



**WORLD FEDERATION  
OF THE DEAF**

## **Position Paper on the primacy of deaf people in the development and teaching of national sign languages**

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March 2023

### **Key points**

- Deaf people and deaf communities must stand at the forefront of all activities related to sign languages. In particular, deaf people must be given the opportunity to teach their own sign languages, their national sign languages.
- Deaf people's lived experiences as deaf people and as users of sign languages must be recognised as having primacy in the teaching of their national sign languages. This is particularly critical in situations where the field of sign language teaching is relatively new and still developing. Measures must be taken to develop training of sign language teaching skills and qualifications to build the capacity and capability of deaf people in this field.
- The languages and cultures of deaf communities are rich resources for societies. Deaf people are best able to model and share these resources with their societies, to those who want and need to learn sign languages, including deaf children, their families, and others.

### **Introduction**

The World Federation of the Deaf is concerned about reports from countries around the world highlighting where opportunities to teach national sign languages are being taken up by people who are not deaf, often excluding deaf people from teaching their own language. Teachers who are not themselves deaf are forming businesses which take on sign language teaching, and schools, colleges, and universities that offer sign language courses may hire hearing people to teach these courses. This has the effect of reducing teaching opportunities for deaf people and deaf communities. Furthermore, the quality of sign language teaching is impacted when deaf people do not teach their national sign languages. This has a negative impact on sign language interpreter training and the training of other individuals who teach and work with deaf children and adults.



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National sign languages develop naturally when deaf people come together. Deaf communities form around deaf people's shared experiences and unique sensory orientations to the world.<sup>1</sup> Along with a national sign language, deaf people exhibit and practice Deaf cultural behaviours and values. National sign languages and Deaf cultures originate from deaf people. Like all living languages, national sign languages develop and evolve with their deaf communities, and deaf people must be placed at the centre of all aspects of their national sign language development, including teaching. Deaf people who are native speakers of their national sign languages, or who use their national sign language as their first or preferred language, must be acknowledged and respected as role models and teachers of these languages and cultures.

The World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) is an international non-governmental organisation which promotes the human rights of deaf people worldwide. An important part of our work is an intersectional approach to the promotion of the human rights of deaf people to an education in their national sign language(s). This includes deaf people from cultural minorities, historically marginalised communities, DeafBlind people, deaf people with additional disabilities, such as deaf people with intellectual disabilities and deaf people who are LGBTQIA+. The need for natural language acquisition in sign language is crucial for all deaf people.

## **International legal framework**

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) is the first international legal framework that recognises national sign languages and entitles deaf people their fundamental human rights to national sign language. The Convention obliges governments to recognise the importance of national sign languages and promotes their use, via Articles 2, 9, 21, 24 and 30. Article 30 legally recognises and confers deaf people and deaf communities the status of cultural and linguistic minorities. It has been long recognised that deaf people are part of a unique intersectionality of belonging to both cultural and linguistic minorities and the disability movement. The WFD position paper on Situating Deaf Communities within "disability vs cultural and linguistic minority" constructs documents the uniqueness of this intersectionality that is not met by any other disability constituencies or minority groups.

The CRPD recognises the primacy of deaf people and their lived experience of national sign language and deaf culture in its article 4.3. This article obligates States Parties to closely consult with and actively engage persons with disabilities, including deaf people through their representative organisations - Organisations of Persons with Disabilities. For deaf communities this most often means their National Associations of the Deaf and Ordinary

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<sup>1</sup> Bauman, H-Dirksen L and Murray, Joseph. *Deaf Gain: Raising the Stakes for Human Diversity* University of Minnesota Press, 2014.



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Members of the WFD. National Associations of the Deaf are run by and for deaf people, recognising the primacy of the voices and lived experiences of deaf people.

The CRPD's article 4.3 requires States Parties to meaningfully engage with the Organizations of Persons with Disabilities, including National Associations of the Deaf, in any legislation, programme and policies concerning deaf people and national sign languages. Furthermore, States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure the recognition and promotion of the use of national sign languages in legislation and in public policies and programs. Promotion also covers support for national sign languages publications, training and education, research and general usage.

The implementation of the CRPD should see an increase in national sign language teaching and resources, and professional and academic research into national sign languages. Ensuring deaf people's primacy roles in all national sign languages work must include and support efforts to raise the capacity and capability of deaf people to lead the development of their national sign languages. Developing deaf people's capacity and capability to teach and lead their national sign languages development could include, for example, funding training workshops for deaf sign languages teaching experts from other countries, if they do not exist in that country.

States Parties have the responsibility and duty to ensure that deaf people have the opportunity to train and work as national sign languages teachers, and have sufficient resources for this work, through the establishment of appropriately resourced teacher training courses. These teaching and training must not be undertaken without the meaningful participation of appropriately qualified and/or experienced deaf people and their organisations.

Deaf people have a significant role in national sign languages teaching for both L1 and L2 learners, and teaching encompasses a wide variety of groups and pedagogies. Teaching can consist of instruction to new signers, such as baby-signing, community-based national sign languages courses, courses in educational settings from primary to postsecondary education, and professional development and interpreter training programmes. Of particular note is national sign languages teaching related to the education of deaf children and their family members and carers. Deaf role models are integral to the full acquisition of national sign languages by deaf children and their families, conveying not only language learning but also cultural and sensory ways of living and being as deaf people that are essential for natural language development and wellbeing in families. Research shows Deaf Mentor or family sign language instructor programs have a positive impact on deaf children's linguistic development and hearing families' language learning and positive attitudes towards their child's future.



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In these programs, deaf people visit families of hearing parents with deaf children.<sup>2</sup> Research also shows that specialised national sign languages classes for parents of deaf children that are taught by trained deaf teachers have superior outcomes for parents' national sign languages learning.<sup>3</sup>

National sign language teaching resources must directly benefit of deaf children and youth and their families, and deaf adults. In most cases, there will not be enough deaf national sign languages teachers to provide national sign languages classes for every school, college, or university that wishes to offer L2 national sign languages classes. Deaf children and youth and their families and deaf adults need deaf national sign languages teachers as language and cultural models. Therefore, national sign language teaching resources should be maintained, promoted and directed toward deaf children, youth, and adults and their families. In many contexts, it is far easier for a hearing school child or college or university student to access a national sign languages class than it is for a deaf child or a parent of a deaf child to access national sign languages services provided by deaf teachers.<sup>4</sup>

To bring an illustration, in Flanders Region of Belgium, it is advised that:

*'Deaf signers/sign language users with linguistics knowledge are better situated/equipped to answer the questions from (adult) students/learners - compared to people who have learned Flemish Sign Language as an L2. Moreover, they have a better feeling of the Deaf community and as such they can not only pass on the language but also the culture. Often, for the hearing learner, his/her SL teacher represents the first contact with a deaf person: and thanks to this first contact with a deaf teacher, it becomes easier for the hearing learner to get in contact with the deaf community, something that is necessary to be able to bring what is learned in class into practise.'*

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<sup>2</sup> Gale E. Collaborating With Deaf Adults in Early Intervention. *Young Exceptional Children*. July 2020. doi:10.1177/1096250620939510

<sup>3</sup> Oyserman, J. & de Geus, M. (2021). Implementing a New Design in Parent Sign Language Teaching: The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). In Snoddon, K. & Weber, J. (Ed.), *Critical perspectives on plurilingualism in deaf education*. Snoddon, K. (2015). Using the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages to teach sign language to parents of deaf children. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 71(3), 270-287. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3138/cmlr.2602>

<sup>4</sup> McKee, R. (2017). Assessing the Vitality of New Zealand Sign Language. *Sign Language Studies* 17(3), 322-362. doi:10.1353/sls.2017.0008; Snoddon, K. (2016). Whose ASL counts? Linguistic prescriptivism and challenges in the context of parent sign language curriculum development. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 21(8), 1004-1015. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2016.1228599>



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The important central position of deaf people is also acknowledged in the agreement between the World Federation of the Deaf and the World Association of Sign Language Interpreters signed in 2007 'recognises the primacy of organisations of Deaf people to chart the political, cultural and educational development of sign language in their country, including the dissemination of sign language dictionaries and teaching materials.'

### Recommendations

- States Parties should take all necessary steps to ensure the capacity and capability of deaf people to serve as cultural and linguistic models, teachers and disseminators of their national sign languages including through the establishment of appropriately resourced sign language teacher training courses and teacher training courses for deaf people.
- Governmental and non-governmental organizations, as well as private businesses and individuals with fluency in national sign languages, should ensure the principle of deaf communities and deaf-led organisations leading the teaching and development of their national sign languages is integrated into their work. Projects involving national sign languages should be undertaken with the involvement of deaf-led organisations, including representative national associations of deaf people.

### Acknowledgments

Dr Raychelle Harris, Dr Kristin Snoddon, Dr Robert Adam, Dr Joseph J Murray, Ms Victoria Manning, Mr Alexandre Bloxs

### 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).

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