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ACCESS TO EDUCATION FOR ETHNIC MINORITY CHILDREN IN GEORGIA (IMERETI REGION)

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ABSTRACT

For representatives of ethnic minorities living in Georgia, general education and knowledge of the state language is one of the ways of civil integration, which promotes their participation in political and public life. In this process, a special role is assigned to the school. The priorities of teaching the state language for non-Georgian language schools are outlined in various international and local documents, and among them it is important to single out the "State Strategy of Civil Equality and Integration 2015-2020". This document aims to promote civic and political participation of ethnic minorities, encourage and promote cultural diversity, increase access to quality education, and improve proficiency in the state language. Ethnic minorities often face serious threats, discrimination and racism in terms of access to education, which deprives them of the opportunity to exercise the right to education on an equal footing with the majority.

KEYWORDS

Ethnic Minority, Child Rights, Education Policy, Discrimination

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Introduction.

According to the latest (2014) population census in Georgia, 86.8% of the population are Georgians, and 13.2% are ethnic minorities. Specifically, in the Imereti region there are ethnic Armenians (Kutaisi, Zestafon, Samtredia, Chiatura), Ossetians (Sachkhere), Meskhetians (Samtredia) and Gypsies (Kutaisi). The law on general education defines the equal right of access to education for ethnic minorities living in Georgia, but the current reforms in the education system have not sufficiently responded to the problem of access to quality education for ethnic minorities.

The norms governing the rights of ethnic minorities are laid out in a number of international legal acts. The protection of the rights of ethnic minorities in the law of protection of minority rights is based on such basic principles as: creation of conditions for the preservation and development of minority identity; The possibility of equal enjoyment of human rights and effective participation in public and political life. Accordingly, the state has a positive obligation to treat minorities equally and non-discriminatory and to take appropriate measures to create a multicultural environment.

Despite inclusive attitudes, international and local legal instruments do not provide a definition of "minority". To date, it has not been clarified at the legal level what categories of groups belong to minorities. There is no universally recognized legal definition of minority at the normative level either in international or domestic law. Article 27 of the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights explains that "in a country where ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right to enjoy together with other members of the same group with their culture, to recognize and practice their religion, or to use their native language."

The difficulty of a widely accepted definition of minorities lies in the diversity of situations in which minorities live. Some groups live together, separate from the dominant population, and some are scattered throughout the country.

In Georgia, the protection of ethnic minorities is a subject of general regulation, and according to Article 11 of the Constitution of Georgia, all people, regardless of race, gender, and nationality, are equal before the law. In addition, Georgia shares the universally recognized principles and norms of international law, based on which everyone has the right to freely, without any discrimination, develop their culture, use their native language in private life and in public.

The Law of Georgia "On General Education" defines the right to receive education and equal access to it. According to the mentioned law, those citizens of Georgia, for whom the Georgian language is not their native language, have the right to receive general education in their native language, in accordance with the obligations stipulated by the national curriculum. Teaching of the state language is also mandatory in these general educational institutions (Parliament of Georgia 2021) (Law of Georgia "On General Education", Article 4, Clause 3).

Although the rights of ethnic minority children may be violated in many ways, the aim of the paper is to discuss these rights in the general education process, in terms of education, language issues, identity and participation in public life. Finally, we can agree that all the above issues come together in the context of access to education. Quality education determines the ability to protect and advocate for all other rights.

Civil equality policy has been actively developed in Georgia since 2009. Ensuring the equality of ethnic minorities was highlighted within the framework of the annual action plan envisaged by the policy.

On the other hand, it should be noted that an education strategy adapted to the specific needs of ethnic minorities has never been created in Georgia. In this regard, in 2015, work began on the strategy document, the approval of which continued in the following years. Local and international organizations, local community representatives and educational researchers were involved in the process, however, in the end this strategy was not approved. From the point of view of the education policy, an important event is the approval of the long-term education strategy in September 2022, including in relation to ethnic minorities. The unified national strategy of education and science for 2022-2030 is a comprehensive document that covers all levels of education and considers the issues of education of ethnic minorities as an integrated part of the overall political vision. This approach is important given the existing practices that treated ethnic minority education in isolation, causing inconsistency with the overall policy and preventing the harmonization of ethnic minority education in the general endeavour. Today, fortunately, the education issues of ethnic minorities, taking into account the specificity and special approaches, are reflected in the defining and regulatory documents of the education policy. The education of ethnic minorities is considered as part of the general education policy. This approach has positive aspects, according to which the education of ethnic minorities is an integrated part of the overall vision.

The aim of the research is to study access to quality education for children from ethnic minorities on the example of general education schools of the Imereti region.

Although the rights of ethnic minority children may be violated in many ways, the aim of the paper is to discuss these rights in the general education process, in terms of education, language issues, identity and participation in public life. Finally, we can agree that all the above issues come together in the context of access to education. Quality education determines the ability to protect and advocate for all other rights.

The subject of the study: the rights of children representing the ethnic minority in the Imereti region in the process of general education.

The main question of the research: To what extent is quality education available in Georgian-language schools for children from the ethnic minority in the Imereti region.

Research methodology: Both qualitative and quantitative research methods were chosen as research methods, through questionnaires, interviews and focus groups. We used questionnaire, in-depth interview and conversation method as tools. In the research process, we followed the norms of ethics, all the tools used in the research were checked by the Ethics Commission and were used after a positive conclusion. In particular:

- The identity of all participants is confidential;
- All participants are informed in advance about the issue;
- The rights of minor students are protected;
- The data obtained during the research and after its completion will be available to the persons involved in the research.

Data were collected as follows:

The questionnaire was conducted with the students of the research schools, who study at the primary and basic level. An in-depth interview was conducted with secondary school students. A focus group was conducted with teachers (primary level class teacher, Georgian language and literature, history, geography, natural science subjects), because the focus group allows for an exchange of opinions and the views of the respondents on the issue and the problems in the school become clear. Since all members of the school community, and especially the head of the administration, are equally responsible for the protection of students' rights, the study of the views and attitudes of the principals was a necessity of the research topic. We considered the best way to conduct a broad discussion on the issue is to use the conversation method, which allows the researcher and the respondent to exchange ideas.

Based on the characteristics of the research, specific target groups of students and teachers were selected, whose opinions and attitudes determine the scope and validity of the research question. The thesis includes discussion of the issue based on the Imereti region. Imereti region unites 12 municipalities (Baghdati, Samtredia, Terjola, Tkibuli, Sachkhere, Khoni, Kharagauli, Chiatura, Tskaltubo, Zestafon, Vani and Kutaisi) and the final data was compiled according to the data received at the diagnosis stage. Finally, to summarize the data of the target groups (120 students) according to ethnicity in the Imereti region, it is quite diverse.

Conclusions.

Based on the review of the studied literature and the analysis of the research results, we can make the following main conclusions about the research issue:

There is no exact data on how many ethnic minority children live in the Imereti region.

Based on the results of the research, there is no data on how many students finish school, what is the share of students who have dropped out of school, and what socio-economic problems are caused by the above-mentioned issue.

The number of students representing the ethnic minority in Georgian-language schools is increasing, although this quantitative increase refers to students at the primary and basic level. The school cannot respond to the growth rate of students in terms of access to quality education.

The results of the research revealed the absence of adapted textbooks in order to meet the needs of non-Georgian speaking students in Georgian-speaking schools.

The national education policy is not focused on protecting the rights of ethnic minority children in the school community.

Although the national curriculum envisages the possibility of teaching the native language as an optional subject for ethnic minority students, schools have not received any methodical recommendations for effective measures, and accordingly, no precedent has been set for the teaching of the Mashbli language.

Recommendations.

- It is desirable to increase the financial resources allocated to the non-Georgian sector of Georgian-language schools.

- It is important to implement the registration mechanism of ethnically non-Georgian children and to study the number of students who have been removed from the school and the cause-and-effect relationships.

- It is necessary to study the influence of community and society to promote the protection of the rights of children representing ethnic minorities.

- For the effectiveness of the unified education policy from the state, it is important to plan and implement such events where students representing ethnic minorities who do not belong to compactly populated regions will be involved as much as possible.

- It is important for the state to offer additional hours or courses for the study of the Georgian language in order to increase access to quality education.

- It is advisable to create an information booklet for raising the awareness of the non-Georgian speaking sector of Georgian-language schools about their rights.

- It would be desirable to revise the eighth article of the national curriculum to allow the creation of groups of students to promote the teaching of the mother tongue.

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