

For Flemish Deaf Learners, a New Reality: Access to Interpreting From Kindergarten to University

For the first time in history, deaf learners in Flanders can have the services of Flemish Sign Language interpreters in regular education settings from kindergarten through university. This breakthrough was achieved as the result of legal action initiated by Mark Wheatley and Kathleen Vercruyse, parents of a deaf son, Basil. Following negotiations with the Flemish government, a decision was made not only to begin providing sign language interpreting hours in kindergarten but to extend this service to all deaf learners in elementary school as well.

Deaf students at the secondary and postsecondary levels have had access to interpreting services since 2011, as a result of a decision handed down in a case heard by the Court of Appeals of Ghent. In that instance, parents of deaf learners and the Flemish Deaf Association (Fevlado) successfully sought to obtain sign language interpreting services for at least 70% of class time for deaf students in high school and advanced education.

Parliament is expected to strengthen the commitment to expanded provision of Flemish Sign Language interpreting for deaf and hard of hearing learners in a vote scheduled for tomorrow (10 July).

The use of sign language in all life contexts—home, school, the workplace, and the political and public spheres—is necessary if people who are deaf and other users of sign language are to attain a more equal position in society. This requirement is at the forefront of my doctoral and postdoctoral research at Ghent University, which, starting from ethnographic research with the Flemish deaf community, compares the emancipation of that community to emancipation processes of deaf communities elsewhere in Europe and in the United States. In their life stories, members of the Flemish deaf community reflect on the impact of an educational past that did not provide room for Flemish Sign Language.

From an emancipatory perspective, the provision of sign language interpreting is an important step, in no small part because it gives educational options to the parents of deaf learners. But have we arrived where we should be?

The foundation stones for children's school trajectories are laid in the home environment. Basil began school with a backpack filled with Flemish Sign Language and deaf culture. His parents are deaf, and Flemish Sign Language is a home language. When Basil's parents had enrolled him in day care, they chose a regular day care center where there were educators who used Flemish Sign Language. This provided an opportunity for all children in the center to acquire a basic vocabulary of Flemish Sign Language (as documented in the 2012 Visual Box film *I Am a Human Being Too*). Basil was able to develop the competencies and self-confidence he needed to deal with the cultural and linguistic diversity he experienced in daily life at his day care center. This diversity also made possible an enriching learning opportunity for his classmates and school environment. Not all deaf children start school with this backpack.

Growing up with Flemish Sign Language is a deaf child's right. If parents are to be supported in creating sign language environments, they need much more than a medical perspective on deafness. They need useful, comprehensive information on a variety of

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topics, including sign language, deaf culture, deaf community, and deaf role models, as well as the assurance that instruction in Flemish Sign Language will be available. The documentary film *My baby is deaf* (Flemish Deaf Association) sensitizes parents and support services to these requirements.

How can all deaf and hard of hearing children in Flanders enter school with a backpack like Basil's? Elements that require the most immediate attention include full educational provision of Flemish Sign Language, contacts with deaf peers and adults (teachers, educators, role models), visual learning processes, and positive views focusing on the capacities of deaf students. Is the breakthrough achieved for younger deaf students an endpoint, or can we build on this foundation to explore how these elements can be taken into account for the creation of the best possible educational contexts for Flemish learners who are deaf?

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Further information on the issues discussed in this essay can be found in De Clerck's 2013 book *Exploring Deaf Epistemologies: Comparative Studies in Identity, Empowerment, and Learning* (Gallaudet University Press).

An international sign translation of this text is available on: www.signlanguageprojects.com

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