



## **Diversity in the Classroom. How Teachers Can Encourage Good Performance**

### **Summary**

Children and young people from immigrant families continue to be less successful in the German education system than those without a migration background. The families of origin and the education system are called upon to eliminate these differences; the individual teachers also play an important role. The Berlin Institute for Integration and Migration Research and the Research Unit of the Expert Council of German Foundations on Integration and Migration conducted a joint research project in this area which was funded by the Stiftung Mercator. Three sub-projects looked at to what extent teachers' stereotypical expectations of performance affected the academic success of children with a migration background and how negative effects can be mitigated.

Teachers' perceptions of diversity in the classroom vary. This can affect how they teach children with a migration background. Study Module A therefore first looks at how teachers appraise certain aspects of cultural diversity. To this end, data from the research project "Deutschland postmigrantisch" (Post-Migrant Germany) was analysed in which 8,270 people were surveyed throughout Germany, including 540 educators. The results suggest that teachers on average tend to have more liberal attitudes toward the issues of affiliation and religious policy than the rest of the population and that they are less likely to accept negative generalisations about Muslims. Nevertheless, some of them also express negative opinions: of the teachers who were employed at the time of the survey, 15 percent still think that Muslims are more aggressive than the "we" category surveyed. Only two-thirds of all teachers surveyed believe that Muslims are just as educationally oriented as non-Muslims even though the educational aspirations, for example, in families of Turkish descent, have been scientifically documented. Moreover, many teachers rate their knowledge of Muslims to be low.

In Study Module B the focus is teachers' expectations of the future academic achievements of pupils. It examines the extent to which such performance expectations influence the activities of teachers in the classroom and whether ethnic inequalities are reinforced by these expectations. In the research project "Kompetenzerwerb und Lernvoraussetzungen"



(Competence Acquisition and Learning Prerequisites), 1,065 children and their teachers were tracked during the first year of school using performance tests, questionnaires and classroom observations. The results show that teachers of children of Turkish descent expect lower performance than of children without a migration background, even if they have the same capabilities. The study also outlines a self-fulfilling prophecy: when teachers overestimate the achievements of children at the beginning of the first school year, they actually learn more over the course of the school year and vice-versa. The analyses also provide some initial indications as to how this effect specifically comes about: teachers call on children of Turkish descent somewhat less often in the classroom than their fellow pupils, and they engage with them for shorter periods of time. Overall, however, teachers rate the performance of their students quite accurately, and the effects of distorted expectations are small.

Another source of performance differences is that children and young people with a migration background also internalise negative stereotypes themselves. As a result, they are less likely to believe they can achieve good results, are more likely to feel stressed and give up more quickly. They may also actually perform worse as a result. What are known as self-affirmation interventions, however, can be used to counteract this effect. In Study Module C "Wider die Stereotypisierung. Bessere Schulleistung durch Selbstbestätigung" (Counteracting Stereotype Threat: Increasing achievement in school by self-affirmation), the effect of an intervention of this kind was assessed on 820 young people from the seventh grade. The results show: if pupils of Turkish and Arab descent learn about subjects that are important to them on a personal level, they perform better right afterwards on a mathematics test than their classmates who have not done this. This effect is still evident even eight weeks later.

Teachers can employ self-affirmation interventions of this kind in specific situations to mitigate the effect that internalised stereotypes have on the academic performance of pupils. To prevent disadvantages brought about by negative stereotypes and expectations, however, it is essential to ensure that teachers reflect their own expectations. In addition, it is not just up to individual teachers to eliminate educational disadvantage in the classroom. All stakeholders in the education system must contribute to finding a constructive approach to dealing with diversity which gives all pupils good opportunities for development. In addition to the school principals, this includes support systems such as institutions for teacher education, but also school book publishers.