



# Role models and confidants? Students with and without migration backgrounds and their perception of teachers with migration backgrounds



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Student perceptions of teachers with migration backgrounds were investigated.
- There is a mismatch of student perceptions and educational policy's intentions.
- A teacher's migration background is not as important as politically assumed.
- A father's educational level is linked to perceptions of teacher-student relationships.
- Teacher professionalism and knowledge of good teaching seem more relevant to students.

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## ABSTRACT

In 2007 Germany's federal Ministers of Education agreed to increase the number of teachers with a migration background as part of the National Integration Plan. Due to their migration background, these teachers are assumed to have special competencies and skills. However, almost no empirical evidence has been provided whether students view teachers with migration backgrounds as important in their daily school life as about the education policy assumes. Using a mixed-methods design, this exploratory study examines those student perceptions. The results show that teachers are perceived and assessed primarily in their professional role as experts for teaching and learning processes.

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## 1. Introduction

In the educational policy debate in Germany, international school achievement studies such as the 'Programme for International Student Assessment' (PISA) have drawn attention to two central challenges in the German educational system: firstly, about one-third of 15-year-old students have a migration background

(Baumert & Schümer, 2001). Secondly, a disproportionately large number of these students can be found in the so-called at-risk group; i.e., their reading competence does not exceed the PISA-Competence Level I, but is sometimes even lower, although a large number of these students passed through the educational system from the first grade onwards. Unlike in the USA where "race continues to be significant in explaining inequity" (Ladson-Billings & Tate IV, 1995, p. 51; this diagnosis seems to still be accurate, see, e.g., Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 5), "with a migration background" is used in Germany as a category that indicates social disparities, both in the political discussion and empirical educational research. Accordingly, since 2005, the German Federal Statistical Office subsumes the following people under this category: individuals "who moved to the present territory of the Federal Republic of Germany after 1949, all foreigners born in Germany and all individuals born in Germany with at least one parent who immigrated or was born as a foreigner in Germany" (German Federal

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Statistical Office, 2011, p. 31; translation CR & MT). In drawing this distinction between individuals “with” and those “without” a migration background, the group without this marker is viewed as the frame of reference. Differences within the group of migrants like ethnicity, duration of stay, family language, etc. are, however, obscured; in fact a homogeneity within the group is implied.

In addition to former strategies of special support programs aiming almost exclusively at students who have a migration background, there have been calls from educational policy makers and the media to address the comparatively poor performance of students with a migration background in the German educational system by employing a greater number of teachers who have a migration background – analogous to the recruitment of teachers of color in the United States. So far, their proportion compared to the number of students with a migration background is very small: while almost 30% of the students have a migration background, only 4.7% of all teachers have a migration background (Authoring Group Educational Reporting, 2010, pp. 253; 259). Given the small number of such teachers in the German educational system, the Ministers of Education of the federal states agreed in 2007 to increase the number of teachers with a migration background as part of the National Integration Plan. On the level of the individual federal states, a number of actions were initiated as part of this educational policy in order to recruit teachers with a migration background. Additionally, a number of private foundations have attempted to increase the number of teachers with a migration background by providing incentives such as special training programs for high-school graduates who have a migration background, enticing them to pursue a career as teachers (cf. also Rotter, 2014, p. 13).

The reason for these calls is not only the considerable underrepresentation of such teachers among the general teaching staff, but also their biographical and experiential backgrounds are subject to particular expectations. To these teachers a specific competence profile is ascribed that is assumed to include special intercultural skills as a result of growing up in two cultures, understood as a homogenous system of meanings and values that unites a nation. These special skills are assumed to facilitate access to students with a migration background so teachers can act as confidants, role models and interpreters. The same applies in terms of access to parents who have a migration background.

In the context of German educational policy the particular competence profile of a teacher with a migration background is associated with numerous expectations to the extent that having a migration background is viewed as a relevant characteristic of teachers. The questions that arise from this educational policy and the special recruitment programs are concerned with exploring the perspective of those involved in schooling, such as principals, teachers and students: How much attention is paid to a migration background? Is it as significant as the educational policy debate makes it appear? Given that students are the primary target population intended to benefit from the employment of teachers with a migration background, this article focuses on comparing the perspectives of students with and without a migration background. Drawing on a mixed-methods approach this study aims to explore the following research questions:

- 1) How do students perceive teachers with a migration background in daily school life?
- 2) Do students with and without a migration background differ in their perceptions of these teachers?
- 3) Do students with a migration background describe a special relationship with teachers who themselves have a migration background?

## 2. Conceptual framework: teacher-student relationship

The importance of a positive teacher-student relationship for the academic well-being, motivation and ultimately for the learning outcome has been pointed out, inter alia, by the meta-analysis of John Hattie. According to Hattie, who has illustrated 138 dimensions that have an impact on student achievement, the teacher-student relationship is ranked at number 11 with an effect size of  $D = 0.72^3$  (Hattie, 2009, pp. 118–119, 297; cf. also; Cornelius-White, 2007; Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011). Several qualitative studies show the importance of a positive teacher-student relationship for school learning, in particular for so-called minority students (e.g., Bishop, Berryman, & Richardson, 2002; Sleeter, 2012). Building a trustworthy relationship should be possible for culturally sensitive teachers, and especially for minority teachers.

In the relevant studies, the student-teacher relationship is primarily conceptualized theoretically from two different perspectives: (a) an extended attachment perspective and (b) the self-determination theory (cf. Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991).

Central to attachment theory is the assumption that a positive relationship between parents and children promotes the basic trust and emotional stability of the child which in turn is regarded as a fundamental prerequisite for exploring the wider environment outside the family. According to extended attachment theory, a sensitive teacher who is able to establish a positive teacher-student relationship may therefore represent a confidant for the student who offers support in exploring the school environment and who can enhance students' participation in school learning processes (cf. Birch & Ladd, 1997; Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Accordingly, a positive teacher-student relationship is seen as important for learning processes, while a negative one may lead to a lack of emotional stability, and may thus hinder an appropriate dealing with the school tasks. Empirical evidence to support these assumptions can be found for example in the study by Thijs and Koomen (2008), which shows the central role of emotional stability as a mediator between support provided by the teacher and the students' learning interest.

The self-determination theory (cf. Ryan & Powelson, 1991) conceptualizes the connection of the teacher-student relationship and the well-being of students in school in a different way. According to the self-determination perspective, three basic psychological needs must be taken into account in order to motivate students: the need (1) for autonomy, (2) for competence, and (3) for relatedness. Teachers could support the fulfillment of these basic needs by showing interest in the students' concerns, by offering clear structures, and by promoting the students' autonomy. The teachers' interest in the needs of their students comprises the affective dimension of interaction between teachers and students. Hence, social relatedness is closely linked to the concept of emotional stability as also developed in the attachment theory.

Some might argue that because of shared experiences connected with immigration such as a certain feeling of belonging, alienness, multilingualism, discrimination, etc., students and teachers with migration backgrounds have special relationships and a sense of understanding each other (cf. Mannheim, 1982). However, this view seems to ignore crucial differences between individuals with migration backgrounds and to oversimplify the student-teacher relationship.

<sup>3</sup> As his work from 2012 is widely a continuation of the findings from 2009 and as „the major messages have not changed“ (Hattie, 2012, p. 13), the information provided here is taken from Hattie, 2009.

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