. "Accessibility of Teacher Training and Higher Education From a Deaf Perspective." In *UNCRPD Implementation in Europe: A Deaf Perspective. Article 24: Education*, edited by K. Reuter, 139-153. Brussels, Belgium: European Union of the Deaf.

¹⁸ Mahshie, S.N. (1995). *Educating Deaf children bilingually: With insights and applications from Sweden and Denmark*. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press.

¹⁹ European Centre for Modern Languages of the Council of Europe. 2018. Sign Languages and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Descriptors and Approaches to Assessment. Accessed February 13, 2018. <https://www.ecml.at/ECML-Programme/Programme2012-2015/ProSign/tabid/1752/Default.aspx>; Reuter, K. 2017. "UNCRPD Article 34 and the UNCRPD Committee's General Comment No 4 on the Right to Inclusive Education: An EUD Perspective." In *UNCRPD Implementation in Europe: A Deaf Perspective. Article 24: Education*, edited by K. Reuter, 49-67. Brussels, Belgium: European Union of the Deaf.

²⁰ American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. 2012. *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines 2012*. Accessed February 13, 2018. <https://www.actfl.org/publications/guidelines-and-manuals/actfl-proficiency-guidelines-2012>

Article 9 of the CRPD specifies the right to a sign language interpreter to access public services. The WFD recognises that the provision of sign language interpreters is an important part of a range of educational options and supports that should be available to deaf learners, but stresses that an interpreter does not replace direct instruction in sign language or a fully accessible sign language environment.²¹ Provision of an interpreter is not bilingual education but rather education in a majority spoken language, mediated by an interpreter.²²

4. EFFECTIVE MODELS OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

In order to achieve inclusive education for deaf learners, it is critical that all deaf children, regardless of where they attend school, are able to access high-quality instruction in a sign language. This means that accommodations such as interpreters and note takers must be accompanied by opportunities to study with other deaf students and with teachers, including deaf teachers, who are themselves fluent in sign language, by the provision of bilingual learning materials, and by opportunities to study sign language as a school subject.²³ A central issue for achieving quality inclusive education for deaf learners is the provision of teacher education that supports deaf candidates' achievement of teaching credentials, teachers' proficiency in a sign language, knowledge and development of quality bilingual curricula and pedagogy, and awareness of the need for high expectations for deaf learners as bilingual learners. There is also a need for schools to support parent and deaf community engagement.

As described by several recent international studies,²⁴ effective models of inclusive education for deaf learners include quality deaf schools which employ a high proportion of signing deaf teachers and administrators. Deaf schools can also provide supports and resources to deaf learners enrolled in mainstream schools, including access to a signing peer group and to deaf teachers.²⁵ For deaf children living in rural areas, the role of deaf schools in supporting mainstream school environments may be especially crucial, as they can support distance learning and opportunities to attend a deaf school on a part-time basis.²⁶

Inclusive education for deaf learners can also include co-enrolment models where a team of deaf and hearing teachers provide simultaneous instruction in sign language and spoken language to classrooms of deaf and hearing students.²⁷ A co-enrolment model may also involve the formation of a bilingual program for deaf learners in separate classrooms within a mainstream school.²⁸ In these settings, it is important for non-deaf learners to also receive instruction in sign language.

²¹ Russell, D. and B. Winston. 2014. "Tapping Into the Interpreting Process: Using Participant Reports to Inform the Interpreting Process in Educational Settings." *Translation & Interpreting*, 6(1), 102-127. doi: ti.106201.2014.a07

²² De Meulder, M., Krausneker, V., Turner, G., and J. Bosco Conoma. (in press). "Sign Language Communities." In *Handbook of Minority Languages and Communities*, edited by G. Hogan-Brun and B. O'Rourke. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

²³ Kauppinen and Jokinen; Snoddon and Underwood.

²⁴ Fevlado. 2015. *Vlaanderen is Gelijke Kansen*. Accessed February 13, 2018. <http://www.fevlado.be/fevlado-vzw/nieuws-prikbord/actualiteit/?d=600>

²⁵ Krausneker, V., Becker, C., Audeoud, M., and D. Tarciová. 2017. "Bimodal Bilingual School Practice in Europe." In *UNCRPD Implementation in Europe: A Deaf Perspective. Article 24: Education*, edited by K. Reuter, 154-172. Brussels, Belgium: European Union of the Deaf.

²⁶ Krausneker et al. 2017. "Bimodal Bilingual School Practice in Europe."

²⁷ Krausneker et al. 2017. "Bimodal Bilingual School Practice in Europe."

²⁸ Lamothe, C. 2017. "Association 2LPE CO: Bilingual Enrolment for Immersion and Collective Inclusion." In *UNCRPD Implementation in Europe: A Deaf Perspective. Article 24: Education*, edited by K. Reuter, 214-227. Brussels, Belgium: European Union of the Deaf; Tang, G., Lam, S. and K.C. Yiu. 2014. "Language Development of Deaf Children in a Sign Bilingual and Co-enrollment Environment." In *Bilingualism and Bilingual Deaf Education* edited by M. Marschark, G. Tang, and H. Knoors, 313-341. New York: Oxford University Press.

²⁹ Fevlado; Krausneker et al. 2017. "Bimodal Bilingual School Practice in Europe."

In each of these models, it is essential that deaf teachers enjoy an equal role with hearing teachers and that all teachers have near-native sign language fluency. Moreover, deaf learners should have access to a sign language curriculum in addition to the mainstream curriculum, and receive diplomas and access to further educational opportunities that are equal to those available to mainstream students.²⁹ Deaf learners should also have access to a spoken language curriculum that takes a deaf perspective in learning a spoken language; i.e., as primarily a written language and with sign language as a basis for learning.

5. CONCLUSION

Human rights instruments that focus on disability rights often take an individualised approach that runs counter to the aims of deaf communities who desire recognition of sign languages and provision of bilingual education for deaf children. The CRPD, with its explicit recognition of deaf learners' linguistic and cultural identity needs, has offered an exception to this approach. However, recent interpretations of Article 24 of the CRPD in regard to education suggest that a stronger focus is needed in terms of the recognition and achievement of the human right to sign language in education.

The WFD urges states parties and related bodies to take special care with interpreting the principles of inclusive education as they relate to deaf learners and to work to ensure that sign languages and the linguistic identity of deaf communities are promoted in inclusive education systems.

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About the World Federation of the Deaf

The World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) is an international non-governmental organisation representing and promoting approximately 70 million deaf people's human rights worldwide. The WFD is a federation of deaf organisations from 135 nations; its mission is to promote the human rights of deaf people and full, quality and equal access to all spheres of life, including self-determination, sign language, education, employment and community life. WFD has a consultative status in the United Nations and is a founding member of International Disability Alliance (IDA). (www.wfdeaf.org) Email: info@wfd.fi

²⁹ Reuter.