



WFD POLICY

Visions and Goals for Access to Adult Education for Deaf People

A position statement of the World Federation of the Deaf

Introduction to Deaf People

There are over 70 million Deaf people in the world. Many of them are either Deaf from birth or became Deaf before learning the spoken language. This fact has serious implications for the education of Deaf people. To be Deaf means to not hear or comprehend speech and language through the ear. Communication for a person who cannot hear is visual, not auditory. To deny sign language to Deaf people is tantamount to denying them their basic human rights to communication and education.

Deafness is a uni-disability, different from other disabilities. In order for Deaf students to become involved in meaningful schooling, it is necessary that their teachers and peers all know and use sign language. Inclusion without including sign language, Deaf Studies and Deaf role models may equal extreme segregation for a Deaf student. Other disabled people who can hear and speak can interact and learn directly while Deaf people cannot.

World Federation of the Deaf (WFD)

The World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) is an international and representative organisation of, for and by Deaf people, composed of 123 member countries around the world. Sign language and English are the official languages of WFD. Deaf leaders of organisations of Deaf people in each country serve as delegates to WFD Congresses, in a fashion similar to the United Nations (UN). The WFD is in fact recognised by the UN as the official representative for Deaf people in policy formulation.

WFD conducted a worldwide survey several years ago and found that 80% of Deaf people do not receive any basic education, especially in developing countries. WFD strongly advocates 1) access to education for Deaf people of all ages as well as for their family members; 2) the use of sign language in education of Deaf students and the use of bi- and multi-lingualism (both sign language and the native language[s] spoken in the country); and 3) the involvement of Deaf adults in all aspects of education planning and programming.

The UN and the Salamanca Statement on Special Needs Education

The UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) sponsored the Salamanca Conference on Special Needs Education in 1994, and the resultant declarations were based on the UN Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities. The focus was on making education accessible for students with all kinds of disabilities, including visual sign communication for Deaf students. The following statement was included in the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action, which was accepted by the Conference and is now an official document of UNESCO:

“Educational policies should take full account of individual differences and situations. The importance of sign language as the medium of communication among the deaf, for example, should be recognised and provision made to ensure that all deaf persons have access to education in their national sign language. Owing to the particular communication needs of deaf and deaf-blind persons, their education may be more suitably provided in special schools or special classes and units in mainstream schools.”

UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros Ghali, in his address to the XII World Congress of the WFD, urged WFD to utilise inter-related policy documents of the UN to build on processes *“featuring the right to sign language as the medium of communication among the Deaf and the recognition of the particular communication needs of Deaf and Deafblind persons.”*



The Gallaudet University Declaration on Adults with Special Learning Needs

The Gallaudet University Declaration adopted by participants at the First National Congress on Adults with Special Learning Needs at Gallaudet University in 1987 included a statement of principles, a few of which are quoted here: *“Lifelong learning for adults with special learning needs must be developed with their full participation, to assure that it responds to their education needs and goals and accommodates to their styles ... It should include opportunities beyond basic education and vocational skills for personal and social development, aesthetic pleasures, and advanced academic and professional study where appropriate ... Lifelong learning for adults with special needs must be sensitive to issues of cultural, linguistic, gender, and economic diversity.”*

UNESCO and the Hamburg Statement on Adult Education Rights

The Fifth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA V), which met in Hamburg, Germany, in 1997, resulted in a declaration and agenda for the future which affirmed that adult education not only expands knowledge, it also promotes human rights, active citizenship and effective democracy in each country. Education and employment are essential to a good quality of life. *“Adult education becomes more than a right; it is a key to the twenty-first century. It is both a consequence of active citizenship and a condition for full participation in society. Recognition of the right to education and the right to learn throughout life is more than ever a necessity; it is the right to read and write, the right to question and analyze, the right to have access to resources, and to develop and practice individual and collective skills and competencies.”*

Topics discussed during this conference and embodied in the adult education principles included access to and involvement in adult education for adults with disabilities, the need for policies and practices to accommodate people with disabilities and to consider linguistic, gender and economic diversity. *“Learning throughout life implies a rethinking of content to reflect such factors as age, gender equality, disability, language, culture and economic disparities. Adult learning should reflect the richness of cultural diversity and respect traditional and indigenous peoples’ knowledge and systems of learning; the right to learn in the mother tongue should be respected and implemented ... We urge UNESCO to encourage Member States to adopt policies and legislation that are favourable to and accommodate people with disabilities in educational programmes, as well as being sensitive to cultural, linguistic, gender and economic diversity.”*

WFD Principles for Access to Adult Education for Deaf Learners

1. Recognise and accept Deafness as a uni-disability with very different characteristics from other disabilities. Acknowledge that Deaf students need direct visual communication and classes with other Deaf students and Deaf or signing teachers.
2. Recognise and accept the native (indigenous) sign language as a language of instruction and utilise a bi-/multi-lingual and bi-/multi-cultural approach for Deaf students. Substantial tutorial and support services may be needed for some students.
3. Enrol Deaf students in certificate and degree programmes in teacher training in Deaf education in Universities to become adult educators, vocational trainers, sign language and interpreter trainers, and role models.
4. Employ Deaf teachers and administrators in planning and implementing adult education programmes. Advocate for educational programmes to work with Deaf people in teaching sign language and training sign language interpreters.
5. Recognise and promote the importance of Deaf participation in the decision-making process on all issues that affect Deaf individuals. Establish an Advisory Council for Deaf Education and involve representatives of the Deaf Community, advocates for Deaf people, and parents of Deaf children.
6. Encourage national federations of the Deaf to establish adult education programmes in co-operation with universities and other institutions of higher education in order to meet the different needs of Deaf adults.



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Adult education policies must take full account of individual differences and situations. The importance of sign language and involvement of Deaf people as resources in adult education programmes must be recognised. Provision should be made to ensure that all Deaf adult students have access to education 1) in their native sign language; 2) in special classes with other Deaf students; and 3) at all levels of education, as appropriate. Deaf people should be involved in planning, implementing and evaluating adult education programmes to ensure appropriateness, relevancy and quality.

THE WORLD FEDERATION OF THE DEAF (WFD)

WFD is an international, non-governmental central organisation of national associations of Deaf people, with a current membership of 127 countries.

WFD has consultative status in the United Nations (UN) system, including the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC); the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO); the International Labor Organization (ILO); and the World Health Organization (WHO). WFD also co-operates closely with the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, and has representatives on the Panel of Experts on the UN Standard Rules for the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities.

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References:

- Gallaudet Declaration on Adults with Special Learning Needs (Gallaudet University, 1987)
- Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994)
- United Nations Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (UN, 1994)
- Gallaudet Report to U.S. DOE/NIDRR (1997)
- Hamburg Declaration on Adult Learning and Agenda for the Future (UNESCO CONFINTEA V, 1997)
- WFD NEWS, the magazine of the World Federation of the Deaf (June 1998)