

**Sign Language and Deaf Education in Hong Kong –  
Recommendations to the Panel on Constitutional Affairs of the Legislative  
Council, Hong Kong SAR Government  
(Re: Concluding Observations by the United Nations Committee on the  
Rights of Persons with Disabilities ("UNCRPD") on the Initial Report of the  
Hong Kong Special Administrative Region ("HKSAR") of  
the People's Republic of China ("PRC") under  
the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities)**

**Prepared by: The Centre for Sign Linguistics and Deaf Studies, The Chinese University of  
Hong Kong**

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**1. Introduction**

1.1 Sign language is a natural language with a full-fledged grammar

Recent advancement in Sign Linguistics and Sign Language Acquisition research have enabled us to reconsider the role that sign language may play in bringing up deaf children. The proposal "Sign Bilingualism" is built upon the assumption that sign language can partner with spoken language in supporting the language, cognitive and social-psychological development, as well as education, of deaf children (Grosjean 2010; Plaza-Pust 2008). In fact, faced with accumulating evidence from sign linguistics research, and subsequent to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in relation to deaf education, the Organizing Committee of the 2010 International Congress on the Education of the Deaf made a public apology to the Congress and Deaf Communities worldwide for having deprived Deaf people of access to sign language and Deaf teachers in deaf education for 130 years. This apology was accompanied with a landmark decision to urge the restoration of sign language and Deaf teachers in educating deaf children in whichever educational setting where this need is called for. There are different modes of

sign bilingual programmes in the world, many of which are implemented in deaf educational settings. Parallel to this development, there have been an increasing number of programmes in the world that attempt to bring Sign Bilingualism in line with inclusive education. This model is implemented in mainstream environment supplemented with sign language support in classroom learning, either in the form of interpretation or co-teaching by a deaf teacher as far as possible. Whichever approach the school adopts in their effort to support deaf children in receiving education, one needs to comply with expectations set internationally which attempt to address fundamental issues of language in deaf education and basic human rights of Deaf people.

Below are the major recommendations prepared by the Centre for Sign Linguistics and Deaf Studies, The Chinese University of Hong Kong.

## **2. The right for the deaf children to grow up sign bilingual**

2.1 Deaf children should have the right to become sign bilingual (Grosjean 1999). They should be provided with both sign and spoken language input as both languages are linguistically equal in status. Access to sign language should be made as simple and direct as possible for children born Deaf and hard-of-hearing, and the same provisions should be available to their families. A website to house the translation of Grosjean (1999) into different languages can be found at [http://www.francoisgrosjean.ch/the\\_right\\_en.html](http://www.francoisgrosjean.ch/the_right_en.html).

2.2 Sign language should not be regarded as a remedial or 'last resort' strategy for deaf children, after they have experienced the insurmountable difficulty in improving their speech only to be branded a failure case at the end. In fact, all these unnecessary and inhumane strategies can be avoided if their spoken language training or development is supported by sign language. Language acquisition research involving deaf children has already proven beyond doubt that sign language is a natural language and has the advantage of supporting deaf children in capitalizing on the critical period effects. There is no evidence, and there never has been any evidence, that deaf children's learning of sign language will interfere with the learning of spoken language (Spencer and Marschark 2010). Because of erroneous assumptions to the contrary, adequate provisions established by the

government are necessary to ensure maximal access to linguistic input through sign language in deaf children's early language development. This should be facilitated and secured with clearly stated education policies by the government.

### **3. The role of Sign Language in Deaf Education**

3.1 As stated by the Education Bureau (2010a) "[t]he aim of special education in Hong Kong is to provide children with special needs with education to help them develop their potential to the full", students should be given provisions that can effectively remove their barriers to learning and develop their strengths (Education Bureau, 2010b). Also, Lane, Pillard, and Hedberg (2011) emphasize that Deaf individuals should be viewed as "SEEING" persons when the definition is based on their strengths, not weaknesses. As a full-fledged natural visual language which is fully accessible to deaf students without barriers, the acquisition of a sign language has proved to be effective in assisting them in developing a good foundation for language to support academic learning and literacy skills development. Therefore, the role of sign language in educating deaf children should be clearly stated in the local education policies, and appropriate services and teacher training programmes should be developed accordingly.

3.2 Given the diverse needs of students, "teachers can no longer adopt one single teaching approach for all students, nor can they expect all students to attain the same academic standard" (Education Bureau, 2010b, p.1). There should not be only "one solution for all deaf students". Educational options have to be made available to deaf infants since birth if early intervention is regarded as a necessity. The provision of sign language as part of early intervention does not mean that the role of spoken language should be downplayed, quite on the contrary, speech training should be encouraged as far and early as possible too, but parents and teachers should be educated about the limitations facing their deaf child, and not to undermine the importance of sign language in their development.

#### **4. Sign language support in different educational settings**

4.1 According to the Article 24 (2b) and (3c) of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, all deaf and hard-of-hearing children should have the right to “access an inclusive, quality and free primary education and secondary education on an equal basis with others”, they should receive education that is “delivered in the most appropriate languages and modes and means of communication for the individual” (United Nations, 2006). To respond to these recommendations, it is high time the Government provide sign language support in deaf education, in both segregated and mainstream settings in Hong Kong at all levels.

4.2 As a natural language with a full-fledged grammar, sign language should be used as an additional medium of instruction, alongside with spoken language, for deaf children in both preschool and school-aged settings.

4.3 As recommended by the United Nations, the government should “allocate more resources equivalent to the services provided for children with disabilities in order to ensure that they are able to develop to their full potential” (2012, p.9). The system of providing a Learning Support Grant (LSG), (i.e. an annual subsidy of HK\$10,000 for one student or HK\$20,000 to school if intensive support is required) adopted since 2004 should be reviewed subject to the rate of inflation and according to the needs of children with different disabilities. In fact, the government has been giving additional resources to support Braille service to children with visual impairment; with the same token, additional resources such as sign language support should be available for deaf children.

#### **5. Parental guidance**

5.1 Parents should be explained explicitly the pros and cons of the different options of deaf education. Considering that there are long-standing misconceptions about sign language among parents and professionals in Hong Kong, public education is necessary to achieve an intelligent understanding of the role of sign language in language development and education of deaf children.

## **6. Training for teachers**

6.1 Deaf education is not simply special needs education or integrated education. Specific knowledge and competency should be required for a registered teacher for the Deaf. Therefore, as in other countries, teachers for the Deaf should be trained in a separate programme and awarded with special qualification.

6.2 As mentioned in the Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities proposed, all teachers for the Deaf should be qualified in sign language (United Convention, 2006), which means a sign language proficiency requirement should be set for teachers or professionals involved in Deaf education who may be educational psychologists, audiologists and language pathologists.

6.3 Besides acquiring sign language skills, teachers for the Deaf should learn about Deaf identity, Deaf culture and Deaf awareness preferably taught by Deaf adults, in order to develop a positive, non-deficit-oriented attitude about Deafness.

6.4 A system of educational interpreters should be developed for in-class support of Deaf students. The role of interpreters should not be restricted to sign interpretation, but also educational support.

## **7. Training for Deaf teachers**

7.1 As advocated by the Organizing Committee and the British Columbia Deaf Community during the International Congress on Education of the Deaf (ICED) held in Vancouver 2010, Deaf participation and collaboration should be promoted in both special and mainstream school settings with deaf children. Fluent Deaf signers should be employed as teachers as far as possible, and set as Deaf models for the students in school.

7.2 Deaf adults should be provided with equal educational opportunities for training to become Deaf teachers for the Deaf. The government has the obligation to support sign interpretation services when Deaf adults undergo these training processes.

## **8. Equal opportunities in education**

8.1 Deaf students should have equal opportunities for participating in class- and school-level activities although they are using a visual language, other than a spoken language, in all kinds of educational settings.

8.2 The contents of the curriculum and the aspired goals and educational outcomes for Deaf students should be the same as hearing students.

8.3 In special schools for the Deaf, sign language should not be used as a medium of instruction only, it should be considered as part of the school curriculum and be taught as a separate subject.

## **9. Public education**

9.1 The public should be educated on the following:

i. Sign language has linguistic status as a language having an independent grammatical system. It is not gesture or the signing version of a spoken language. "Sign language" is used as a general term here, but each country has its own sign language (e.g., American Sign Language, Russian Sign Language, Hong Kong Sign Language), and some countries have more than one;

ii. Sign language is the language used by the Deaf community. As a natural language, it does not adversely affect, but support, the learning of other languages, be they signed or spoken;

iii. Deaf people have the rights to be given oral language and sign language training, and to receive education through these two languages in any educational settings where they find themselves .

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