

## **Hard-of-hearing—and included. Austria as an example of the development from the education of “deaf-mutes” to pedagogics for hard-of-hearing children**

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In the past, educators and the general public did not differentiate between deaf and hard-of-hearing people. We do not know when exactly deaf educators first differentiated between deafness and more moderate forms of hearing loss. Until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, hard-of-hearing people and deaf people alike were known as *deaf-mutes* and educated in schools for *deaf-mutes*. Only then did physicians and teachers discover that hard-of-hearing people had some residual hearing. Yet it took even longer for them to consider individual needs and abilities. When, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, hearing and speech training became a focal point in the education of hearing-impaired children, deaf and hard-of-hearing students were separated for the first time. Separate classes and schools for hard-of-hearing children were established, in which teaching was predominantly based on spoken language. This remains true into the present.

In the Austrian School Act and in Austrian anti-discrimination legislation, hearing-impaired people are mentioned, yet it is not clearly defined how exactly they are to be educated. Many of them are educated in so-called integration classes, in which most students are hearing and in which the language of education is spoken language. There are only a few schools in Austria that cater to the specific needs of hard-of-hearing children. Many hearing people believe that, unlike deaf people, hard-of-hearing people with good spoken language skills do not have problems with communication and comprehension. Yet a hearing impairment always results in communication barriers. Hard-of-hearing people often miss out on information; only about a third of spoken words can be lip-read. Many people do not know

that most hard-of-hearing people need visual support, regardless of the degree of their hearing loss. Compared to hearing children, hard-of-hearing children often do not have the same chances for educational success. First results from my dissertation research show that they are often disadvantaged in education.

The lack of education in Austrian sign language as well as the fact that teachers frequently lack sign language skills make it impossible to offer truly accessible education for hearing-impaired children. This also affects their chances for self-determination and freedom of choice. Inclusive education requires a didactic and methodological concept that embraces the needs of everyone: hearing, hard-of hearing, and deaf children alike. During the 20 years in which relevant Austrian legislation has been enacted, many suggestions for possible solutions have been discussed, yet so far, none were realized.