Abstract

When teachers and students interact in everyday academic activities, some students are ascribed social roles as "smart", which lead other students to contest these roles. Such struggles around what it means to be smart and which students come to be viewed as smart are a pertinent problem for students, teachers and educational scholars, because they create social inequities in schools.

This study explores how smart student roles evolve over the course of fourth -, fifth -, and sixth form classes in a Danish primary school. Theoretically, the study draws from the frameworks of "social identification" and "participation framework".

Methodologically, the study is based on three years of linguistic ethnographic fieldwork in a public primary school in Copenhagen and with students and their families. This study documents - in broad ethnographic scope and interactional detail - how smart student roles evolve into favoured roles, and become contested by other students.

While focusing on "smartness", this study also describes how a student come to inhabit disapproved identities, such as "disruptive" and "passive" student, relative to a classmate come to been seen by the teachers as the "smartest" student in class. Such linking of students' social identities evolves vis-à-vis institutional conceptions of smartness.

This study has implications for education and research. It shows how being labelled a smart student can have unintended, negative consequences. Students socially identified as smart and favoured by the teacher are at risk of being ostracized by peers, of encountering greater pressure for classroom performance and of suffering reduced learning opportunities.

The study inspires teachers to create wiggle room for their students by becoming aware of the conventional definitions of the smart student in their classrooms and schools, and how the enactment and contestation of the smart student role may either encourage or constrain possibilities for student participation.

This study points out that educational scholarship can gain a better understanding of children's educational socialization through future explorations of children's academic trajectories in and out of school, and on how those trajectories often become linked to the trajectories of siblings, vis-à-vis institutional conceptions of smartness.