

*Day of General Discussion on the Right to Education of Persons with Disabilities  
sponsored by: Fundación Universia and UNICEF*

*Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)*

*Room XVII, Palais des Nations, Geneva 15 April 2015*

*12.00-13.00: Interactive panel on Non-exclusion on the basis of disability, reasonable accommodation and access to inclusive education systems*

Speech by Markku Jokinen, WFD Honorary President, EUD President

Distinguished members of Committee, thank you for inviting me as one of the panelists in this important event. I am here today representing both the World Federation of the Deaf and European Union of the Deaf. In these capacities, I would like to address the needs of deaf students with regards to non-exclusion, reasonable accommodation, and accessibility within inclusive education system.

The topic of today's panel discussion, namely "non-exclusion on the basis of disability", made me think about non-exclusion on the basis of sign language, linguistic and cultural identity of deaf students, deaf culture and deaf community as mentioned in articles 24§3 and 30§4 of the CRPD. The CRPD requires us to respect deaf people's linguistic and cultural rights. However, the principle of non-exclusion on the basis of disability (i.e. hearing impairment) alone does not guarantee quality and inclusive education to the deaf students.

The CRPD recognises deaf people both as a group of persons with disabilities AND a linguistic and cultural group. Thus, attempt to disregard deaf people as a linguistic and cultural group reduces their opportunity to achieve both full and equal participation in education and full human rights. This must be noted when considering criteria for inclusive education, educational options and developing educational programs and materials and legislation as well.

The principle of respecting students' linguistic and cultural rights and their backgrounds is not unique to the deaf community. It also applies to students with other disabilities belonging to different ethnic, linguistic and cultural minorities, as stated in Article 30§4, "Persons with disabilities shall be entitled, on an equal basis with others, to recognition and support of their specific cultural and linguistic identity".

Most multilingual countries, whereby there exist more than one official (spoken) languages, have already in place bi- or multilingual educational arrangements. As such, the concept of inclusive education applies not only to students with disabilities but all other students as well. There are some examples of how hearing children of deaf adults, whose first language is sign language, is taught together with students who are deaf as well as students who would like to learn and use sign language in their school years.

Multilingual-multicultural education is an urgent response to the linguistic needs of students from culturally diverse background. To sustain cultural identities and heritage of these students, it is equally important to engage diverse teachers, including teachers with disabilities such as deaf teachers, teachers with indigenous background and of other intersecting identities, who can serve as role models.

Such educational considerations constitute only part of what inclusive education system entails. It is also imperative to create learning environments that maximise both the academic and social developments. Thus, the key concept of inclusive education is essentially defined as a barrier free learning environment, in which the unique needs of all learners are taken into consideration. In practice, for deaf students, it would be provision of a sign language learning environment, as part of bilingual education.

There are already existing bilingual and bicultural programs aimed for deaf students in different countries. In the case of inclusive education, some good examples of bilingual teaching programs that combines both deaf and hard of hearing students with hearing students are the French speaking community of Belgium (Communauté scolaire Sainte-Marie Namur) and Hong Kong (Kowloon Bay St. John the Baptist Catholic Primary School). In these schools, each bilingual class consists of a group of (= more than a few) deaf students in addition to hearing students, and they are taught by two – signing and speaking – teachers in parallel. Such settings enable the learning environment to become bilingually equal in signed and spoken languages.

Some bilingual programs work within or with a public school where deaf students study school subjects that demand high-level academic skills in sign language in their classes and some other schools subjects with other students through sign language interpreters. Basic skills of sign language are also taught to all students in these schools.

Quality bilingual education requires employing teachers, who are deaf and/or are qualified in sign language. Not only do trained deaf teachers serve as important role models, they also strengthen linguistic and cultural identities of deaf students, making them feel the sense of belonging to an important part of human diversity. More importantly, trained deaf teachers serve as language models equipped with high-level sign language skills that enable them to directly communicate with, and ensure full participation of deaf students.

There is one study that investigates interaction outcomes of two groups of signing students with Cochlear Implants (CI). One group uses sign language to interact while the other group uses only spoken language. Results showed that the signing CI group was able to develop and expand the group discussion by creating new ideas and themes, taking turns, and linking one idea to another. The spoken CI group was found to involve interaction that do not connect, link or expand the discussion of others.

Traditionally, deaf students have been categorised as students in special education. This perception still persists despite the fact that organisations of deaf people all around the world have advocated for bilingual and bicultural education. I would like to stress that from the beginning, the WFD has neither demanded special or segregated education nor regard bilingual and bicultural education as special education.

During the negotiations of the Ad Hoc Committee for the Convention, there were many discussions about special education because representatives of World Blind Union (WBU), World Federation of the Deafblind (WFDB) and World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) advocated for education within their respective groups of blind, deaf-blind, and deaf students based on needs of their students. It was assumed by representatives of other groups of disabilities and governments that WFD demanded special education, but this was not the case. Rather, during the negotiations, WFD clearly advocated for the idea of bilingual and bicultural deaf education to be included in the different draft texts of the convention for articles relating to education

Inclusion is likely to be effective and obtainable if all of the following components are factored in for each student: accessibility, universal design, non-discriminatory practices, meeting students' need, reasonable accommodation, and individual support. It is often mistakenly assumed that provision of either reasonable accommodation or individual support alone would mean inclusive education. It

is important to note that the application of these factors vary between groups of persons with disabilities.

It is unfortunate that several countries have taken action based on the governments' loose interpretation of inclusion. As a result, deaf students are placed in schools near their homes with no consideration or allocation of resources for the planning and implementing of sign language learning environment. Moreover, according to a recent WFD survey about the deaf education situation in 46 countries, out of those who have ratified the CRPD, only a few states parties have actually taken steps to make changes and adapt their education system in accordance to Article 24. Consequently, most deaf communities do not have access to either an education in sign language or a sign language learning environment.

Linguistic and cultural accessibility covers the following aspects:

- All communication is accessible
- The learning process and teaching are both culture- and language-sensitive
- The curriculum includes elements of deaf community, deaf culture and sign language with aims to nurture the linguistic identity and development of the deaf community (Article 24 3(b)), as mentioned in the CRPD
- The learning environment is visually and tactually accessible
- The learning materials are culture- and language-sensitive

In a bilingual education approach, the national sign language is used as a medium of instruction and is also taught as a mother tongue subject. Simultaneously, the written language of the country is taught as a second language. This approach ensures accessible communication, facilitation of the learning process, and access to learning materials. In practice, states would need to provide, through systematic teacher education programs, an adequate number of teachers who have rich or are preferably native-level competencies in sign language with ample knowledge about deaf culture. Effective implementation of linguistically and culturally sensitive curricula, learning materials, and accessible schools often require legislative support. Thus, it is encouraged that stakeholders in education legally adopt bilingual education as well as ensure that there are desired effects in practice.

Current learning environments that are designed for non-disabled students are causing barriers that hinder full participation of deaf students. Therefore, reasonable accommodation is necessary. For instance, deaf students studying with hearing peers would require presence of educational sign language interpretation service. This provision would ensure two-way communication between the deaf student, hearing teacher, and other students during the learning process. However, this service is not needed if the learning environment is linguistically and culturally accessible to the deaf student. Therefore, it is important to note that sign language interpreting service alone does not constitute a true learning environment fully accessible. Deaf students should be able to communicate directly with school staff and peers in sign language without relying on a sign language interpreter.

## Conclusion

Attempt to disregard deaf people as a linguistic and cultural group reduces their opportunity to achieve both full and equal participation in education and full human rights. When developing policy in deaf education, national associations of the deaf must be consulted because as deaf leaders, they have first-hand expertise and knowledge on the linguistic and cultural needs of their deaf community. Thus, it is important to carefully consider their views and concerns. Resources must be allocated for the purpose of monitoring, reviewing and evaluating, in close consultation with the deaf community, the development of curricula that includes sign language and deaf culture

aspects, training sign language and deaf culture to teachers, adopting appropriate legislation to ensure the right of deaf students to receive education in national sign language.

Over the course of 30 years, there have been several development cooperation projects in the Global South run by Nordic associations of the deaf. The main activities of the cooperation projects include capacity building of organisations of the deaf, sign language dictionary work, sign language interpreter training, development of deaf education, and teaching sign language to families. These projects run in cooperation with governments in the Global South. Additionally, we need to ensure that governments and the relevant UN agencies are aware of such cooperation works and in turn reference them when designing and implementing inclusive education to deaf students. More importantly, development of such projects must be led by deaf people and their organisations.

Finally, inclusive education is much more than general education with accessibility, universal design, reasonable accommodation, and individual support. It is about respecting diversity based on deaf culture, and linguistic and cultural identity of deaf children. A true inclusive education is based on needs of these children and one that paves the trajectory that enables them to grow into individuals and citizens with full potential. Bilingual and bicultural education can be part of this genuinely inclusive education system.

Thank you.