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## Reflections on the education of the deaf in Catalonia and Brazil: the place of sign languages

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**Abstract:** Bilingual education for deaf students that addresses the linguistic and cultural specificities of children during the language acquisition and development period remains a significant challenge worldwide. This article discusses the organizational structures of schools serving deaf students in Catalonia, Spain, and Brazil, focusing on the role of sign languages in these contexts. The aim is to discuss the presence of sign languages in these schools and their incorporation into pedagogical practices. To this end, the organizational forms of schools in Catalonia and Brazil will be reported based on legislative and educational documents and observational visits, with a focus on who is responsible for teaching sign languages and how they are integrated into school spaces. The results indicate strengths and challenges, including the need to develop a specific curriculum for teaching sign languages and to improve teachers' continuing education, with a focus on assessment, teaching, and learning. Comparative analyses of different realities can inform strategies to improve the provision of bilingual education for deaf students.

**Keywords:** deaf education; inclusive education; sign language teaching; comparative education.

### 1 Introduction

Sign language (SL) is the language by which deaf individuals are constituted, and when adopted in educational settings, it fosters the better development of deaf students (Lacerda; Santos, 2013; Morales López, 2019). Education in SL is a linguistic right of deaf individuals, as it is through SL that deaf children can become self-aware, think about the world, and understand it (Lacerda; Santos, 2013; Swanwick, 2016). Upon arriving at school, children can acquire the proposed knowledge if it is taught in an accessible language that does not constitute an obstacle and that comfortably allows them to think, ask questions, and reflect on the content being taught. In this regard, deaf children have the linguistic right to attend a school that offers school practices in sign language. This premise, an inalienable right, remains a significant



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challenge to be achieved in the education of deaf people in various contexts around the world (Marschark; Antia; Knoors, 2019; Tang, 2024).

Until the last decade of the 20th century, deaf people were preferentially educated in special schools focused on oral communication, both in Brazil and in Catalonia (Spain) (Fernández-Viader; Fuentes, 2004). It was thought that these individuals needed to be schooled separately from other students, with a slowed progression, and many schools proposed completing a school grade in two academic years. This form of schooling was challenged, on the one hand, by studies on sign languages and the affirmation of their importance for the development of deaf people, and, on the other hand, by discussions proposing inclusive education for all groups in mainstream schools (Skliar, 1998).

The Salamanca Declaration addresses principles, policies, and practices in the area of special educational needs (UNESCO, 1994) and deepens the debate by guiding the education of deaf people primarily towards spaces that prioritize sign language as the primary medium of linguistic exchange. However, the educational response takes diverse forms, ranging from schools with bilingual and bicultural projects to schools that include sign language as a means of instruction, as linguistic and cognitive support, or simply as a language of interaction. Swanwick indicates (2016, pp. 1-2, our translation):

There is no globally agreed-upon definition for bilingual education for deaf children. Policies and practices vary significantly across national contexts, particularly regarding the roles and uses of spoken and written language. However, there is a common philosophy and an underlying set of principles that transcend countries and cultures. From a philosophical standpoint, bilingual education seeks to achieve humanitarian and democratic goals, such as social inclusion and the valuing of diversity. It is an educational approach that recognizes the unique and distinctive characteristics of deaf language and culture, validates the linguistic and cultural choices of deaf people, and celebrates this diversity.

However, what does it mean for sign language (SL) to be the “language of instruction”? Will the school content, practices, and actions be presented in SL? Yes! However, it is not just that. A bilingual school for deaf students also needs to have SL as the language from which pedagogical proposals are conceived, teaching methodologies are organized, and learning processes are evaluated. Thus, tensions remain regarding the schooling models to be offered to deaf people in the two realities

examined in this article, since the need for, and the primacy of, SL in their constitution and development are not always clear.

This article aims to present information about the educational model for deaf people in Catalonia and Brazil, highlighting elements of school organization and the role of sign languages in different experiences. The fluidity of the concept of "bilingualism" in different realities and official documents will be considered. Therefore, the goal is to understand how sign languages are present in schools and how they participate in pedagogical practices.

As a methodology for this study, a qualitative and descriptive approach was adopted, with document analysis and field research as procedures (Paiva, 2019). For the document analysis, widely disseminated legislative documents from both countries were consulted, as were documents related to the schools' educational projects. In addition, *on-site observation visits were conducted at the schools in both Catalonia and Brazil, followed by field diary entries by the authors during data collection for the Narwhal Project (Jarque et al., 2025)*. For the discussions and analyses, we sought to anchor them in the literature on the area.

Both documentary data and data from observational visits were treated from the perspective of Comparative Education (Nóvoa, 2017). Thus, it is not only an interest in comparing educational systems, but a study perspective that takes into account the interrelationships between education and society, considering local and global contexts in understanding educational issues.

## **2 Deaf education and sign language in Catalonia**

In Catalonia, an autonomous community in northeastern Spain, deaf people were educated in specialized centers until the early 1980s under the oralist paradigm (Bellés *et al.*, 2000). The implementation of the *bilingual education modality* began in 1994-1995 (Fernández-Viader; Fuentes, 2004).

In the same year, 1994, the Parliament of Catalonia approved a Proposition that marked the beginning of the process of official recognition of LS and its use in the school context (Jarque; Bosch-Baliarda; González, 2019). The next step was taken in 2006, with the approval of the Statute of Autonomy of Catalonia (Catalonia, 2006, art. 50.6, p. 16, our translation), a regional organic law with legal recognition at the national level, which includes an explicit reference to LS:

Public authorities must guarantee the use of Catalan Sign Language and the conditions that enable equality for deaf people who choose this language, which should be taught, protected, and respected.

Also in 2006, the Organic Law of Education (LOE) (Spain, 2006) was approved, a national standard that establishes the fundamental framework of the country's education system. In 2020, it was modified by the Organic Law of Modification of the LOE (LOMLOE) (Spain, 2020). These laws, together with the autonomous regulations—especially the Education Law of Catalonia (LEC) (Catalonia, 2009) and two decrees that develop it (Catalonia, 2017, 2022)—constitute the legal framework that regulates the educational proposal in Catalonia, since this autonomous community holds exclusive powers in matters of education.

Regarding the vision of sign language in the educational context contemplated in these legal texts, the LOE (Law on Educational Orientation) aimed to establish a common educational framework for the entire Spanish State, respecting the territorial organization and competencies of the autonomous communities. It also sought to guarantee quality education for all students, based on the principles of equity, inclusion, and compensation for inequalities. However, despite these principles, the LOE did not address the education of deaf students or sign language.

It was only with the approval of Law No. 27/2007 (Spain, 2007) that Spanish Sign Language (LSE) and Catalan Sign Language (LSC) were officially recognized, in addition to regulating means of support for oral communication for deaf, deaf-blind, and hard-of-hearing people, in the context of accessibility. This law recognizes the right of these people to freely choose to learn, understand, and use sign languages (Jarque; Bosch-Baliarda; González, 2019).

Two years later, the Catalan Education Law (LEC) (Catalonia, 2009) was approved, whose main objective was to establish an educational model adapted to the social, cultural, and linguistic needs of Catalonia. This law stipulates that Catalan will be the language of instruction and learning in schools, while also guaranteeing the learning of Spanish and, progressively, a third foreign language. Furthermore, the LEC aims to guarantee equity and access to education for all children and young people, as well as promoting the autonomy of educational units, allowing them to adapt their pedagogical projects. The LEC does not explicitly refer to the LSC (Catalan Language Law), but it contributes to the development of specific educational projects in educational institutions.

Only in 2010 did the Parliament of Catalonia approve Law No. 17/2010 on Catalan Sign Language (Catalonia, 2010). The legal text adopts a linguistic and cultural perspective that differs significantly from the recognition conferred at the national level (Jarque; Bosch-Baliarda; González, 2019) and explicitly mentions the educational context. Article 5.2 establishes:

In the school setting, the learning of Catalan Sign Language is guaranteed in the bilingual educational modality, in which it is the vehicular language of instruction, along with Catalan, as the official and vehicular language of the education system, and the other official oral and written languages in Catalonia (Catalunya, 2010, p. 7, our translation).

Furthermore, this law was complemented in 2014 with the approval of Accessibility Law No. 13/2014, which defines the "bilingual educational modality":

An educational project in which Catalan Sign Language coexists as a subject of study and a vehicular language for communication and access to the school curriculum, along with the official oral and written languages, which are also objects of learning (Catalonia, 2014, pp. 947-80, our translation).

It is telling that both the language law, proposed by the then Department of Culture, and the accessibility law, promoted by the Department of Social Rights, explicitly guarantee bilingual education, whereas the education law does not. Although the LEC (Law on Completion of Education) was regulated by Decree No. 150/2017 (Catalonia, 2017), on educational support for students within the framework of an inclusive education system, it makes no explicit reference to sign language, although it does include specific support for students with hearing impairments.

Even in the LOMLOE (Spain, 2020), whose main objective is to guarantee equitable, inclusive, and quality education that is comprehensive, flexible, and adapted to the diversity of students, the reference to Spanish Sign Language (LSC) is quite limited. It appears only in Article 75, relating to educational, social, and labor inclusion, which states: "2. to strengthen educational inclusion, educational administrations may incorporate Spanish Sign Languages into their educational offerings" (Spain, 2020, art. 75, p. 43, our translation). In other words, although the principles of inclusion and personalized attention to the student, through specific support from the initial stages of education, stand out as key aspects, the use of LS is not configured as a guaranteed right but rather as an optional possibility to be decided by educational administrations.

Only in 2022 was Decree No. 175/2022 approved by the Catalan Parliament, which regulates teaching methods in basic education and explicitly states the use of

sign language in educational contexts. It establishes, in parallel with the national organic law, that: “In order to reinforce inclusion, centers may incorporate Catalan Sign Language into their educational offerings” (Catalonia, 2022, p. 10, our translation). Furthermore, sign language is explicitly indicated as an instrument for thinking and learning, with a status equivalent to that of spoken and written language.

Competence in linguistic communication forms the basis for independent thought and knowledge construction in all areas of learning. Therefore, its development is linked to explicit reflection on the functioning of language in the specific discursive genres of each area of knowledge, as well as to the uses of orality, sign language, and writing for thinking and learning. Finally, it enables the appreciation of the aesthetic dimension of language and the enjoyment of literary culture (Catalunha, 2022, p. 35, our translation).

In other words, it recognizes its relevance to Catalonia's sociolinguistic reality and treats it as formative content for all students. It argues that LSC is not only an instrument aimed at the inclusion of students with hearing impairments, but also a resource that enriches the linguistic and cognitive development of all students, regardless of their profile.

Finally, the reference to Catalan Sign Language (LSC) in Decree 91/2024, which regulates the linguistic regime of the non-university education system, is particularly relevant. The decree establishes, among its purposes, “To ensure the learning and use of Catalan Sign Language for students with hearing impairments in the bilingual education modality” (Catalonia, 2024, p. 8, our translation). However, it is important to note that a decision of the Superior Court of Justice of Catalonia currently suspends the decree. Some of its articles were declared null and void as a result of an administrative appeal filed by an entity that argued that the decree did not guarantee the effective and balanced use of Castilian Spanish in the education system. For this reason, it is necessary to monitor the case's legal evolution to determine the definitive scope of the norm, including the provisions relating to LSC.

These legislative advances have great symbolic relevance, as they clearly highlight the reality of the few schools with bilingual projects. They constitute legal recognition of this reality. However, teachers do not have an approved LSC (Language, Culture, and Society) curriculum proposal, despite the bilingual modality having been in place for 30 years. Over these three decades, three curriculum proposals have been developed: 2005, 2010, and 2021 (Jarque *et al.*, 2021). These versions met the demands of various legislative proposals in the educational field but were ultimately

shelved. The lack of an official curriculum compromises the progress of pedagogical activities related to LSC.

Currently, only in the city of Barcelona is it possible to access education that includes LSC (Brazilian Sign Language) from a bilingual perspective. Below, we will discuss the characteristics of the two schooling modalities (special and mainstream) that include LSC. The educational program for deaf students begins early through one of the educational services that offer additional and intensive support to educational institutions: the Center for Re-education for the Hearing Impaired (CREDA). Admission to CREDA is based on a medical diagnosis of hearing loss.

Among CREDA's functions are providing families with information about schooling options, resources, and services available to meet their children's needs, and identifying specific needs. Only in situations where significant support needs are present can a person attend a special education school specifically for deaf people. Generally, children with other disabilities or needs arising from language deprivation are served. In some cases, the school also serves high school students who need to maintain and develop basic skills through instruction in sign language to access non-compulsory high school in regular institutions later.

Only one specific special education school includes sign language (LS) in its pedagogical proposal within the institution's educational project: CEE Josep Pla. This center's methodology is based on bilingualism: the use of both sign language and spoken language, both Catalan and Spanish. The service is individualized: tutoring sessions are in small groups (4-5), grouped by profiles and ages. Furthermore, the students mostly come from cities near Barcelona, and most receive transportation grants. It offers Early Childhood Education and Elementary School for students aged 3 to 14. Its objective is to provide an appropriate pedagogical approach for each student, promoting, whenever possible, inclusion in the regular education system at the end of the Elementary School stage (CEE Josep Pla, 2020). However, few students complete this stage.

The Center offers secondary education for students aged 14 to 21 who are unable to attend regular high school, providing adapted compulsory secondary education (ESO) with the possibility of a graduation diploma and access to mid-level technical courses. For these students, shared schooling is contemplated, combining attendance in regular centers and special education centers, promoting diverse

experiences and contact with hearing or deaf students from other contexts. The partner center should preferably prioritize deaf students.

However, the most frequent student profile at the Center comprises young migrants from Latin American or Asian countries who arrive without a language of communication or thought, due to linguistic deprivation (Morales López, 2024). Therefore, the Center also proposes two other educational approaches: (a) transition programs to adulthood, aimed at both students with additional difficulties and those who enter the education system late; and (b) training and integration programs, aimed at students with longer schooling or with abilities that allow them to access official technical training. It also has a "comprehensive support room" for students with other special educational needs resulting from linguistic deprivation or developmental conditions, such as autism spectrum disorder or intellectual disability.

In all these options, LSC is used as a language of communication and a vehicle for learning, including in the teaching of the foreign language, English, with a focus on developing writing skills. The Center's linguistic project records the basic principles (CEE Josep Pla, 2011, p. 6, our translation):

- Sign language is incorporated into the curriculum for deaf students as an area of study, on par with other areas of the curriculum.
- Given the characteristics of deaf students, the competence in sign language that a student will typically achieve will be superior to that in spoken language. Therefore, this is not balanced bilingualism. Sign language is considered the first language, and spoken language the second.
- Sign language is used as a language of communication and learning, and also for learning spoken language, mainly in written form, explaining its functioning through the contrast between the respective structures.
- The bilingual approach also implies the incorporation of cultural and social content related to the community of deaf sign language users in the area of sign language.

Furthermore,

Sign language competence allows one to develop and express ideas, opinions, and feelings, that is, to construct one's own thinking. We consider this in all its dimensions: that of sign language interaction, that of visual listening (referring to attention to what is said in a visual-gestural way), and the production and mediation between verbal and non-verbal aspects (CEE Josep Pla, 2011, p. 7, our translation).

However, these proposals from the Center's linguistic project and the PEC constitute a partial reality within the institution. Sign language teaching has been

avored by the individual commitment of the faculty, mainly due to the presence of deaf sign language teachers with specialized training in sign language who have remained constantly up to date. Cultural aspects and the processes of constructing deaf identity are also considered. This aspect is further enhanced by the presence, in the 2024–2025 academic year, of four deaf sign language teachers, one of whom serves as director and the others as tutors in the classrooms. These professionals also have specific training in teaching sign language, offered through postgraduate programs and university courses. Furthermore, they are actively involved in the deaf community association movement, leaders who have contributed to language policy and the dissemination of sign language as a language of learning.

The educational support service also enhances the presence of adult sign language interpreters. Two deaf monitors, proficient in Sign Language, accompany students during meals, after school hours, and in extracurricular activities. Furthermore, the educational perspective incorporates a vision of the international deaf community. To this end, activities are proposed that involve deaf people, many from other countries, who give lectures on various topics. Telematic exchange projects are also organized with other centers serving deaf students and using other sign languages and spoken languages, such as English.

The other option is the mainstream school with a bilingual program, whose proposal, as mentioned earlier, is limited to Catalonia, restricted to a single center per educational stage; it is located in Barcelona and forms a continuous service line. The following explains how these centers are organized and how the bilingual program is implemented. All receive support from CREDA Pere. Barnils, which provides speech therapists, a deaf teacher for the students, and support in pedagogical strategies.

Families with children aged 0 to 3 years who choose the bilingual model in the first cycle of Early Childhood Education should enroll their children at the Bressol Municipal Forestier School, a center with five classrooms (EBM Forestier, 2024). Sign language acquisition is facilitated by its use in activities specific to the educational level (such as storytelling and experimentation) and in communication situations and basic needs (such as feeding, sleeping, etc.). Once a week, a deaf teacher participates for 90 minutes to support sign language interaction in the classroom. The Center also has a deaf educator with technical training in Early Childhood Education to offer

educational support. One of the main limitations of this educational proposal is the small number of deaf children attending the Center.

Regarding the educational proposal in regular schools, bilingual education is provided only in the second-cycle stages of Early Childhood Education (3–6 years) and Elementary Education (6–12 years) at the Três Pins Municipal School. The bilingual project to serve deaf students is based on two axes: (a) the joint education of deaf and hearing students and (b) bilingual (intermodal) education for deaf students (EM Tres Pins, 2016). The first axis is achieved through educational attention, preferably in mixed classrooms with deaf and hearing students. In these classrooms, there are two professionals: the main teacher, who expresses themselves orally, and the co-tutor, the Hearing and Language teacher, with competence in LSC and dual qualification (teacher and speech therapist, or equivalent qualifications).

Regarding the second axis, bilingual education for deaf students is realized through the use of CSL (Catalan Sign Language) as L1 (first language) and written and spoken language as L2 (second language). This implies that CSL provides access to all curricular content. The Hearing and Language teacher accompanies deaf students in the classroom, adapting and interpreting spoken-language content, developing adapted activities, assisting the main teacher, and supporting families, among other functions. This role encompasses all curricular areas except linguistics. Spoken and written languages are taught outside the classroom, in small groups, using a methodology similar to that of L2 teaching. This process is conducted by the speech-language pathologist, who is also a teacher. Regarding English, the offering varies according to the students' profiles and the development of their communicative skills in CSL and spoken Catalan.

Portuguese (Brazil): SCL is taught as L1 to deaf students in a dedicated classroom by a deaf teacher (Aliaga; Cedillo Vicente; Sánchez-Amat, 2018). Hearing students receive SCL training for one hour per week. However, no curriculum proposal provides specific guidelines for its teaching, either as L1 or L2. Furthermore, the hearing students' SCL level does not allow for fluid communication with deaf students. A clear limitation is observed, as there is only one teacher for all levels.

Regarding secondary education (ages 12–16), it currently takes place at the Institut El Bosc de Montjuïc, where the center's bilingual educational project is in the definition phase. Sign Language (LS) is taught as a first language (L1) to deaf students

by a deaf teacher, and is shared with the Tres Pins Elementary School, which also serves as an identity and cultural reference point.

Clearly, a single teacher cannot be the sole instructor of LSC (Language, Culture, and Society) across all three regular schools, moving between them. As for interpreters, they only work in post-compulsory secondary education (from age 16 onwards) and under precarious working conditions, as they are outsourced. Consequently, many of them leave the profession each year, thereby reducing the availability of interpreters in educational institutions.

If the deaf student is not enrolled in these centers, they can attend centers for deaf groups. In this case, some centers that receive support from CREDA Pere At Barnils and CREDA Jordi Perelló, students can count on speech therapists and bilingual support teachers who use sign language to access the curriculum, but they do not receive classes in LSC (Languages and Communication).

#### **4 Deaf education in the Brazilian context**

In Brazil, thanks to the struggles of the deaf community (deaf activists, family members, and researchers), the linguistic right to a sign language has been translated into several legal documents, such as: recognition of Brazilian Sign Language (Libras) as a "form of communication and expression of deaf communities" (Brazil, 2002); the presence of Libras as a "language of instruction" in schools that promote Bilingual Education for the Deaf (Brazil, 2005); and the right to communicational accessibility (Brazil, 2015).

Thus, spaces that accept deaf students and have been called "bilingual" are those that, despite varying organizational structures, incorporate Libras (Brazilian Sign Language) in their school practices. In Brazil, the bilingual school education modality is that offered in Libras as L1 (first language) and in written Portuguese as L2 (second language), in bilingual schools for the deaf, bilingual classes for the deaf, mainstream schools, or bilingual education centers for the deaf, as stipulated by Law No. 14.191 (Brazil, 2021).

To address the Brazilian reality, we chose to present and discuss some of the various forms of school organization that, having deaf students enrolled, include Libras (Brazilian Sign Language), in order to reflect on the place occupied by this language in school practices and on the possible impacts of these forms of organization on the

schooling of deaf students in Brazil. These are: a) schools for deaf students; b) hub schools; and c) inclusion in mainstream schools, highlighting the work of Specialized Educational Services (AEE) and the role of the Sign Language Interpreter (TILS).

In Brazil, according to Rocha (2018), the education of deaf people has been studied since the founding of the “National College for Deaf-Mutes of Both Sexes” in 1856. The author emphasizes that documentary research prior to this milestone is practically nonexistent. The “College”, currently known as the National Institute for Deaf Education (INES), is recognized within the Ministry of Education (MEC) as a national reference center for deafness, supporting the formulation and implementation of public policies.

It is known that the "College" was a space for the circulation of sign language, according to an 1875 publication, "Iconography of the Signs of the Deaf-Mute". According to Rocha (2018), the book is a copy of Pélissier's 1856 work, a French deaf teacher, and the documentary importance of the Iconography stands out, as it is the first document produced in Brazil to guide the learning and consultation of manual signs. Therefore, the central role of sign language from the beginning of the institutionalization of deaf education in the country is evident.

Currently, schools for deaf students are those that preferentially <sup>1</sup>enroll deaf students and use Libras (Brazilian Sign Language) as the language of instruction and communication in school practices. These schools have been the model advocated by deaf communities as the most suitable for deaf students (Brazil, 2014). These schools are relatively easy to organize in large urban centers, where there are significant numbers of deaf students who can meet and form this school community. In this space, the language of interaction and school practices should be Libras. Teachers, administrators, and other school professionals, such as librarians and cafeteria workers, should interact with deaf students in Libras. Furthermore, it is fundamental that the curricular organization of these schools takes into account: Libras and its functioning (Paiutto; Lacerda, 2024); the primacy of visuality among deaf students (Lebedeff, 2017); and the cultural issues of deaf communities (Karnopp; Klein; Lunardi-Lazzarin, 2011).

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<sup>1</sup> Some schools also prioritize the enrollment of children of deaf parents, even if they are hearing. The focus is on prioritizing users of Libras (Brazilian Sign Language).

Currently in Brazil, all basic education networks are required to follow the National Common Curriculum Base (BNCC), which guides the content to be covered across various subject areas and school years. However, the BNCC makes no mention of Libras (Brazilian Sign Language) or the unique experiences of deaf individuals, instead focusing on teaching Portuguese as a mother tongue, paying little attention to the bilingual conditions of minorities such as indigenous and deaf communities (Colacique; Gonçalves, 2023). Furthermore, few educational networks in Brazil have a curriculum specifically designed for deaf students who use Libras (see, for example, the Municipal Secretariat of São Paulo, 2019a; 2019b), that is, with Libras as a curricular language rather than merely a language of communication. Nevertheless, these schools can plan, implement, and evaluate pedagogical actions aimed at teaching and learning processes in Libras.

In terms of pedagogical design, how do such schools define themselves as bilingual? Müller and Karnopp (2017) investigated the problematization of bilingual school education for deaf students in the state of Rio Grande do Sul (RS). The authors analyzed documents that characterize schools for deaf students as bilingual, such as the School Regulations and the Political-Pedagogical Proposal. They found that the schools for deaf students participating in the research characterize themselves as bilingual in school documents because they enable:

[...] services for deaf students; educational proposal based on bilingualism; curriculum and access to content in sign language; importance of acquiring sign language; learning Portuguese, in written form, successively to the acquisition of Libras (Brazilian Sign Language); respect for deaf history, identity and culture; attention to linguistic differences and deaf singularities; contact with bilingual educators and deaf instructors; formation of the deaf community; articulation with deaf cultural markers; among other points (Müller; Karnopp, 2017, p. 71).

Furthermore, according to the authors, the documents establish Libras (Brazilian Sign Language) and Portuguese as, respectively, the first and second languages, and recognize Libras as a linguistic system that should be prioritized in curricular activities at all levels of education. Thus, when we observe schools for deaf students in operation, what obstacles do we encounter? Firstly, there is a limited number of deaf teachers working there. Although it is becoming less frequent, some school systems still avoid hiring deaf teachers due to an ableist perspective, or, when hiring such a teacher, only allow them to teach Libras (Martins, 2025).

Nowadays, more trained deaf teachers are available (Martins, 2025); however, they are not always employed in schools for deaf students, mainly due to obstacles in public competitions and selection processes, a reality we observed in the schools visited. Tests prepared and designed for users of Portuguese as their mother tongue sometimes penalize these professionals, who are unable to be approved to work in these schools.

It is also noteworthy that it has been more frequent to find deaf teachers with degrees in Sign Language<sup>2</sup> (qualified to teach Sign Language in the final years of elementary school and high school) than deaf teachers with degrees in Pedagogy (qualified for Early Childhood Education and the initial years of elementary school) and/or other teaching degrees, and therefore qualified to teach the various subjects of elementary school – final years and high school. Many deaf students opt for a degree in Sign Language, both because of the greater availability of courses (compared to a degree in Bilingual Pedagogy) and because of the conditions of access and retention, given the linguistic accessibility compared to other teaching degrees. This scenario means that the majority of teachers working in schools for the deaf are hearing teachers.

Regarding proficiency in Libras (Brazilian Sign Language) among hearing teachers working in schools for deaf students, Müller and Karnopp (2017) interviewed teachers responsible for the Portuguese Language subject. Regarding the priority role of Libras, as evidenced in the documents and teachers' statements, it is important to note that when asked about their fluency, only eight teachers described themselves as fluent in Libras.

Müller and Karnopp (2017, p. 77) draw attention to the inconsistencies between what is written (in documents) and what is said (in interviews) in relation to what happens daily in schools:

We observed that institutions propose prioritizing the development of sign language through children's contact with deaf and hearing professionals who use it; however, there is a shortage of these professionals in schools. Sign language classes are proposed for families and the school community, but

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<sup>2</sup> On the MEC website, e-MEC system ( <https://emec.mec.gov.br/emec/nova> ), there are 132 records of undergraduate courses containing the name "Libras" (Brazilian Sign Language). Of these, 107 are Bachelor's degree courses in Libras, under various names; 22 are Bachelor's degree courses in Libras that were TILS (Interpreters of Libras Sign Language), and only three are Bilingual Pedagogy courses. In addition, there are five records with the name "Bilingual Education for the Deaf," three of which have not yet started.

there is little demand. A bilingual school is proposed; however, in meetings, communication generally occurs in spoken language (oral form), relying on translators and interpreters for communication between deaf and hearing individuals. [...] Classes are taught in sign language, but assessments are generally written. A bilingual education is proposed; however, some curricula prioritize sign language classes over bilingual education.

While acknowledging some impasses and inconsistencies in the contexts of bilingual schools, Müller and Karnopp (2017) emphasize that the intention is not to discredit the work developed in these institutions, but, on the contrary, to highlight the need to provoke reflection so that it is possible to think about bilingual education for deaf people in other ways. In this sense, proficiency in sign language is a necessary condition for working in a school for deaf students (Souza; Lacerda, 2023), but it is not sufficient. If teachers are not attentive to the curriculum and pedagogical actions from the perspective of Libras (Brazilian Sign Language), the pedagogical practice will be compromised. Regrettably, even in these schools, there is often little reflection on Libras and on how this language can guide practices that focus on visibility, spatiality, and the relationships inherent to the functioning of a sign language (Peluso; Lodi, 2015).

It is not uncommon to find organizational structures in schools for deaf students conceived from a hearing perspective. The ways of conducting meetings, planning teaching activities, and evaluating classes do not always follow or prioritize Libras (Brazilian Sign Language). The fact that Libras is the language of instruction does not guarantee that it guides ways of thinking, teaching, and constructing knowledge—it may be there as a language to communicate something, but not necessarily as the language from which practices are effectively built.

Furthermore, deaf students are not always offered the opportunity to interact with the deaf school community, even when there are bilingual schools for deaf students. To understand the complexity of deaf education, we will take as an example the situation analyzed by Camillo (2020). The researcher investigated deaf education in the municipality of Santa Maria, a medium-sized city in Rio Grande do Sul. In this municipality, the author mapped nine state schools with deaf students enrolled in the 1st through 9th grades of elementary school and twelve municipal schools with deaf students enrolled in Youth and Adult Education (EJA). It is important to highlight that there is, in the city, a specific bilingual public school for deaf students; however, the mapping carried out by Camillo (2020) indicates that the children and young people

are "scattered" throughout the city, which does not constitute the organization of specific classes for deaf people. According to the author, the municipal schools have a special education teacher working in Specialized Educational Assistance (AEE). As Müller and Karnopp (2017) note, attending a school for deaf students, in addition to the need for public school transport, implies a political-ideological choice on the part of family members or the deaf people themselves.

Still within the context of schools for deaf students, it is not uncommon to find Special Education classrooms that provide care for deaf students with specific educational needs (such as visual, cognitive, and behavioral support, among others). For this care to be effective, it must be provided by a bilingual professional who works to promote the full development of this population, and such professionals are not always available.

Another possibility for bilingual schooling is the so-called bilingual hub school for deaf students, which are regular schools that accept hearing students but prioritize enrollment of deaf students, seeking to group them into a school unit within a given region (Brazil, 2005, 2021; Lacerda; Santos; Martins, 2016). This has been the solution found for bilingual education for deaf people in less populated cities; in regions of large cities where there are not enough deaf people to organize a school for deaf students; or, also, because it is believed that the proximity of deaf and hearing students can favor better school and social development for all students.

In this proposal, in Early Childhood Education and the initial grades of Elementary School, deaf children will be in exclusive classes for deaf students (bilingual classes), in which the language of instruction is Libras (Brazilian Sign Language). Sometimes, these classes are organized in a multi-grade format, grouping deaf students from two or more school years, so that linguistic exchanges are more intense and they feel in a more interesting learning environment. It is argued that classes of 8 or 10 students, for example, during a school cycle, are more conducive to development and learning than classes with 2 or 3 children from a single school year (Lacerda; Santos; Martins, 2016).

In this context, bilingual teachers (generally hearing, for the reasons already explained) are in charge of the classroom. Often, due to the need for fewer teachers, they are selected based on their proficiency in Libras (Brazilian Sign Language). In these classrooms, it is expected that the content planned for Early Childhood

Education and Elementary School – Early Years will be taught in Libras and that the conceptual construction and expansion of linguistic mastery by deaf children will occur consistently. Also, in this form of organization, Libras must be the language of instruction – the language from which school practices are conceived and applied.

It is also worth highlighting the frequency with which these schools offer sign language instruction to the surrounding community and to the families of deaf students, aiming to expand the use of sign language and communication between students and their families. This action, in general, gives visibility to the deaf community and, more specifically, to its relevance in education.

Regarding these teaching experiences, little has been learned, especially regarding pedagogical practices. Formagio and Lacerda (2016) document the daily life of one of these classrooms, in which it is possible to identify practices in which Libras (Brazilian Sign Language) is effectively the language of instruction and of the constitution of subjects.

For the final years of elementary school, deaf students are placed in regular classes (where both deaf and hearing students are enrolled), and Libras (Brazilian Sign Language) is present through the work of TILS (sign language interpreters), who mediate classroom interactions. This organizational structure is based on the idea that, in the early grades, deaf children appropriate Libras and the fundamental content presented by the school, in and through Libras, and that, in the final years of elementary school, they will be able to follow the school curriculum through translation processes. Daroque and Lacerda (2023), in research conducted at a leading bilingual education school for deaf students, analyze planning, teaching, and assessment practices carried out by classroom teachers and TILS, and point out the possibilities and challenges of this form of school organization, since teachers and TILS are not always able to develop work that considers the singularities and needs of deaf students.

In this context, Brazilian legislation (Brazil, 2005) provides for the teaching of Portuguese as a second language for deaf students; that is, Portuguese content must be taught using a specific methodology, through Libras (Brazilian Sign Language), by a bilingual teacher. This requires a licensed bilingual teacher to work in the final years of elementary school, a type of training that is still uncommon in Brazil (only three face-to-face courses are registered in the e-MEC system). In general, school systems seek

bilingual Libras/Portuguese language professionals within their staff who are available for this role, or they develop training programs to prepare some teachers for this task.

In schools where this is implemented, there are reports of successful practices in teaching Portuguese and student learning (Lacerda; Santos; Martins, 2016). In other subjects, the TILS (Translator and Interpreter of Brazilian Sign Language) translate lessons taught in spoken Portuguese into Libras (Brazilian Sign Language), a process that is always complex (Daroque; Lacerda, 2023; Santos; Lacerda, 2015). Partnerships between teachers and TILS are essential for TILS's work to make sense in Libras for deaf students, but they do not always materialize. The lead teacher needs to be attentive to the needs of deaf students and negotiate with TILS for more appropriate ways to approach the content so that meaning in Libras is achieved (Daroque; Lacerda, 2023).

Also, in bilingual schools for the deaf, the presence of deaf teachers is fundamental; if this is not possible, the presence of deaf instructors responsible for teaching sign language to deaf and/or hearing students, as well as to school professionals, is essential. The presence of deaf adults who use sign language is fundamental for teaching and communication in Libras (Brazilian Sign Language), as well as for issues of identity. The presence of deaf peers, diverse linguistic exchanges, and a deaf community, even if integrated into a larger hearing community, can provide a sense of belonging.

This form of school organization, while favoring the participation of deaf and hearing students in joint activities, expanding respect and knowledge about Libras (Brazilian Sign Language) for society in general, demands adjustments, since the school curriculum is traditionally designed for hearing people. In this sense, the presence of two languages imposes new ways of organizing the school, a reorientation towards a bilingual perspective that is sometimes difficult to implement (Lacerda; Santos; Martins, 2016).

On the other hand, in regions where schools for the deaf or centers for the deaf are not present, the option is enrollment in the mainstream school closest to the deaf student's residence, with the presence of a sign language interpreter (TILS), who will mediate school interactions in sign language, with or without specialized educational support (AEE). This scenario is among the most complex because, in many cases, the deaf student is the only one in their school or academic period and has only the TILS

(the professional present who enables access to school content) as an interlocutor in Libras (Brazilian Sign Language).

In these cases, when the interpreter of Brazilian Sign Language (LIBRAS) is quite competent, which is not always the case (Oliveira; Lacerda, 2024), they seek to favor the school development of the deaf student, but this student will be in a situation of significant linguistic isolation (Lacerda; Santos, 2013), and LIBRAS will be the language of accessibility, but not the language of interactions, or even the one used to think about school content and ways of constructing knowledge. The practices are designed for hearing people, and in this scenario, the deaf child navigates waters that are not always favorable, doing their best to learn under quite adverse conditions.

Teaching Portuguese as a mother tongue is another important problem. Even though the TILS (Translator and Interpreter of Sign Language) translates the lesson's development, the prevailing curricular principle is to teach the written form of the language that hearing children speak. Deaf children do not speak Portuguese and need a different teaching methodology (provided for in legislation as teaching Portuguese as a second language), which is denied to them. In this scenario, the development of sign language itself is not considered—there are no classes in Libras, nor attention to how the child thinks or develops this language, with a focus on "hearing" school content (Moraes; Klein; Coelho, 2024).

In general, in these contexts, the deaf child will be invited to attend the Specialized Educational Assistance (AEE), which, at best, will focus on teaching Portuguese as a second language—mediated by Libras (Brazilian Sign Language), for a mere 2 or 3 hours per week. This occurs when the professional conducting the AEE is proficient in Libras and can adapt the content to the needs of the deaf student. According to guidelines from the Ministry of Education (MEC), the AEE for deaf students would involve three didactic-pedagogical moments: (a) Specialized Educational Assistance in Libras; (b) Specialized Educational Assistance in Libras;<sup>3</sup> and (c) Specialized Educational Assistance in Portuguese Language<sup>4</sup> (Alvez; Ferreira; Damázio, 2010).

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<sup>3</sup> To work in teaching Libras (Brazilian Sign Language), the AEE (Special Education Teacher) needs to have knowledge of the structure and fluency in Libras (Alvez; Ferreira; Damázio, 2010, p. 17).

<sup>4</sup> The objective of this service is to develop linguistic and textual competence for reading and writing in Portuguese (Alvez; Ferreira; Damázio, 2010, p. 20).

Cardoso (2013), in researching Special Education Services for deaf people, found that Libras (Brazilian Sign Language) in inclusive schools is much more linked to a formal learning process than to acquisition through cultural interaction with peers who are fluent in this language. According to Cardoso (2013), the need for more time at school in a formal learning situation (due to the three distinct didactic-pedagogical moments offered by Special Education Services) highlights the production of a discourse that presents deaf students as students with difficulties.

Regarding (b) the AEE of Libras (Brazilian Sign Language), the author questions the limitations and bureaucratization of Libras learning through the AEE. Finally, when analyzing the AEE of LP (Portuguese Language), she denounces that while Libras is constituted as an accessibility resource, LP is the means by which the deaf person becomes a citizen. The status difference between the languages may also lie in the fact that Libras is not included in the BNCC (National Common Core Curriculum) as a mother tongue.

Furthermore, it is important to emphasize that, given the territorial restrictions and the *status* of Specialized Educational Services (AEE) within schools, there is little to no room to negotiate a specific curriculum for deaf students. It is concerning that the largest number of deaf students are enrolled in this model. According to the INEP School Census of 2022 (BRAZIL, 2023), among the total enrollments in Special Education, when including students with deafness and hearing impairment, 54,766 are enrolled in regular classes (which presuppose AEE services), compared to 6,200 in classes exclusively for deaf students.

It should be noted that the Brazilian Ministry of Education (MEC) published, in 2021, the “Curriculum Proposal for Teaching Written Portuguese as a Second Language to Deaf Students (PSLS)” (Nascimento *et al.*, 2021). According to the authors Nascimento *et al.* (2021), the organization of the curriculum proposal for teaching PSLS caters to both levels of education: Basic Education and Higher Education. Basic Education, divided into stages, was subdivided into levels of learner proficiency in language practices, such as reading and writing. These levels were associated with school years, so that the curriculum proposal was organized into six notebooks. The proposal includes the following:

Teaching PSLS involves skills in reading (seeing), writing, translating, and signing. One reads Libras (Brazilian Sign Language), reads written

Portuguese, writes in Libras, writes in written Portuguese, and, finally, one language is contrasted with the other and translated (Nascimento *et al.*, 2021, p. 28).

The PSLS proposal is robust and innovative; however, it seems to have been forgotten by the MEC (Ministry of Education), both due to weak dissemination at the time and, to this day, a lack of commitment to implementing it (Santos; Lebedeff, 2024). Furthermore, the proposal is not available on the MEC website under the "publications" tab, making it extremely difficult to access the six volumes of the Curriculum Proposal.

## 5 Final Considerations

Despite the progress made in bilingual education for deaf students in both Brazil and Catalonia, several challenges persist that limit access to and the quality of this educational model. Among the most significant is the development of an official curriculum for teaching sign languages (Brazilian Sign Language - Libras and Catalan Sign Language - LSC). Both contexts lack a consolidated curriculum that establishes the milestones for linguistic development in Libras and LSC, as well as guidelines on learning content and specific pedagogical strategies. Although there are ongoing proposals, such as those of Jarque *et al.* (2021) or the SMESP Curriculum (São Paulo, 2019a, 2019b), the lack of a common curriculum prevents the deepening of teaching practices and the monitoring of student development.

Another factor to highlight is the lack of specific, ongoing sign language training for teachers, which constitutes a significant barrier. Despite training efforts, many educators lack adequate skills in Libras (Brazilian Sign Language) and LSC (Catalan Sign Language), limiting their ability to implement the bilingual model effectively. Furthermore, the scarcity of deaf teachers and the lack of specialists trained in sign language (bilingual teachers, in the Brazilian case) and dual-qualified (teachers and speech therapists, in the Catalan case) make the full integration of sign language into classrooms even more difficult. In Catalonia, there is no regulated training that guarantees it. Neither in teacher training nor in speech therapy—the two required qualifications—does the content include specific instruction on bilingual education for deaf people or on sign language.

It is also noteworthy that bilingual educational projects for deaf students are concentrated mainly in large cities, creating disparities in access to these programs in regions farther from major centers. This concentration limits equitable access to

bilingual education and excludes many deaf students in areas farther from specialized centers, a reality present in both contexts analyzed, particularly in Catalonia, where there is only one center per educational stage and the right to transportation for students from regular schools is not recognized.

The recognition and professionalization of sign language interpreters also deserve discussion. Although sign language interpreters play a crucial role in the education of deaf students, their professional recognition and integration into the job market remain a concern in both contexts studied. Interpreters are not always part of schools' educational teams and often lack the resources needed to perform their functions effectively. In Catalonia, it is noteworthy that, despite possessing official qualifications, the conditions are inferior to those corresponding to their qualifications and to the responsibilities of the work. Thus, the lack of formal employment and precarious contracts leads to high turnover. Furthermore, the collective of deaf teachers also demands greater recognition of their work and improvements in working conditions.

Regarding certification and the requirement for competence in sign language, official certification of sign language (Brazilian Sign Language and CSL) competencies for professionals working with deaf students is under development in both contexts analyzed, but has not yet been widely implemented. The requirement for these competencies is crucial to guarantee educational quality and the full inclusion of deaf students in the educational system.

Another point is the plurality of school organizational forms. In both Brazil and Catalonia, schools with deaf student enrollments are observed in different formats. The issue of linguistic pairs in sign language seems to be the central problem, and many localities lack schools for the deaf or other prominent groups of deaf students, leaving them alone or accompanied only by sign language interpreters. Certainly, in these contexts, sign language does not have prominence or a leading role. In Catalonia, the difficulty of accessing a specific, non-specialized school for deaf students in the initial stages is highlighted. School practice conceived in sign language, organized from sign language, and implemented through sign language occurs only in a special education school. Inclusive proposals are closer to an accessibility model.

Regarding the role of deaf teachers, the employment situation is unstable in both countries, due to the incipient training of most deaf professionals (or training

inadequate for educational tasks) and unattractive salaries that prevent these professionals from remaining in schools. In Catalonia, there is currently no figure for a deaf instructor specializing in sign language (LS) who teaches these languages. This is only possible if the person has both teacher training and speech therapy training. For this reason, there are not enough professionals. It would be necessary to create the figure of a specialist instructor in LS, a person who does not necessarily need the qualifications of a teacher and speech therapist, but rather the didactics of sign language teaching.

Regarding the concept of bilingual education in both countries, Law No. 14.191 (Brazil, 2021) highlights the centrality of Libras (Brazilian Sign Language) as the language of instruction, which would be the ideal scenario for bilingual education. However, few proficient professionals work in this field, and obtaining them in education systems across different regions is also difficult. Education systems confuse the presence of Libras in the classroom with that of sign language interpreters, for example, in fulfilling the bilingual proposal. In Catalonia, how can the development of deaf identity and culture be fostered with only one deaf teacher covering all three educational levels? Can the diversity and cultural appreciation indicated by Swanwick (2016) be present, with a symbolic presence of deaf people?

Despite legislative and educational efforts to improve responses to the needs of deaf students, both in Brazil and Catalonia, further progress is needed in curriculum development, teacher training, territorial equity, and the recognition of sign language-related professions. These challenges must be addressed comprehensively to ensure the centrality of sign languages in educational processes intended to be bilingual for deaf students, aiming for inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all deaf students in both the Brazilian and Catalan contexts.

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