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Fit for Heterogeneity?–Potential Challenges and Necessary Teacher Competences for Providing Career Guidance to Stu-Dents With a Migratory Background

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Abstract

Context: The increasing migratory related heterogeneity of schools poses major challenges for the education system as a whole and for teachers in particular and also has implications for career guidance in schools. Teachers are often insufficiently prepared during their studies both for providing career guidance and for promoting language skills and therefore frequently feel overwhelmed by these demands.
Approach: This article presents literature-based theoretical and conceptual considerations on the specific challenges teachers may encounter when providing career guidance to students with a migratory background and the competences they need to deal with these challenges. The theoretical considerations form the basis for the development of an integrated framework which is to be validated empirically and extended in subsequent research, including qualitative interviews with stakeholders.
Findings: Teachers can face various challenges when working with students with a migratory background. A key issue is the possible lack of language skills not only in German itself but also regarding the technical and educational language used in school contexts. Added to this are social factors such as the importance of the family environment and possible difficulties in cooperation between school and home. Students new to the German school system frequently lack adequate information about the education and training system, as well as knowledge about the broad range of post-school opportunities. In addition, students with a (presumed) migratory background may be at risk of racism and discrimination both within school career guidance and in interactions with companies.
Conclusions: Teachers face significant challenges when teaching (linguistically) heterogeneous learning groups. To competently overcome these, they require comprehensive specialist knowledge including insights into language acquisition processes, student diversity as well as inclusion. Such knowledge should be integrated into all stages of teacher training and education, starting at university. Above all, teachers need to be linguistic and social mediators, being open to diversity and inclusion and view the uniqueness of their students as a valuable resource rather than a problem.

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Keywords

migratory background, teacher competences, school, language skills, career guidance

1 Introduction

In 2024, 25.2 million people with a migratory background lived in Germany, accounting for approximately 30.4% of the total population (Media Service Integration, 2025). Among those under 20 years of age, the proportion was even higher at 42.4 % (Media Service Integration, 2025). The increasing migration-related heterogeneity of schools poses major challenges. A central core mandate of general education schools is to reduce educational inequalities and enable students to lead self-determined lives and participate equally in education and society; this participation is a basic prerequisite for integration (Berlin Institute for Empirical Integration and Migration Research [BIM], 2017).

However, international school performance studies show that this goal has not yet been achieved. In the 2022 PISA study, students with a migratory background scored an average of 448 points - 53 points less than their classmates without a migratory background (501 points) (Lewalter et al., 2023). Even when socioeconomic disadvantage is factored out, a performance gap of 32 points remains (Anders, 2023). Germany is among the countries where educational success correlates most strongly with the migratory background and socioeconomic status of students (Expert Council for Integration and Migration, 2024). As Tjaden (2015) notes, "migrant students are disadvantaged in terms of their educational achievements (i.e., grades, school placements, competencies) and attainment (i.e., formal qualifications, degrees)" (p. 1).

Increasing heterogeneity leads to a shift in schools toward greater cultural and linguistic diversity and inclusion, requiring teachers to teach students for whom the local language is a second language (Knudsen et al., 2021). The Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs (2019) defines the promotion of (Educational) language skills as a cross-cutting task for all those involved in school education and as a consistent teaching principle in all subjects, learning areas, and learning fields. Language support must therefore not be limited exclusively to the area of German or German as a foreign or second language.

The difficulties faced by students with a migratory background often extend beyond schooling and can also arise during the school-to-work transition. Even with comparable qualifications and grades, they experience greater difficulty securing vocational training placements than peers without a migratory background (Stanat et al., 2010). This may have serious personal consequences, such as becoming NEET, and societal repercussions, particularly amid labour shortage. Effective career guidance offers at schools need to be tailored to the individual needs and interests. In Germany, career guidance is an explicit mandate of general educational schools and the organisation is the binding responsibility of both the schools themselves and the employment agencies (Driesel-Lange & Klein, 2025). This article focuses primarily on teachers as actors and institutional agents in career guidance (Stanton-Salazar, 1997).

Teaching (linguistically) heterogeneous learning groups at a high level of quality is demanding (Vock & Gronostaj, 2017). Prospective teachers in particular often feel unprepared and overwhelmed by this (Morris-Lange et al., 2016). Teachers must be equipped with the skills and knowledge to teach a diverse classroom (European Commission, 2018). To design effective teacher training programs, it is essential to understand the specific requirements of working with students with a migratory background – an area that remains under-researched. The overarching research question is therefore: *What specific challenges <u>may</u> teachers in Germany face*

when providing career guidance to students with a migratory background, and what competences do they need to overcome these challenges?

The paper's novel contribution lies in the presentation of initial ideas for the planned development of an integrated conceptual model for teacher training in Germany, linking challenges to teacher competences. This provides a theoretical basis for further empirical research, including qualitative interviews with stakeholders as well as the development of practices for intermediate and long-term outcomes regarding the improvement of career guidance for heterogeneous learning groups to promote educational equity and participation. This is initially taking place within the context of the German education system, but the findings can also provide starting points for international research discourse on career guidance.

It is important to note that people with a migratory background do not constitute a homogeneous group. The statistical concept itself has come under criticism because the realities of people's lives vary so greatly, e.g., in terms of the reason for and timing of immigration, country of origin, length of stay in Germany, first language, and level of German language proficiency (Expert Council for Integration and Migration, 2021). A migratory background alone does not necessarily lead to disadvantages.

2 Challenges in the Context of Career Guidance for Students With a Migratory Back-Ground

The following section describes possible challenges, which were derived from literature. Sources were identified through searches in major academic databases (ERIC, Scopus, FIS Bildung) using the keywords "migration", "career guidance" and "school" and the corresponding German translation ("Migration", "Berufsorientierung", and "schul*") respectively. Languages included were German and English. Because migration has existed for a long time, no time limit was initially set and older sources were also included. The literature reviewed focuses on empirical and theoretical studies adressing students with migratory backgrounds in the context of career guidance at school. The found literature was expanded using a snowballing approach.

2.1 The Importance of Language Skills for Career Guidance

Everyday life (at school) is shaped by language, and learning in all subjects means acquiring language (Ahrenholz, 2010). In almost all subjects, the language of instruction is German. This poses a challenge for those students who do not yet have a firm language command. Most young people with a migratory background have learned German as a second language, i.e., "successively, i.e., at a later stage than their first languages" (Rothweiler, 2007). In contrast to foreign language acquisition and similar to first language acquisition, this is mostly uncontrolled language acquisition (Geist & Krafft, 2019), in which young people learn the language "on the side," so to speak, without direct instruction. Even though support in the form of German as a foreign language lessons is often provided, students are expected to learn German in a short time to participate in regular lessons as quickly as possible. This poses a particular challenge for young people who enter the German school system at an advanced age, as they only have a very short period of time until the end of their schooling and the content and language requirements gradually increase with each grade. Bourdieu defines language as linguistic or symbolic capital, which is linked to power, resources, and the maintenance of boundaries based on notions of national identity, as confirmed by language (Sharif, 2017). For students, it is about acquiring German as soon as possible in order to be able to participate in school lessons, but

also to make themselves understood and to develop friendships with peers outside their own linguistic community (Sharif, 2017).

Language and knowledge must always be considered together, as knowledge transfer and learning take place to a large extent through the medium of language (Ender & Grieshofer, 2025). Students who receive less linguistic stimulation in German at home, for example because their family environment speaks a language other than German and their parents do not have sufficient knowledge of German, are particularly disadvantaged (Vock & Gronostaj, 2017). In this context, it should be noted that the mere fact that a language other than German is spoken at home does not in itself constitute a fundamental problem. On the contrary, multilingual students may have additional skills, which can even be an advantage on the job market (see chapter 2.3).

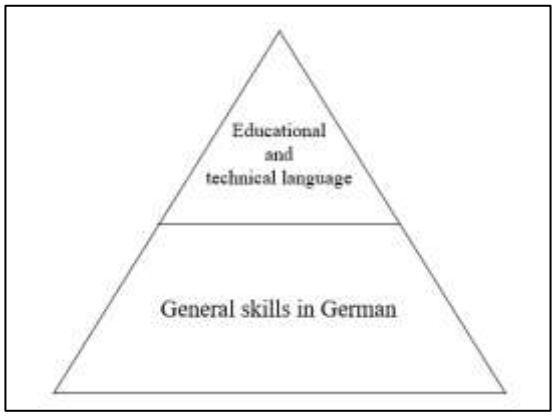
Social background has a particular influence on successful educational biographies. This is also evident in studies such as the PISA study: students from socioeconomically disadvantaged families and those whose family language is not German performed worse on average in the tests. Many families with a migratory background are affected by both factors (Stanat & Felbrich, 2013). Schools must compensate for these educational inequalities, as education-based literacy and literacy skills are of great importance for a successful school career and the associated development of career and life paths and, ultimately, for participation in society (Ender & Grieshofer, 2025).

At school, students are confronted with language requirements on two levels. This is shown in Figure 1.

1. Firstly, they must have a basic knowledge of *German as the language of instruction*. Language proficiency at level B1 is the (minimum) requirement for participation in regular classes (Ministry of Education of Lower Saxony, 2016, p. 8). These German language skills form the indispensable basis for building up educational and technical language registers (see point 2).
2. On the other hand, specific linguistic registers (*Educational and technical language*) are used in schools, which often differ from everyday language, are new to all students, and can pose a challenge - even for students without a migratory background who learned German as their first language (Vock & Gronostaj, 2017; Kalinoswki et al., 2019).

Figure 1 illustrates that the general skills in German form the basis on which educational and technical language is built. Without sufficient knowledge of the German language in general, it is not possible for students to learn educational and technical language.

Figure 1
Two Levels of Language Requirements



Language is relevant for career guidance for a variety of reasons. Here, too, "technical content is linguistically codified, and subject matter and language are inextricably linked" (Settelmeyer et al., 2019, p. 13). Language skills have a direct impact on school performance and educational transitions. Poor grades are often not based on a lack of knowledge, but on insufficient language comprehension and expression skills (Feilke, 2012). These poor grades then have an impact on the chances of getting an internship or even a training position if the company values "good" grades. During the orientation process, students must be able to obtain information about occupational fields, specific occupations, and companies, e.g., by reading information or talking to other people, as well as being able to cope with application procedures linguistically. In the context of practical contacts such as internships, they are additionally confronted with the linguistic register of occupational (technical) language and must learn to use it accordingly. For being able to participate in competence assessments with the language of instruction being exclusively German, students need to be able to understand the questions and tasks and answer or complete them accordingly (Reyes, 2012). A lack of language skills can distort the results or prevent participation altogether. Including results from both languages would give teachers the opportunity to see a child's total repertoire of skills and abilities (Knudsen et al., 2021).

The language skills acquired at school form an indispensable foundation for developing professional language skills, for example in dual vocational training, and language skills have a significant impact on professional competence (Betker et al., 2024). If students do not acquire basic (Educational) language skills in school, they are at greater risk of dropping out of training programs. In line with Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent et al., 1994), limited language proficiency may negatively affect students' self-efficacy beliefs and thereby constrain their perceived career options.

The challenges described above give rise to various competences that teachers need. First and foremost, it is a question of attitude (Hattie et al., 2020). Teachers must be open and willing to address the potential difficulties faced by young people with a migratory background and feel responsible for promoting language skills. They must incorporate languages into their teaching that they themselves do not understand or speak, which means that they must be able to deal with uncertainty in general and linguistic uncertainty in particular (Plöger & Fürstenau,

2021). Teachers must be aware of the connection between social, linguistic, and cultural background and educational success and not attribute academic difficulties solely to migratory background. They need to recognize the linguistic requirements of their own subject, to systematically take these into account, and to consciously use language in teaching and learning (Leisen, 2013). Lessons need to be "systematically designed to take into account the linguistic prerequisites of the students and to promote language learning processes together with subject-specific learning processes" (Kurtz et al., 2014). Teachers need diagnostic skills so that they can assess the linguistic requirements of their students. By incorporating linguistic aspects into their teaching and providing constant feedback to students, teachers can strengthen the student's self-efficacy.

However, the approach of reducing the linguistic requirements in subject teaching and, for example, using simpler language falls short (Vock & Gronostaj, 2017). The permanent and exclusive use of simplified language in class ("dumbing down the curriculum") in order to make it easier for students to access subject content not only denies them access to educational language, but also hinders the successful learning of subject content, as this cannot be understood in isolation from appropriate language (Vock & Gronostaj, 2017). The challenge for teachers is therefore that, on the one hand, they have to adapt their teaching to the existing language skills of their students, but on the other hand, they have to design their lessons in such a way that students are as well prepared as possible for the language requirements they will face in their lives – and all this within the constraints of limited resources and time.

2.2 Information Deficit Hypothesis, Educational Aspirations and Career Compromises

Newly immigrated families in particular are often unfamiliar with the German education and vocational training system and find it difficult to provide their children with targeted support (Morris-Lange et al., 2016). The German system differs significantly from the systems of other countries, where, for example, training is either "strongly school-based, short qualifications, or semi-skilled work" (Regional Transition Management District Office of Central Saxony, 2012) or, in other cases, occupations that require training in Germany are academized in other countries (e.g., nursing professions) (BIBB, 2020). This can lead to misconceptions. At the same time, studies show that young people with a migratory background often have a high level of willingness to learn and strong motivation to pursue education (Granato, 2020, p. 209). Although families with a migratory background are more likely to have a lower social status, they are usually more education-oriented than families without a migratory background with a comparable social status (Soremski, 2009).

Knowledge of the educational and vocational training system is often taken for granted in schools. According to the information deficit hypothesis, it is assumed that students with a migratory background are less well informed about the education system in their country of immigration and are therefore not necessarily aware of the range of possible educational pathways, their requirements, obstacles, and returns. Parents being educated in their home countries may not have concrete ideas about standards and demands of the host country's school system (Salikutluk, 2013). This can contribute to an overestimation of the chances of success in further education and academic pathways (Granato, 2020). This lack of knowledge on the part of parents and other family members can lead to children being taught "exaggerated" aspirations (Wicht et al., 2017).

Kekki and Linde (2024) postulate that students "need to acquire basic knowledge about the school system and labour market, as well as other local or national information needed to make

career plans". The lack of the fundamental requirement for societal orientation may hinder their transitions and thus must be considered by the counsellors before more elaborate counselling is attempted" (Kekki & Linde 2024). Teachers or career guidance counsellors must be able to adapt their guidance counselling to the students' language skills, but also their contextual knowledge (Kekki & Linde 2024).

According to Gottfredson (1996), people hold images of occupations. Holland calls them "occupational stereotypes" (Holland, 1992), including personalities of people in those occupations and the work they do as well as the lives they live. The most preferred occupations are identified by assessing the compatibility with their images of themselves. When people arrive in a new country, they often lack social contacts and role models to guide them. Since occupations may differ from those in their home countries, e.g., in terms of the training required, it can be difficult to assess their own suitability and fit for these professions.

Studies show that young people with a migratory background are particularly prone to making career compromises if they are unable to successfully pursue their preferred educational or career choices (Busse et al., 2025). The higher dropout rate among young people with a migratory background may therefore simply reflect a greater discrepancy between their expectations and what they can achieve in the education and training system (Busse et al., 2025).

In the context of career guidance and transition planning, teachers must be particularly sensitive to the different backgrounds and levels of knowledge of their students. They must recognize that many students, especially but not only those from newly immigrated families, have limited knowledge of the (vocational) education system, career profiles, opportunities for further education, and the qualifications required for these. It is the school's responsibility to systematically impart the relevant knowledge and thus compensate for educational inequalities. They must support students in developing realistic plans for life after school and try to prevent compromises. This may include, for example, pointing out support options to students (scholarships, AFBG, etc.) and referring them to the appropriate agencies. Nevertheless, parents' ideas should not simply be ignored and dismissed as unrealistic. Counselling, including the involvement of parents, should be linguistically understandable and culturally sensitive, with teachers taking into account possible linguistic asymmetries and gaps in knowledge and adapting their counselling accordingly.

2.3 Inclusion of Migration Specific Capital

Through their "experiences of transitioning to a new culture and language" (Schiele, 2006), people with a migratory background have skills that young people without a migratory background do not have. In addition to multilingualism, these include, for example, intercultural competence. Although many of these skills are "urgently needed in an economic and working world characterized by competition and globalization" (Bundesanstalt für Arbeit, 1993, 362), they often remain "invisible and unrecognized because they cannot be measured by the standards of German educational certificates" (Schiele, 2016). The failure to take migration-specific skills into account is "not only a dilemma for those affected, but also for the German economy" (Working Group on Skills Assessment, 2010). The European Union, for example, has set the goal that all EU citizens should be proficient in two languages in addition to their mother tongue (European Parliament, 2025). In a global context, mastery of more than one language is valued on the global job market (Delbridge & Helman, 2016). However, the multilingualism of students, especially those with a migratory background, is often not recognized or even devalued in some cases. Even though the reality of life for many students is shaped by multilingualism,

there is a "monolingual habitus of the multilingual school" (Gogolin, 2008). There is a difference in the assessment of the "value" of different languages, which is not least related to what is considered a valuable language socially or globally; it is clear that languages are given different status within schools (Dirim & Khakpour, 2018). While English is introduced as a lingua franca in primary school and at least two foreign languages must be learned in secondary schools (often Latin, French, Italian, or Spanish), other languages (e.g. Turkish, Arabic, Polish) are then often given little or no attention or are even seen as a problem. Merz-Atalik (2014) points out that multilingualism is often blamed for deficiencies in the second language and that the first language is perceived as irrelevant in the school context. This is referred to as neolinguicism and in some cases even escalates into the prohibition of certain languages in schools (Plöger & Rühlmann, 2022). Teachers must develop an open, appreciative attitude toward all languages. In order to challenge widespread misconceptions about language acquisition that have now been clearly refuted by science (e.g., that multilingualism automatically leads to problems), teachers need a sound basic knowledge of linguistics in the field of (second) language acquisition. Teachers must also be shown concrete ways in which they can incorporate languages into their teaching that they themselves do not speak and how they can cope with the uncertainty that this entails (Plöger & Fürstenau, 2021).

2.4 Racism and Discrimination

An (assumed) migratory background can lead to racism and discrimination during the school-to-work-transition (Diehl & Fick, 2016). Discrimination occurs when a teacher treats students differently from others solely on the basis of their actual or presumed (e.g., based on their name) migratory background. This can refer to everyday classroom interactions, but the awarding of grades or educational recommendations can also be influenced by discrimination. It is irrelevant whether a teacher acts consciously or intentionally in this way or whether the different treatment is the result of unconscious assumptions (Berlin Institute for Empirical Integration and Migration Research [BIM], 2017).

Students can also experience racism and discrimination when they come into contact with the world of work. The reasons for the discrimination against applicants with a migratory background are manifold. The Expert Council for Integration and Migration (2014) points out, for example, that "unequal treatment often results from unconscious associations, stereotypical attributions, or favoritism toward one's own reference group." The effects of this discriminatory behavior are serious: if qualified students are denied the opportunity to obtain a training position solely because they have a migratory background and are therefore presumed to face greater difficulties, valuable potential is lost to the training market. Furthermore, it can be very disheartening for young people to be denied opportunities solely because of their migratory background. However, research shows that students with a migratory background very rarely take advantage of mental health and other supportive services in schools, which may be due to language barriers or simply because they don't know that such offers exist (Vehviläinen & Souto, A.-M, 2022).

Dealing professionally with discrimination and racism in the context of career guidance requires teachers to have intercultural skills. In his work on multicultural counselling, Sultana (2017) highlights the importance of recognising the complexity of the concept of culture. He further advocates counsellors to become aware of, and overcome the pitfalls that arise in career guidance in multicultural society. The contestation of prevailing categories of race and ethnicity are at the heart of the social justice approach to career guidance and critical social work, which

was particularly influenced by Tristram Hooley, Ronald Sultana and Rie Thomsen (2018; 2019). Teachers need to become aware of their interactional practices and redesign them (Vehviläinen & Souto, A.-M, 2022). They must have the ability to address sensitive topics such as experienced and anticipated racism, origin, migration experiences, and belonging, and to create a space in which students can open up. They need in-depth knowledge of different forms of racism (e.g., everyday racism, structural racism) and possible interactions with other forms of discrimination (e.g., classism, sexism, ableism) (Weis, 2017). In order to counteract and prevent the (re)production of racism-related differences and inequalities, there is a need for structurally anchored, interdisciplinary, anti-racist awareness training for (prospective) teachers as part of their professional development (Beck et al., 2023).

3 Conclusion and Research requirements

Fundamentally, working in (linguistically) heterogeneous learning groups is highly complex and places considerable demands on teachers, especially if they have not received specific training in this area. In order to improve the performance of students with a migratory background, the OECD recommends in its assessment of the results of the 2022 PISA study that education policy should compensate for socio-economic disadvantage and language barriers among students with a migratory background (including through the targeted use of educational resources to benefit socio-economically disadvantaged students with a migratory background) (OECD, 2023). Primarily, teachers need recognize that the situations of students with a migratory background might (but do not necessarily need to) differ from those of native students (Kekki & Linde, 2024). In addition to basic knowledge of career guidance, teachers working with young people from migratory backgrounds must have specific skills in order to compensate for any educational inequalities that may exist and enable participation. Teachers must be aware of their students' linguistic strengths and weaknesses and, at the same time, consider the linguistic complexity of their teaching materials. This requires openness and sensitivity to linguistic and, where applicable, cultural diversity (Hachfeld, 2012). (Prospective) teachers must be made aware of the existence of linguistic and cultural heterogeneity and learn to critically question their own beliefs. We live in a culturally heterogeneous society. This must also be reflected in teacher training: diversity and inclusion must be recognized as a natural part of everyday school life (Hachfeld, 2012). However, it is not just a matter of providing training courses, they should also be effective – in the sense that teachers expand their knowledge or change their attitudes, and that the newly gained insights are also reflected in more inclusive teaching (Lipowsky & Rzejak, 2014).

Competent handling of different learning prerequisites should be a central learning objective for all teachers; teacher training must be adapted accordingly (Morris-Lange et al., 2016). In addition to that, teachers need materials for differentiated instruction. Schoolbook publishers in Germany have been taking on this challenge for a few years now, but there is still not nearly enough of it, and teachers are required to adapt and design materials themselves in isolation (Vock & Gronostaj, 2017). The necessary competences need to be operationalized in order to translate them into practical action. They are to be put into an integrated framework for teacher training.

To review and expand the considerations made, among other things qualitative interviews are planned with those involved in career guidance (teachers, educational staff, career counsellors, company training staff, and young people themselves). The first step will be interviews with teachers from general educational schools in Lower Saxony who are involved in career

guidance (planned: n= 10). The schools were selected on the basis that they have a very heterogeneous student body due to migration. The interview guide includes questions about their own education and training, particularly in German as a second language, as well as the challenges they perceive in career guidance in linguistically heterogeneous classes. It also asks what materials and training they would like to see on this topic.

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