The social identification of a ”smart” student in the Arabic mother tongue classroom

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Critical studies within Linguistic Anthropology of Education (Wortham 2008, 2006, 2004) show that teachers and students co-construct identities and learning, and they do it moment-by-moment through joint orientation to local actions. At the same time, they orient to stereotypical cultural models while doing it, and compare local actions to such models. As a result the particular student (and teacher) is positioned in comparable and even similar ways across moments in time, and he or she is ascribed comparable and even similar school-relevant identities among the various possible and available ones, for example ”smart” or ”lagging behind” students.

This presentation constitutes a case study of one child’s trajectories of social identification in an Arabic mother tongue classroom. I show that my focal child, Mohsen, shifts between a position as student, although a favoured and selected student, and a more superior and privileged position, where he has the right to symbolic and material resources. I also show that my focal child’s regular identification as a ”smart” student is drawn upon even when his local actions are hardly interpretable in accordance with this social model. The social regularity of the specific identification of Mohsen gets social consequences as other students contest this social order. As a conclusion I will discuss the social and pedagogical consequences of the described trajectories. I find them problematic for several reasons. If as a default some students are assigned a favourable position in the classroom by the teacher, qua their identification as ”smart”, this may make the learning environment less responsive to the initiatives and efforts made by other students. In addition, although from one perspective the favoured student has a privileged position, this may not necessarily be privileged compared to the social position in the peer group.

Keywords: Social identification, mother tongue classroom.