

2. Institutional Injustice, Sign Language Deprivation and Its Lifelong Health Consequences – Impulses for Inclusion Research

Initiators: Katharina Pape

Sabine Fries, Landshut University of Applied Sciences

Moderation: sought

The historical suppression of German Sign Language (DGS) is one of the chapters of German educational, social and health history that has so far been insufficiently addressed. While the consequences of oralism for the education and participation of deaf people have been widely described, the long-term health and psychosocial effects of sign language deprivation have so far received only limited scientific attention. This contribution takes up this research gap and discusses the suppression of German Sign Language as a relevant topic for inclusion research.

It is based on the final report on the Suppression of Sign Language and Its Lifelong Health Consequences. The report combines historical sources, scientific literature, archival material and testimonies from contemporary witnesses, and shows that the decades-long suppression of sign language cannot be understood merely as a pedagogical misdevelopment. Rather, it constitutes institutional injustice, the consequences of which shape educational biographies, identity development, mental health, health literacy and access to healthcare into adulthood.

[Link to the report](#)

The contribution raises the question of what significance the historical deprivation of sign language holds for inclusion research, and what consequences follow from this for education, healthcare and social policy. Central to this is the assumption that language – and thus sign language – is a fundamental prerequisite for education, self-determination, social participation and health. When deaf children are denied access to a fully accessible language, disadvantages arise that extend far beyond school years and can affect the entire life course.

Theoretically, the contribution operates at the intersection of inclusion research, Deaf Studies, Disability Studies and health sciences. It understands the historical suppression of German Sign Language as an example of how institutional conditions can produce health and social inequalities. In doing so, the contribution broadens the view of inclusion research to include linguistic barriers, institutional responsibility and historical reappraisal.

The conference contribution also marks the transition to a further research phase. Building on the findings of the first project phase, a second project phase has been approved, in which the long-term effects of sign language deprivation on educational biographies, health, psychosocial development and social participation will be examined in greater depth. The aim is to expand the empirical evidence and develop scientifically grounded recommendations for action for education, healthcare and policy. The findings are to be incorporated into the further development of inclusive educational and care structures as well as into research, policy and practice.

The contribution is intended as an invitation to view the suppression of German Sign Language not merely as a historical chapter of deaf education, but as a topic of inclusion research with high social and health-policy relevance. It shows how historical reappraisal can help make institutional responsibility visible and generate impulses for a more inclusive education, health and social policy.