

## Sign language interpreter in inclusive education: best practices around Europe

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### Abstract

Qualified and trained sign language interpreters in education are essential for children who are deaf<sup>1</sup>. In order to be educated adequately in a regular school setting a deaf child needs access. This access to education can be provided in various ways. This article will provide a brief insight into the current situation in Europe and the possibilities and limitations of a sign language interpreting services in the classroom.

**Key words:** sign language interpreter, education, access, quality of interpreting services

Historically children who were deaf or hard of hearing were placed in specialized schools. The schools were often boarding schools and the children went only home for a few weeks a year (Tijsseling, 2014; Woll & Adam, 2012). A considerable amount of time in the deaf schools was spent on speech therapy instead of on learning as in regular schools. Times have changed, deaf schools are closing and in many European countries deaf pupils are increasingly placed in regular schools (Krausneker, Becker, Audeoud, & Tarcsiova, 2017; Murray, Meulder, & Maire, 2018). This change occurred due to new conventions, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), but also due to the improvement of technical hearing aids, such as cochlear implants (CI) (De Meulder & Hualand, 2019; Holmström & Schönström, 2017; Murray, Meulder, et al., 2018; Murray, Snoddon, De Meulder, & Underwood, 2018; Reuter, 2017).

The UNCRPD article 9.2(e) states the right to professional sign language interpreters:

*Provide forms of live assistance and intermediaries, including guides, readers and professional sign language interpreters, to facilitate accessibility to buildings and other facilities open to the public.*

The right to education is also mentioned in article 24 of the CRPD, specifically the right to inclusive education. The World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) has protested against this as inclusive education is not necessarily the best option for deaf students (Murray, Meulder, et al., 2018). Therefore, the WFD calls for more research into best practices to ensure sign language environments for deaf children in different educational environments (Murray, Meulder, et al., 2018).

Many children in western countries with hearing loss are receiving a cochlear implant (CI) at a very young age. Parents of deaf children are often unaware of sign language as a natural language

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<sup>1</sup> Deaf person in this article refers to persons who are deaf, deafblind and/or hard of hearing

for their deaf child and may be advised by medical professionals to not use sign language in combination with a CI as this might hinder the learning of spoken language (O'Neill, 2017). At the same time, the Deaf community has been lobbying for deaf children to use the form of communication that suits them best be it sign or spoken language, or a mix of both (Humphries et al., 2014). This article, however, focuses on the provision of sign language interpreting services.

As a result of technological advances it is assumed that these children can attend education like any other child (De Meulder & Hualand, 2019). Deaf children are most often placed in regular classrooms. Some countries allow for the pupil to have a sign language interpreter in the classroom, but this is highly dependent on the country and the laws and regulations in place (de Wit, 2017). An educational setting can be a challenging place to be in; there are many interactions and interventions either individually, in pairs or in larger groups. The pupil who is deaf will need to be very focused on the communication before even understanding what is being said. This process takes a lot of energy and is exhausting. Having a sign language interpreter in the classroom will ensure that more information gets across, which will be less fatiguing for the pupil to receive the information.

Importantly, when a pupil has an interpreter in the classroom, one must be aware that information goes indirectly, namely through the interpreter. This has great consequences for the pupil. The pupil must look at the interpreter to receive the information and also understand the interpretation produced by the interpreter (Mark Marschark, Sapere, Convertino, & Seewagen, 2005; Brenda Schick, 2004). It is important to realize that the pupil will only be able to focus on one thing at a time. The moment the pupil watches the interpretation he or she will not have any direct contact with the teacher or students and might miss out on any other visual information presented (De Meulder & Hualand, 2019; de Wit, 2017).

The sign language interpreter cannot just be anyone. The interpreter must be educated and qualified as an interpreter. The interpreter should not be an assistant, but a college or university trained professional. As mentioned before, the pupil relies on the interpretation, that means that the interpreter has a great responsibility to ensure communication is interpreted correctly so the pupil is receiving all education through the interpreter (Brenda Schick, 2005). To interpret adequately the interpreter must be knowledgeable on the topic. This means that the interpreter must inform her or himself, prepare, and seek clarification if needed.

For the pupil, having an interpreter in the classroom is often the first encounter with a sign language interpreter for a longer period of time (de Wit, 2011). Deaf pupils often do not know what the role of the interpreter is and will need to be informed what the interpreter's responsibilities are and what can be asked of the interpreter. The interpreter in the classroom requires different skills and strategies (Marc Marschark, Sapere, Convertino, Seewagen, & Maltzen, 2004). The interpreter is not there to help but to provide an interpretation. The educational responsibility lies with the teacher, who may also lack experience in working with an interpreter. It is essential that all parties involved acknowledge their roles and inform each other of their expectations. This will assist in laying the foundation for a more successful interpretation in the classroom.

Even given the limitations to having an interpreter in the classroom it is often the only way a deaf child can gain functional access to education. Each child has the right to an education, regardless of their abilities, therefore access to education must be provided, also if this means providing a pupil with extensive sign language interpreting services in the classroom. Education is essential for the future of the child and national governments must ensure that this foundation is provided to each child. As a consequence, when an interpreter is needed the school and the government must take on the responsibility and assist in providing the interpreting services. There are many different systems across Europe, for a comprehensive overview please see De Wit (2017). To ensure the quality of services, the interpreter must be trained, qualified and properly remunerated. Such interpreting services will give deaf children access to education, will increase educational achievement and will contribute to the well-being and quality of life of the deaf pupil (Hintermair, 2008; de Wit, 2011).

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