



## Dead End Schools? Refugees at Segregated Schools in Germany

### Summary

German schools have taken on approximately 130,000 young refugees as students since 2015. Most of these young people have now been attending school in Germany for over a year, yet a large number of them still have little or no contact to their local peers. This is a result of segregation – something that has been an issue in the German school system for many years. Despite new regulations forbidding schools to place young people newly arrived in Germany in “foreigners only” classes long-term, it is still possible for these young people to finish their schooling without having had any but the most minimal contact to their peers who do not have migration backgrounds. Especially in inner-city schools, classes are now often made up almost entirely of young people who have either come to Germany as migrants themselves, or whose parents did so.

This is not necessarily problematic in itself. Research has shown that even segregated schools can provide good learning opportunities, especially as they often have many years’ experience dealing with migration and linguistic diversity. But students at these schools are often socially disadvantaged. They often have to cope with conflicts, are low-achieving and may struggle with behavioural issues. As a result, teaching and learning can often only take place at a relatively basic level, meaning that some young people may be unable to achieve their academic potential in the mid to long term.

These barriers to learning may also be formative for the educational careers of many young refugees currently attending segregated schools. A systematic study carried out at the end of the 2016/2017 school year by the Expert Council of German Foundations on Integration and Migration (“SVR”) Research Unit shows numerous examples of this in current educational practice. The aim of the study was to gain an insight into everyday life in the classroom for refugees at segregated schools – a model of schooling that for years has been the subject of lively controversy among educational policy-makers in Germany and beyond. The study was supported by the not-for-profit education organisation Teach First Deutschland.



The study took the form of surveys carried out with teachers (known as “teaching fellows” under the Teach First scheme) employed by Teach First Deutschland on a temporary basis at 56 secondary schools in the federal states of Baden-Württemberg, Berlin, Hamburg, Hesse and North Rhine-Westphalia. The schools in question could nearly all be described as “segregated”, in that well over half of their students come from socially disadvantaged homes and have migration backgrounds. The teaching fellows estimated that in the year for which the study was carried out, 2017, an average of just under one tenth of the young people at their respective schools had only recently arrived in Germany, either as a refugee or through other forms of migration.

On arrival at one of these 56 schools, young refugees are initially placed in preparatory classes lasting one to two years. Here, the teaching staff typically delivers an intensive programme of preparation for the regular curriculum, tailored to the level of prior knowledge of the young people in the class. After they have completed the preparatory classes, some students change schools, but over 60 percent of the teaching fellows reported that the majority of students in their preparatory class go on to participate in the regular curriculum at the same school. Over half of these display significant learning progress after just a short period of time. Given the observed absence of individual learning support in the context of the regular curriculum at the 56 schools, this learning progress can be explained to a great extent by the pre-existing levels of education and the eagerness to learn shown by many young refugees. It also seems that teachers rarely coordinate the provision of additional support for learners. The teaching fellows reported that as a result, numerous young people are likely to be at risk of “falling through the cracks” of the school system, achieving grades far below their potential in their final exams or even dropping out of school altogether. It is the teaching fellows’ opinion that it is precisely these “high-risk” students who need support in multiple aspects of their education (in terms of language, teaching content, social skills and, in some cases, psychological help) and that the level of support offered must be much greater than it has been to date.

The Teach First teaching fellows offer a special way of accessing school teaching. Most of them do not hold a regular teacher training degree, but instead have university degrees in a variety of subjects (mostly at a high level), and are employed as supplementary teachers. Applicants wishing to become teaching fellows must undergo an intensive selection process and, if successful, are given thorough training in how to deal with the pedagogical demands of



everyday life in a school. Although their experiences in working with young refugees at segregated schools cannot be viewed as representative of schooling practices for the whole of Germany, they can offer, as temporary teachers, a particular insight from both an external and internal viewpoint into the everyday lives of refugees at segregated schools. They can also help to provide initial indications of where action is most urgently needed.

The experiences of the teaching fellows confirm earlier findings of the SVR Research Unit, whereby even segregated schools, despite their many years of experience with linguistic and cultural diversity, are not always adequately prepared for working with a multicultural, socially disadvantaged student demographic. Schools must undergo a fundamental culture change to ensure that in the future they are able to meet the requirements of this situation. But implementing such a systematic development programme in schools is a major project that requires whole-hearted support on the parts of the responsible school authorities and ministries of education, in particular when it comes to teacher training, school funding, and the allocation of refugee students.

- **Teacher training:** Going forward, all teachers in training should be trained in how to promote language learning in the classroom and how to navigate a culturally diverse classroom environment. They should also be given more opportunities to specialise in this area, e.g. in German as a second language. In addition, more professional development courses should be offered throughout Germany in areas where training is urgently needed, for example language learning, migration, and understanding the psychological effects of having to flee one's home as a result of war or violence. In order for these courses to have lasting effects in (segregated) schools, they should be planned to meet long-term needs and include all teachers at a given school.
- **School funding according to need:** Segregated schools should automatically receive more funding in order to cope with the greater demands placed upon them. Germany's 16 federal states should therefore allocate a significant proportion of their additionally funded teaching positions to schools on the basis of data showing the actual conditions and the student demographic at every school. At the same time, the knowledge of local school authorities relating to the specific context should also be used in order to allocate funds intelligently according to need.
- **Avoid segregation in the future:** When school authorities allocate young refugees to a school for the first time and the school in turn allocates students to classes under its



internal system, this should not be done solely on the basis of age and available places. Rather, they should place a far greater emphasis than at present on the social, linguistic, and cultural composition of the existing learning groups in each case. This should also be the case when students are moving from preparatory classes into regular classes. To ensure that young refugees are allocated in an intelligently balanced way, granular data relating to school and social demographics is needed. Some federal states and local authorities already hold this kind of data, but it is rarely used, because the pressure to integrate thousands of young refugees as quickly as possible in schools has been intense in recent years. But when dealing with large-scale migration in the future, the federal states should make greater use of such data, as it offers an opportunity to proactively avoid segregation.