

Women, children, dogs, flowers and men: Constructions of Norway and investment in Norwegian language

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Women, children, dogs, flowers and men: Constructions of Norway and investment in Norwegian language Marte Monsen, Guri Bordal Steien, Dept. of humanities, Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences, Hamar, Norway. In this paper, we are concerned with the relationship between institutional constructions of National identity and investment in language learning. The study is based on data from ethnographic fieldwork among fifteen refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) to Norway, during their first year and a half in Norway, including observations of cultural orientation and introduction programme classes. We find that the participants tend to be preoccupied by constructions of gender relations in the Norwegian society. For instance, after a year and a half in the host society, one of the participants, Christophe, concluded that Norway operates with the following hierarchy as regards the value of different “agents” (see Latour, 2009) in society: “les femmes, les enfants, les chiens, les fleurs et en tout dernier, les hommes” (‘women, children, dogs, flowers and at the very last, men’). Such constructions have led us to examine how gender relations are presented by the institutions whose mandate is to prepare newly arrived migrants for life in Norway. Previous research suggest that many European states display progressive norms and values in the information they present to migrants, which paradoxically might imply that certain outlooks on life are not welcomed (Joppke 2008, Pautz 2005).

Our data from classroom discourse in cultural orientation and introduction program classes in Norway, as well as from textbooks used in the Introduction program, indicate that there is a great emphasis on gender equality. However, gender equality is often presented through narratives where women hold the top positions both in the family and in society, which sometimes leads to constructions of hierarchies as the one Christophe conveyed. We discuss how this might affect investment in language learning for people that are positioned in the bottom of the hierarchy.

References

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