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## Students' perspectives on minority teachers in Germany

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### *Abstract*

In recent years, there is an ongoing call to employ more minority teachers in Germany's educational system. Associated with this call is the hope that minority teachers can deal with diversity issues more adequately and professionally. Students with migration backgrounds as well as majority students are believed to benefit from the employment of minority teachers. Up to now, there is little or no evidence to support this hope and previous research primarily examines teachers' perspectives. In order to explore the conditions that make it possible to realize the supposed benefits of minority teachers, the present paper focuses on students' perspectives. It is assumed that a positive effect of immigrant or minority teachers occurs not through their mere presence but through interaction with their students and due to specific constraints and affordances of their classrooms. Relying on group discussions, an ongoing project tries 1) to reconstruct students' experiential knowledge concerning minority teachers and 2) to explore what relevance and meaning they attribute to their experiences with minority teachers. So far, the results indicate that teachers' minority statuses become relevant only in certain situations and this difference dimension seems to be tightly linked to other dimensions (e.g. age, gender, class) that are more salient for students.

### 1. Background: Perspectives on minority teachers in Germany

#### 1.1 Expectations

Responding to the results of international assessment studies on student achievement, which revealed substantial difficulties of minority children in Germany, the need to develop a more culturally sensitive school system was expressed. Hiring more minority teachers is considered to be a promising means of dealing with existing difficulties.<sup>1</sup> The hope that employing minority teachers entails more adequate and professional approaches to diversity issues was mainly articulated in the context of educational policy (Strasser & Steber, 2010). Although this hope has been

expressed repeatedly for more than a decade, there still is little evidence that supports it. Only recently educational science has begun to question the underlying assumptions that the call for more minority teachers is based on and to examine the possible effects and conditions of immigrant teachers' professional actions (Strasser & Steber, 2010; Georgi, Ackermann & Karakaş, 2011). In order to explore the conditions for successfully realizing the alleged positive impact, this article focuses on students' experiences with minority teachers. It is assumed that a positive effect of minority teachers occurs not by their mere presence but in interaction with specific constraints and affordances of their professional context. The climate and the interactions with students in the classroom may be of special relevance.

Given the need of providing equal opportunities within the educational system, the call for a more culturally diverse teaching faculty can be based on ethical considerations. Concerning the *empirical* basis for this call, however, there is still little research that corroborates such expectations. Only recently, studies by Edelmann (2006), Georgi et al. (2011), Rotter (2012), Strasser (2013) and Strasser, Waburg and Hummel (2013) have sparked an interest in investigating the specific role of minority teachers. In contrast to the undifferentiated expectations expressed by educational policy, extant research does not suggest a general effectiveness of minority teachers, as the ethnic background of any given teacher does not warrant a general effect (Morris, 2007; Quijcho & Rios, 2000). Nevertheless, it is plausible to assume that minority teachers draw on specific personal experiences that may be useful in overcoming cultural and/or language barriers (Irvine, 1989; Rotter, 2012). Their socio-cultural experiences as well as their potential multilingual competencies (Nieto, 1998) facilitate more deliberate dealings with cultural diversity at schools (Georgi et al., 2011). Minority teachers may also be helpful in establishing constructive relationships between minority parents and the school system (Irvine, 1989; Meier, Stewart & England, 1989; Rotter, 2012). The realization of minority teachers' personal potentials, however, depends on certain context-specific conditions such as school climate, the existence of an inclusive school program and the support from fellow teachers and school administrators (Strasser, 2013). It seems crucial that minority teachers have experience in and engage in different cultural contexts and settings, which may differ in certain aspects from the societal majority. On account of this knowledge about minority culture(s), the demands of society and the educational system, these teachers are seen as 'cultural mediators'. Because minority teachers in Germany have predominantly succeeded in the German educational system, they may be better equipped to understand possible adjustment problems and tensions between the educational systems' demands and specific ethnic cultures. Due to these teachers' educational successes and their status as teachers,

they may serve as role models for ethno-cultural minority students (s. below; Georgi et al., 2011).

Their status as teachers and as representatives of society, however, can also work against the aforementioned goals. For example, there is evidence that minority teachers may develop negative images of their own ethnic groups (Tellez, 1999) and pursue strategies that involve dissociation from their ethno-cultural backgrounds in order to be successful (Strasser & Hirschauer, 2011). The role of social class differences between and within ethnic groups cannot be neglected either (Morris, 2007). Additionally, it is not clear if minority teachers have specific skills and competencies and how these skills may manifest. If there are specific competencies that enable teachers to deal with cultural diversity, all teachers regardless of their background ought to develop these skills. Hiring more minority teachers appears to be a useful measure when all teachers are simultaneously encouraged to become multicultural professionals. It is counterproductive, however, when diversity issues are delegated solely to minority teachers and become their exclusive domains. Recent research illustrates that minority teachers often have to act as ‘lone fighters’ (Strasser, 2013), and that existing socio-cultural barriers and differences are reproduced due to the seclusion of minority teachers, as Wilkins and Lall (2011) demonstrate for black minority teachers in the United Kingdom.

In ‘classic’ immigration countries like Canada and the United States, research interest in minority teachers predates that in Germany. In the United States the issue of minority teachers has been addressed for more than two decades (e.g. King, 1993). Researchers unanimously agree that teachers from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds contribute extensively to American education (Easton-Brooks, Lewis & Yang, 2010; Irvine & Fenwick, 2011). A special emphasis has been put on the need for teacher educators to become aware of minority teacher candidates’ specific potentials and problems (Kohli, 2009). Hence, there is a wealth of studies that focus on the recruitment and retention of minority teacher candidates (Chen, 2012). Despite the unanimous call for more minority teachers and an abundance of corresponding studies, there is still a limited presence of teachers with diverse cultural, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds at American schools. Current data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2009) illustrates that minority teachers are under-represented, which stands in stark contrast to an increasingly diverse student body. After reviewing the existing research about minority teachers in the United States, Chen (2012) notes that the knowledge about minority teachers and their professional strengths is still very limited. Most of the research focuses on teacher candidates and teacher education programs. Both the actual professional action of teachers at school and the student perspective are rarely addressed.

## 1.2 Students' perspectives – a neglected source of information

Existing studies almost exclusively rely on teachers as the sole source of information. Therefore, teachers' actual classroom behavior and professional action is mostly assessed with self-reports and retrospective accounts. Although the proponents of more minority teachers at German schools argue that this would benefit both minority and majority students, the student perspective has been widely neglected. Taking their views into account renders new sources of information accessible and allows researchers to assess aspects such as classroom climate, processes in the classroom and the construction of collective meanings.

In light of the existing literature about teaching and learning in general, it seems strange that research on minority teachers exclusively focuses their perspective. Self-reports by teachers about their professional actions and instructional strategies are generally viewed as problematic (Clausen, 2002); they tend to be considered relevant only when combined with other sources of information (Ditton, 2002). Observations of classroom processes by external, trained observers in turn are considered to be the most informative method for accessing teaching and learning in the classroom. It is, however, questionable whether the observation of individual classes by outsiders is appropriate when it comes to investigating aspects such as social climate, interaction processes and relationships within the classroom. Furthermore, observation data must not be mistaken for an objective image of reality and actual processes. Thus, there is a long tradition of taking students' judgments and views into account, particularly in studies concerned with the 'ideal' teacher (Holl, 2008). When focusing on the assessment of instructional aspects, students' points of view are incorporated in different research paradigms such as the process-, the product- and the process-product approaches to teaching (Schneider & Bodensohn, 2008). Students' perspectives are seen as perspectives in their own rights on par with those of teachers and external observers.

As students are irrevocably affected by instruction and teaching, their extensive experience and specific views are especially significant and relevant. The validity and potential biases of students' judgments and statements has been a controversial object of discussion (Gerstenmaier, 1975; Marsh, 1977; Marsh & Hattie, 2002; Stolz, 1997; Toland & Ayala, 2005). The argument that such evaluations are primarily shaped by individual preferences and reflect only common prejudices is now regarded as refuted (Ditton, 2002). It has been suggested that it is possible to differentiate two components of students' judgments: the individual view and a collectively shared perspective (Saldern, 1987; Eder 1996). The commonly shared portion of views in particular is seen as a reliable source. Gruehn (2000) demonstrates that students' statements and evaluations of teaching situations in her study correspond with results based on observational data. Bias effects reflecting subjective

preferences proved to be negligible. As Clausen (2002) points out, even if students' perspectives, observational data and teachers' perceptions do not correspond, this cannot be interpreted as judgment error or distortion but is a consequence of the specific perspective. Hence each perspective represents a specific source of validity. Concerning students' perceptions of teaching and classroom processes, it seems to be relevant that their views are closely linked to cognitive and psychosocial criteria (ibid.). These perceptions seem to be, at most, slightly influenced by the personality of the individual student and the structural features of the instructional setting; they are affected much more by the teacher and his/her teaching style and behavior (Ditton, 2002). Following Gerstenmaiers' (1975) distinction between 'love theme' and 'mastery theme', research has differentiated two dimensions or points of reference to describe students' views. The former pertains to aspects like emotional warmth, social competence or individual wish-fulfillment whereas the latter refers to teaching quality, teachers' subject-specific competence and assertiveness (Ditton, 2002).

### 1.3 Minority teachers' importance for students

#### 1.3.1 Identity formation and the relevance of role models

Role models play a significant role in subject development and learning. Along with parents, teachers are among the first people in children's lives to serve as role models (Stewart, Meier, La Follette & England, 1989). Research shows that they are more important for ethnic minority students than for majority students (Jussim & Harber, 2005). African-American youths' self-concept, for instance, is more susceptible to teachers' judgment and perceptions (Shade, 1983). In addition to their lower social status and weaker performances, they are more dependent on and more strongly influenced by teacher expectations than white middle-class students (Good & Brophy, 1985). Because teachers tend to expect more from White and Asian students than from African-American and Hispanic students (McKnown & Weinstein, 2008), this susceptibility is highly problematic for certain minorities. Teachers that share the same ethnic or cultural background could serve as role models and thereby counteract the alienation between minority children and the educational system (Fryer & Torelli, 2005). African-American adolescents regard schools as part of a culture they do not belong to and that is not congruent with their personal context and frame of reference. The lack of congruence between the values of people's personal contexts and those appreciated and fostered by the educational system may entail that these students feel like strangers in school (King, 1991). The same holds true for students of Turkish descent in Germany (Strasser & Hirschauer, 2011; Strasser, 2012). Consequently, academic success is interpreted as adaptation to the

majority's norm-system and abandoning one's cultural identity (Ogbu, 2003). Minority teachers hence have the potential to function as examples of how to reconcile academic success and one's ethnic and cultural identity.

There is some evidence (from research in the United States) that suggest that being taught by minority teachers affects minority students' academic performance: They achieve better results on standardized tests, select advanced courses more often, are more likely to go to college and less likely to drop out (Achinstein, Ogawa, Sexton & Freitas, 2010). Such evidence is lacking for Germany. Nevertheless, existing studies do suggest that minority teachers in Germany are also particularly relevant as role models as well as for the identity development of minority students. Not only do minority teachers consider themselves as positive examples for academic success, they also feel that their minority status and corresponding experiences help them relate better to their minority students (Georgi et al., 2011; Rotter, 2012). This suggests another dimension of significance for students beyond academic success and identity formation.

### 1.3.2 Students' well-being and classroom climate

It is reasonable to assume that the presence of minority teachers may be relevant for emotional and social aspects of minority students' school attendance. As existing research indicates the well-being of the latter is lower than that of majority children (Chiu, Feldman & Rosenthal, 1992; Roebbers, 1997; Sam & Berry, 1995). Teacher judgment plays a decisive role for students' well-being: A teacher's evaluation whether a student is well or poorly adapted appears to be strongly correlated to student well-being and teachers tend to judge minority students to be less adapted (Roebbers, 1997). This may be due to teachers' expectations concerning students' acculturation, which are usually oriented towards assimilation strategies (ibid.). The well-being of minority students, however, is positively affected when integrative acculturation strategies are favored (Searle & Ward, 1990; Zheng & Berry, 1991). It remains to be determined whether minority teachers' professional action is oriented more towards integrative acculturation strategies than that of majority teachers. It can nevertheless be assumed that the mere presence of teachers with a similar background and diverse experiences may indicate to minority students that ethnic and cultural diversity is appreciated; this is a basic precondition of an integrative school context, which can positively affect the classroom-climate and individual students' well-being. In settings that embrace cultural diversity, people experience their own minority status as less relevant. This correlates to higher levels of well-being (Purdie-Vaughns, Steele, Davies, Dittmann & Randall-Crosby, 2008; Steele, Spencer & Aronson, 2002). This effect also applies to majority students. Not only are they affected by a positive classroom-climate, they may further-

more benefit from a culturally diverse teaching faculty that is open concerning the attitudes towards and knowledge about minorities and a multicultural society (Quiocho & Rios, 2000; Shaw, 1996).

### 1.3.3 Potential challenges for student-teacher relations

Despite the potential positive effects of their presence, there are also specific challenges. It has to be taken into account that a culturally diverse background does not automatically entail appropriate professional action and that ethnic and cultural aspects interact with a series of other potentially relevant difference dimensions in educational contexts such as gender, social class and age (Leiprecht & Lutz, 2005; Weber, 2009; Morris, 2007). Therefore, even if minority teachers and students have things in common, students do not automatically appreciate these commonalities; they may even serve as sources of tension and conflict. Existing research suggests that teachers may expect different things from students with backgrounds similar to their own which strains the relationships between these teachers and their students (Achinstein & Aguirre, 2008). The fact that minority teachers have successfully adapted and assimilated to majority culture, its demands and values makes them suspicious for minority students that oppose the majority (Achinstein et al., 2010). There continues to be little research on the effects of ethnic or cultural 'mismatch', meaning when teachers and students are members of different minority groups. Irrespective of the fact whether their presence has positive or negative effects, minority teachers appear to make ethnic and cultural aspects in the classroom more salient due to their presence. The specific meaning for the specific school and classroom has to be negotiated in any given context (Achinstein & Aguirre, 2008; Achinstein et al., 2010).

The relevance and significance of teachers' minority status in actual instructional and school-related interactions has not been addressed sufficiently. Particularly, it has not been investigated from students' perspectives yet because the majority of research draws on teachers' biographies and experiences.

Considering research on students' views and judgments, it seems more than appropriate to take their perspectives about minority teachers into account. *If minority teachers are supposed to make a difference through their presence, attitudes and professional actions, it makes sense to ask: (How) are these (supposed) features of teachers perceived by students?*



## 2. Method

### 2.1 Goal

The objective of the present study is to reconstruct students' implicit and tacit knowledge<sup>2</sup> about school with a particular emphasis on their experiences with minority teachers. We examined how teachers' backgrounds affected students' perspective and how and to what extent cultural or ethnic differences were negotiated. The collective pattern of meaning of teachers' cultural backgrounds should be assessed without instilling its supposed relevance in advance.

### 2.2 Instrument

In order to study students' perspectives on and experiences with minority teachers, group discussions were carried out. In the German context group discussions are an established research method especially for research on youth and migration (e.g. Bohnsack, 1989; Meuser, 1998; Nohl, 2001). "The method serves to examine collective orientations including the terms and structures of social worlds" (Schittenhelm, 2010, p. 130). Because interview effects are less relevant in discussions than in one-on-one interview situations, the method is considered to be a valuable instrument in cases where participants and interviewers do not have the same background (Herwartz-Emden, 2000); its use seems also appropriate to circumvent the asymmetries of power inherent in intercultural interview situations (ibid.). In light of minority students' experiences with discrimination (Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung, 2012), it may be easier for them to express their opinions and speak freely in group contexts where the power is more evenly distributed.

Successfully conducting group discussions for research purposes presupposes that the groups are pre-existing 'real groups', that is, the people involved have to be members of a group that has experiences in a certain setting in common. We chose groups that constituted a school class throughout a school year and that were taught together by a series of teachers. Shared experiences form the basis for collective orientations that are formulated on a group level (Bohnsack, 1995). "The group discussions are conducted in a non-directive manner, thus enabling the group to develop its own reference terms" (Schittenhelm, 2010, p. 130).

In order to assess students' unbiased opinions about their teachers' minority statuses, it was important not to guide the discussion and specifically ask them to talk about issues of cultural diversity. Therefore, the students were asked about their general experiences at school and concerning all their teachers. As a result, the students automatically talked about the minority teachers in all group discussions but they did not always mention their teachers' migration status. This research approach allows us to the relevance of teachers' minority status as it is attributed by

the students themselves. Teachers' minority backgrounds were not explicitly addressed by the researchers until the end of the discussion.

### 2.3 Material and data analysis

The group discussions were conducted in the context of a school project that implemented single-gender learning environments for boys and girls in grades 5, 7 and 9. Two teachers with minority statuses were involved in the school project. Group discussions were held halfway through the school year, in January, and at the end, in July. The discussions were audio-recorded and the verbal recordings were then transcribed. The analysis followed a sequential approach according to the 'documentary method' (e.g. Bohnsack, 2010; Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2014). The documentary method distinguishes between an immanent or literal meaning and a documentary meaning (pre-reflective or tacit knowledge) of any given statement. This methodological differentiation results in two work steps: 'formulating interpretation' and 'reflecting interpretation'. "The basic structure of formulating interpretation is the decoding and formulation of the topical structure of the text. ... The task of the reflecting formulation is ... the reconstruction of the framework of orientation, of the habitus" (Bohnsack, 2010, p. 111). The step 'formulating interpretation' was executed for all eleven group discussions. Those text passages that referred to teachers with a minority status were then further analyzed during the step 'reflecting interpretation'. Repeated comparisons within and between group discussions are an important feature of the documentary method. The following two case studies are the result of these comparisons. The presentation focuses on the main results. Due to the limited space limitations not all interpretative steps that led to these results can be described in detail.

Case 1 focuses on Ms. Kalmer, a female Math teacher of Russian descent. The corresponding material consists of eight group discussions, conducted with four to eight minority and majority students. The empirical material consists of 5 discussions with girl groups in grade 7 (one conducted in January and one in July) and grade 9 (one in January and two in July) and three discussions with boys in grade 9 (one in January and two in July). Case 2 focuses on Ms. Brecht, a female German language teacher of Romanian descent. The analysis is based on material from three group discussions with girl groups in grade 5, seven to eight minority and majority students (one was conducted in January and two in July).

### 3. Results

#### 3.1 Case 1: Ms. Kalmer, a math teacher who is of Russian descent (“She’s got an accent”)

Ms. Kalmer taught girls in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade and groups of both girls and boys in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Across all group discussions students talked about subject-specific aspects when describing and evaluating Ms. Kalmers’ classes, that is; for the students, her competence as a math teacher was most salient as evidenced by the following statements:

Honestly, I don’t think Kalmer is good; I don’t like her teaching style, because she’s way too strict, well, she just strictly follows the curriculum (Boys, 9<sup>th</sup> grade, July, group 1)

well Ms. Kalmer also gives lessons, and she lets the students participate, for instance by interrogating students ... and controlling their homework (Girls, 9<sup>th</sup> grade, July, group 1)

I thought that classes with Ms. Kalmer were more vivid, because we could put our hands up and talk whereas the other teacher Mr. Jehlen, he just reads from his strange transparencies (Girls, 9<sup>th</sup> grade, July, group 2)

It’s good that she always wants to know, what our problem is, and mostly when you presented a wrong solution, she specifically points to the individual error and goes through the task again with you (Girls, 9<sup>th</sup> grade, January)

The student accounts especially focus on Ms. Kalmers’ emphasis on subject content and her instructional behavior. The way she explains mathematical concepts and the way she engages students in classroom discussions and responds to their needs seems to be particularly relevant to the students. The students also take Ms. Kalmer’s other characteristics into account, particularly personality traits such as her gender, age and her physical appearance:

the first impression was, when we first saw her, that she is totally sweet, she was nice, so young and [...] curly hair and looks good, is quite beautiful (Girls, 7<sup>th</sup> grade, January)

She brought strawberries, we ate strawberries in class and she wanted to know about our holiday plans (Girls, 7<sup>th</sup> grade, July)

I think this makes more sense, she is a female teacher ... for girls, and for boys it’s the other way round, because they have a similar way of thinking or similar experiences, for instance in math (Girls, 9<sup>th</sup> grade, January)

Ms. Kalmer in our class, I really believe that she says ... ehm ... well she is a woman and now has a boys’ class and somehow has to prove that she can control boys and that is what she tries with any measure (Boys, 9<sup>th</sup> grade, July, group 1)

Well Ms. Kalmer is much younger than the other math teacher (Girls, 9<sup>th</sup> grade, July, group 1).

The students do not focus on Ms. Kalmer’s ethnic and cultural background. The fact that she is of Russian descent is only mentioned casually when the interviewer

asks about this aspect and even in these passages the topic is not discussed extensively. Students merely allude to her Russian accent, as in the following passage:

- I: Well the other girls from your group they somehow mentioned that Ms. Kalmer is foreign ... ehm ... does this play any role..
- S<sup>3</sup>: Well that
- S: Yes with her accent
- S: ( ) accent.
- Claudia: Yes you notice the accent but she speaks perfect German
- S: Yes
- I: Well
- S: ( )
- Miriam: Well she did not yet bring Vodka if that is what you're aiming at. (Girls, 9<sup>th</sup> grade, July, group 2)

In this passage, students address the question about Ms. Kalmer's background by referring to her accent. Claudia, however, emphasizes that the teacher speaks perfect German; her accent is not seen as a shortcoming and the students do not convey any further meaning beyond the accidental observation of an individual feature. The interviewer's question concerning the teacher's ethnic background seems to strike the students as odd, which is illustrated by Miriam's caricaturing statement. The ethnic and cultural background is associated with 'folkloristic' particularities that – according to the students – are irrelevant for math classes (just like alcoholic beverages are irrelevant in math classes).

In a group discussion with boys, the interviewer asks a similar question, which the boys disregard. They do not address Ms. Kalmer's background at all; instead they talk about her classroom behavior, her instructional style and their own achievements. They furthermore compare her with a male math teacher.

To summarize, according to both boys and girls, Ms. Kalmer is mainly seen in her role as a math teacher. When they talk about her, subject specific perspectives prevail. The questions that are relevant for the students include: Can I learn something from her? How does she teach her subject? Does she respond to the student's individual needs? Is she fair? The students discuss these issues in their assessment of all teachers, not only in the passages concerning Ms. Kalmer. Gender, age and personality traits are as well, but they seem to play a minor role. Ms. Kalmer's cultural and ethnic background is irrelevant to all interviewed groups and to their experiences with this teacher.

### 3.2 Case 2: Ms. Brecht, a German language teacher who is of Romanian descent (“Hello, we all can speak German. What does she want from us”)

Ms. Brecht taught German to a group of girls in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade. Like in case 1, the students focus on different aspects when talking about Ms. Brecht. The first discussion addresses the fact that Ms. Brecht does not only focus on teaching her subject but is also interested in her students in general.

In German, our teacher is quite nice ... so for example we always have some kind of small talk (Girl, 5<sup>th</sup> grade, January)

I would have liked it very much ... I think it would have been better when our German teacher would have come with us (on a school trip); because we trust her more, it is so much fun (Girls 5<sup>th</sup> grade, January)

The first discussion took place just a few months after the students entered the secondary school (‘Gymnasium’). Considering the challenging transition from primary school to secondary school, it becomes evident that social and emotional considerations are relevant to the students. It is important to them to have someone they can trust and relate to in this new environment and context. During the discussions half a year later, Ms. Brecht position as German language teacher becomes more focalized:

Well, she always talks when there is a test, and she always talks about my mistakes, I don’t know why. And then she looks at me, and I just think, oh my God, why does she do that (Girls, 5<sup>th</sup> grade, July, group 1)

so most teachers learn it from Ms. Brecht, yes do you know Aylin, well she received that school grade ... I think this is totally mean (Girls, 5<sup>th</sup> grade, July, group 1)

Ms. Brecht’s teaching ... well ... for instance Ms. Schiller, the other German teacher explains much better and she somehow does things better, she is nice and does not rant and rave at somebody (Girls, 5<sup>th</sup> grade, July, group 2)

And Ms. Brecht, she says, well in oral exams she is very strict (Girls, 5<sup>th</sup> grade, July, group 2)

Yes and Ms. Brecht always expects the best, in my class you have to work yourself totally into the ground, that is what she says (Girls, 5<sup>th</sup> grade, July, group 2)

Here, the students primarily discuss Ms. Brecht’s expectations, her feedback behavior and the way she handles errors. In contrast to the first discussion, the relationship between Ms. Brecht and her students is no longer characterized by trust; instead it is determined by her expectations which are perceived as being very high. The students experience the way she handles errors and failures as shameful exposure.

In addition to Ms. Brecht’s teaching style, the students talk about her physical appearance and her social status. They explicitly criticize her tendency to talk about

expensive things she owns and about her extravagant voyages and holiday trips. They perceive Ms. Brecht as vain and pretentious. Her behavior in that respect – which manifests itself, for instance, when she brings expensive objects to class – is described as inappropriate for a teacher. Ms. Brecht seems to emphasize her social status, which is a tendency the students strongly object to. They feel like their teacher tries to set herself apart from them. The students interpret Ms. Brecht's strategy of social distinction in the context of her minority background. It appears that she developed an assimilative stance towards integration. She feels the need to reaffirm her successful integration by pointing to her (material) acquisitions and achievements.

The students address her ethnic and cultural background themselves, without being prompted by the interviewer. According to the students, her background primarily serves an explanative function. They use it to try to explain their teacher's German lessons, as the following passage shows:

I: You already mentioned Ms. Brecht, that is your German teacher, isn't it?

Sen: Yes [several parallel answers]

S: ( ) that she is very special.

I: OK, could you ( )

(Nicole): Yes, I think, she is against foreigners, but

I: Against foreigners [astonished]

S: Why?

S: But she is a foreigner herself (.)

(Aylin): Yes because she I think well, Tijana always has the theory, I don't know, if it's true, because she also is a foreigner and may have had difficulties in learning German and then she said, that she now makes it worse for foreign children, she makes bad, no ... how do you say, she wants to make it more difficult for them to learn German

Trang: And she ~

Aylin:                    ↓ to be good in German (.)

Trang:                    ~ And she always mentions, that we have poor language skills, that we are not good and everything

Lotta: she once wanted to forbid Amely that she speaks at home, Amely is from Romania, that she speaks Romanian at home because she, she has that with the „sch“ and „s“

S: Wasn't it Tijana?

S: Ehm

Sen: No

S: That was ~

S:                         ↓ still that was the same with both?

S: Yes, the same with both (.)

Sen: [mixed-up talking]

Lotta: Then she was, both were hurt by that, because that actually is their mother tongue ... and then someone comes around and says you are not allowed to talk

- your language anymore ... ehm, because otherwise they unlearn it and that is their decision, actually, and after school, no one can demand anything really
- I: Mhm
- Luisa: Well, ehm I also thought this was mean she once went to the parents of each student and told them: your girl cannot speak German at all ... ehm, despite the fact that Tijana for example speaks German very well, in my opinion
- S: Sometimes she confuses some
- Luisa:                                    └ Yes
- S:   ~ articles or
- Sen: [mixed-up talking]
- Luisa: Well, Tijana sometimes confuses the articles or she may confuse some of these words ... just because, well, she is from a different country, but I think it is really mean that Ms. Brecht wants to make it so much harder for us foreigners, because ... well, OK, my parents are from a foreign country but actually most are ... ~
- S: But you can speak German really good.
- Luisa: ~ Yes, actually most of those who are sitting here, their parents may be foreigners, but they are born here in Germany, except some ... but I think it is somehow mean, we also belong somehow to Germany. So, we too are Germans, because we are born here, I have a German passport, thus I also belong to it ... and hence I think it is very mean to call me a foreigner
- S: Yes
- Trang: Once it was, I don't know, that a girl did not know the actual holiday. And then she said, we are in Germany here, you have to know all the German holidays (Girls, 5<sup>th</sup> grade, July, group 1)

When the interviewer asks about Ms. Brecht, one student mentions that she is “very special”, which alludes to the fact that she seems different from other teachers in specific ways. Despite the negative connotation of this statement, the student is reluctant to elaborate. Although there are hints that something is wrong with Ms. Brecht, their nature is not explicitly addressed initially. Only when the interviewer follows up on the question, Nicole explains in her connecting claim: “I think she has something against foreigners.” By saying this, she makes a serious accusation and the following mix of voices indicates that some of the students are surprised by this statement. The interviewer wants to know more and another student also demands an explanation. She points out that Ms. Brecht is also a foreigner which calls the accusation into question. At first, the students seem to disagree about Nicole’s proposition. Over the course of the following discussion Aylin, however, mentions an absent student’s ‘theory’. The use of the term theory indicates that the students are looking for an explanation. They are bewildered by the teacher’s behavior and try to make sense of it. The ‘theory’ that Tijana allegedly proposed refers to Ms. Brecht’s personal migration history. The theory assumes that she had difficulties

herself when she was younger and that she therefore wants to make the lives of foreign children as difficult.

When they talk about Ms. Brecht's ethnic background, the students do not declare their solidarity with her or emphasize similarities; instead they define her in opposition to themselves. Ms. Brecht's migration history is something of the past ("She *was* a foreigner herself"). Her status as a foreigner is in the past whereas she several times addresses her students as such. The fact that they are repeatedly reminded of their foreign descent makes it difficult for them to sympathize with the teacher. They do not experience the migration history as a common ground but as something that separates them from their teacher. They, furthermore, do not perceive her actions as supportive. Instead they feel that Ms. Brecht deliberately tries to erect barriers that hinder their development. In the course of the discussion, the students find further evidence for Ms. Brecht's supposed xenophobic stance. They perceive the fact that she forbids them to talk their mother tongues at home as a serious transgression of boundaries. Furthermore, they consider it as embarrassingly impertinent that she exposes their poor language skills to anyone – that is, particularly to other teachers and parents.

In the course of the discussion, the students talk vividly and reject the teacher's deficit orientation. They support each other and affirm each other's competencies and strengths. The students and their teacher obviously do not agree about the student's language skills. The students are unable and unwilling to accept their teacher's criticism. They possibly feel that Ms. Brecht does not acknowledge that German is not their mother tongue and that they can actually speak German quite well. Thinking of Ms. Brecht as xenophobic helps them to make sense of the teacher's behavior. Considering findings about the development of the academic self-concept (Dresel & Ziegler, 2006), this may also be interpreted as strategy that helps students protect and maintain their self-concept. If the teacher is xenophobic, her criticism and demands are unfounded and there is no reason for the students to doubt their own language skills.

Over the course of the school year, the students' opinion about Ms. Brecht changes and she is described and judged differently. The students appear to be ambivalent because, even towards the end of the school year, there are favorable statements about Ms. Brecht. Evaluation of her personal teaching style, however, prevails. The ways in which she handles errors and her feedback behavior appear most relevant for the students.



#### 4. Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to explore students' perspectives about the ethno-cultural backgrounds of their minority teachers. The starting point was the allegedly positive effect of minority teachers concerning more culturally sensitive schooling. Due to the scale and the exploratory character of the study, we do not want to overstate the conclusions drawn from the presented results. Nevertheless, the two presented cases illustrate different aspects that seem to be relevant from students' perspectives. Although there is little research that takes students' perspectives on this subject into account, the research that does exist suggests that 1) students may consider their minority teachers as role models and 2) minority teachers may foster students' well-being. Nevertheless, 3) certain tensions and challenges in the relationship between minority teachers and students may arise. The manifestation of the last two findings depends on the individual teacher's attitude towards integration and acculturation. General research on students' perspectives about their teachers indicates that they use two points of reference: 'love' and 'mastery'. We will discuss the results of our study in the light of these aspects.

The two cases illustrate that minority teachers do not necessarily meet the high expectations that are placed on them by educational policy. Their minority status and ethno-cultural background is not automatically relevant to their students. In case 1, the students disregard and do not address this "dimension of difference." Indeed, the students mention Ms. Kalmer's perfect German skills, so she could potentially serve as a role model in this respect. It is also possible that her migration background is irrelevant for the groups' framework of orientation. Nevertheless, it could be significant for individual students.

In case 2, the teacher's minority background becomes relevant over the course of the school year and it seems to be closely connected to her classroom behavior and instructional expectations. The students do not see the teacher's background in a positive light and as a marker of difference. Although the teacher could serve as a role model successfully overcoming language deficits because of her personal educational experience, the students are unable to see her as such. This may be due to the way the teacher interact with them and the way she communicates her expectations, which the students experience as an "imposition." We may conclude that teachers' ethno-cultural backgrounds become relevant for students when they assign a function to it, especially when they look for explanations. Hence, they develop 'theories' that explain the teacher's behavior. In other instances, they invoke the teacher's background when they want to differentiate or reassure themselves. It is important to note, that students' perceptions are not stable over time and across groups. This demonstrates that the relevance of teachers' backgrounds is mutually

constructed and depends on the specific context. The cultural background in and of itself hence has no further meaning but gets relevant only in complex interaction processes.

In light of existing research about students' perspective and judgments, this conclusion is not surprising. It has been demonstrated repeatedly that demographic aspects (like gender, age, etc.) alone play a minor role at best (Ditton, 2002). Any given teacher's personal attitudes and preferences are far more important for students' judgments. Their perspectives may evoke two different dimensions which Gerstenmaier (1975) calls the 'love theme' and the 'mastery theme'. The first dimension involves socio-emotional aspects whereas the second is associated with teachers' subject-specific competencies, teaching styles and their classroom management. How a teacher is judged by students is mainly determined by his/her instructional behavior that balances the love and the mastery theme: A good teacher – according to the students – delivers vivid lessons, is knowledgeable in his or her subject, maintains good relationships with students and is fair and just (Ditton, 2002, p. 267).

In the presented case studies, the mastery theme prevails in case 1. The relationship between the students and their math teacher appears undisturbed and therefore, socio-emotional aspects do not need to be discussed. The teacher can be judged based on her main 'function', which is being a competent math teacher. In case 2 the love and mastery themes become blurred over time. This may be due to the teacher's failure to communicate her subject-specific expectations in a way that the students perceive as just and fair. Consequently her subject-specific expectations and instructional behavior – such as exposing students' mistakes and deficits – damage her previously good relationship with the students. While she initially meets the students' social and emotional needs when they are new at the school, this equilibrium is lost later when subject-specific expectations become prevalent. The failure to mediate between 'love' and 'mastery' may be due to the teacher's attitude and personal experiences. Obviously becoming fluent in German is very important to her. Judging by the students' statements, her attitude about integration is assimilative and she favors corresponding acculturation strategies.

It still remains to be seen whether the professional behavior of minority teachers is based on more assimilative, integrative attitudes and if there are systematic differences between majority and minority teachers. Georgi et al. (2011) and Rotter (2012) suggest that minority teachers may use their languages of origin to express a – possibly only domain-specific – assimilative attitude: Although minority teachers may speak their languages of origin in the classroom, this language use is restricted to situations that involve disciplining of students and the clarification of extracurricular issues. Despite the possibility to rely on and use multilingualism,

German is seen as the one and only language of instruction (Georgi et al., 2011). This also seems to be Ms. Brecht's stance. She may be correct in supposing that fluency in German is a precondition for a successful educational career at Germany's higher secondary schools and may also protect students from discrimination, but she is unable to convey her position in a way that is acceptable for her minority students. By identifying her students' mother tongues as the source of their deficits, she does not take their multilingual resources into account. Furthermore, she does not consider students' use of their mother tongues as a resource that has diagnostic and prognostic value. Taking the potential of languages of origin into account is important in order to foster language skills (Gogolin, 2008). Hence, the students fail to recognize Ms. Brecht's intention to help further their German language skills. They feel like their abilities are not appreciated and it is possible that they interpret this as an attack on their academic self-concept<sup>4</sup>. This attack compromises their identity in ways that are only explainable through the supposed xenophobic attitude of the teacher. Although this 'theory' seems to be rather farfetched because Ms. Brecht is of foreign descent herself, it is reasonable to assume that her attitude depends on her biographical experiences to a certain extent. The experience with migration and integration processes does not necessarily entail a uniform stance towards acculturation. According to Berry (1980), we can differentiate four different attitudes and acculturation strategies: assimilation, integration, segregation and marginalization. Ms. Brecht seems to favor an assimilative strategy which may have helped her to succeed in the German educational system and become a teacher.

Ms. Brecht's attitude in and of itself does not necessarily determine the students' perceptions; instead they are concerned about the way she translates said attitude into instructional behavior: She has high expectations but does not frame them in an encouraging manner. That minority teachers are able to create learning environments that challenge minority children in particular is indeed an expectation that is associated with the recruitment of minority teachers (Strasser & Steber, 2010). Highly demanding learning environments, however, are only effective when they instill positive expectations in students with respect to their competencies (Jussim & Harber, 2005). By focusing on the students' deficits, Ms. Brecht accomplishes the opposite effect. We can only speculate what has led to this deficit-oriented attitude. The students' theory is backed by existing research which demonstrates that teachers who successfully completed the educational system may have developed negative images of their own minority group (Tellez, 1999). This may be an effective strategy to avoid the effects of negative stereotypes associated with one's group of origin (Strasser, 2012). A study with Turkish students in Germany reveals that setting oneself apart from the Turkish community seems to be a com-

mon strategy of dealing with existing negative stereotypes (Strasser & Hirschauer, 2011). The role of social class and stratification-specific differences between and within minority groups should not be neglected either (Morris, 2007). Ms. Brecht's students interpret the way she behaves as a form of social dissociation. In addition to her assimilative and deficit-oriented teaching style, she does not provide an example of how to reconcile one's cultural identity and academic success. Consequently, following Ms. Brecht's example poses a threat to her minority students' cultural identities (Ogbu, 2003).

It is important to not only take teachers' minority-related attitudes and acculturation strategies into consideration; their classroom behavior may also be profoundly affected by their professional self-concept. When they develop their professional attitudes, it seems important how they deal with the expectations that are placed on minority teachers (Rotter, 2012, 2014) and what role is attributed to them within the teaching faculty (Strasser, 2013). Rotter (2012) differentiates three ways of dealing with expectations towards minority teachers: 1) teachers may embrace the role of being a positive example and cultural mediator; 2) they may accept the role of functioning as a positive example but negate specific competencies associated with their own minority statuses; 3) they may reject the attributed role that is assigned to them and emphasize their subject specific competencies. In both presented cases, the minority teachers seem to represent the latter manifestation because they focus on subject-specific issues. We may argue that this way is dominant at German higher secondary schools ('Gymnasien') because the teachers at those schools traditionally specialize in specific subjects and receive less pedagogical training. Therefore, the type of school the minority teacher work at may be another variable that needs to be taken into account. The relevance and significance of minority teachers may also vary according to the subjects they teach. It may make a difference, for example, if teachers teach subjects that convey the 'culture', language or history of a country or not. These aspects have not been investigated yet. Hence, the presented case studies suggest a series of open questions: How does teachers' practical behavior, their attitudes and the institutional context, composition and characteristics of a class affect students' perceptions? How do teacher's backgrounds interact with other difference dimensions such as gender, social class and generation and in what contexts do they interact in what way? How relevant is it that teachers and students match ethnically and what are the effects of a 'mismatch'? In order to investigate these questions, the complex interplay variables and categories – teachers' attitudes, social class aspects, acculturation strategies etc. – at different levels – individual, school, educational policy, society level – has to be thoroughly modeled because the presence of minority teachers is not necessarily relevant in and of itself. Instead, its relevance depends on multiple conditions, is

different for different groups in the educational system and may change when the rate minority teachers increases. Therefore, even if minority teachers are not as relevant as expected for students' experiences at a group level, they may be important for parents and the school as an institution. Moreover, the teaching faculty should mirror society's population in all its diversity. Nevertheless, the two cases demonstrate that minority teachers may need intercultural training just like majority teachers in order to deal with diversity issues adequately and professionally.

### Notes

1. In the following, we will use the term 'minority teachers' instead of 'teachers with migrational backgrounds' because the category 'migration background' is rather vague and does not take into account the fact that teachers belong to different minority groups. Minority groups differ with respect to power relations, societal status and stereotypes associated with them. Hence, for example it probably makes a difference whether a teacher is of Austrian or of Turkish descent. Furthermore the term 'migrational background' is primarily used in German-speaking countries. Talking about 'minority teachers' allows us to connect to international research contexts.
2. "This implicit or tacit knowledge forms a sort of structure, by which action is orientated mostly independent from subjective meaning, and has insofar a certain objectivity opposed to." (Bohnsack, 2010, p. 100)
3. 'S': Speaker cannot be identified.
4. Existing research demonstrates that teacher feedback is the main source for students to develop their academic self-concept and that a student's self-concept is jeopardized when a teacher attributes mistakes to this student's abilities (Dresel & Ziegler, 2006). It should be noted, however, that the group discussion design of this study does not assess individual student's academic self-concept and that group processes may also have contributed to students' 'xenophobia theory'.

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