

Becoming deaf, being muted, forgotten by history?

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Deaf people in Austria experience discrimination. They do not have equal access to education or employment. These problems are not recent, but are rooted in the educational system and its history.

In my contribution, I look at the example of the Linz Institute for Deafmutes from 1812 to 1869 to examine how schools constructed “disability” and “deafness” as phenomena. In this context, “construction” relates to the fact that the school automatically related deafness to helplessness. This construction of helplessness is seen for example in the fact that many teachers also diagnosed deaf students with a learning disability. To analyze this observation, I use four concepts: “Deafness” describes the hearing loss, while “dis/ability” refers to a learning impairment that the school diagnosed in addition to impaired hearing. “Class” encompasses all social relations, the parents’ professions, and financial framework. “Gender,” lastly, encompasses assignment to the female or male gender.

Taking up the example of Linz (Upper Austria): Between 1812 and 1869, the Austrian state educational system did not provide any special schooling for children with hearing loss. As a solution, independent schools were founded, often by the Catholic Church. In hindsight, it is not evident by which criteria these schools evaluated their students. Between 1812 and 1869, 237 of the 953 students in Linz were labeled as “feeble-minded” and were not allowed to finish their education there.

The school’s student evaluation processes were shaped by a double hierarchy. Teachers evaluated students from their position of power and also decided what was taught.

The processes at play here are called “Rosenthal effect.” It means that teachers are biased about certain groups of learners. Often, these biases are related to social origin or gender.

120 of 953 students worked in various professional fields after leaving the school. Those learning trades such as weaver, spur maker, tailer, or shoemaker often worked in the same fields as their fathers. Girls often had fewer opportunities. If they entered the paid workforce, they often did so as seamstresses or as maids on a farm. There was thus a clear gender gap in occupational fields.

These examples from the past allow us to criticize the current educational system. They provide the deaf community today with notions of how discriminating structures have evolved, and where changes in educational policies might be implemented to replace those discriminating structures.