

# “SHE SAID THAT I WAS A PATTERN-BREAKER”: CAREER ASPIRATIONS AND CHALLENGES FOR STUDENTS OF A TRANSNATIONAL BACKGROUND IN TEACHER EDUCATION IN DENMARK

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**ABSTRACT.** This article explores the career aspirations and educational experiences of Danish-born students of a transnational background who are nearing completion of their studies to become professional teachers in compulsory schools in Denmark. The theoretical framework of the study is grounded in the tenets of critical multiculturalism and transnationalism. The findings obtained from individual qualitative interviews with seven students indicate their overall satisfaction with teacher educators and the learning environments within their campuses. However, the participants also reported experiencing varying degrees of unfair treatment, labelling, and prejudice. Despite having encountered different forms of discrimination, the participants have ambitious career aspirations, often manifested in their determination to challenge social injustice and bring positive change to the compulsory education system.

« SHE SAID THAT I WAS A PATTERN-BREAKER » : ASPIRATIONS  
PROFESSIONNELLES ET DÉFIS DES ÉTUDIANTS ISSUS D'UN MILIEU  
TRANSNATIONAL DANS LA FORMATION DES ENSEIGNANTS AU  
DANEMARK

**RÉSUMÉ.** Cet article explore les aspirations professionnelles et les expériences scolaires d'étudiants nés au Danemark et issus d'un milieu transnational qui terminent leurs études d'enseignement dans les écoles obligatoires danoises. Le cadre théorique de l'étude s'appuie sur les principes du multiculturalisme critique et du transnationalisme. Les résultats des entrevues qualitatives individuelles menées auprès de sept étudiants montrent leur satisfaction globale à l'égard des formateurs d'enseignants et de leurs environnements d'apprentissage. Cependant, ils ont également mentionné avoir subi des traitements injustes, de l'étiqouetage et des préjugés. Malgré avoir été confrontés à différentes formes de discrimination, les participants ont des aspirations professionnelles ambitieuses, souvent manifestées par leur détermination à combattre l'injustice sociale et à apporter un changement positif au système d'éducation obligatoire.

It is a sunny April morning in one of Denmark's university colleges. I am sitting in a classroom and interviewing a student teacher who has agreed to participate in my research project about student teachers' perspectives on multicultural education. The interviewee is nearing completion of her 4 years of studies to become a professional teacher. She is feeling a mix of excitement and anticipation about the next chapter in her life. The room has glass walls allowing us to see other students passing by on the way to the library or sitting around the tables and chatting. The environment feels lively and welcoming. The interviewee was born in Denmark, but her family has a transnational background. She shares a story:

I met a teacher at my workplace. I worked in a clothes shop. I worked in the bags section back then. And that teacher came in and said, "I need a teacher's bag," and I was like, "This one is a good teacher's bag." Then we chatted about how I knew that because I was studying to become a teacher. And then I asked her about education, what she had taken and things like that. And then she said that I was a pattern-breaker. (Participant M3)

The interviewee explained that she was confused about the final remark on her being a pattern-breaker. Despite her initial confusion, she understood exactly the origins of that remark. It was an indication of low expectations and existing prejudice toward young people of a transnational background who are being assigned patterns of behaviour and societal labels of inferiority solely based on their appearance.

For the purpose of this study, the term *transnational background* is used to refer to Danish-born individuals whose parents or grandparents, after immigrating to Denmark, maintained ties across cultures. These ties are manifested in various ways, such as maintaining cultural traditions, speaking heritage languages at home, or upholding social connections with communities in their places of origin. Although Denmark is often portrayed in the media as being a welfare state with the world's happiest people, many researchers point out the issues of inequality, injustice, labelling, and racism toward individuals with transnational backgrounds, especially non-Western backgrounds (e.g., Jensen et al., 2017; Kristensen, 2022; Larsen, 2012; Vertelyte & Staunæs, 2021). These discriminatory discourses pose significant barriers for young people in their pursuit of educational opportunities and labour market access.

Focusing on Danish-born student teachers of a transnational background, this article examines how they make sense of their educational pathways, articulate their career aspirations, and envision their professional futures in Denmark's compulsory school system. In the context of this article,

*career aspirations* are defined as the range of professional goals and ambitions that these students strive to attain in their future careers. These aspirations include a commitment to social justice, cultural responsiveness, and continuous professional and personal development to successfully address the diverse needs of all children. According to previous studies, student teachers' career aspirations often correlate to the personal experiences and challenges they faced during their compulsory education (Flores & Day, 2006; Miller & Shifflet, 2016). The guiding research questions are as follows:

1. What are the career aspirations of Danish-born student teachers of a transnational background?
2. How do childhood memories and previous schooling experiences influence their career aspirations?
3. What challenges do these students encounter during their teacher education journey and the on-site schoolteacher training?
4. How do they navigate and overcome these challenges?

The article addresses these research questions by analyzing qualitative interviews with seven student teachers of a transnational background at two university colleges in Denmark. Considering the complexity involved in embracing transnational identities, there is a clear indication of the necessity for encouraging student teachers to engage in self-reflection and explore cultural nuances, solidifying their professional identities and pedagogical approaches (Carter Andrews, 2021; Ladson-Billings, 2021). Recognizing this, the present study puts forward empirical evidence underscoring the need to nurture teachers who not only are professionally competent but also are equipped with critical multicultural viewpoints. The article offers a unique insight into the experiences of student teachers of a transnational background, an area that remains under-researched. To date, there is a notable lack of studies specifically exploring this particular demographic in Denmark.

The next section will introduce a conceptual exploration of the tenets of critical multiculturalism and transnationalism, which underlie the theoretical framework of the study. An overview of the Danish political and educational context will subsequently be presented by summarizing the latest relevant research studies. Following this, the methodology will be explained and the findings will be explored through analysis of the interviews with the participants. Finally, the article concludes with a comprehensive discussion of the findings, offering valuable insights and arguments that underscore the necessity for targeted improvements in

teacher education programs in Denmark to align with the changes and diversification of the student body.

### **CRITICAL MULTICULTURALISM AND TRANSNATIONALISM**

The study's theoretical framework draws on the body of knowledge regarding critical multiculturalism and transnationalism. Critical multiculturalism evolved as a response to liberal multiculturalism, which originally aimed to improve social harmony by recognizing and respecting ethnic, cultural, and linguistic differences through a problem-solving approach (May & Sleeter, 2010). Multicultural education, which was grounded in the principles of liberal multiculturalism, quickly gained popularity in educational institutions in the Western world as a seemingly practical way to address cultural diversity. However, critical analysis of the liberal multicultural approach to education quickly identified various flaws that manifested in overlooking the underlying power dynamics that perpetuate structural inequalities such as racism, institutionalized poverty, and discrimination (May & Sleeter, 2010). Critical multiculturalism goes beyond the unelaborated celebration of diversity and critically examines power structures and social injustices within multicultural societies by emphasizing the need for policy reforms and transformative practices (May & Sleeter, 2010). This article utilizes the ideas of critical multiculturalism to underscore the significance of social justice and reform in teacher education. Such an approach is essential for educational institutions to recognize and value the unique experiences of students of a transnational background, thereby ensuring the provision of relevant support and the establishment of empowering learning environments.

The issue of labelling youths from minority backgrounds has been specifically looked at through the framework of critical multiculturalism. Winn and Behizadeh (2011) pointed out that labelling youths, especially youths of colour, as public enemies leads to increased security measures, such as hiring more security personnel, installing surveillance equipment, and employing police officers, all of which transform schools into prison-like environments and promote a school-to-prison pipeline narrative. Overall, this narrative refers to a pattern in which suspensions, expulsions, and other disciplinary practices are disproportionately imposed on students from marginalized communities (Dunn et al., 2022; Winn & Behizadeh, 2011). Hence, it is highly relevant to critically assess the impact of labelling and stereotypes, both positive and negative, on school environments. Czopp (2008) underscored the importance of enhancing awareness regarding the potential adverse effects of positive stereotypes, which are intended as compliments, on intergroup interactions. Such

stereotypes, although well-meaning, can be perceived as inappropriate or offensive, necessitating a deeper understanding of their impact on social dynamics. For instance, some African American participants in Czopp's study reacted negatively when White participants praised Black people for their athleticism, perceiving this stereotype as meaningless and biased, and criticizing it for failing to imply anything of social significance about cultural diversity or being Black. To understand different dimensions and the impact of existing cultural stereotypes in Danish teacher education, the presented study explores the views of students of a transnational background, giving them an opportunity to critically reflect on their own educational experiences.

In the European context, Islamic religious culture increasingly encounters suspicion and hostility, a phenomenon highlighting the need to re-examine the role of religion and religious marginalization in perpetuating inequality and patterns of social exclusion (Drouhot & Nee, 2019). This situation exemplifies the broader issues of labelling and stereotypes discussed earlier, where religious identity becomes a marker for exclusion and discrimination, akin to ethnic or racial categorization. Critical multiculturalism, as conceptualized by May and Sleeter (2010), provides a framework for understanding these dynamics. It positions culture and intercultural relations within the broader context of power imbalances in societies, asserting that culture and identity are dynamic and multi-layered, shaped by intersecting social categories. This approach allows for a critical examination of normative constructs like Whiteness and the processes of racialization, offering insights into how religious identities intersect with these broader patterns of social stratification and exclusion.

However, the dynamic view on culture and identity should not be misinterpreted as a promotion of cosmopolitanism, which has been criticized for apolitical notions of breaking free from societal influences and entering a utopian realm of increased liberty as a citizen of the world (Calhoun, 2003). Transnationalism is, therefore, a more appropriate term describing the lasting meaningful connections people maintain across different countries and cultures (Mau, 2010). Transnationalism can be viewed from two perspectives: "from above" and "from below," where the former focuses on the macro-level structures and actions of nation-states, international organizations, and corporations (Mau, 2010). In the context of this study, transnationalism from below is more relevant since it is a multifaceted phenomenon that emphasizes the everyday experiences, choices, and actions of individuals that transform social spaces and redefine territorial and social boundaries through their agency in culture-crossing processes (Mau, 2010). Nevertheless, various studies within

teacher education revealed that embracing plurilingual and transnational identities is a complex process that requires self-reflection and active exploration of cultures (Mansikka & Holm, 2011; Nuñez et al., 2021).

When cultural issues, cultural competence, and critical multiculturalism are present in teacher education programs, they are often confined to specific curriculum areas and not holistically integrated across entire programs (Vavrus, 2010). This segregation reflects a broader disconnect. Critical multicultural advocacy often confronts resistance, especially from institutional leaders who may dismiss race and racism as irrelevant, adhering to a colour-blind and politically neutral stance (Lea, 2010; Vavrus, 2010). However, embracing a more holistic approach to teacher education necessitates moving beyond this colour-blind ideology. It involves actively empowering future teachers to acknowledge and engage with diverse perspectives and experiences (Carter Andrews, 2021; Ladson-Billings, 2021). This is where the concepts of transnationalism and critical multiculturalism become crucial. In this article, these concepts are operationalized by advocating for an educational framework that not only recognizes but actively incorporates diverse cultural perspectives to equip future teachers with theoretical and practical knowledge to effectively address local and global inequities, fostering an environment that is responsive to the dynamic, multicultural nature of today's classrooms.

The presented theoretical framework not only serves as a lens for interpreting the findings but also guides the theoretical underpinnings of the research design, which is rooted in the principles of culturally responsive data collection (Berryman et al., 2013). The subsequent section will explore the Danish context and current political discourses on integration and multiculturalism, setting the stage for the presentation of the methodology.

## DANISH CONTEXT

Danish society is becoming increasingly diverse. In January 2025, first-generation immigrants made up 12.6% of the entire population, while descendants of immigrants made up 3.7% (Statistics Denmark, 2025a). Currently, the five largest groups by place of origin are immigrants from Türkiye, Poland, Ukraine, Romania, and Syria (Statistics Denmark, 2025b). Statistics Denmark defines *immigrants (indvandrere)* as persons who were born abroad and whose parents are neither Danish citizens nor born in Denmark. *Descendants of immigrants (efterkommere)* are defined as persons who were born in Denmark with neither parent being both a Danish citizen and born in Denmark. If one or both parents were born in

Denmark and have Danish citizenship, their children will not be classified as descendants of immigrants. However, if Danish-born parents both retain foreign citizenship, their children will be classified as descendants of immigrants (Statistics Denmark, 2025b). In this study, "transnational background" is the term consistently used to describe the participants. This term is preferred for its breadth and because it avoids the negative political connotations often associated with the term "descendant of immigrants."

### ***Politics, integration, and discriminatory discourses***

Danish politics concerning immigrants and integration are complex. They are characterized by continuous policy changes in the direction of increased control of immigration and focus on immigrants' labour market participation (Vitus & Jarlby, 2022). The tightening of policies results in inflexible integration efforts, leading to counterproductive outcomes due to increasingly bureaucratic procedures (Vitus & Jarlby, 2022). In his article on integration in Danish society, Rytter (2019) criticized the ambiguity of the concept of integration, which has been used to stigmatize and exclude immigrant minorities. Vitus and Jarlby (2022) add that neglecting the social and cultural aspects of integration and focusing solely on employability and economic self-sufficiency hinders the development of a sense of citizenship, belonging, and responsibility. Hence, the whole concept must be critically examined and questioned to address its consequences.

According to Jensen et al. (2017), issues of discrimination and racism are routinely pushed to the sidelines and delegitimized within the prevailing discourse on integration, leading to the exclusion of anti-racism from policy development. Active denial of the existence of discriminatory discourses such as racism manifests, for example, in the misuse of the concept of immigration – which is sometimes employed as a replacement for the idea of race – resulting in differential racism, which operates within a framework that does not explicitly involve the notion of races (Jensen et al., 2017). Despite the denial of racism in the political arena, antiracist education has gained attention among activist groups in Denmark and emphasizes the importance of acknowledging and addressing people's lived experiences of racialization and racism (Vertelyte & Staunæs, 2021). However, these issues require more public attention and critical research on how discriminatory discourses and power dynamics impact people's lives.

### *Togetherness and coercive benevolence in an educational context*

In the context of Danish education, the notion of *togetherness* (*fællesskab*) plays an important role. Togetherness in schools focuses on what students learn outside the formal curriculum, such as the school's traditions, language, and values, which shape the school's culture and common spirit (Jantzen, 2020). The notion of togetherness may be interpreted as both a sense of belonging and a motivation to contribute to strengthening the existing school culture (Jantzen, 2020; Mason, 2020). The concept of common spirit in an educational context can be traced back to the Danish philosopher of the Enlightenment N. F. S. Grundtvig (Jantzen, 2020; Mason, 2020). A common spirit among people is both dialectical and paradoxical, as it arises from shared culture and history but only exists when individuals actively participate and shape the community together. Grundtvig believed that education and enlightenment were crucial in fostering this togetherness, which influenced the Danish folk school movement, feasibly contributing to Denmark's political, social, and cultural success (Jantzen, 2020; Mason, 2020).

Although Danish education is largely grounded in the ideas of togetherness, various studies indicate issues of marginalization, labelling, and exclusion of minority students. For instance, Kristensen (2022) studied the dynamics of children of descendants' resistance against labelling in compulsory schooling. The study identified that the label "immigrant" was extensively used to identify youths with non-Danish ethnic backgrounds, even though they were born and raised in Denmark. Therefore, these youths felt a need to resist being assigned patterns of behaviour associated with the stigmatized immigrant position. A study by Helledatter Jacobsen and Piekut (2023) investigated school principals' perspectives on the uncertainties surrounding the reception of immigrants in Denmark and the potential impact of Danish policies on daily educational practices. On the one hand, the researchers revealed that the principals considered a school context to be a bubble that can secure children from discriminatory discourses. On the other, they observed a range of responses from school principals – including frustration, acknowledgement of insecurity, and even anger – highlighting their awareness and concerns regarding the unstable conditions faced by immigrant children, even in schools described as secure environments.

An interesting notion of *coercive benevolence* was suggested by Shirazi and Jaffe-Walter (2021), who analyzed how Muslim youths navigated secondary schooling in Denmark. The researchers described how schools were planning and implementing interventions aimed at promoting a sense of

togetherness, without considering their cultural appropriateness. In this context, coercive benevolence manifested as a deliberate and forceful encouragement for all students to participate in extracurricular common-spirit-building activities, such as class camp trips, without recognizing or addressing the concerns that certain students might have regarding dietary restrictions or accommodation arrangements. Overall, the study indicated that while teachers expressed criticism toward right-wing nationalist movements and anti-immigrant discourses, their everyday decisions and practices reflected racial stereotypes.

When it comes to higher education, there are few studies on the experiences of students from minority backgrounds. A study conducted by Hansen (2014) at the University of Copenhagen revealed how the learning environment in the pharmaceutical program created a division between the academic and social lives of ethnic minority students and ethnic Danish students. Minority students often felt separated from their ethnic Danish peers in various aspects, such as limited participation in social activities and segregated academic group work. The study suggested the need for targeted efforts to address the social dimension of the learning experience in order to promote minority students' sense of belonging to the learning environment.

In the following sections, a study performed in two university colleges with students of a transnational background will be presented, and its findings will be discussed in light of the theoretical framework and previous studies in the field.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The presented study is a qualitative inquiry using in-depth individual interviews as a primary data collection technique. In-depth interviews provide a rich insight into individual experiences and perspectives (Braun & Clarke, 2013), allowing for a nuanced understanding of complex issues like those faced by student teachers of a transnational background. The study follows a culturally responsive data collection approach, treating the process as a reciprocal knowledge exchange between the researcher and participants (Berryman et al., 2013). While exploring the participants' opinions and experiences, the study underscores the impact their contributions can have on social justice within the study's context.

### ***Participants***

Teacher education in Denmark is offered by six university colleges with multiple campuses all over Denmark. To attain professional teacher status,

a candidate must complete a 240 ECTS (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System) credit program corresponding to 4 years of study. Upon completion, graduates receive the title of Bachelor of Education and are licensed to teach in compulsory education establishments. This article reports on the findings collected through qualitative, semi-structured in-depth interviews with seven student teachers of a transnational background, in two university colleges located in two different regions in Denmark.

The participants in this study were full-time student teachers in the final term of the last year of their studies. Prior to the study, the participants had completed their on-site schoolteacher training and most of the courses included in their program. Besides their on-site training, all participants had working experience as part-time substitute teachers in public schools in Denmark. The average age of the participants was 27 years old. They were all born and raised in Denmark. However, their cultural backgrounds were diverse. The participants' parents and/or grandparents migrated to Denmark for varied reasons, including employment opportunities, seeking refuge, or reuniting with family members. Information on the participants is presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1. *Participant information*

Participant	Pronouns	Family background	Specializations within the program
Participant A1	he/his	Eastern African	English, History
Participant A2	she/her	Northern African	Danish, Social Studies
Participant M1	he/his	Middle Eastern	English, History
Participant M2	he/his	Middle Eastern	English, Christianity / Religion
Participant M3	she/her	Middle Eastern	English, Mathematics
Participant W1	she/her	Western European	English, German
Participant Y1	she/her	Eastern Asian	Mathematics, Social Studies

*Note.* According to the requirements set by the teacher education programs in the two university colleges, all student teachers must choose three subjects as their specializations within the program. Table 1 reveals two out of three specializations to protect the identities of the study participants.

All participants self-identified as individuals of a transnational background, meaning that they have embraced both Danish culture and maintained meaningful connections with the cultures of their families' places of origin. This is reflected in, for instance, the adherence to cultural traditions, the use of heritage languages in their households, or the maintenance of ties with relatives living in their families' places of origin.

### **Ethics**

As the study was led by a Norwegian researcher, it was reported to the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (Sikt). This agency conducted a thorough review of the research objectives, interview questions, and approaches to handling and storing data, ultimately providing a positive assessment confirming the study's compliance with relevant data protection regulations concerning research involving human participants. The privacy considerations ensured that the participants' rights, interests, opinions, and dignity were respected.

The teacher education community in Denmark is relatively small, and as such, it is important to take extra precautions to protect the identities of study participants. This is particularly important when reporting findings from a very specific group of individuals, such as Danish-born students of a transnational background in this instance. To maintain ethical standards and comply with data protection regulations and laws, personal details irrelevant to the study, such as exact age and civil and socio-economic status, have been omitted from this article.

### **Data collection and analysis**

The interviews were conducted in person by the author of this article, who travelled to the campuses of the participating university colleges. The average length of the interviews was 48 minutes. The participants were interviewed in Danish, and the audio recordings were subsequently transcribed verbatim. During the interviews, the participants were explicitly prompted to retrospectively consider their learning experience in the teacher education program and reflect on various aspects, such as the learning environment, on-site training, and communication with peers and educators.

The interviews were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach as described by Braun and Clarke (2013). ATLAS.ti analytical software was used throughout this process. Initially, the transcriptions were extensively reviewed through close reading to become familiar with the data. A complete coding approach using descriptive codes was applied to identify meaningful units of data. The codes were grouped thematically in

categories that represented the patterns in the data, and the categories were illustrated using code networks, which later developed into themes. The themes were then examined in relation to existing research and analyzed using the study's theoretical framework.

The theme entitled “career aspirations and challenges for student teachers of a transnational background” was selected for this article. The code network associated with this theme was visualized in an artistic representation showcased in the subsequent section that presents the findings. The quotations from the interviews were translated from Danish into English by the researcher, who aimed to preserve the accuracy and essence of the original text. To ensure the translations' fidelity, an external assistant verified the translated content, serving as an additional quality control measure.

## FINDINGS

Although all participants expressed overall satisfaction with the learning environment and the educators, they shared numerous examples of challenges that they faced during their 4-year journey through the program. Many of the challenges encountered by the participants exemplify instances of labelling and prejudice based on transnational background, physical characteristics, culture, and religion. Figure 1 visualizes the main findings presented in this section.

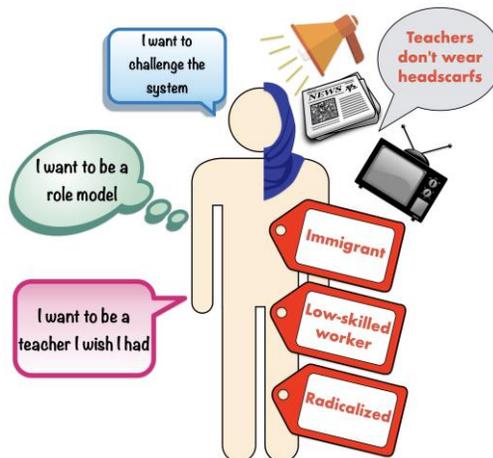


FIGURE 1. Career aspirations and challenges for student teachers of a transnational background

Figure 1 is split into two halves. The left half displays speech bubbles, indicating the participants' common career aspirations. These include their determination to challenge systemic discrimination, their ambitions to become role models for future generations, and their desire to embody the qualities of an ideal teacher, which they felt was absent in their own educational journey. In contrast, the right half of the figure illustrates the labels assigned to students of a transnational background by society and the influence of various discriminatory narratives on their lives. The upper right corner symbolizes the external voices the students continually encounter, such as the media influences or opinions that affect their decision-making or foster doubts. This includes, for example, debates over wearing religious clothing in public and how such choices might shape public perceptions of their personal and professional attributes.

At the beginning of the interviews, the participants reflected on their career aspirations. Since they were all nearing completion of their studies, they felt excited about entering public schools in a new role as professional teachers. All participants brought their childhood memories from not long ago when they were pupils in public schools. Their memories were still fresh since the average age of the participants was 27 years old at the time of the study, meaning they completed compulsory education an average of 10 years earlier. Several participants reflected on the composition of the teaching body back then. Participant M1 revealed that he aspired to become a role model for youths of a transnational background, a role model he lacked when attending compulsory schooling:

I don't live in [the city]. I live a little further out, like a suburb. You know, there aren't that many high-rise buildings. There are simpler homes. And what I have noticed out there. I feel there is ... but it may sound strange ... but there is a lack of teachers with other ethnic backgrounds. I felt that in my school. There were only teachers who were 50+ [years old], who were Morten or Svend, and they were Danes. ... I feel that it can be difficult for a younger boy or girl to have a role model they cannot relate to. (Participant M1)

As well as relating to these experiences, several participants also recalled memories of discriminatory discourses surrounding them when attending compulsory schooling. These discourses were made evident in various ways, such as low expectations toward their academic success. These participants felt that society had already predetermined their roles as low-skilled workers, thereby reinforcing stereotypes. It is important to note that categorizing individuals as low-skilled workers is itself a stereotype, as every occupation, regardless of its nature, necessitates a distinctive set of skills and knowledge. Participant A2 shared a personal story from her

adolescence, when she had already made the decision to become a schoolteacher. She confided her educational aspirations to a schoolteacher at that time, only to receive an unexpected response that triggered doubts about whether her religious clothing choices could potentially influence her professional career:

When I was in the ninth grade at school, I had a teacher who told me, “You cannot become a teacher because you wear a headscarf.” It’s a bit of a sad story. But then I thought I would show her that I could. But I had doubts – well, can I be a teacher and wear a headscarf? Should I take it off? Or should I just take English at a university level instead? But then I thought, no!, I actually want to be a teacher. (Participant A2)

This story highlights how discriminatory attitudes and behaviours can potentially undermine the aspirations and potential of individuals. Participant A2 shared later in her interview that she encountered further instances of discrimination during her on-site schoolteacher training. She was not only called out for her choice of clothing but also faced teasing from her own pupils. Despite the negative experiences associated with this discriminatory behaviour, Participant A2 expressed that it has become a source of strength for her. It fuelled her determination to persist in challenging the system and to inspire and empower Muslim girls who may have doubts regarding their own potential for success.

Two participants brought language-related issues to the discussion and stressed the need for greater awareness of the benefits of acknowledging and utilizing children’s heritage languages in the educational process. Again, this awareness could be traced back to their personal experiences. Their career aspirations at the time of the interviews revolved around introducing fresh perspectives to schools, aiming to dismantle the long-standing stereotypes that view heritage languages as obstacles to children’s development.

Back then, people didn’t know much about bilingual children, well, at least not in Denmark. My mother was prohibited from speaking [heritage language] with me because [schoolteachers] thought it was wrong at the time because it would make me dumb ... the society thought I would have learning difficulties if I spoke [heritage language] at home. (Participant W1)

Participant A1 further delved into the topic of language policies within compulsory schooling and expressed criticism toward the practice of segregating children of a transnational background into separate classes aimed at improving their proficiency in Danish. A notable concern brought by Participant A1 was the absence of consent from both the children and the parents in making such decisions:

It's very cliché, but I want to be a teacher I wish I had in my school days. I felt myself so misunderstood when I was little at my school ... I was taken out of classes to learn extra Danish. And I felt comfortable with my Danish. So, I didn't understand why I had to go to *that* Danish. So, once a day, I was taken out of my normal class to learn basic Danish. I didn't feel like I fit into that box at all, and they never asked for my consent. It was just something they decided for me, and my mother was like, "If your teacher thinks it's a good idea, then of course you should do it." (Participant A1)

The experience shared by Participant A1 offers an opportunity to examine the issue of labelling children of a transnational background within the context of compulsory schooling. This issue was further explored by other participants who discussed the use of the terms "immigrant" and "plurilingual" to categorize people from racial or ethnic minority backgrounds. Although the term "plurilingual" can be perceived as a positive acknowledgement of an individual's linguistic repertoire, in certain social contexts, labelling individuals as plurilingual may unintentionally reinforce their divergence from White-dominant society and can perpetuate a sense of marginalization or foreignness, leading to potential feelings of exclusion or non-belonging.

For example, I have a friend who is Norwegian, but she is not seen as a plurilingual student because you can't see it in her unless she speaks and she has an accent. But me, for example, they can just see, "You are plurilingual." And there are also many older teachers who associate it with ... well, if we don't have any clearly coloured people in our class, well, then we don't need cultural competencies because all these are ethnic Danes. (Participant A2)

Participant W1, who selected German as one of her specializations, shed light on another form of labelling that she encountered along her educational journey. She recounted facing stereotypes from her peers who held negative attitudes toward her specialization. Furthermore, during her on-site training, where she taught German in schools, she observed a significant emphasis on the history of World War II within the curriculum, which neglected the exploration of contemporary German culture. This discrepancy in the curriculum led Participant W1 to perceive it as perpetuating a narrow representation of German culture, ignoring its modern facets and diversity. This omission may contribute to an incomplete and distorted understanding of German society, reinforcing preconceived notions and biases held by both pupils and teachers.

I've been teaching German during the on-site training, and I noticed that my sixth grade only worked with Nazism and Danish Nazis ... They didn't work with popular culture at all when I was there. I think that we

can explore German culture without necessarily disappearing into history. And then I tried to introduce them to some popular culture, but it ... There was a huge amount of stigma around it. (Participant W1)

Participant M2, who specialized in the subject of Christianity / religion as part of his teacher education program, shared another example of prejudice in public schools. During his on-site training, Participant M2 encountered opposition from a group of parents who expressed their objection to having a teacher of Middle Eastern background teaching their children religion. The arguments put forth by these parents were rooted in prejudiced beliefs solely based on the student teacher's family background rather than considering his professional teaching competencies.

I was attending my last on-site training at a school that was very homogenous. In other words, only ethnic Danes were there. And when I came to that school, there were many people who were surprised to see someone with a different ethnic background who was going to teach. I was supposed to teach Islam in the subject of Christianity, and I got a message from the parents who assumed that I wanted to run a Quranic school and that I wanted to radicalize the pupils. I hadn't even started yet, but I already faced a lot of prejudice there, but you know ... It hurt me ... Naturally, I felt saddened by the kind of welcome I received. But I pushed through and completed my classes, and they ended up being fantastic classes where my pupils obtained knowledge about Islam. (Participant M2)

Participant M2 provided additional details regarding the support received from the school leadership and supervisory teachers in addressing the concerns raised by the group of parents. The intervention from the school leadership played a crucial role in calming the parents and facilitating a constructive resolution to the situation. Participant M2 perceived the outcomes of his teaching as overwhelmingly positive, particularly for pupils who gained valuable insights into Islam as a world religion. This positive exposure not only fostered a greater understanding of Islam but also contributed to debunking stereotypes and negative portrayals of the religion by the media. Other participants also mentioned the negative influence of the media on societal attitudes toward individuals of a transnational background. In the context of discussing labels and stereotypes, Participant Y1 specifically drew attention to the pervasive tendency of the media to equate the term "immigrant" with criminality, perpetuating prejudice within Danish society:

The media also blow things up a lot – "That *immigrant* has done this!" and the word "immigrants" ... When you ask most people who immigrants are, they would say it is someone who has an Arabic or

Kurdish or Turkish background, and they are from the Middle East. Many have asked me, "But are you an immigrant?" – "No" – "Well, you actually are because your mother immigrated here." But that is because the media have inflated this word. It's a bit of a swear word, I think. And there is an assumption that immigrants do these bad things. Well, there are second-generation immigrants who have become doctors or something. After all, there are many who are educated. And yes, of course, there are also some who become criminals, but that's also the case with ethnic Danes, isn't it? (Participant Y1)

Despite the negative encounters with prejudice and the challenges faced by the participants, it is important to emphasize the overall satisfaction expressed by the participants toward their educators and the learning environments within the campuses. The participants observed that the teacher educators, in general, exhibited professionalism, openness, and supportiveness. Reflecting on the campus culture, the participants felt a sense of welcome and inclusivity, witnessing examples of initiatives aimed at creating more inclusive learning environments for students of a transnational background.

There are parties and drinking and so on. I also feel that even though I'm a Muslim, I can go and function there. But we are being put in a bit of a box when we come to those parties, though. But I have actually noticed that they have also tried to make some events where there is no alcohol served, where they actually try to involve Muslim minority students, which I think is awesome. So yes, democracy, equality, everybody is together – I think this reflects this campus's culture. (Participant M2)

It is crucial to acknowledge these positive aspects while recognizing the ongoing work needed to create truly empowering and equitable learning environments. By building upon the positive experiences and addressing the challenges described by the students, university colleges can continue to enhance their efforts toward fostering cultural competence, addressing biases, and equipping future generations of teachers with the necessary knowledge to work in culturally diverse schools.

## **DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

The analysis of the interviews with student teachers in this study revealed a shared sense of enthusiasm and anticipation regarding their future careers as professional teachers in Danish compulsory education. The participants expressed ambitious career aspirations, often manifested in their determination to challenge discriminatory discourses and bring positive change to the compulsory education system. Several participants shared their aspirations to serve as role models for youths of a

transnational background. These aspirations stem from their own experiences during compulsory schooling, where they encountered an absence of role models among the teachers. Interestingly, this issue extends beyond the context of Danish compulsory schools, as Abel (2019) reports similar concerns in the United States, where despite a growing diversity among pupils, the teaching workforce remains predominantly White, female, and middle class. Hence, diversification of the teaching body can be seen as a necessary precursor to fostering empowering learning environments where all pupils feel seen, heard, and supported. For instance, teachers of a transnational background can potentially contribute to dismantling systemic inequalities and biases within the education system, such as those described by Shirazi and Jaffe-Walter (2021), who revealed that coercively promoting a sense of belonging, without regard for cultural appropriateness, can lead to adverse effects.

However, it is important to acknowledge that simply having a transnational background does not automatically guarantee preparedness to work with and support cultural diversity within educational institutions. A study conducted by Nuñez et al. (2021) with Latinx student teachers revealed that it was only during their participation in a specially designed bilingual teacher education program that they began to openly share and reflect on their understanding of the value of their own cultural heritage. Furthermore, appropriate educational support for students of a transnational background is necessary, given that a European study by Crul et al. (2012) revealed a tendency for high drop-out rates to disproportionately affect descendants of immigrants.

Power relations, in the context of this discussion, refer to hierarchical interactions and the decision-making authority within educational settings. This concept was brought to the forefront by some participants when reflecting on the agency of children and parents in making decisions about the educational process. This raises considerations regarding teacher–pupil and teacher–parent power relations and suggests that parents from minority groups may feel hesitant to voice their opinions or challenge the expertise of teachers. Parallels can be drawn with a study by Mathiesen (2015), who researched Somali-diaspora mothers' agency in Danish public schools. Mathiesen reported that Somali mothers struggled to assert themselves as advocates for their children in the face of racism, marginalization, and unfairness, resulting in a tendency to adopt a non-critical supportive role rather than engaging in opposition and resistance.

Analysis of the interviews revealed a recurrent pattern of low expectations and labelling, which were found to be interconnected phenomena, as

labelling often contributes to the development of low expectations for individuals of a transnational background. The opening quotation in the article exemplifies how a seemingly pleasant conversation can abruptly conclude on an awkward note when an unfortunate compliment is made, revealing an underlying prejudiced opinion. In this context, labelling someone as a pattern-breaker carries a concealed meaning of holding low expectations for their career prospects, attributing to them a predetermined pattern of failure solely based on their appearance. This can serve as an example of a seemingly positive stereotype that – despite the speaker's intentions – in reality perpetuates discriminatory discourses. Czopp's (2008) study on the impact of positive stereotypes indicates that there is a need for better awareness of the underlying biases of such expressions.

Furthermore, labelling based on an individual's cultural background may lead to further stigmatization and marginalization, potentially influencing their self-perception and overall well-being. The presented study provides an illustrative example wherein a participant experienced doubts regarding their career choices after being labelled as an unsuitable candidate for the teaching profession based on their choice of clothing. Here, parallels can be drawn with the work of Dunn et al. (2022), who studied how youths of colour fought discriminatory discourses within school environments by creating counternarratives in the form of artwork, such as drawings and poems. The artwork served as a powerful means to draw attention to systemic and institutional discrimination while also showcasing their resilience in overcoming these obstacles.

Resilience and determination to face injustice within educational institutions were also expressed by the participants in the current study. They criticized the impact of the media on shaping the public's negative perceptions and attitudes toward immigrants and cultural and religious minorities. The media's portrayal of immigrants as radicalized criminals contributes to the stigmatization of individuals of a transnational background and reinforces an "us versus them" narrative. This narrative then enters schools and manifests in, for instance, parents' negative attitudes toward teachers of a transnational background, as described by a participant who encountered opposition from a group of parents who expressed their objection to having a teacher of a Middle Eastern background teaching their children religion. This example demonstrates how preconceived notions and biases based on an individual's cultural background can overshadow their qualifications and expertise. A comparative European study by Drouhot and Nee (2019) indicated, for instance, growing suspicion and hostility toward the Muslim religious

culture and emphasized the necessity to reassess the impact of religion and religious marginalization in shaping inequality and patterns of exclusion typically associated with ethnic categorizations.

Despite the challenges faced by the participants, they all remained optimistic about their future careers in Danish compulsory schools. They expressed a strong commitment to promoting equality in schools by challenging discriminatory discourses and actively working toward creating empowering learning environments where all children would receive support, recognition, and respect.

## CONCLUSION

As a new generation of teachers prepares to enter Denmark's compulsory schools, this article turned its attention to a subgroup whose voices are often overlooked: Danish-born students of a transnational background. It traced how they described their educational journeys and the ambitions guiding them toward the profession. The findings of this study have implications for teacher education, particularly in the context of the increased diversification of Danish society, which also reflects in the student body in Denmark's university colleges. While the participants in this study expressed overall satisfaction with their educators and the learning environments within their campuses, they also reported experiencing varying degrees of unfair treatment and prejudice in other settings, such as on-site training and interactions with peers, schoolteachers, and pupils' parents. Hence, teacher education should aim at confronting the issues of discrimination, systemic biases, and power dynamics within educational settings. These could be addressed by resisting systemic colour-blindness and challenging active denial of the existence of discriminatory discourses, namely racism, as pointed out by Jensen et al. (2017). If not addressed, systemic colour-blindness can give rise to false ideological beliefs which further perpetuate injustice. This includes viewing racism as a historical artifact exhibited only through individual deviant behaviours, perceiving schools and classrooms as fair environments free from institutional racism, and attributing academic failure of students of colour to knowledge deficits rather than considering the impact of the learning environment and the school's commitment to social justice (Lea, 2010; May & Sleeter, 2010; Vavrus, 2010). While fostering students' academic achievements, teacher education programs rooted in the principles of critical multiculturalism should also strive to maintain commitments to promoting social justice and motivating students to think critically about systems of power within educational settings. This can be achieved by bridging the gap between students' real-

life experiences and classroom instruction, empowering them to become agents of change by applying their knowledge to actively oppose structural inequities.

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