

## 2. Academic analyses

### d) Sign language interpreter use in inclusive education

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#### 1 Introduction

Historically, children who are deaf would attend a special school for the deaf (Betten, 2013; Moores, 2010; Tijsseling, 2014). Regardless of the language of communication in the classroom, deaf children typically communicated in sign language among themselves. In so doing, deaf children developed a shared language (Tomaszewski, 2001). In the last thirty years, perspectives on the education of persons with disabilities have shifted. Increasingly, the aim is to include<sup>41</sup> persons with disabilities into society, closing special education institutions, and moving them into mainstream education (Brennan, 2003; De Meulder, 2016). In this chapter, the consequences of this shift will be discussed for deaf sign language users who are using a sign language interpreter. The interpreter in this case is the tool providing access for the deaf person to equal educational opportunities.

This chapter provides an impression of the regulations and policies in Europe regarding the right to education and the right to a sign language interpreter in that setting. This includes an analysis of who is responsible for organising the educational interpreting service and an assessment of the need for trained, qualified, and properly remunerated interpreters. Next, the potential limitations of an interpreter in the classroom will be discussed, such as the concept of indirect education and the risk of isolation of the deaf student. Additionally, best practice examples are shared alongside a model of indicators to consider when looking at the quality of life of deaf persons in education with an interpreter. The chapter closes with current and future considerations and opportunities for deaf students with a sign language interpreter in education.

It is apparent that due to the increase in deaf persons with cochlear implants, the use of sign language is more and more under debate, and especially the use of sign language with children who are implanted at a young age (Humphries et al, 2014). This chapter will not elaborate on

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41 UNCRPD General Comment No. 4: "Inclusion involves a process of systemic reform embodying changes and modifications in content, teaching methods, approaches, structures and strategies in education to overcome barriers with a vision serving to provide all students of the relevant age range with an equitable and participatory learning experience and the environment that best corresponds to their requirements and preferences."

this topic, but rather acknowledges the view that the use of sign language is a human right for deaf children, as it is the only language that is fully and easily accessible to them, independent of the degree of their hearing loss. Thus, access to an interpreter is a starting point to creating equal opportunities in education.

## **2 Inclusive education**

The relatively recent move towards inclusion of persons with disabilities in society has been supported by many stakeholders, including NGOs, and the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), by the EU and its Member States who are State Parties to the Convention. However, the position of Deaf-led NGOs, as well as researchers, such as Murray et al. (2018), has partly differed from other disability groups. These stakeholders emphasise the need for the creation of a sign language environment for deaf learners within the inclusive mainstream education for deaf learners.

Article 24 of the UNCRPD is dedicated to education. Murray et al. (2018) analyse the consequences of Article 24 for the deaf population and recommend that there should be no unreflective placement of deaf children in local schools but rather recommend the development of multiple models of inclusion.

Including deaf children and students in society means that an interpreter is needed for every deaf student in the classroom. Deaf pupils and students are usually scattered across the country and typically do not live close to each other. Thus, when they attend a school in the vicinity of their home, they will usually be the only deaf student in the classroom or even in the school (Brennan, 2003; Richardson et al, 2010).

## **3 Legislative provisions**

The right and the use of sign language interpreting services vary greatly across Europe (de Wit, 2016). The legal entitlement to an interpreter is often limited to public services and legal settings. The next most frequently mentioned setting is education. A follow-up study by de Wit in 2017, conducted for the benefit of this chapter, on the status of sign language interpreting in mainstream education, found that sign language interpreting in inclusive education is typically limited to secondary education levels and higher. Thus, deaf pupils attend primary education without an interpreter. In general, no other measures to ensure accessibility are provided, other than maybe through a classroom assistant, as we see in some countries. Alternatively, they attend a school for the deaf. At secondary, and especially at tertiary level, a sign language interpreter can then be provided in the majority of the countries, and even this provision can be limited in hours.

The 2017 study was conducted among the same respondents of the 2016 study by de Wit. The respondents are representatives of national associations of sign language interpreters, or national deaf associations, or individual interpreters all from member states of the Council of Europe. The respondents were invited to participate in a short online survey on the status of interpreting in mainstream education in their national country or region.

Of the 41 national and regional respondents of the 2017 study, 25 reported that a deaf student or pupil is entitled by national law or regulation to a sign language interpreter in inclusive or mainstream education. In reality, of the 41, a total of 32 countries and regions indicate that they have sign language interpreters interpreting in some or more levels of mainstream education (see figure 1). The following countries that in general do not have a sign language interpreter at all at any level of mainstream education provided a variety of reasons for this absence, such as: sometimes they work with special needs assistants (Ireland), the deaf students attend special schools (Albania, Greece), there is no legal basis to provide sign language interpreting in education (Bulgaria, Luxembourg, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia), sign language use is not encouraged among deaf children (Romania), and no formal training of sign language interpreters (Serbia).

	SLI in education in law / rgulation?	Kindergarten	Primary / Elementary	Secondary / High school	Tertiary / College or university	Vocational training	Adult education / non-formal training	Other
Armenia	Yes							
Belgium - Flanders	Yes			•	•	•	•	
Croatia	Yes		•	•	•	•	•	
Cyprus	Yes			•	•			
Czech Republic	Yes			•				
Denmark	Yes				•	•	•	
England, Wales & Northern Ireland	Yes						•	
Finland	Yes		•	•	•	•	•	
France	Yes			•	•	•	•	
Georgia	Yes			•			•	
Germany	Yes	•	•	•	•	•	•	
Hungary	Yes							•
Iceland	Yes			•	•	•	•	
Italy	Yes				•		•	
Kosovo	Yes			•	•	•	•	
Latvia	Yes				•	•		
Lithuania	Yes							
Netherlands	Yes		•	•	•	•		
Norway	Yes				•		•	
Scotland	Yes		•	•	•			
Slovenia	Yes		•	•				
Spain	Yes		•	•				
Sweden	Yes				•	•	•	
Switzerland - German region	Yes				•		•	
Switzerland - Italian region	Yes		•	•			•	
Albania	No							
Austria	No			•	•	•	•	
Belgium - Wallonia	No	•	•	•	•	•	•	
Bulgaria	No							
Estonia	No				•			

	SLI in education in law / regulation?	Kindergarten	Primary / Elementary	Secondary / High school	Tertiary / College or university	Vocational training	Adult education / non-formal training	Other
Greece	No							
Luxembourg	No							
Malta	No	•	•	•	•	•	•	
Montenegro	No							
Poland	No				•			
Romania	No							
Russia	No				•			
Serbia - Utloss	No							
Switzerland - French region	No			•	•	•	•	
Ukraine	No				•	•		

Figure 1: Deaf student/pupil entitlement to a sign language interpreter in mainstream education by law or regulation compared to the levels of education the interpreter most frequently interprets.

As mentioned earlier, there is a wide spectrum in the provision of sign language interpretation among various EU countries and regions. The variety manifests itself, for instance, in the type of provision determining the right to an interpreter: some countries stipulate such entitlements by law, while others get by with looser, non-binding regulations. Even within a country (e.g., Belgium, Spain, Switzerland) there can be regional differences or tailor-made arrangements. In addition, the right to an interpreter in education can vary between countries by the number of hours per week, school year, obtained prior degrees, or by the age of the deaf person. So, in some countries, such as the Netherlands, a deaf secondary-level student is entitled to have a fulltime interpreter in the classroom, in others, the student has no right to an interpreter at all, as is the case in Macedonia. Interestingly, there is no identifiable relation between the formal recognition of a national sign language and the right to an interpreter or interpreting service provision in that country (de Meulder, 2016; de Wit, 2016).

A good example of the provision of sign language interpretation in mainstream education can be found in Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Iceland. The deaf children are entitled to a full-time sign language interpreter from kindergarten up to any level of education and there is no age limit. Notably, in Norway, deaf children do not work with a sign language

interpreter until tertiary education, as they have a right to a teacher who can sign at primary and secondary level. In the Netherlands, deaf students are also entitled to a sign language interpreter at any level of education, but unfortunately only until the age of 30. After that age, the government does not pay for the interpreting services any longer in education, unless it is work-related continuing education. In these aforementioned countries, all the sign language interpreters must also have a bachelor's degree in interpreting in order to work as a sign language interpreter.

The 2017 study shows that in most of the countries, the school or parents or even sometimes the special needs services, organise the interpreting services for the deaf student until the tertiary level (see figure 2). This is different for vocational training and adult education, where it is mostly the deaf student who organises the interpreter. At times, more than one party is involved in organising the services.

	School / institution	Parents	Student / pupil	Special needs service	Other	N/A	Total
<b>Preschool (Kindergarten)</b>	12 30 %	7 17,5 %	1 2,5 %	7 17,5 %	3 7,5 %	10 25 %	40
<b>Primary / Elementary school</b>	17 39,5 %	7 16,3 %	2 4,7 %	9 20,9 %	3 7 %	5 11,6 %	43
<b>Secondary / High school</b>	18 35,3 %	8 15,7 %	6 11,8 %	11 21,6 %	6 11,8 %	2 3,9 %	51
<b>Tertiary / College or University</b>	14 26,4 %	4 7,5 %	13 24,5 %	12 22,6 %	8 15,1 %	2 3,8 %	53
<b>Vocational training</b>	10 21,7 %	2 4,3 %	15 32,6 %	9 19,6 %	7 15,2 %	3 6,5 %	46
<b>Adult education / non-formal education</b>	9 18,4 %	1 2 %	18 36,7 %	11 22,4 %	8 16,3 %	2 4,1 %	49
<b>Total</b>	80 8,8 %	29 3,2 %	55 6,1 %	59 6,5 %	35 3,9 %	24 2,7 %	905 100 %

Figure 2: Responsible party for the organisation of interpreting services.

There is no evident best practice for determining who should organise the interpreting services. As the interpreters are the experts in providing these services, it appears that they could also be the best to organise or assist the deaf student or their parents in arranging the services instead of the educational institution. In Belgium-Flanders, for example, the schools or the referral agency are currently responsible for organising the service, which can cause issues as they have less expertise regarding what services are needed. In the Netherlands, the interpreters can be contracted directly and the deaf student can choose the interpreter they prefer. The difficulty in that scenario is that the parents or student are not always aware of the difference in quality of the interpreters and lean toward any interpreter who is available.

#### **4 A need for sign language interpreters**

In Europe, the total number of interpreters has increased during the last fifteen years (de Wit, 2016). There are differences between countries, but overall the total number has risen. However, this rise has not lessened the perceived lack of interpreters. As a result of the increased inclusion of deaf persons in mainstream education, the demand for sign language interpreters in education has increased dramatically over the years (Antia, et al., 2007; Marschark, et al., 2005). Of the 45 respondents to the European survey conducted by de Wit (2016), 64% still report an overall lack of interpreters to meet the demand.<sup>42</sup> Although the respondents do not indicate the shortage specifically for education, the lack of interpreters becomes apparent when comparing the number of interpreters and the number of deaf sign language users in a country (see figure 3). The numbers indicate that it would be impossible to have an interpreter for each deaf person in a classroom.

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42 Albania, Armenia, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, England Wales & NI, Estonia, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Kosovo, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Scotland, Serbia, Slovakia, Switzerland-French, Turkey, and Ukraine.

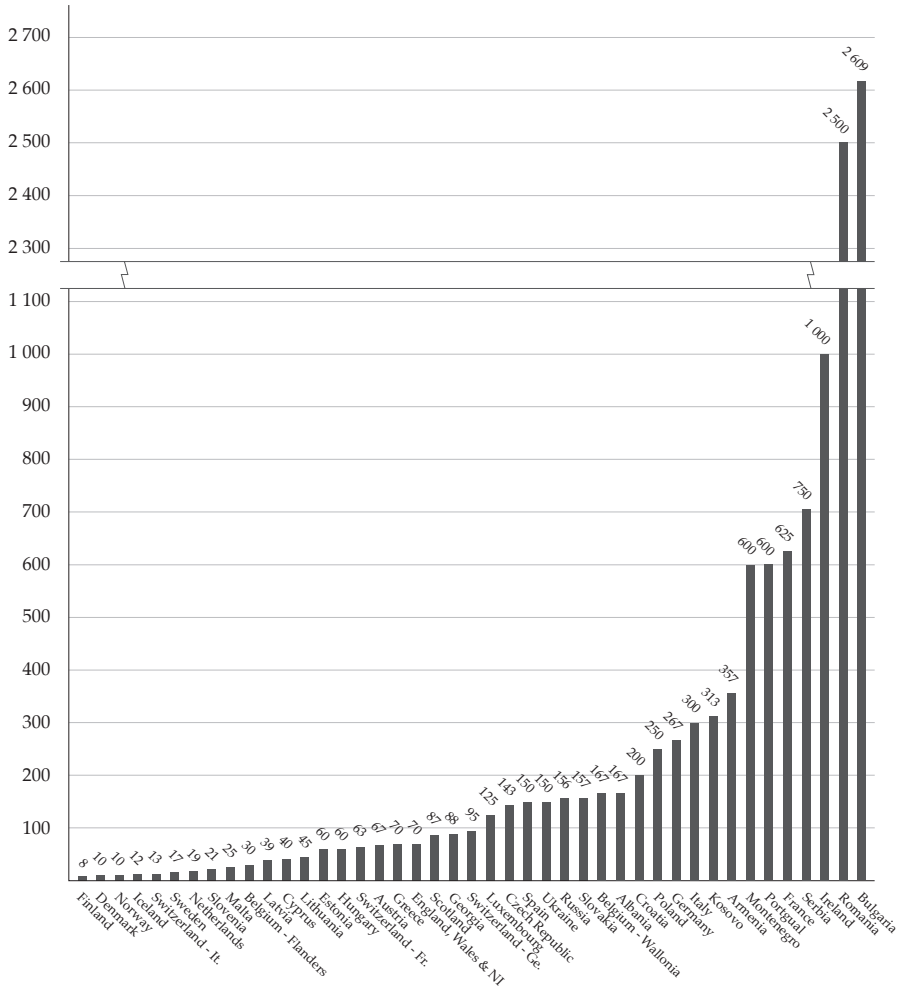


Figure 3: Deaf sign language users per interpreter per country/region (2016).



## **5 Status of sign language interpreters**

The increase of the number of interpreters in Europe can mostly be tracked back to the increase in the educational training for interpreters. In 2016, a total of 87 programmes were reported in Europe (de Wit, 2016) compared to a total of 65 in 2012.

The level of education and qualification of interpreters is also a complicating factor. There are countries, especially in the eastern part of Europe, where interpreters only attend a course of a few weeks organised by the deaf community to become an interpreter. By way of contrast, there are other countries that require prospective interpreters to complete a bachelor's and sometimes even a master's degree in interpreting. In only 16 countries in the 2017 study of de Wit it is mandatory for the interpreter to have an interpreting degree in order to interpret in educational settings.

The level of training the interpreter acquired has an impact on the quality of the interpreting services. Interpreters work in all levels of education for deaf students, increasingly also in higher education. It can happen that the interpreter has a lesser level of education than the educational setting he or she is working in. All the respondents from the 2017 study by de Wit report that the interpreter does not have to have the same or a higher degree than the educational level they are interpreting in. In the USA, individual states have passed legislation where the educational interpreters need to be nationally certified (EIPA) in order to work in a specific educational level.<sup>43</sup> Not having received that level of education might cause challenges for the interpreter, when understanding the content of the lessons is a prerequisite to providing adequate interpretation.

During the last two decades, there is a new development in the sign language interpreter profession in Europe, and that is the establishment of national or regional registration bodies. These registration bodies are established to safeguard and monitor the quality of sign language interpreters. Most of them are independent and the stakeholders (e.g. deaf or interpreter organisations) have a supervisory role. Generally, the registration body admits sign language interpreters according to pre-set requirements, such as an entry examination or obtained interpreter qualification. Some of the registration bodies also register special qualities or qualifications of sign language interpreters, such as skills in interpreting in legal or mental health settings. The respondents of the 2017 study indicate that in their countries there is no need for a sign language interpreter to have a special or additional qualification to interpret in educational settings.

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<sup>43</sup> For more information, see: <http://www.aslinterpretercorps.com/educational.html> (Accessed on 10 November 2017).

Another crucial element that impacts the status of the sign language interpreter profession is the payment. The data of the 2017 study shows large variability between the countries, therefore it is not possible to make a good comparison between the type of interpreting degree and the fees the interpreter receives, as in some countries the interpreters are employed by the educational institution, the interpreting agency, the national deaf association, or they work as freelancers. In addition, the national GDP also can have an influence as well as the regional differences within a country, such as in Spain. Another determiner is who is paying for the interpreting services: for example, the government, or private or educational institutions. In the majority of the countries the interpreting fee in education is the same as in any other areas, such as employment or leisure.

Inadequate compensation for interpreting services can lead to a low number and/or quality of interpreters. Various countries and regions (Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania) indicate that interpreters do not receive appropriate remuneration for the requested service, as a result they are unable to have only interpreting as a main source of income. In addition, the level of remuneration might not stimulate new professionals to pursue a career in interpreting or encourage current interpreters to further educate themselves. In Austria, there is a tendency to pay a higher fee for interpreting at universities than at lower educational levels. In Kosovo, the deaf students are stuck while a disagreement between the universities and the ministry of education regarding who is responsible for paying for the interpreting services for deaf students continues to be debated. In Germany, on the other hand, the hourly fee for qualified interpreters is set at 75 euros per hour, following the fee paid to court interpreters. The social services in Germany at times try to offer a cheaper alternative than qualified interpreters; nevertheless, parents fight to get a qualified interpreter for their deaf child, which can mean going to court to get the interpreting services their child is entitled to.

## **6 Limitations of interpreter use in education**

If deaf students gain access to education through an interpreter, it is assumed that this will enhance their future quality of life and their chances to fully realise their economic potential and thus contribute to society in equal measure (EU, 2010; Hintermair, 2008). However, upon analysing governments' justifications of the right to interpreting services, these key objectives are rarely mentioned (de Wit, 2016).

Nearly all EU member states have ratified the UNCRPD, and therefore should ensure equal access to education, but this is not always the case. As the number of deaf students in mainstream classrooms increases, European governments face a growing demand for interpreters in education, and,

therefore, increasing interpreting costs. Higher costs can dampen the willingness to subsidise interpreting services.

Next to the financial barriers, other challenges and obstacles are identified, which need to be addressed when attending education with a sign language interpreter. In 2011, de Wit undertook a study to identify key indicators to assess the quality of life of 70 deaf persons enrolled in secondary and tertiary inclusive education with sign language interpreters. A model of quality of life indicators was proposed based on an international literature review, showing the domains and the related indicators that impact the quality of life of a deaf person in education with an interpreter (figure 4). The domains are interrelated and start with demographics, followed by family, educational institution, interpreting services, and employment. Within the domains, sub-indicators were identified as well (figure 5). The indicators from one domain showed to have an impact on the following domain. The higher the number of indicators completed or checked per domain, the greater the impact on the quality of life of the deaf student.

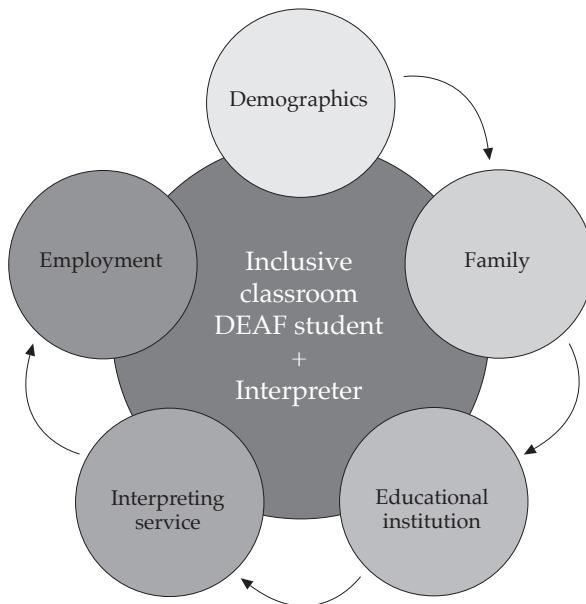


Figure 4: Main domains of Quality of Life indicators for deaf students in inclusive classrooms with a sign language interpreter.

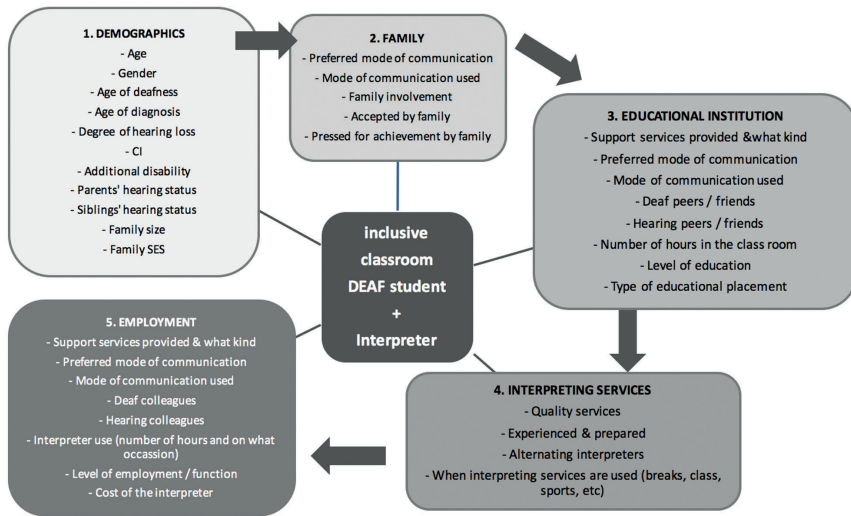


Figure 5: Subdomains of Quality of Life indicators for deaf students in inclusive classrooms with a sign language interpreter.

Using these indicators, de Wit investigated the impact of sign language interpreting on the quality of life of past ( $n=37$ ) and present ( $n=33$ ) Dutch deaf students in secondary and tertiary education. The past deaf students were no longer in an educational setting with an interpreter and the present students were enrolled in secondary education or higher with an interpreter. The results revealed that the current group of students were less happy being in education with a sign language interpreter, compared to those students who were previously educated using an interpreter. In comparison to the students who had completed their education, the current students report to have fewer deaf peers in the classroom, used less preferred methods of communication, and were less satisfied with the interpreter's skills. On a positive note, the current students reported to have more hearing friends, a greater feeling of acceptance by their deaf or hearing family, a higher percentage of preferred communication methods in the family, more consideration from the school towards the interpreter, and more satisfaction with the interpreter's professional attitude.

Maybe unsurprisingly, the study also showed that the degree of parents' involvement with the school influenced the overall happiness of the student. The study showed that the parents of the group of former students were more involved with the school, compared to the parents of the current students, resulting in more support services at school and increasing the feeling of overall acceptance at school. The feeling of acceptance has a prominent place in the responses of the students.

In addition, the group of students who were currently in education did not face the lack of interpreters that the previous generation had faced. The current group were all provided with an interpreter and could even, in most cases, choose the interpreter they liked best. The former group indicated enormous appreciation of the interpreter who had worked with them, as there were so few available and they were lucky to have an interpreter. As now there was more choice, it seemed that this gave the current group the option to be more critical of the quality of the interpreting services, and the academic and social skills of the interpreter. Importantly, persons in the group of former students who completed a higher degree of education were now all employed, versus those with a lower education who were unemployed.

On average, over 90% of deaf children have hearing parents (Brennan, 2003; Mitchell & Karchmer 2004). As a result, sign language is not the parents' native language and parents would first need to acquire the sign language before they can use a full-fledged language in communication with their deaf child. However, there often is a lack of information provided to hearing parents about the importance of sign language and they are frequently encouraged by medical professionals to primarily teach their deaf child spoken language, rather than learning and communicating in sign language, which some parents might also perceive as too much of a challenge. In such a case, the school-aged deaf child might not have acquired sign language as a first language and sign language interpretation might neither be sufficient to provide full accessibility of the educational content nor to replace sign language acquisition in the family or through a signing teacher and a signing deaf peer group.

Additionally, it needs to be considered that the sign language interpreter profession primarily evolved from hearing children of deaf parents informally interpreting without having had the opportunity to attend a formal training for interpreters. However, the majority of sign language interpreters today do not have deaf family members and have learned sign language as a foreign language later in life. Thus, in many classroom settings, the deaf student and the interpreter are both the only signers and non-native signers. Both will not be exposed during the day to other signers and as a consequence have a limited range of sign language input.

An added complexity is that children need to learn how to work with an interpreter (Schick, 2008). When starting mainstream education, they are unaware of what the role of the interpreter is and what their shared responsibility is to ensure quality access to their education.

Most importantly, what is often overlooked is the fact that the deaf student with a sign language interpreter in the classroom is educated indirectly: all education is mediated through the interpreter and the deaf student is

never taught directly by the teacher. Whatever is being said and no matter who says it, the deaf student needs to look at the interpreter to access that information. This so called interpreted education (Schick, 2008) affects the student's learning. For example, an interpretation is always based on the understanding of the interpreter and the decisions that he or she makes. In addition to the fact that information gets lost in interpretation, it also requires the continuously high attention span of the deaf person to watch the interpreter all day. Next to frontal teaching, classrooms are filled with a range of interactions that require the flexibility of the student and the interpreter to constantly adjust. The teacher has a key role and the potential to facilitate the communication access and participation of the deaf student or, in failing to do so, risks limiting it (Stinson, 1996). When working with a sign language interpreter in the classroom, the teacher must focus on their communication skills and at the same time be informed, along with the student, regarding the best strategies for using interpreters effectively in the classroom (Antia, 2009). Also, how much interpretation is needed during informal moments depends on the communication possibilities of the deaf student, the peers, and the teachers.

In summary, making the classroom accessible for the deaf students requires a set of skills and involvement of all interlocutors. Bearing in mind all of the above elements to make the classroom accessible, the deaf learner who is mainstreamed individually is still at risk of being highly dependent on the sign language interpreter in the classroom for communication access and for language acquisition as well as personal and social development when there are no deaf peers around. However, taking these elements into consideration will reduce the risk of social isolation of the single deaf student in the classroom. For a full overview of all considerations to enhance the quality of life of the deaf student in the classroom, see de Wit (2011).

## **7 Best practices**

The indicators of quality of life for deaf persons with a sign language interpreter in the inclusive classroom can be used as a framework to guide parents and educational institutions (figure 4). In the family domain, one very important indicator is the feeling of acceptance by the deaf student by their family. This appears to have a major impact on the rest of their development and their success in mainstream education with a sign language interpreter. The advantage of attending mainstream education with an interpreter is that the deaf pupil can live with their family and attend a school of their choice nearby. As was shown in the 2011 study by de Wit, students also indicated that they have more hearing friends now, as they are in an inclusive setting, which has a more diverse population of students than ever before.

The provision of sign language interpreting services also gives the student the option at secondary level of education and higher to choose a study of their interest. In the past, deaf students were educated at a deaf institute and received vocational training in a limited number of practical professions, such as shoemaking or tailoring. Education was not made accessible through sign language interpreting services and only an exceptional few were able to succeed in mainstream education.

When specifically considering the quality of the interpreting services it should be noted that this has an enormous impact on the active involvement of the deaf student in the inclusive classroom and, as a result, on higher academic success (Schick, 2005). A highly professionally trained interpreter must collaborate closely with the teacher in order to ensure optimal and equal participation of the deaf student. Information and awareness are the key elements that need to be in place to ensure quality interpretation in the classroom.

Best practices of sign language interpreter use in mainstream education tend to be in those countries where the use of sign language is encouraged and accepted from an early age. Such practices can be found in educational institutions that value the deaf learners' environment and respect the variety of sign language input, understand the need for deaf peers, and teach in sign language in combination with sign language interpretation.

## **8 Discussion**

In this chapter, an outline was presented on the challenges and opportunities for deaf students when attending mainstream education with a sign language interpreter, as well as the barriers and expectations interpreters are faced with as professionals.

To ensure equal opportunities in education for deaf sign language users, it appears to be insufficient for governments to simply provide the entitlement to having a sign language interpreter in educational settings. The professional qualities of the interpreter need to match the circumstances, which can only be achieved by proper formal training, adequate payment, and quality registration. At the same time, a coherent policy and agreement needs to be in place regarding how to optimise the deaf student's participation and to ensure the feeling of acceptance by peers in the classroom. Both aspects can be achieved by creating further awareness of the needs of all stakeholders involved.



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## **Biography**

Maya de Wit is a certified sign language interpreter with a MSc in the European Master of Sign Language Interpreting (EUMASLI) whose working languages include International Sign, Dutch Sign Language, American Sign Language, as well as spoken English, German, and Dutch. She regularly interprets at the EU institutions, United Nations, Council of Europe, and other international organisations.

Author of “Sign Language Interpreting in Europe,” a book that saw its fifth revised edition published last year, de Wit has been tracking the development of the profession in over 45 European countries and regions since 2000. de Wit delivers training and consultancy on topics such as optimising the cooperation between consumers and spoken and sign language interpreters, sign language interpreting techniques for high-level settings, and raising professional standards of sign language interpreters.

From 2006 to 2012, de Wit was the president of efsli, the European Forum of Sign Language Interpreters. She was the first sign language interpreter to become a member of AIIC and currently she is the coordinator of the global AIIC Sign Language Network.