

German sign language as a subject in primary and secondary education – a motor of curricular change

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In all countries, lessons in the respective (spoken) national language are part of a child's curriculum – in Germany, these lessons occur in classes on German. In contrast, many German federal states still do not offer lessons on and in German sign language, even though they are essential for deaf students' language development and success at school.

Language is a vehicle of communication and cultural participation. In all school subjects, it is the medium of learning. Supporting the development of linguistic abilities is an essential part of the educational mission. Language is central to students' cognitive, emotional and social development. Why, then, is it not yet normal for deaf students to be educated in sign language and to have lessons for sign language?

The school subject German sign language has, in fact, a two-hundred-year-old tradition. From 1810 onwards, the first school for deaf children in Berlin, founded in 1788 by Adolf Eschke, had a curriculum that included the subject "pantomime". It was taught by the deaf teacher Johann Habermaß, who showed his students signs and the signed alphabet. Habermaß and Eschke communicated with their students in sign language. Yet, in 1829, after both had died "pantomime" as a subject was terminated. Sign language was thus pushed out of deaf education already before the 1880 Milan Conference on Deaf Education [during which an international assembly of teachers of the deaf decided to push oral education at the cost of sign language]. What were the reasons? Why didn't the subject "pantomime" develop into the modern subject "German sign language"?

There are two reasons. First, German sign language only gained official recognition as a national language in 2002. Second, deaf people in Germany still have not gained official

recognition as a linguistic minority. Since the 1990s, the deaf empowerment movement and its supporters have fought for deaf children's right for education in sign languages and for all schools to use a bimodal-bilingual model. Many protagonists were involved in developing the first curriculums for German sign languages and bimodal-bilingual concepts in deaf education. In 2003, the federal state of Bavaria introduced German sign language as a subject in schools for the deaf. Since then, several more German federal states have followed suit and included it into the curriculum for deaf students. In 2021, the assembly of state ministers of education issued a recommendation for all federal states to allow all types of school to offer German sign language as an elective subject (*Wahlfach*) and a mandatory elective subject (*Wahlpflichtfach*), that is, as one of two mandatory foreign languages.

One important goal remains for the German sign language community German sign language as a non-territorial minority language has yet to be recognized in the German constitution. Only when this condition is met, can education in German Sign Language gain a solid foundation and German sign language be preserved as an immaterial cultural good.