

The Disabled Person's Organisations (DPO) Network Submission to the
Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education,
Research, Innovation and Science
Topic - Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM)
Submitted on 29th June 2023

Introduction

This submission, by the DPO Network includes feedback from the Irish Deaf Society (IDS) and the Disabled Women Ireland (DWI) on behalf of the network.

The DPO Network is an Irish alliance of Disabled People and their organisations (five DPOs) who have joined together as we have a common interest in the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Ireland.

The five DPO member organisations of the DPO Network are:

- As I Am - Ireland's National Autism Advocacy Organisation
- Disabled Women Ireland (DWI)
- Independent Living Movement Ireland (ILMI)
- Irish Deaf Society (IDS)
- National Platform of Self Advocates

The DPO Network is committed to the human rights and social model of disability which says that the exclusion, inequality, and discrimination that disabled people experience is not the consequence of our impairments but a result of the economic, cultural, social, and political barriers which are created and persist in society.

The DPO Network and Irish Deaf Society have previously made submissions to the Joint Committee on Disability Matters on the topic of the "Review of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004" in March 2023. We have included those submissions as appendices to this document as they contain complementary commentary and perspectives on the importance of access and early intervention when it comes to education for disabled people and Deaf people, points which are all relevant when looking at access to STEM.

DPO Network Members: As I Am - Ireland's National Autism Advocacy Organisation, Disabled Women Ireland (DWI), Independent Living Movement Ireland (ILMI), Irish Deaf Society (IDS), National Platform of Self Advocates. Chairperson – Jacqui Browne, chairperson@dponetwork.ie. www.dponetwork.ie

This document will examine a variety of points to consider when looking at access to STEM for disabled people and Deaf people.

Points raised by Disabled Women Ireland:

1. **Disproportionate Impact of Classes Over Quota:** The lack of science teachers and classes operating over quota sizes has a disproportionate impact on students who require additional support. Deaf students and those with specific learning differences, such as dyscalculia, face significant challenges in accessing appropriate resources and assistance in STEM subjects. It is essential to address the shortage of qualified teachers in these areas to ensure that all students receive the support they need to succeed.
2. **Support for Specific Learning Differences:** Support for students with specific learning differences should extend beyond core subjects and encompass STEM education. For example, individuals with dyscalculia, a specific learning difficulty related to mathematics, require specialised support to overcome barriers in understanding and engaging with STEM concepts. By providing comprehensive support tailored to specific learning differences, we can foster an inclusive and accessible learning environment for all students.
3. **Impairment-Related Challenges in STEM:** Impairment-related challenges, such as limited hand-eye coordination, pose significant obstacles to the participation of Deaf students and others with physical impairments in the practical aspects of STEM subjects like chemistry and biology. Unfortunately, these subjects have not received the same level of support as core subjects like Irish, English, and Maths. It is crucial to develop an adapted curriculum and embrace Universal Design for Learning principles across all disciplines, including the Arts and Sciences, to ensure equal opportunities for all students.
4. **Proactive Universal Design and Support:** At third-level education, there is often an excessive emphasis on self-advocacy, placing the burden on students to secure accommodations and support themselves. It is essential to shift the focus towards proactive Universal Design for Learning and provide comprehensive support systems for STEM students. This includes raising awareness about available accommodations, reducing administrative burdens, and fostering positive academic relationships that do not rely solely on students' ability to advocate for themselves. Mentorship programs can play a vital role in supporting students' academic and career development.
5. **Intersectional Challenges for Disabled Women and Girls:** Disabled women and girls face additional obstacles in pursuing STEM fields due to gendered factors, which are compounded by disability-related challenges. They often experience underestimation in educational settings and harsher social judgment when advocating for their access rights. It is important to address these intersectional challenges by promoting gender equality, providing tailored support, and creating inclusive environments that empower disabled women and girls to thrive in STEM education and careers.

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6. **Addressing Educational Gaps and Uneven Access:** Disabled young people are more likely to experience uneven access to education, including difficulties in securing appropriate school placements. These challenges can result in educational gaps that significantly impact their foundational learning in STEM subjects. To mitigate these effects, it is crucial to provide tailored support programs and interventions that enable disabled students to catch up and bridge any educational gaps, particularly in STEM subjects, which form the basis for further learning and career opportunities.

Points to consider with specific reference to Deaf people and Irish Sign Language:

1. **Insufficient Funding for ISL Vocab for STEM:** The existing ISL glossary project, which seeks to develop ISL vocabulary for STEM concepts, is severely underfunded. Without an adequate budget, progress in this area remains limited, hindering Deaf students' comprehension and engagement with STEM subjects. We strongly recommend that the government allocate appropriate funding to support the expansion of this project, ensuring comprehensive and accurate ISL resources for STEM education.
2. **Limited ISL Proficiency among Teachers:** Article 24 of UNCRPD stipulates that Governments must respond appropriately to employ teachers fluent in sign language and professionally trained to teach Deaf children. However, there is currently no mandatory qualification for teachers working with Deaf children in mainstream school and schools for Deaf children. The situation is far from satisfactory especially when we consider the rights of Deaf children to access education through the medium of ISL and be taught by qualified and competent teachers has been upheld by UNCRPD. This limitation and lack of fluency impacts the quality of instruction and impedes students' ability to fully grasp complex STEM concepts. We encourage the Department of Education to invest in specialised training programs that enhance teachers' ISL skills, enabling them to effectively communicate and support Deaf students' educational needs in STEM subjects.
3. **Resource Disparity in Deaf Schools:** Deaf schools often face resource limitations compared to mainstream schools. With smaller student populations, these schools may struggle to offer a wide range of subjects, limiting Deaf students' opportunities to pursue their interests in various fields, including STEM. We urge the committee to address this issue by advocating for increased resource allocation to Deaf schools, ensuring equitable access to STEM education for all students.
4. **Lack of Response to Proposals:** We are disheartened by the lack of response we received from the Department of Education regarding our proposal to amend the ISL home tuition scheme. This proposal aimed to enhance the provision of ISL support for Deaf students studying STEM subjects. We urge the committee to investigate this matter and emphasise

the importance of prompt and transparent communication between relevant authorities and organisations representing Deaf individuals.

5. **Lack of Accessible Online STEM Resources in ISL:** While there are abundant online resources available for self-learning in STEM subjects, it is disheartening that these resources are not available in ISL, making them inaccessible to Deaf students. We recommend that the government collaborates with educational technology developers and content creators to produce ISL-accessible materials for online STEM resources, thus enabling Deaf students to fully participate in self-learning and independent study.
6. **Consultation with DPOs:** Consultation in relation to Deaf education and students must be sought from Deaf experts in this area. As outlined under the UNCRPD, disabled people and our representative organisations must be consulted on all decisions which impact our lives, not just on legislation specifically focussing on disability. The UNCRPD also states that DPOs must be involved in consultation processes from the planning or design stage onwards.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, our submission highlights important issues regarding disabled people and Deaf people's access to STEM education.

It is crucial to address the disproportionate impact of classes over quota sizes on students who require additional support, such as those with specific learning differences like dyscalculia. Impairment-related challenges in STEM, including limited hand-eye coordination, must be acknowledged, and accommodated to provide equal opportunities for all students. Proactive universal design and support, rather than relying solely on self-advocacy, are essential for creating inclusive learning environments. Intersectional challenges faced by disabled women and girls in STEM education must be recognised and addressed, while efforts to bridge educational gaps and ensure equal access should be prioritised.

In relation to Deaf students several areas must be addressed. Insufficient funding for the development of ISL vocabulary in STEM hinders Deaf students' comprehension and engagement with these subjects. The limited proficiency of teachers in ISL further impedes effective communication and support for Deaf students in STEM education. Resource disparities in Deaf schools restrict the opportunities for Deaf students to pursue their interests in STEM subjects. The lack of response from the Department of Education regarding our proposals underscores the need for transparent communication and prompt action. Furthermore, the absence of accessible online STEM resources in ISL limits Deaf students' ability to engage in self-learning. Finally, we emphasise the importance of consulting Deaf experts and involving DPOs in decision-making processes to ensure that the rights and needs of Deaf individuals are properly addressed.

By considering these important points, we urge the Department of Education to take necessary actions to enhance access to STEM education. Through proper funding, teacher training, resource

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allocation, accessible materials, and meaningful consultation, we can create an inclusive and equitable educational landscape that empowers disabled people and Deaf individuals to fully participate and excel in STEM fields.

Supporting Documents

Irish Sign Language Act 2017: <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2017/act/40/enacted/en/html>

Deaf Education position paper: <https://www.irishdeafociety.ie/about/policy-paper-deaf-education/>

The Education of Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children in Ireland – NCSE Policy paper:

<https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/DeafEducationReport.pdf>

The Irish Deaf Society Strategic Plan: <https://www.irishdeafociety.ie/about/strategy/>

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While the information contained in this submission was accurate and up to date at the time of its completion, it is important to note that language and information are constantly evolving. As time progresses, new developments, interpretations, and understandings may emerge, potentially rendering certain aspects of this submission outdated or less relevant. Therefore, we strongly encourage individuals to exercise caution and verify the appropriateness and accuracy of the information provided if utilising it at a later stage.

For further information regarding the information stated above, please contact John Sherwin, CEO of the Irish Deaf Society and secretary for the DPO Network – ceo@irishdeafociety.ie.

APPENDIX 01 – DPO Network Submission on EPSEN March 2023

The Disabled Person's Organisations (DPO) Network Submission on the Education of Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004.

Introduction

The Disabled Person's Organisation (DPO) Network welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission on the Education of Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004.

The five DPO member organisations of the DPO Network are:

- Disabled Women Ireland
- Irish Deaf Society
- Independent Living Movement Ireland (ILMI)
- The National Platform of Self Advocates
- AsIAm

Collectively, the DPO Network is committed to the realisation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD), wherein disabled people are entitled to an education under Article 24. Furthermore, we are committed to the human rights and social model of disability which says that the exclusion, inequality, and discrimination disabled people experience is not the consequence of our impairments but a result of the economic, cultural, social, and political barriers which persist in society. All our work is led and informed by the active participation of disabled people based on their lived experience. Given the broad membership base of the members of the network, the Network gives a unique space for a genuinely cross-impairment analysis of the issues faced by disabled people and provides a space for networking between the organisations.

Under Article 41 of the Irish Constitution and Article 28 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC), children living in Ireland have the right to an education. This right is reaffirmed in Article 24 of the UN CRPD, which states that all

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disabled people, including children, have the right to an education on an equal basis with others¹.

In this submission, we highlight the key recommendations of each of the five DPO Network members, which are discussed in greater detail in each organisation's own submission.

Disabled Women Ireland:

DWI is Ireland's only national cross-impairment Disabled Persons' Organisation (DPO)² representing disabled women, girls and non-binary people. DWI is an unfunded, entirely voluntary all-island organisation.

Key Recommendations:

1. Amend the EPSEN Act to ensure the adoption of an inclusive education system, informed by the principles of Universal Design for Learning, across all educational settings as required by the State's obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.
2. The Departments of Education and of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth should co-create a dedicated National Strategy or appropriate and actionable policy framework, with measurable timeframes and targets to prioritise transition from the current segregated educational system to an inclusive UNCRPD-compliant system. Goals and targets of this strategy should be identified in close consultation with disabled people through their CRPD-identified representative organisations, with a particular focus on prioritising the input of disabled children and young people. We further recommend that the relevant Ministers provide an annual update on

¹ Article 24: Education; UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

² A DPO is an organisation whose primary focus is advocating for the rights of disabled people where a clear majority at all decision-making levels are disabled people themselves, as defined under General Comment No. 7 (2018) of the UN CRPD: <http://docstore.ohchr.org/SelfServices/FilesHandler.ashx?enc=6QkG1d%2FPPrICAqhKb7yhnsnbHatvuFKZ%2Bt93Y3D%2Baa2pjFYzWLBu0vA%2BBR7QovZhbuyqzjDN0plweYI46WXrJJ6aB3Mx4y%2FspT%2BQrY5K2mKse5zjo%2BfvBDVU%2B42R9iK1p>

implementation of the strategy to the Dail and to relevant CRPD monitoring bodies, such as IHREC.

3. Implement the EPSEN Act in its entirety, ensuring that disabled children have statutory rights to individualised educational assessments, educational plans and related supports as well as an independent appeals process
4. DWI strongly recommends a complete ban on the use of seclusion and restraint in school settings, as recommended by the CRC Committee.
5. While transitioning to a complete ban on the use of seclusion and restraint, we also recommend that educational settings be required to report instances of seclusion and restraint to parents and guardians, that data into the use of such practises be collected, and research into their impact be conducted, and access to a complaints mechanism be provided.
6. Amend the EPSEN Act to ensure that disabled children are involved in all aspects of having their individual educational requirements met, including educational assessments, the creation of individualised educational plans and reviews.
7. Ensure access to support and a wide variety of communication methods is embedded across law and policy related to EPSEN to facilitate children and young disabled people to express their views
8. Collect disaggregated data in relation to disabled children in education and ensure that it is sent to Disabled Persons' Organisations (DPOs) in accessible, transparent formats.
9. Ensure that future consultations are fully accessible to disabled people, through engaging with DPOs
10. Adopt a systematic approach to providing alternative, accessible formats of all documents (policy and legislation) to ensure children and young people can participate in consultation processes and express their views on an equal basis with others.

Irish Deaf Society:

The IDS is the only national Deaf-led representative organisation of the Deaf, and it serves the interests and welfare of the Deaf community. It provides a number of education, personal and social services to Deaf children, adults, and their families. The Irish Deaf Society is recognised as a Disabled Peoples Organisation (DPO) under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).

Key Recommendations:

1. Include and recognise Irish Sign Language as a language within the EPSEN Act and encourage its use in all educational settings.
2. Consultation in relation to Deaf education and students must be sought from Deaf experts in this area
3. Collect data relating to the educational outcomes of Deaf students.
4. Encourage the employment of Deaf people in schools with Deaf students.
5. Include Irish Sign Language within the school curriculum
6. Improve the ISL tuition scheme as recommended in the IDS Deaf Education paper (linked below in supporting documents)
7. Reform and promote the ISL Tuition Scheme as recommended in the IDS Deaf Education paper (linked below in supporting documents). Many hearing parents are unaware of this scheme.
8. Reasonable accommodations including assistive technology (such as captioning, real-time translation and assistive listening devices) should be made available to Deaf students who do not use ISL in the classroom.

Independent Living Movement Ireland:

ILMI is a national Disabled Person's Organisation (DPO) that works to build an inclusive and equitable society for disabled people in Ireland and internationally. Our

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values of agency, collective empowerment and social justice are at the very core of all our work.

Key Recommendations:

1. The EPSEN act must be implemented fully and in line with UNCRPD.
2. Disability equality must be central to all decisions made and enacted by the EPSEN act with disabled students and their allies central to the process and outcomes that affect them.
3. Include Disability Equality training and workshops into the educational system as part of a wider emphasis on equality and diversity. This must be distinct from Disability Awareness – a practice that is outdated, and must be delivered by DPOs. Disability Equality included to the circular will make for a more contemporary, fairer and holistic approach to education and society.

The National Platform of Self Advocates:

The National Platform of Self Advocates is an independent Disabled Person's Organisation run by people with intellectual disabilities for people with intellectual disabilities.

Key Recommendations:

1. Special needs assistants should be made available to children with intellectual disabilities from the start of primary school. This would prevent children from having to go to special schools because they don't have the support needed to take part in ordinary schools.
2. All teachers should be taught how to teach and communicate with people with intellectual disabilities. This would make it easier for students and teachers to understand each other.

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3. Teachers should be taught how to use plain English. Writing and presenting information in plain English benefits everybody. It helps all students to understand and makes classrooms more inclusive.
4. People with intellectual disabilities should be employed in appropriate jobs in schools and be visible to everybody. This helps to create a positive attitude towards disabilities. It makes environments more inclusive and increases the expectations people have of individuals with intellectual disabilities.
5. Make sure that the EPSEN Act is updated to be in line with the UNCRPD.

AsIAm:

AsIAm is Ireland's national Autism charity and advocacy organisation, working to create a society in which every autistic person is empowered to reach their own personal potential and fully participate in society.

Key Recommendations:

1. Introduce longer term systemic and structural reforms which support every child's right to be educated and be included in a mainstream classroom with their peers in their local school
2. Increase accessibility of classrooms and schools in line with Universal Design.
3. Fully implement the EPSEN Act and update the Act to reflect a Social Model/Human Rights understanding of disability and best practices for inclusive education under the UNCRPD and UNCRC;
4. Increase training and opportunities for professional development for teachers and SNAs, on training which focuses on child-centred, neuro-affirmative approaches to supporting autistic pupils and pupils at school.

5. Improve data collection in relation to disabled children to enable better future planning and to better support autistic and disabled children to access an education in their local school;
6. Implement measures which result in greater recognition of the essential role of Special Needs Assistants, support teachers and therapists, and provide for their inclusion and integration into the education system, including mainstream classrooms and schools.
7. Ensure that all students can access reasonable accommodation and are provided with an accessible curriculum
8. Introduce statutory guidelines around the use of suspensions and expulsions, and for the elimination of seclusion and restraint.
9. Ensure statutory rights to Individual Educational Plans and Educational Assessments.
10. Expand the role of Children's Disability Network Teams across a range of education settings, to ensure that pupils can access Speech and Language Therapists, Occupational Therapists and Psychologists that meet their needs in their locality and ensure greater investment in disability services in conjunction with Progressing Disability Services, to meet these needs accordingly.
11. Improve communication and coordination between other departments/divisions and agencies

Access issues with the consultation process

In addition to raising our concerns about the EPSEN Act, we also wish to highlight ongoing access issues with the current consultation process. While the Department's willingness to accept submissions in formats other than the online survey via email is welcomed, it is important to note that no postal address was given for submissions to be sent in hard copy. Additionally, information about the consultation process itself was not provided in Plain English, Easy-to-Read or Irish Sign Language, limiting the

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ability of many disabled and d/Deaf people to participate in this process. Members of the DPO Network also highlighted that the vagueness of the survey questions was also inaccessible. Organisations within the DPO Network also contacted the department via the provided email address to ask questions about the consultation, but didn't get any response – creating challenges for those of us providing full submissions.

It is also important to note that under the UN CRPD, the State has a responsibility to **actively** consult with disabled people through their representative organisations (Article 4.3) which, to our knowledge, has not happened. In addition to ensuring that the views of disabled people contribute to the review itself, active consultation with DPOs is essential to support DPOs, which are chronically under-resourced and underfunded, to contribute meaningfully to this process. DPOs can also support and advise government departments in ensuring that consultations are conducted in an accessible manner.

We are also concerned about the involvement of disabled children in this consultation process. While there are currently no DPOs for children in operation in Ireland, it is absolutely essential that the views of disabled children are actively sought out and prioritised in this process and that appropriate supports are provided to facilitate their involvement.

Supporting Documents:

1. Deaf Education position paper:
<https://www.irishdeafsociety.ie/about/policy-paper-deaf-education/>
2. IDS NCSE Submission:
<https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/DeafEducationReport.pdf>
3. NDA Participation Matters Guidelines on implementing the obligation to meaningfully engage with disabled people in public decision making:
https://nda.ie/uploads/publications/NDA-Participation-Matters_Web-PDF_092022.pdf

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APPENDIX 01 – IDS Submission on EPSEN March 2023

Irish Deaf Society Response to the
Review of the Education for Persons with Special Educational
Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004

Submitted on 3rd March 2023

Introduction

This document is a response to the Department of Education’s review of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004 and is submitted by the Irish Deaf Society (IDS). The IDS is the only national Deaf-led representative organisation of the Deaf, and it serves the interests and welfare of the Deaf community. It provides a number of education, personal and social services to Deaf children, adults, and their families.

The Irish Deaf Society is recognised as a Disabled Peoples Organisation (DPO) under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). IDS are members of the World Federation of the Deaf and the European Union of the Deaf and have consulted with international Deaf representative bodies in relation to a number of societal issues that impact on Deaf people.

The Irish Deaf Society leads the ISL Act Cross Community Group, which is a group of National organisations and service providers working in the Deaf community. We consult with this group in relation to topics of interest to Deaf people including the ISL Act and the topics discussed in this submission. This group includes the following members: Bridge Interpreting, Centre for Deaf Studies (CDS) TCD, Chime, Council of ISL Interpreters of Ireland (CISLI), Council of ISL Teachers (CISLT), Greenbow LGBTQ+, Irish Deaf Research Network (IDRN), Irish Deaf Youth Association (IDYA), National Deaf Women of Ireland (NDWI), Sign Language Interpreting Service (SLIS).

There are no accurate statistics on the size of the Deaf community in Ireland, but it is estimated that 5,000 people communicate in Irish Sign Language (ISL) as their primary language together with a community of an estimated 40,000 including family, friends and those working in the Deaf community. The most recent data from the central statistics office show there are over 103,000 people who are deaf and hard of hearing in Ireland. However, not all communicate in ISL as their primary language, or many may not consider themselves to be part of the Deaf community. The IDS use the term Deaf to cover all Deaf people, regardless of the degree of hearing they have.

This document will highlight our recommendations of points to be considered in the review of the EPSEN Act.

Points to be considered

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1. The Irish Sign Language Act 2017 recognises Irish Sign Language (ISL) as the indigenous language used by the Deaf community in Ireland. This official recognition of ISL as a language is a significant step forward from the mention of sign languages in the Education Act 1998, where ISL is listed under 'service provision' in Section 72. The ISL Act 2017 contains 11 clauses covering Deaf people's right to use ISL as their native language and the obligation on public bodies to provide information, resources, and public services through ISL. Public bodies in this instance include the Department of Education, Schools as Public Service Bodies, National Council for Special Education (NCSE), National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and the Teaching Council of Ireland.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), ratified by the Irish Government on 8th March 2018, strengthens this emphasis on the rights of Deaf people to access education through the medium of ISL. For example, UNCRPD Article 24 states that "States Parties shall take appropriate measures to facilitate the learning of sign language and the promotion of the linguistic identity of the Deaf community." UNCRPD Article 2 stipulates that all languages should include signed languages while Article 21 emphasises the importance of recognising and promoting the use of sign languages. However, the EPSEN Act 2004 currently does not meet these legislative and policy objectives on the rights of Deaf people to access education through the medium of ISL. It is therefore incumbent on the EPSEN Act 2004 to include the teaching and learning of ISL and ISL as a language of instruction in school at pre-school, primary and post-primary education levels. Article 28 of the UNCRC says that children and young people have the right to education no matter who they are: regardless of race, gender or disability; if they're in detention, or if they're a refugee. Children and young people have the right to both primary and secondary education and should be able to choose different subjects when in secondary school. This should include the option of technical and vocational training, so they shouldn't have to focus on academic subjects if they don't want to.

2. The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) published a policy paper in 2011 which advocates for the development of bilingualism for Deaf children in Ireland, however, there has been no follow-through on its implementation. Given the importance of the ISL Act 2017 and UNCRPD (2006) on the right to access education through the medium of ISL, the IDS recommends the EPSEN Act includes a requirement for the provision of 'sign bilingual education' programmes for all Deaf children regardless of school placement. International research on sign bilingual education has been on the rise over the last twenty years to the extent that we can no longer ignore its importance in an Irish context. Sign bilingual education programmes have four main objectives, which are as follows:
 - a. to promote the acquisition and use of sign language as first language to support literacy and numeracy skills in spoken language (e.g., English);
 - b. to allow Deaf students to use an accessible, visual language as a means to break down access barriers and unlock the curriculum;

- c. to improve deaf students' proficiency in the written and spoken language of the majority population;
- d. to enhance deaf students' social, emotional, and positive identity development and their academic achievement.

The rationale for a sign bilingual education programme lies in the fact that Deaf children “are naturally predisposed to visual communication, as this mode is compatible with the way they perceive the world” and sign language is more accessible than spoken language. Evidence shows that sign language turns on Deaf people’s visual abilities while spoken language requires the ability to hear and speak which Deaf people have limited use. Evidence also indicates that focus on the exclusive use of spoken language even with the support of cochlear implants has not yielded improved literacy outcomes in many Deaf children.

In 1998 the National Forum for Early Childhood Education suggested that the Department of Education investigate the potential of setting up pre-schools that provide education through sign language as well as spoken language. However, this has not been followed up on since.

- 3. Article 24 of UNCRPD stipulates that Governments must take appropriate measures to employ teachers fluent in sign language and professionally trained to teach Deaf children. However, there is currently no mandatory qualification for teachers working with Deaf children in mainstream school and schools for Deaf children. The situation is far from satisfactory especially when we consider the rights of Deaf children to access education through the medium of ISL and be taught by qualified and competent teachers has been upheld by UNCRPD.

IDS suggest the EPSEN Act 2004 include a requirement for Deaf children to have access to appropriately qualified and trained teachers of the Deaf at all stages of their education and for teachers responsible for teaching Deaf children to undertake continuing professional development courses including ISL and deaf awareness courses. It is also the case that teachers teaching in the Deaf schools/units are not proficient in ISL and therefore it needs to be noted that this point must be related to all Deaf students, whether they are in mainstream schools or Deaf schools.

IDS recommends that higher education institutions specialising in teacher education liaise with the Centre for Deaf Studies, Trinity College Dublin, or Dublin City University’s Deaf Education training program to develop modules on ISL teaching and learning and Deaf Studies for inclusion as part of the teacher of the deaf education programme.

- 4. The Irish Deaf Society believes that individual education plans for Deaf children, under section 8 of the EPSEN Act, should include a specific focus on the development of ISL skills and access to appropriate communication supports. It is crucial that the plan is developed in consultation with a Deaf education specialist who has a thorough understanding of the

unique needs of Deaf children.

5. Section 9 of the Act highlights the role of Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENO) in the education of children with special needs. The Irish Deaf Society believes that SENOs should be required to have expertise in Deaf education and ISL to adequately support Deaf children and their families. This expertise should include knowledge of the various communication modes available to Deaf children, such as ISL and other sign languages, as well as a deep understanding of the social and emotional needs of Deaf children.
6. Early language acquisition of Irish Sign Language is critical for Deaf children as it gives them a solid foundation for future learning and socialisation. Without this early intervention, Deaf children suffer from language deprivation which can significantly affect the development and well-being of deaf children.

Some benefits that Deaf children can earn from early language acquisition are as follows:

- a. Improved cognitive development: Language acquisition supports the development of cognitive skills, such as memory, attention, and problem-solving, which can benefit a child's overall learning and academic success.
 - b. Better communication skills: Early language acquisition can help Deaf children develop effective communication skills, which can help them build relationships with others and effectively communicate their needs and thoughts.
 - c. Increased socialisation opportunities: Early language acquisition can help Deaf children interact with their peers and adults, which can help them develop social skills and build connections with others.
 - d. Higher self-esteem: Early language acquisition can help Deaf children feel more confident and comfortable expressing themselves, improving their self-esteem and overall well-being.
 - e. Improved literacy skills: Early language acquisition can support the development of literacy skills, which can help Deaf children succeed academically and in their future careers.
 - f. Overall, early language acquisition of ISL is critical for Deaf children as it can provide them with a strong foundation for future learning and socialisation.
7. The European Union of the Deaf supports mainstream education for Deaf students, providing it has specific conditions met that would make it compatible with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Article 24. Mainstream Education is not proven successful for Deaf children, with Deaf students in being placed at a serious disadvantage. Krausneker et al (2022) state mainstream schools in most European countries struggle to maintain quality education in sign languages for deaf children.

The conditions that must be met are as follows:

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- a. Acceptance that mainstream schools apply equally to a teacher and the Deaf child and must involve the integration of hearing children and interpreters together.
 - b. The Deaf child must have functional access to the school curriculum
 - c. Parents, teachers, and hearing children must learn Irish Sign Language
 - d. Schools must have Deaf teachers
 - e. Research must be carried out into the effects of integration and its continual monitoring
8. The need for accurate assessment and monitoring of the educational progress of Deaf students needs to be considered. Regular data should be collected and reported on regarding the educational outcomes of these students. This will help to identify any areas of concern and inform the development of policies and programs to better support these students in the future. It is also important that accurate data is collected regarding the usage of ISL in education.
9. The majority of Deaf children are born to hearing parents, many of whom have no previous experience or knowledge of the Deaf community. DCU's Elizabeth Mathews report from 2021, 'Socio-Emotional Development in Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children', found that only one family out of 20 families who have a Deaf child was given any information about ISL or the Deaf community. Parents need to be supported by organisations such as the IDS, as well as the Department of Education in ensuring that they are aware of their children's right to Education in their preferred language. The Department currently provides the Visiting Teacher Service, which claims to support ISL provision, however, spoken language remains dominant over ISL. Visiting teachers must be further informed and aware of ISL and the Deaf community to be able to support family members to the full extent. It is also important that family members have access to ISL. For Deaf parents of students, the Department of Education needs a clear policy regarding the provision of access and information through ISL. Many Deaf children who have cochlear implants, or other hearing aids, are not encouraged to use ISL, or their families are not provided with information about the Deaf community.
10. Many Deaf students are currently supported by Deaf Special Needs Assistants in their classrooms. However, the title of SNA is not sufficient to cover the job that these members of staff are doing. A more appropriate title for such roles is needed, as a huge percentage of their day-to-day tasks is to interpret and ensure that student is following what is being discussed in the classroom.

The Department of Education must make a conscious effort to employ Deaf people in schools that have Deaf students. Seeing successful Deaf people can inspire and motivate students to pursue their own aspirations. Deaf role models can also provide invaluable guidance and support and exposure to a diverse range of Deaf role models can help students develop a positive sense of identity and pride in their Deaf culture and community. By

providing access to Deaf role models, the Department of Education can create a more inclusive and empowering learning environment for Deaf students.

11. Having Irish Sign Language on the school curriculum is crucial for the full inclusion and equal education of Deaf people. For hearing students, learning ISL is extremely beneficial as it can help promote greater awareness and understanding of Deaf culture and community, as well as fostering empathy and respect for linguistic and cultural diversity. IDS propose that the EPSEN Act 2004 include a requirement for the inclusion of ISL as a compulsory subject in school and an exam subject at Junior and Leaving Certificate levels.
12. The National Council for Special Education has an Irish Sign Language Scheme in place, however the scheme falls far short of the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) position that inclusive education for Deaf learners is that of high-quality education with direct instruction in sign language, access to Deaf teachers and Deaf peers who use sign language, and a bilingual curriculum that includes the study of sign language. The IDS recently made a submission to the NCSE outlining our view on this scheme – that submission has been attached to this document. The submission expresses that the IDS strongly disagree with the medical criteria, which suggest that ISL should be available only to those who are profoundly Deaf and without Cochlear implants.
13. The Department of Education is responsible for the implementation of the ISL Tuition scheme. We have sent a proposal for reform of that service to the Department and received no response. The IDS Deaf Education position paper calls for improvements to this scheme which is currently not delivering enough.
14. The use of appropriate technology, such as captioning, real-time translation and assistive listening devices should be used where appropriate to support Deaf students who may not use ISL in the classroom and ensure equal access to educational material.
15. Consultation in relation to Deaf education and students must be sought from Deaf experts in this area. As outlined under the UNCRPD, disabled people and our representative organisations must be consulted on all decisions which impact our lives, not just on legislation specifically focussing on disability. The UNCRPD also states that DPOs must be involved in consultation processes from the planning or design stage onwards.

Conclusion

The Irish Sign Language Act 2017 recognizes Irish Sign Language (ISL) as the indigenous language used by the Deaf community in Ireland. This act acknowledges the right of Deaf people to use ISL as their native language and obligates public bodies to provide information and resources through ISL. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities strengthens this emphasis on the rights of Deaf people to access education through the medium of ISL.

Sign bilingual education programs have four main objectives, including promoting the acquisition and use of sign language as a first language to enhance the social, emotional, and positive identity development of Deaf students.

The Irish Deaf Society believes that individual education plans for Deaf children should include a specific focus on the development of ISL skills and access to appropriate communication supports. Additionally, they recommend that higher education institutions specializing in teacher education develop modules on ISL teaching and learning for inclusion as part of the teacher of the deaf education program.

Overall, the IDS emphasizes the importance of early language acquisition of ISL for Deaf children and highlights the need for qualified teachers and appropriate access and support to fulfil their right to education.

Supporting Documents

1. Irish Sign Language Act 2017:

<https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2017/act/40/enacted/en/html>

2. Deaf Education position paper:

<https://www.irishdeafociety.ie/about/policy-paper-deaf-education/>

3. The Education of Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children in Ireland – NCSE Policy paper:

<https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/DeafEducationReport.pdf>

4. Socio-Emotional Development in Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children:

https://www.chime.ie/images/uploads/news/Socio-Emotional_Development_in_Deaf_and_Hard_of_Hearing_Children_2021.pdf

5. IDS NCSE Submission:

(Attached to email submission.)

6. Bilingual School Education with Spoken and Signed Languages in Europe:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/13670050.2020.1799325?needAccess=true&role=button>

7. The Case for Sign Bilingualism in Irish Deaf Education:

<https://journal.iraal.ie/index.php/teanga/article/view/1275/1622>

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For further information regarding the information stated above, please contact the Irish Deaf Society Advocacy Service at advocacy@irishdeafsociety.ie or 01 860 1878.

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