

Language in transnational education trajectories between the Soviet Union, Israel and Germany. Participatory research with children

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Abstract

The paper focuses on language in transnational education and puts children's perspectives in the spotlight. In light of increasing transnational mobility, their voices are of particular significance: How do transnational children – children with migration experience – perceive the role of languages in educational trajectories? In order to answer these questions, a qualitative study was conducted with children of Soviet immigrants who were socialized in a Hebrew-speaking education system and who are today pupils in Germany. The findings from group conversation and language portraits allow deep insights into children's perspectives on multilingual practices and highlight the importance of the environment – in this case, a German school that became part of transnational education by offering opportunities for students with migration experience.

Keywords: transmigration, transnational children, multilingualism and education, transnational education

Sprache auf transnationalen Bildungslaufbahnen zwischen Sowjetunion, Israel und Deutschland. Partizipatorische Forschung mit Kindern

Zusammenfassung

Der Beitrag widmet sich dem Thema Sprache in transnationaler Bildung und rückt die Perspektive der Kinder in den Mittelpunkt. Angesichts der zunehmenden transnationalen Mobilität sind ihre Stimmen von besonderer Bedeutung: Wie nehmen transnationale Kinder – Kinder mit Migrationserfahrung – die Rolle von Sprachen in den Bildungsverläufen wahr? Um diese Fragen zu beantworten, wurde eine qualitative Studie mit Kindern sowjetischer Migrant*innen durchgeführt, die im hebräischsprachigen Bildungssystem sozialisiert wurden und heute eine deutsche Schule besuchen. Die Ergebnisse aus Gruppengesprächen und Sprachportraits ermöglichen tiefe Einblicke in die Perspektiven der Kinder auf mehrsprachige Praktiken und unterstreichen die Bedeutung des Umfelds – einer deutschen Schule, die Teil der transnationalen Bildung wurde, indem sie Möglichkeiten für Schüler mit Migrationserfahrung eröffnete.

Schlagwörter: Transmigration, transnationale Kinder, Mehrsprachigkeit und Bildung, Transnationale Bildung

1 Introduction

Multilingualism is a social reality, impacted by a long history of transnational mobility including children in the midst of their education. Thus, while children's transnational education is likely affected by language considerations that arise from being transnationally mobile, we do not know how children view this situation. This is because, first, language has not been discussed extensively in the research on transnational education, and, second, research is often conducted on or for children but not with them. This paper focuses on language in transnational education and puts children's perspectives in the spotlight, particularly when considering the following questions: How do transnational children – children with migration experience – perceive the role of languages in educational trajectories? How does their perception as a multilingual speaker develop in this process? To answer these questions, I will first present a literature review that links research on multilingualism in education to transnational studies (section 2). I will then turn to transnational children and argue why their experiences with language use must gain more attention (section 3). The main part of the paper will present a qualitative study (section 4) framed by a specific institutional context – a German school that became part of transnational education by adjusting to students with migration experience (4.1). To access children's perspectives, data were collected through language portraits and group conversation with children of Soviet immigrants who were socialized in a Hebrew-speaking education system and who are today pupils in Germany. In the methodological section, I will discuss the opportunities and limitations of this method (4.2). The qualitative data allow for deep insights into how transnational children perceive language use and highlight the importance of the environment, as will be shown in the findings (section 5). The paper will conclude with implications for further research and practices in transnational education (section 6).

2 Language as an issue of transnational education research

This section will show why language constitutes a crucial issue in educational research and why this perspective is important for the field of transnational education.

Transnational mobility has an impact on language practices: multilingualism, while already present, continues to increase and diversify within and across national borders. Yet, the exact number of children who grow up multilingual is often not documented. For Germany, indirect data can be found in statistics on the so-called migration background. The microcensus, for example, collects data on children “with an immigrant background” who attend day-care facilities and “speak predominantly not German at home” (*Report* 2016, p. 40). According to these surveys, in western Germany, they constitute up to 50 percent, with an increasing tendency (*ibid.*). These figures neither reflect the language constellations (languages of parents, siblings, common family languages) nor the actual language practices of the children. A more differentiated picture exists for the federal state of Hamburg: In 2015, 42.8 percent of the four-and-a-half-year-old children in the families spoke languages other than or next to German (*Lengyel* 2017, p. 159).

At the same time, in most countries, including Germany, the education system itself is nationally oriented, meaning it is also monolingually oriented: (1) Language – mostly the