

The World Federation of the Deaf's submission
Contribution: Curriculum, Pedagogy and Assessment at the Service of the Right to Education

Submitted to: Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

Mandate: Special Rapporteur on the right to education

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1. Introduction

The World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) is honoured to submit its input to the call for contributions issued by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to education for the forthcoming report to be presented at the Human Rights Council at the 62nd session of the Human Rights Council on ***curriculum, pedagogy and assessment at the service of the right to education***.

The World Federation of the Deaf is an international non-profit and non-governmental organisation and has a membership composed of national deaf associations from 138 countries. The WFD has a consultative status with the United Nations and is a founding member of the International Disability Alliance (IDA). The WFD promotes the human rights of deaf people in accordance with the principles and objectives of the United Nations Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and other Human Rights Treaties. As the representative body, the WFD strives to ensure that deaf people across the world, especially in the Global South, are equipped with the knowledge, tools, and strategies to advocate for, achieve, and defend their rights.

The present submission aims to contribute a deaf-led, rights-based perspective on curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, with particular attention to the central role of language access in the realisation of the right to education.

2. The right to education for deaf children and learners and their linguistic human rights

The realisation of deaf children's right to education is uniquely sensitive to the fulfilment of their language rights. Therefore, the right to education for deaf learners must be interpreted and implemented in light of the interconnected guarantees set out in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), particularly Articles 2, 9, 21 and 24. Article 2 recognises sign languages as languages in their own right, establishing the linguistic foundation necessary for the enjoyment of all other rights. Article 9 on accessibility and Article 21 on freedom of expression and access to information together require States to ensure access to education through national sign languages and other accessible modes of communication. National sign languages are sign languages that are part of the linguistic ecology of a community or region and are natural languages that

emerge through everyday use by communities of deaf people. Natural sign languages have their own vocabulary,



grammar, and social rules of use (Rowley et al., 2022). Article 24 further obliges States to deliver inclusive education systems that support the full development of deaf learners' linguistic identity, dignity and potential.

3. Barriers to equitable education for deaf learners

Without the full realisation of their right to language, deaf children cannot meaningfully realise their right to education, including access to government curricula, pedagogy, and equitable and holistic assessment. Education outcomes, participation, and well-being are inseparable from early, continuous, and unrestricted access to a fully accessible natural sign language from infancy throughout the lifespan.

International human rights law recognises education as a foundational right that must enable the full learning potential of every child, including deaf children. Deaf learners across the world face systemic barriers to education due to inaccessible and unsuitable curriculum design, pedagogy and assessment. Compounding these systemic barriers is a lack of early and sustained access to language beginning in early infancy, which places children at risk of language deprivation.

Language deprivation begins early, before formal education begins, when deaf infants do not have consistent access to language during the neurocritical period of language development and acquisition. This deprivation is not an inherent consequence of being deaf but the result of systemic policy and practice failures in early childhood that prioritise only spoken language approaches (Gale & Martin, 2026). The consequences of language deprivation are profound and long-lasting, with cascading effects across childhood developmental domains (Murray et al., 2019; 2020; WFD 2016, Glickman et al. 2018, WFD 2022), impacting negatively on educational and literacy outcomes and psychosocial well-being across the lifespan (Kushalnagar et al., 2020; WFD, 2022; Simms et al., 2013; Lillo-Martin & Henner., 2021; Clark et al., 2021). Studies also demonstrate that early exposure to a fully accessible visual language and to signing spaces where sign language is used as a main mode of communication supports language development and can lead to better educational outcomes later on and protects against the health risks faced by deaf individuals that stem from language deprivation (Haualand et al., 2024; Wilkinson & Morford, 2020).

The WFD has consistently warned that denying deaf children's access to sign language places them at critical risk for language deprivation and also has emphasised that this language denial constitutes violations of multiple interrelated human rights which are protected by the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. These include the right to education (Article 24), health and well-being (Article 25), and culture and participation (Article 30).

Critically, language deprivation and its ensuing impact on deaf children's education can be prevented. When deaf children are exposed to a natural sign language from birth, they acquire that language on a developmental timeline comparable to how hearing children acquire spoken language (Lillo-Martin & Henner et al., 2021). However, basing language acquisition models on hearing monolingual children

perpetuates a deficiency model based on deaf individuals' perceived impairment and masks crucial differences regarding the language ecologies of deaf learners, who live in multilingual communities



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with different signed, spoken, and written languages with different functions (Snoddon & Wilkinson, in press).

4. Assessment, pedagogy and curriculum strategies

Under international human rights law, curriculum, pedagogy and assessment constitute the substantive content of the right to education and its design to enable full development, dignity and participation in society. For deaf learners these components must be interpreted following the guarantees contained in the CRPD that establish that national sign languages are natural languages, require accessibility and freedom of expression and mandate inclusive education systems where sign language is the medium of instruction and deaf children experience belonging and participation with signing peers and adult signing models and educators.

Curriculum and pedagogy play a decisive role in either preventing or perpetuating language deprivation. Research consistently demonstrates that deaf children who are exposed early to a fully accessible sign language show typical language development, while those denied such access face long-term educational and psychosocial consequences (Simms et al., 2013; Lillo-Martin & Henner, 2021). Thus, deaf children's education must begin with early and consistent access to a national sign language. Primary and secondary school curricula, pedagogy and assessments must be delivered in the medium of national sign language by qualified educators.

In order to align assessment systems under the international human rights law, a holistic and formative approach is to assess sign language development every 6 months from birth to 5 years of age and beyond. This is essential for ensuring accountability from early intervention and educational systems and upholding language and education rights for young deaf children between birth and 5 years of age and beyond. Assessments that are currently being used in the USA and Canada include the Visual Communication and Sign Language Checklist (Simms et al, 2013).

For deaf learners experiencing language deprivation, as for other deaf learners, immersion in a classroom community of signing peers and educators will help to ensure access to pedagogy and curriculum, and to holistic and equitable assessments in the national sign language. Educators of deaf learners must themselves be assessed in terms of their sign language proficiency to ensure educators are qualified and supported to deliver pedagogy, curricula, and assessments in the medium of sign language. Importantly, for deaf learners the right to education includes the right to sign language socialisation spaces for social and emotional development and belonging (Haualand et al., 2024).

5. Conclusion

Education rights and language rights are inseparable for deaf children. Language deprivation and lack of access to education in the medium of sign language are the single most critical barriers to deaf children's realisation of their right to education. Accordingly, pedagogy, curriculum, and assessment must be delivered in the medium of sign language and designed with the goals of preventing, or

alleviating if necessary, language deprivation. In addition, providing and maintaining sign language socialisation spaces should be a central goal of education for deaf learners.



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6. Key recommendations

The World Federation of the Deaf respectfully recommends that State Parties:

- Ensure early, continuous and unrestricted access to national sign languages and signing spaces from infancy as a prerequisite for the realisation of the right to education.
- Develop and validate national sign language-based and bilingual assessment tools.
- Provide regular sign language assessments to track language development.
- Adopt bilingual and national sign language-rich pedagogical approaches across all levels of education.
- School curricula must be delivered in the national sign language by qualified educators who have been assessed in terms of their sign language proficiency.

If you have any questions or queries, do not hesitate to contact the WFD Executive Director, Mr John Moore, at john.moore@wfdeaf.org

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