"I want to take the real classes":

Students with Refugee Backgrounds and the Discursive Construction of 'Belonging'

Most newly arrived refugee students' first German school experience is preparatory language instruction. This paper examines how adolescent refugees who arrived in the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia during their last two years of lower secondary school make sense of their place within the 'imagined' community of the school (Anderson 2006) as they transition from preparatory classes to mainstream, grade-specific instruction. As social actors, individuals construct and reify group membership through their communication with others (Kroskrity 2000) and sociolinguistic research on bilingualism in schools indicates that language choice and communicative practices inform social identity (Jaspers 2011; Nortier 2018; Spotti 2011). During the 2017-2018 school year, I conducted participant observation and semi-structured interviews with eight students with refugee backgrounds between the ages of 15-16. My research indicates that students' discursive construction of 'belonging' is rooted both in the situational dynamic between their membership in a closely bonded group of language learners and their desire to be fully accepted by their age-group peers. The students distinguished between what they characterized as 'baby' / 'migrant' classes and 'real' / 'German' classes and referred to themselves as 'refugees,' 'foreigners,' 'Muslims,' or as citizens of their home country in comparison to 'German' students. Such ascriptions may be due to their physical separation from the day-to-day activities of their age-group peers due to their placement in preparatory classes, as well as ideological conceptions of what constitutes a 'good student' – to use the students' own words, as mastery of the German language is required to progress academically in mainstream classes. However, the use of sociopolitical or religious terminology to identify language differences is also rooted in German social policy and language ideologies about what makes a 'successful migrant.'

Works Cited

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