



Introduction

Deaf children must have access to quality education and care in sign language from early childhood (before starting school). Access to education in sign language must be supported at all levels of schooling. Today, deaf children and young people are too often denied their right to education or face many barriers to education. According to the WFD, two percent (2 %) of the world's deaf population has access to education in sign language. This is because of a lack of teachers fluent in local sign language and lack of awareness by parents that their children can and have a right to go to school. A further barrier – since most deaf children are born to hearing parents who lack sign language skills – is a lack of comprehensive policy and programming support for sign language learning by families with deaf children.

Being denied the human right to education in sign language has long-term consequences. If deaf children do not develop the ability to communicate, they are unable to learn and get jobs and are isolated within their communities. Thus, deaf children have a right to a quality education, like all other children, in a language and environment that maximises their potential.

Education is important for supporting deaf children, youth, and adult's language learning (sign languages and written languages), learning about the world and different school subjects, and preparation for further education and employment. Education for deaf learners will support better teacher preparation as more deaf people can become teachers of deaf children.

UN CRPD and the SDGs

For you as a deaf advocacy or national association of the deaf to be able to advocate for the rights of deaf children to education, you need to know and should be able to refer to international conventions and commitments to education. There are policies and conventions that protect deaf children's right to quality education. Deaf organisations can lobby for legislation that promotes sign languages as languages of instruction for deaf learners and policies that support hiring deaf teachers. Education is an important right recognised throughout the core human rights treaties including the CRPD, as it enables many other rights to be achieved.

For instance, Article 24(1) of the UN CRPD states that an inclusive education system enables all learners to reach their fullest potential. Article 24(2) states that persons with disabilities should not be excluded from education, and educational environments should maximise social and academic development. Article 24(3) states that learning of sign language should be facilitated and the linguistic identity of the deaf community should be promoted. Article 24(4) states teachers with disabilities who are qualified in sign language should be employed. Article 24(5) states persons with disabilities must have access to university education, adult education, vocational training with reasonable accommodation provided (i.e., sign language interpreters).



In addition, SDG 4 Quality Education states: “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.” Unlike the Millennium Development Goals, the SDGs mention people with disabilities, and this means that people with disabilities must be included and lead in all areas of development. As governments and international communities agree to achieve the 17 Sustainable Development Goals by the year 2030, this can be used to advocate for improvements to deaf education practices in your country.

However, much confusion has arisen around the definition of ‘inclusive’ education in Article 24. Some have argued that it means all children, including deaf children, must be in ‘mainstream’ education settings and that deaf schools are ‘segregated’, and should be closed. It is important to emphasise the need for deaf children to have a choice to be educated with peers and in sign language environments. Thus, articles 24(3) and 24(4) stress the unique needs of these groups of children. Article 24 makes clear that no mainstream school may exclude a deaf child from attending if this is his or her choice. However, Article 24 should not be misread as mandating mainstream schools as the only modality of education for all deaf children.

Advocacy talking points examples

- Statistics or general info about the number and education access for deaf children in your country (percentages and ratios, 75% or $\frac{3}{4}$ children)
- How policies protect deaf children’s rights to education
- Any education and disability rights laws/policies
- Nation’s commitments to SDGs and CRPD
- One example of what barriers to education exist – be as specific as possible (weakness from SWOT analysis)
- Describe opportunities and recommendations for enhancing deaf education
- Emphasise how investing in deaf education benefits the country’s national and international goals

Stages of Education

When advocating for education and stages of education, you should refer to research and have arguments so you can convince the decision-makers of your country to understand why education in sign language is important. Those are for example language foundations, language deprivation, and importance of access to higher education. It is critical that decision-making about deaf children’s educational choices is based on evidence and robust research.

Language foundations

The most important years for language development are between ages 0-5 years old (approximately). It is essential for deaf babies and young children to receive as much exposure to early visual language (sign language) as soon as possible (Baker, 2011). The child can learn multiple languages at one time, and this will only benefit the child’s language



skills. Multiple languages (sign language + written and/or spoken language) will support brain development and will not cause any developmental delays or prevent the child from using a sign language and/or speech to communicate as they grow older.

Language deprivation

Ages 0 – 5 years are critical years for brain development and language learning. A lack of full language and access to communication at this young age can lead to what is called 'Language Deprivation'. Language deprivation means the child has not had the opportunity to learn full rich language at an early age. This has been found to cause linguistic and cognitive delays which may appear as low academic performance, challenges with attention, and social-emotional dysregulation.

All children use language to communicate their wants, needs and ideas. Without access to full language at an early age, deaf children may not equally learn to express and receive information at the same rate as their peers. Full access to language supports children to build social emotional skills to form friendships and think critically in school.

Literacy in primary grades

Deaf learners' literacy development is supported through bilingual teaching strategies. These teaching methods include visual processing strategies (strategies for recognising words in their print form) and a top-down reading model (focusing on the level of the sentence and text, not individual letters or sounds). Literacy instruction can also make use of chaining to link signs to printed words and fingerspelled words. Critical pedagogy can help deaf learners to analyse and develop strategies for dealing with discrimination, prejudice, and oppression.

Higher Education (university and vocational training)

Access to higher education is essential to enable deaf learners to reach their fullest potential. Deaf learners need access to qualified sign language interpreters and opportunities for direct instruction from deaf individuals to support university studies and vocational training. Access to higher education creates opportunities for deaf adults to receive the training and credentials to enhance deaf education programs, create policy, and advocate for the needs of deaf people in their country. Vocational training creates opportunities for deaf individuals to earn sustainable livelihoods, innovate and contribute to their local communities.

Education types and settings

Deaf children and youth may attend a deaf school or a mainstream school (with or without sign language and other forms of support). Deaf schools may or may not employ deaf teachers or non-deaf teachers who are proficient in sign language. All schools with deaf learners should ensure deaf children and youth receive an education in sign language. This can be done by employing deaf and hearing teachers who are fluent in sign language and trained in bilingual education approaches, and by creating partnerships with deaf communities and deaf schools.



Deaf students should have the right to choose the education type and setting of that matches their wishes and needs. As a national association of the deaf representing and advocating for the rights of deaf people, you should stress the importance of placing a deaf student in an environment that is supportive and where sign language is used. Teachers of deaf children need to be proficient in sign language and training needs to be provided for that purpose.

Bilingual / Bimodal Education

Bilingual education for deaf learners involves sign language as the language of instruction in addition to written languages, which are taught through the medium of sign language. Bilingual education includes the study of sign language as a school subject and requires the development of sign language teaching materials, such as videos. Bilingual education includes learning about deaf cultures and history and developing a positive deaf identity. It is important to keep in mind that bilingual or multilingual education does not itself guarantee educational outcomes – it must be quality education in sign language. You may also see the term, “Bilingual Bimodal” education, which specifies that education programs plan for and use two languages (sign language and written language, e.g. Ethiopian Sign Language and Amharic) and two modalities (visual and auditory).

Inclusive Education

Inclusive education for deaf learners refers to education systems and opportunities that support their academic and social development. This means education in the medium of sign language with teachers and peers who are fluent in sign language. Inclusive education is a growing priority for governments and international organisations and donors. Inclusive education for deaf learners must include the full use of sign language as the language of instruction and for deaf children to interact and learn with deaf peers and from deaf teachers fluent in sign language.

However, the concept of inclusion is often misinterpreted among governments and schools. Placing a deaf pupil in a mainstream environment is not sufficient without taking various factors into account. On the other hand, education in deaf schools needs to be significantly improved. The CRPD is sometimes understood wrongly because some deaf children are placed in a mainstream school where (s)he is the only deaf person and has access only through sign language interpretation. In this way, the deaf person cannot communicate naturally and directly with people surrounding her or him in sign language. Thus, academic, and social development of deaf person is not maximised. Instead, the deaf person should be placed in a school that has other deaf students and where teachers are very fluent in sign language.

Education in mainstream setting is not always a positive experience for deaf students. They face barriers particularly if teachers do not know sign language well. Deaf children have higher risk of becoming abused if other people in schools do not sign proficiently. Schools in which the majority of students are hearing may present barriers to deaf students, in that they lack the supportive and inclusive signing environments that deaf students require to thrive and to acquire a strong sense of linguistic and cultural identity.



For guidance on inclusive education see:

[WFD Position Paper on Inclusive Education](#)

[International Disability Alliance](#)

Institutional approaches

Institutional approaches refer to instructors / teachers, training/qualifications/ SL skills, visual learning environment, and education materials and technology. Those must be taken account when planning educational programs for the deaf.

Training of teachers and instructors

According to the WFD, one of the barriers to the effective education of deaf children include a lack of trained teachers (including deaf teachers as role models), and a lack of teachers who are fluent in sign language. You as a national association of the deaf should pay a specific attention to teacher trainings and qualifications. To provide an education in sign language, deaf teachers are needed. Schools and universities can work with deaf organisations and deaf communities to support training of deaf people to become teachers and teaching sign language to hearing teachers. Training of deaf and hearing teachers needs to be ongoing.

Numerous countries have established teacher training courses related to deaf education or special education/inclusive education with a track for teachers of the deaf. University and teacher training programs are great partners for enhancing deaf education systems and deaf associations play a key role in teaching sign language and developing courses that fit the local context of deaf communities and education resources.

Some examples of university initiatives include:

- Philippines, [De La Salle-College of Saint Benilde School of Deaf Education and Applied Studies](#)
- Uganda, Kyambogo University – Department of Special Needs Studies, Deaf Education Section
- Ethiopia, Addis Ababa University, [Bachelor's Degree in Ethiopian Sign Language and Deaf Culture](#)

Visual Learning environment

A visually stimulating environment is important for deaf education programs. Consider ways to design a classroom that presents information and supports learning through pictures, charts, and visual cues. Demonstrate new concepts using drama / theatre, objects and local resources, and take time to teach new lessons in different formats (act-it-out, draw on the board, small discussion groups, written notes, etc.)



Universal Design for Learning

“Universal design for learning (UDL) is a framework to improve and optimize teaching and learning for all people based on scientific insights into how humans learn” (CAST, 2020). UDL grew from the architectural concept of Universal Design (UD), how buildings are designed so that all people can access the space equally.

For example: Ramps for wheelchair users to access a building also benefit families using baby strollers, people with pull carts, older relatives, and more.

In practice, UDL means that teachers use multiple and flexible approaches to teaching so that all children, including children with learning differences or disabilities, can learn and engage in the classroom equally. UDL is commonly referenced with discussions of inclusive education practices and initiatives. See the resources below to learn more about UDL and how it is referenced in relation to the CRPD and in literacy skill development.

Education materials and technology

Use of technology in education for deaf learners can include video technology (sign language videos, video cameras, applications such as Skype and WhatsApp) to support teaching of sign language texts and literature, access to communication and information, and creation of sign language literature resources. In addition to technology tools for teaching and learning, there are a variety of technologies that can be used by individual students depending on their communication choices, family decisions, and resources available.

This category may also be called, “Assistive Technology”, examples include:

- Notetaker
- Captions on videos
- Speech-to-Text applications
- Zoom/Skype, DVDs, video recordings
- Listening devices (e.g. hearing aids, cochlear implant, microphone)

Examples/further reading:

- [eKitabu Kenya](#)
- [Deaf Child Worldwide Ugandan SL](#)
- [VL2 Gallaudet Storybooks](#)

Example: Moroccan Sign Language Assistive Technology for Reading Improvement of Children who are Deaf/Hard of Hearing project

Project funded by USAID, World Vision, and the Australian Government as part of the “All Children Reading: A Grand Challenge for Development” from 2015 – 2018.



Aim: Improve the reading skills of students who are deaf or hard of hearing in Morocco by providing teachers with an assistive technology: Moroccan Sign Language (MSL) dictionary software with images, video clips and lessons. Teachers could develop their own materials using this software.

Stakeholders: The project provided training to teachers, school directors, parents, deaf associations in Morocco. Established a steering committee to discuss and make decisions about deaf education in Morocco.

Key outcomes:

- Administrators and teachers learned new teaching methods and assistive technology
 - Policy makers considered adjustments to deaf education strategies
- Stakeholders gained positive attitudes and expectations about the capacities of deaf learners in Morocco. (Soudi and Vinopol, 2019)

Education Planning

Guidance from "[The Why and How of an ASL/English Bimodal Bilingual Program](#)":

School-wide planning

Define and share a common goal and approach to using sign language and written language
Involve multiple stakeholders: teachers, families, staff, etc.
Led by one individual responsible to oversee plans

Individualized planning

- Discuss with the child and family about the child's language and communication skills
- Create a document for each child that describes their language and communication skills and preferences

Teacher implementation planning

- Coordinated between teachers and families
- Outline language use in each activity of the day
- Include recommendations for language use at home