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EDUCATION RIGHTS IN THE TIME OF COVID-19 IN ARMENIA

Keywords: distance education, digital education, youth and education, sociology of education, educational policy, education in Armenia during COVID-19

Introduction

Education is an area led by quality, equity, accessibility, ethics and other commitments, which guide the activities of education specialists and reflect the expectations of education beneficiaries, as well as obligations of the states towards their citizens. The level of fulfilment of those obligations by education systems largely depends on educational policy and its implementation by participants of educational process: managers and admin-

istrators of education, teachers, students and parents. The COVID-19 pandemic emphasises the importance of realisation of the educational policy in such challenging times. Despite all the efforts, during the COVID-19 pandemic education systems around the world experience exceptional disruptions and struggle to achieve good outcomes in terms of quality of education, justice and inclusion. The disruptive effect of the pandemic in

some cases continues and may become worse due to inaccurate planning of educational policy in the times of pandemic and/or lack of its implementation in the absence of appropriate support and guidance [Hanson, D., Maushak, N.J., Schlosser, C.A., Anderson, M.L., Sorenson, C. & Simonson, M. (1997), Heng, Kimkong & Sol, Koemhong. 2020].

This article explores the effectiveness of educational policy for the case of Armenia in the time of the pandemic, challenges of distance education and the quality and effectiveness of educational services provided by state secondary schools according to the assessments of different groups, including youth.

Theoretical and methodological basis of the article

During the COVID-19 crisis, distance learning was the only viable alternative that ensured the continuation of educational process [Çağatay, İhsan Ulus. 2020]. It has provided students from all over the world with varying degrees of opportunity to continue their educational process and has allowed different societies to continue educating their young generation, turning them into knowledgeable and skilled workforce in the future, which is important for the promotion of the economic growth and the solution of national, regional and global issues [Hanson, D.,

Maushak, N.J., Schlosser, C.A., Anderson, M.L., Sorenson, C. & Simonson, M. (1997)].

Many international studies prove that having access to internet and technical means by youth, as well as teachers' skills and their training on online educational tools had a direct impact on the quality and accessibility of distance learning.

While there is no common definition and concept of distance education, different theorists emphasise some aspects of distance education.

Thus, distance education is defined as institution-based formal education where the group of learners is separated, and interactive communication systems are used to connect learners, resources and instructions [Hanson, D., Maushak, N.J., Schlosser, C.A., Anderson, M.L., Sorenson, C. & Simonson, M. (1997)]. It is an educational process in which a significant portion of learning is conducted by someone who is distanced from the learner's territory and/or time.

Distance learning is planned as a systematic activity which includes selection of teaching materials, preparation and presentation of didactic materials, as well as control over and support of the learning process of students, and which is achieved by overcoming the physical distance between the teacher and the student by using one or more appropriate technical means [Keegan, D. (1986)].

The widespread implementation of distance education created a need to study and analyse Armenian experience with this form of mass education. This re-

search has been conducted by the Civic Youth Center and the Center for Educational Research and Consulting between September and November 2020 and aimed to identify the challenges and issues related to realisation of educational rights in Armenia at the time of COVID-19. The research particularly explores the effectiveness of educational policy during the pandemic, the quality and effectiveness of educational services provided by public secondary schools according to the assessments of different groups, and the challenges of distance education.

Research questions are:

- ◆ To what extent were the teachers and students prepared for distance learning?
- ◆ What are the reasons for students to participate/not participate in distance education?
- ◆ What was the effectiveness of educational policy and educational services during the pandemic?
- ◆ What are the main challenges of distance education?

Research methodology

The following data collection methods and respective information sources have been used to answer the research questions:

- ◆ Quantitative online survey among 722 teachers, 867 students of 7th and higher grades and 800 parents. The quantitative online survey was administered to identify the readiness of students and teachers for distance education, as well as to assess the quality of distance education and the effectiveness of educational policy.
- ◆ Qualitative interviews were

conducted with educational area experts and policy makers both in the beginning and after the final quantitative data collection. The education experts shared their opinion on current educational system in Armenia and validated the survey results.

- ◆ Document analysis- legal acts, statistical data, sectoral analysis, reports,
- ◆ Content analysis of educational pages in social media, namely on Facebook platform, processed with MAXQ-DA program.

Teachers' and Students' Readiness for Remote Learning

As already mentioned, the main components of distance education are: institution-based nature, which distinguishes itself from self-education; separated group of learners; interactive communication means; and the

concept of connecting learners, resources and instructions.

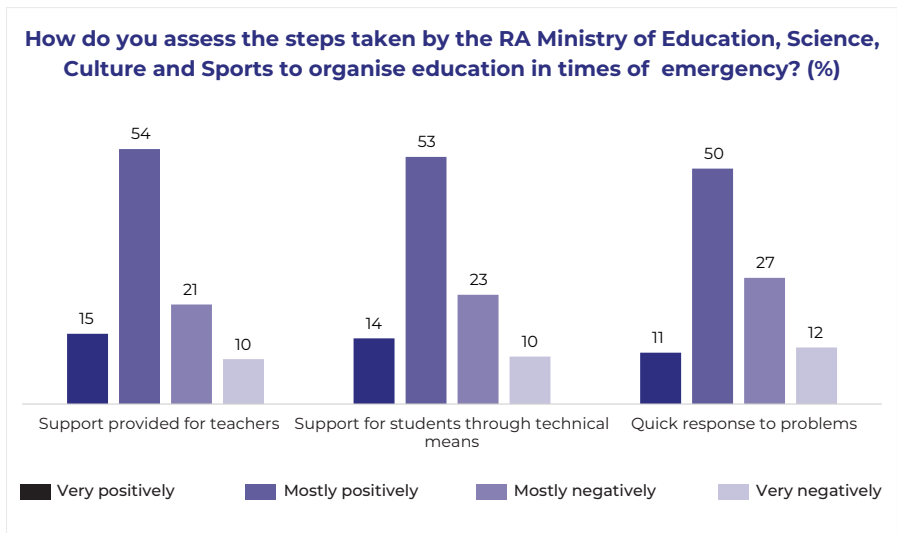
In Armenia, the large-scale implementation of distance education started in March 2020, when by the RA Government

Decision N 298-Ն of 16 March 2020 an emergency situation was declared, and educational institutions, including schools, switched to distance education.

The majority of teachers participating in the survey for the Report on the Evaluation of the Effectiveness of Educational Pol-

icy in the Conditions of the Epidemic positively assessed the steps taken by the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport of the Republic of Armenia towards the organisation of education during emergency situation.

Figure 1. Effectiveness of Educational Policy Assessed by Teachers (N=722)



The main complaints and negative assessment of teachers are related to the decision of 27 April

2020, according to which students' marks for the second semester, as well as annual marks,

were calculated based on the marks entered into electronic registers before 13 March 2020, while the vast majority of teachers performed student assessments during online lessons as well. In the opinion of the expert community, that decision resulted in a decrease of student attendance in online lessons. This topic was extensively debated in social media as well. According to the content analysis, that decision was considered inappropriate by the students, teachers and parents, because it meant that all their efforts were useless and meaningless in terms of participation in remote lessons.

Implementation of distance ed-

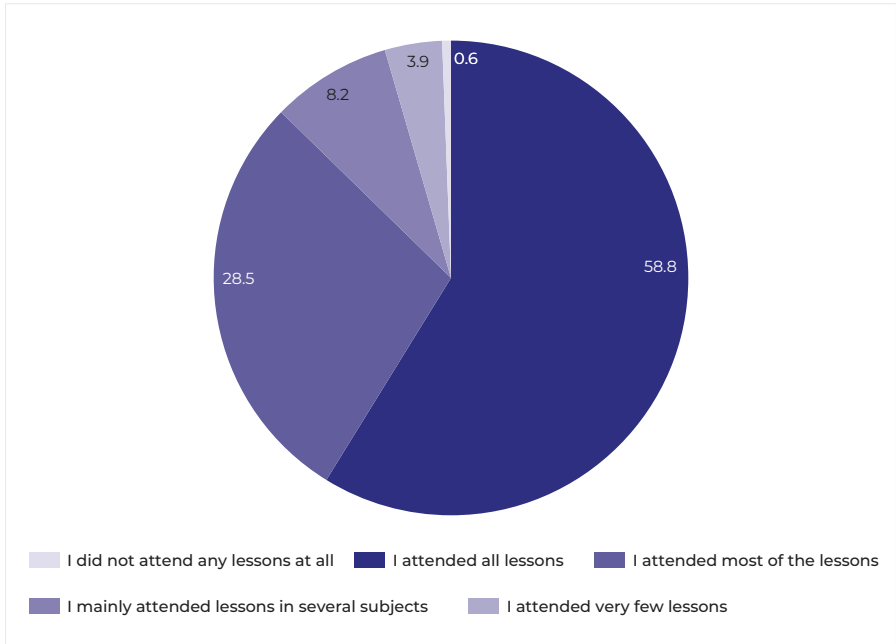
ucation faced a wide range of challenges, including teachers' ICT skills, students' participation in distance education and their satisfaction with it. During the pandemic, a significant range of training courses for teachers was provided by the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport of RA: around 2000 teachers were trained. Nevertheless, 34% of teachers involved in the survey stated that they still need training in ICT (Figure 2). 63% of teachers participating in the survey attended training courses to improve their computer skills, while 37% did not participate in such activities.

Students' participation in remote lessons

Another challenge of distance education is students' participation. The majority of students attended most of the remote lessons, and 58.8% participated in all lessons. Participation in remote lessons required the youth's quick adaptation to the conditions of the epidemic.

91% of the students participating in the survey reported having internet access at home. The majority of students (about 95%) attended online classes via mobile phone, however, mobile phone tariffs with internet access were not affordable for all students.

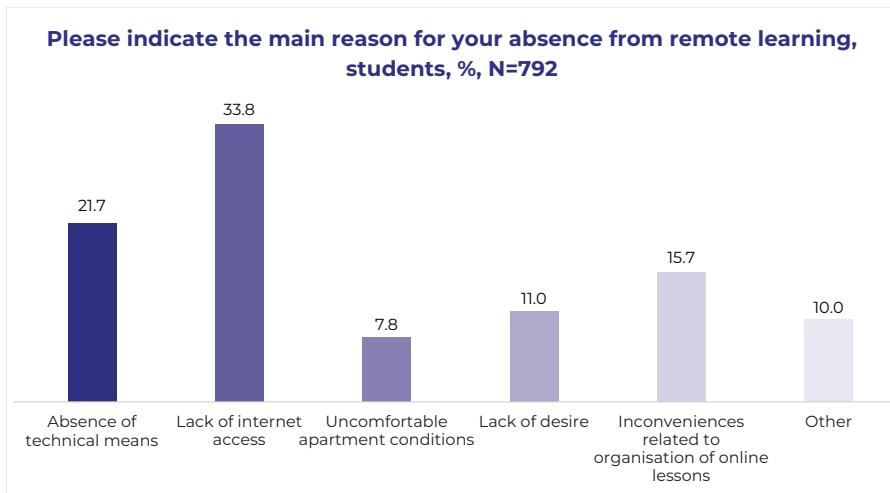
Figure 2. Frequency of students' participation in remote lessons (N=867)



The lack of technical means affected students' participation in remote lessons. 33.8% of the students stated that their absence from remote classes was caused by the lack of internet access, and 21.7% mentioned the lack of technical means, even though the Ministry of Education, Sci-

ence, Culture and Sport tried to solve this problem by providing families in need with technical means. As seen above, 91% of the children reported having internet access at home, but 33.8% do not own technical means to do so.

Figure 3. Reasons for students' absence from remote lessons (N=867)

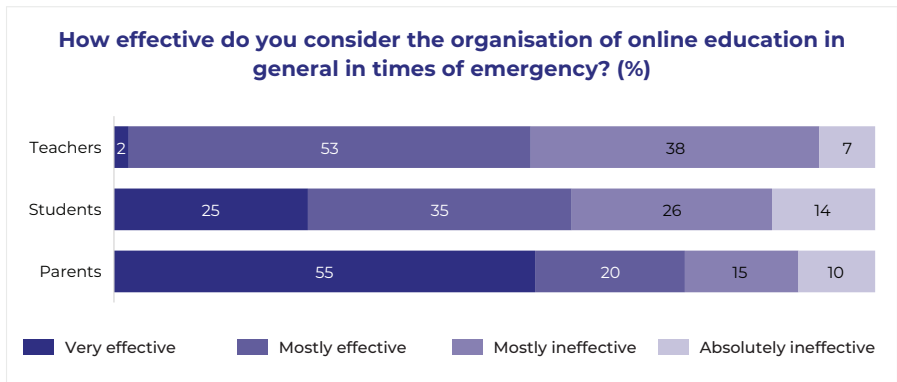


Effectiveness of Educational Policy and Educational Services in the times of COVID-19

The opinions of teachers, students and parents who participated in the survey on the effectiveness of online education are very different. Some survey participants and experts think that online lessons were effective, while others believe they were ineffective. The details are presented in Figure 5. Parents rated the effectiveness of online lessons higher than the students and teachers. It was rated the lowest by the teachers due to

lack of necessary knowledge and experience. As it was presented above, ICT training is among the most demanded types of training activities. This lowest rating given by the teachers is also based on the fact that most of them tried to organise and conduct online lessons in traditional, “classroom” manner, which created difficulties for them and therefore affected their assessment of online lessons.

Figure 4. Effectiveness of online education (N of teachers-722, N of students -792, N of parents-800)



Taking into account this general declaration of teachers, it can be interesting to analyse the opinions of students participating in the study. The questions asked concerned the process of organisation and implementation of remote lessons by the teachers. About half of the students (47%) assessed teachers' presentation skills high or very high.

The students rated the availability of teaching materials very high (37%), whereas the opportunities of child-centred approach towards the students by the teachers during remote

lessons was rated much lower. Additionally, the issue of internet connection from teachers' side was raised, as 36% of the students assessed the teachers' internet connection as low / very low.

Although parents assessed the general organisation of distance learning very positively (see Figure 5), students rated the effectiveness of online lessons higher than their parents. Both parents and students considered teaching of arts and humanities subjects more effective than that of natural sciences.

Figure 5. Assessment of the Quality of Remote Lessons by Students, N=823 (Please assess the quality of remote lessons in the following component)

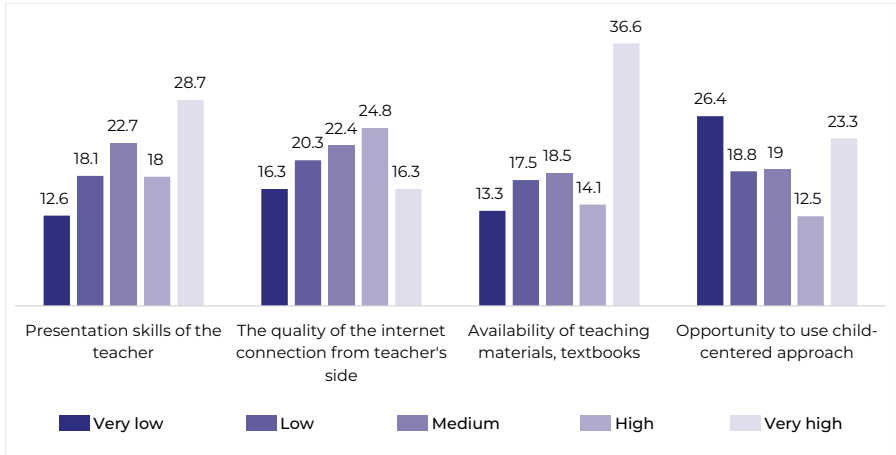
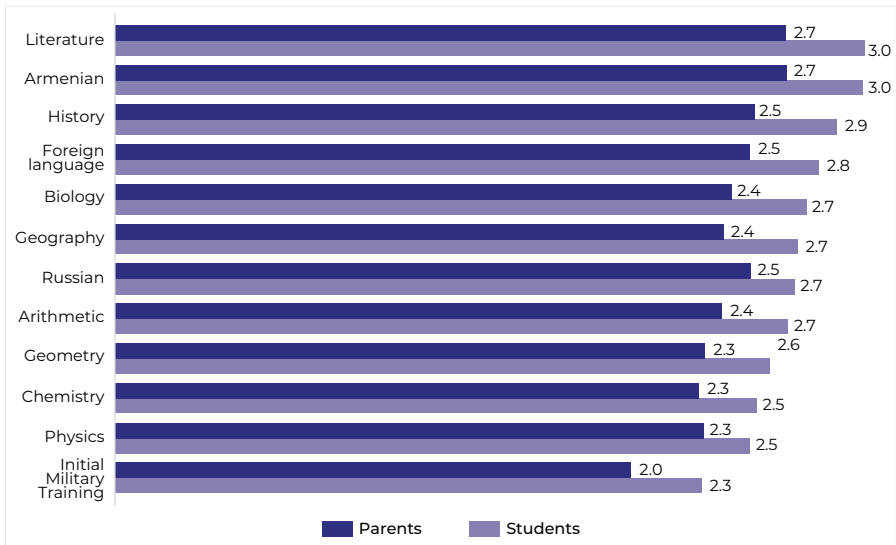


Figure 6. Assessment of the Effectiveness of Remote Lessons by Subjects (N of students-867, N of parents-800)



The main problems of child's education rights provision during COVID-19

The challenges and problems of distance education, which have been identified during the research conducted in Armenia, may generally apply to other countries as well. Particularly, the results of the analysed qualitative data reveal that studying online, which comes hand in hand with reduced social interaction, was a real challenge for the students. They were lacking cultural knowledge, namely the insights typically arising from face-to-face teaching and social interactions. The effectiveness of education partly depends on that communication. Online education creates a barrier between the learner and the teacher.

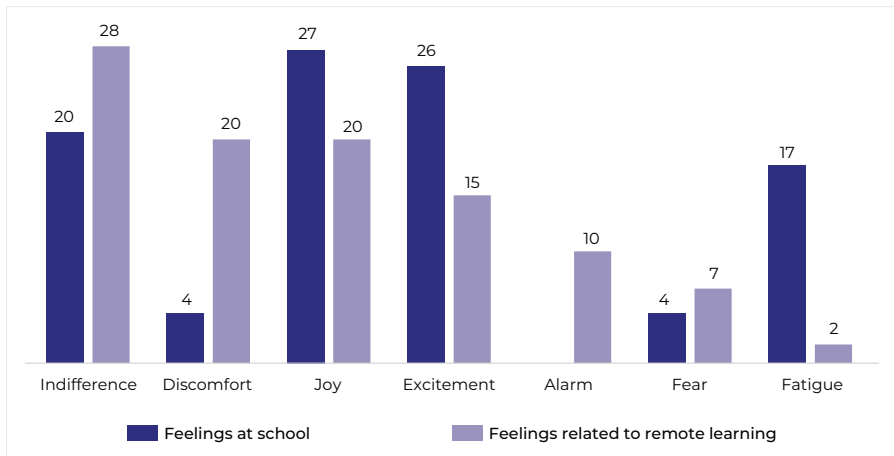
Another important problem of distance learning is the psychological effect of remote learning on students, parents and teachers. The psychological, educational and social problems of distance learning were mainly significant for primary school students (ISCED 1). This may also be attributed to a lack of under-

standing by students, parents and even teachers of the nature of teaching and learning activities carried out at home.

Distance education has in some ways affected the social life of students and their parents. In particular, the necessary equipment is lacking, children's level of activity is low, and there is greater anxiety due to lack of appropriate space for all members of the family. This is especially true for the families with more than one student involved in distance education.

One of the identified challenges of distance learning is the level of students' participation in lessons. It is necessary to clearly distinguish between the participation and involvement of the students. Although the majority of students participated in remote lessons, only some of them were actively involved. Moreover, throughout the whole process of remote lessons, the involvement of the students decreased over time.

Figure 7. Students' feelings at school before COVID-19 and at the beginning of remote learning.



In addition to the above-mentioned issues, the following challenges of distance education were widely shared and discussed on the social media platforms:

- ◆ Distance learning can cause many **psychological, educational and social problems**, especially for primary education students (ISCED 1).
- ◆ Schools and the education system were not ready for the organisation of online education in terms of both **methodological and didactic materials**. Most of the sub-

ject textbooks and didactic materials were available only on paper, not electronically, making it technically difficult to deliver them to the students.

- ◆ Remote education requires at least **elementary technical knowledge from the teacher**, while the majority of teachers do not have material presentation, video communication and other necessary skills.
- ◆ Spending long hours in front of a computer or phone screen has caused serious

health problems for children.

- ◆ Distance education assumes a **certain degree of independence of the students**, while primary education students in particular had difficulties to actively participate in the classes, and as a result, parents had to become heavily involved in online lessons.

Overall, the sudden changes prompted by the COVID-19 crisis suggest that some key issues will determine the quantity and the quality of online education in

the future. On the students' side, connectivity and extracurricular issues, the level of students' motivation and their learning skills influence their virtual learning. On the institutional side, professors' expertise in online teaching pedagogy, the incentives structure introduced by educational policies and the existing IT infrastructure will contribute to the successful functioning of the online education in schools and educational institutions.

Main Findings

Before the pandemic, the lack of computer skills among the teachers and the students, and insufficient availability of technical means were reported, which had a negative impact on the efficiency of online lessons, even though the majority of teachers who participated in the research had attended training to improve their computer and distance education skills.

Most teachers were provided

with internet access and technical means to organise online lessons, mainly using smartphones. However, the majority of teachers still needs information and communication training, including learning to use electronic management tools.

Around 90% of the students participated in online lessons. The main reasons for not participating were the lack of internet access and unwillingness to

participate. 95% of the students participated in online lessons using their phones, but the internet prices were not affordable for all of them. The lack of technical means also affected students' participation in online lessons. Additionally, it was observed that the students did not have enough skills to efficiently use innovative educational tools available on the online platform. Nevertheless, there were children who were able to participate in online lessons even though they were previously unable to come to school before: children with disabilities, children working in rural communities, etc.

The following challenges of distance education during the pandemic have been revealed:

- ◆ Testing of teachers' computer skills and methodological skills for online teaching;
- ◆ Lack of monitoring and evaluation system of distance learning;
- ◆ Uncontrolled and direct influence of the family on the learning process of students;
- ◆ Lack of physical contact;
- ◆ Testing of personal skills of children;
- ◆ Violation of principles of social justice, equality and participation in the education system;
- ◆ Due to the transition to distance education, students have experienced some social-psychological issues, such as anxiety or worry.

The following positive effects of the pandemic on the education system were observed:

- ◆ Integrating crisis management into educational policy;
- ◆ Development of infrastructure;
- ◆ Preparation, development and dissemination of educational online resources;
- ◆ Capacity building of teachers;
- ◆ Development of cooperation between state-private sectors and donor community;
- ◆ Bigger teachers-parent cooperation;
- ◆ Stronger cooperation within teacher community and development of support culture;

- ◆ Ability to organise learning process more effectively and inclusively for disadvantaged children who were previously physically unable to come to school.

The whole research findings are presented in the “Report On The Evaluation Of The Effectiveness of Educational Policy In The Conditions Of The Epidemic” In Armenian and in the article “The Challenges of Digital Education (The Case of Armenia)” in English.

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EDUCATIONAL RIGHTS OF YEZIDIS CHILDREN IN ARMENIA

Keywords: education in Armenia, Yezidi children, school dropout, educational research in Armenia

Introduction

Research studies and academic literature on the education of ethnic minorities focus on minority groups' low academic achievements rather than on the variability in educational performance among different groups [Luciak M., 2004]. Educational failure is more easily attributed to cultural differences or cultural incompatibility, despite the fact that some minority groups whose culture and language significantly differ from the majority achieve good educational results [Ogbu, 1995, p. 190]. Ogbu's

theory on the variability in educational performance among different ethnic minority groups provides helpful explanations. Not all minority members who achieve low educational results in European countries are failing in school because of primary cultural and language differences, social class factors or institutional barriers in educational settings. The study of community forces shows that a group's instrumental, relational and symbolic beliefs about the benefit, value and meaning of schooling

influence the educational strategies of its members. This Ogbu called primary and secondary cultural differences.

The paper focuses on the schooling of ethnic minorities within the Armenian context. Many European researchers attribute low educational attainment of different ethnic groups to social class factors and underestimate the relevance of minority status. John U. Ogbu's theory tries to understand the variability in educational performance among different ethnic minority groups. Ogbu proposed a typology of ethnic minorities: autonomous, immigrant and caste-like minorities. The largest of the ethno-religious minorities living in Armenia is the Yezidi community - 35,308 people (Census). From this point of view, the Yezidi community in Armenia is a mixed type of national minority: as a culture, it is an autonomous community with its beliefs, habits, language, as a social group it is an immigrant type with a high level of integration. This contradiction affects socialization, the realisation of Yezidi children's right to education. Yezidi people

as a national minority are afraid to be assimilated and, trying to keep their specific cultural identity, don't allow their children to go to school after 12-13 years old. For legitimization of this serves cultural habit of "girls' rape".

In Armenia, 12-year secondary education is compulsory, after graduating from the basic 9th grade, the child must be admitted to the high school or continue his / her education in a vocational institution. In this regard, there are a number of educational problems in the Yezidi community of Armenia, that have an impact on socio-cultural factors and features. The prevalence of early marriages is one of the factors that contributes significantly. It is common for Yezidi girls to get married at the age of 12-13. As a rule, girls who get married at an early age are forced to leave school immediately without education.

This research has been conducted by the Center for Educational Research and Consulting between September and November 2021. The goal of the research is to explore the

problems of early marriage and school dropouts in Yezidi community. The research was fund-

ed by the Eurasia Partnership Foundation.

Research questions:

- ◆ How Yezidi students/parents evaluate the quality and accessibility of school education?
- ◆ What are the main reasons for dropping out of compulsory education?
- ◆ How do early marriages affect the continuing education of Yezidi girls?
- ◆ What part of the children of the Yezidi community is excluded from compulsory education?
- ◆ How did the transition to distance education during COVID-19 affect the educational inclusion of students in Yezidi community?

Research Methodology

The research relies on a triangulation of multiple information sources, data collection methods and analytical approaches. In order to answer the research questions, the following data collection methods have been applied:

Secondary analysis

Desk-review and secondary analysis of legal and policy framework related to the overall education system, the legal package on educational legislation; previous studies of education reforms and previous assessments. The analysis also includes statistical data of out of school children,

any related studies, research and analytical reports.

- ◆ Statistical Data
- ◆ Previous research
- ◆ Legal act
- ◆ International experience

- ◆ Written, official inquiries (RA Ministry of Education and Science, regional administrations, schools, community administrations)

Primary data collection

Considering the comparative advantages of the mixed methods approach, the research tried to utilize quantitative data collection methods. However, inception discussions with experts and stakeholders, as well as preliminary mapping of the problem coverage and scope, revealed that large-scale primary quantitative data collection is non-relevant due to the small size of target groups. Instead, it is envisaged to use secondary sources for quantitative data and conduct secondary analysis of existing statistics. Primary data collection methods are developed to reach out Yezidi community, including the most vulnerable children, both girls and boys, and the service

providers, managers and local, regional and national authorities. The method for each target group is described below:

Interviews

- ◆ Interviews with students, including 15 interviews out of compulsory education
- ◆ Interviews with parents, including 15 out of compulsory education children
- ◆ Interviews with school principals and community leaders, 9 interviews
- ◆ Expert interviews with representatives of international and local organizations, researchers, 5 interviews.

Group discussions

Focus group discussions were held among students and parents: 4 group discussions among parents and 4 group discussions among students: 2 group discussions each for girls and boys, 2 group discussions with mothers and fathers.

Sampling

The sampling included communities that have a larger Yezidi population in Armenia.

Data protection

Data Protection is a key aspect of the fieldwork. Data protection includes measures concerning collection, access to data, communication and conservation of data. In all evidence generating activities children and, where relevant, adults, were fully informed, in the language and manner appropriate to their maturity and capacity. The children participated only after the informed written consent was granted from a guardian/caregiver/parent. The child's personal approach and competency also were taken into account

and written informed assent forms were filled in.

The quality of mainstream schools in Yezidi communities: perceptions and assessments

"School dropout rate among Yezidi children has been a common issue in Armenia for decades." [Alternative Report to the UN Committee on Child's Rights on Implementation of Yezidi Children's rights in Armenia, 2017]. However, attitude towards schooling has changed in the Yezidi communities - and even more so - in several regards.

In the last decade, the community has started to prioritize education for future carrier and job, as well as for attainment of life skills.

Acknowledgment of the role of education and school has been consistent following several cases when a child of a Yezidi family started to attend school till grade 12 or attended extracurricular classes, others started to replicate. Here the principle of community identity, solidarity, and non-isolation from the community also came into play.

It [education] is very important nowadays. If you are ignorant, it is very difficult. When going out, for everything. For calculations, for paperwork. Now everything is by phone, by cards. If you are illiterate, ignorant, how would you carry on, especially nowadays?

Quote from mothers' group discussion, Alagyaz (village in Armenia)

Education in Yezidi community is mainly seen and perceived not as a children's right but rather as a means to achieve some short- or long-term goals. Moreover, parents correlate leaving school with the child's academic performance – if the child does not demonstrate high academic performance, the parents do not see the worth and relevance of learning, attending the school, and, therefore, do not send their

child to school. It is interesting that the roots of the problem are hidden in the quality of education provided by the school – parents, being unhappy with the quality of education, do not want their child to continue studies at that school, and since they do not consider another community school as an option, the child is left out of education.

If the child doesn't study at all, why send to school – to do what, frustrate the teacher? If they go to school for eight years and learn nothing, would they be learning in the next four years?

Quote from an interview with a mother, Yeghegnut (village in Armenia)

Interestingly, such an approach was reproduced by the children as well, which is closely related to the gender roles and role expectations present in the community.

Mothers underline that education is important for children, especially for future career and job. Moreover, mothers recognize the importance of education, highlighting that now they have no job, are deprived of well-being, as without a job and financial resources, they can't support themselves and their families.

Continuity of education is also conditional upon availability of financial resources, as to get professional education, children should go to a professional education institution either in one of the regional cities or in Yerevan, which for some families means financing the pupil's living in that place. Hence, pursuing professional education created financial burden for the family. Because of the financial burden, even if they pursue professional education, they prefer distance learning.

In terms of access to education, there are several problems in the Yezidi communities:

- ◆ No kindergartens and pre-schools
- ◆ Inadequate professional

qualities of the teaching staff, including discrimination against Yezidi pupils

- ◆ Inadequate physical facilities and equipment
- ◆ Low quality of teaching Yezidi language
- ◆ Complexity of curriculum
- ◆ Distance of education institutions – school, high school, vocational institution – from the communities
- ◆ Impossibility to pass admission exams
- ◆ Lack or absence of extracurricular programs.

Attending a kindergarten or a preschool prepares the child for school, while in Yezidi communities lack of such facilities/institutions puts the children at a disadvantage – they start attending school with poor knowledge of Armenian language and inadequate self-regulation. Whereas children who have attended a preschool or a kindergarten are more prepared for school as they are equipped with essential knowledge and skills, including knowledge of the Armenian language.

Teachers' qualifications also need improvement in the schools in Yezidi communities. Moreover, essential qualifications include knowledge about Yezidi community, culture, and non-discrimination against children.

The issue of instruction in Yezidi language is also connected with school leaving and access to education. There are no qualified teachers to deliver instruction in Yezidi language, and the problem is recurring. Since enrolment in vocational and tertiary education institutions from Yezidi community is low, there are few specialists of Yezidi language, and there is a room for improvement of the professional qualifications of active teachers. Lack of professional development of Yezidi language teachers is also a problem.

The next group of problems includes access, quality, and content of education; the curricula are complex, and in addition, in the Yezidi communities neither parents nor the older generation can help the children with studies. In this sense, the parents

... main teaching staff are Armenians, and, sometimes, not all of them of course, but there are 41 teachers who are discriminating and treating Yezidi children differently from Armenian kids. Such cases are observed, but I repeat again, not all of them; there are also those who are very dedicated and doing a great job. Here, it is most probably very important that the teachers are Yezidis, but we used to have only one Yezidi teacher in our school, the teacher of the Yezidi language. Well, naturally, because they don't complete undergraduate studies and so forth, that's where the problem originates.

Quote, Expert interview

mentioned the importance of afterschool classes and homework preparation. Although nowadays Yezidi families have started the practice of sending their children to private tutors, as mentioned by the respondents, not all families can afford additional studies for their children.

Not all communities have secondary schools, and some parents in particular do not send their daughters to high schools in nearby villages “in fear of them being kidnapped”.

There are communities with no access to transportation facilities, and the kids from such communities do not attend kindergarten, high school, or VET institution in an adjacent com-

munity, and it may also be attributed to tuition fees.

Vocational education is not accessible to the children of Yezidi community, as learners are not sure whether they can participate in the admission examinations with the knowledge attained at school.

Motivation to learn is low among school children because of the lack or absence of extracurricular studies or because the parents do not let their children attend such groups. There is great interest in sports, arts, software development, but the study groups in these areas are either not offered in communities or the children are not able to attend.

Main reasons why Yezidi children leave compulsory education

The issue of Yezidi children leaving school is conditional upon national and cultural customs, as well as socio-economic and organizational matters. The atti-

tude towards education, as well as the problem of dropout rates, has significantly evolved in the past decade. Of course, you can still find out-of-school children

in Yezidi communities, but the study suggests that the situation has fairly improved recently.

In Yezidi communities not only girls but also boys leave school. Moreover, the issue of dropout rate escalates in high school – grades 10-11.

Yezidi children, as suggested by the parents, children, and experts, leave school for the following reasons:

- ◆ The community fear of assimilation.
- ◆ There is a tradition in the community that children should drop out before turning 16 to prevent kidnapping – the case for girls – and to take a role in the family or migrate – the case for boys.
- ◆ Education, especially high school, is not available in all communities.
- ◆ The role of education is not adequately prioritized either by the learner or their family.

Attitude towards education in Yezidi community and incomplete education of children is driven by the concern for pre-

serving their culture and fear of assimilation.

It seems to me that irrespective of everything we – the Yezidis – should go hand in hand with evolution, reach an adequate level of development, and it seems to me that our new generation should fight to show it to the older generation. They should prove that we can synchronize with time and progress. It essentially seems to me that there is a fear of assimilation. I think, from the perspective of preserving the family, from the patriarchal perspective, a species may segregate.

Quote, interview with a female pupil, Yeghegnut (village in Armenia)

It is interesting that girls in Yezidi families are often prevented from going to school justifying that the girl might be kidnapped. but when asked, for instance, how many cases of kidnapping they have heard about in the past three years, the respondents could not recollect any. The police also have not shared any statistical data about such cases. Of course, it should be considered that parents of a female child in such cases do not file with the police for cultural reasons. First, they think that one should not file a complaint against anyone from their community, and there is almost no practice of “bringing the girl back”. It was indicated by the respondents, that “it is a shame to bring a kidnapped girl back”. If a girl is kidnapped in Yezidi community, one of the reasons of not reporting to the police is that people don’t want to disrupt solidarity, aggravate hostility, which makes it difficult to generate accurate data about such cases. We may assume that such occurrences are significantly low nowadays, as the fear that the girl will be “kidnapped” is not

a reason but rather an excuse of not attending school. Yezidi families may drop out a girl from school for marriage. Many parents note that it is not appropriate to send “an engaged girl” to school, even though general education in the Republic of Armenia is compulsory. Such a practice is often conditional upon the fact of marriage, as well as the intention to marry – in some cases a 16-17-year-old girl is married after leaving school. Such a phenomenon has cultural and traditional foundations, as after a certain age, when a girl is prepared for marriage, their active social life, in such a case – attending school – is considered incompatible in Yezidi communities.

In Yezidi communities, girls are also not allowed to attend school due to their identity and solidarity of the community approach; this is a common practice, and almost everyone follows it. Interestingly, during interviews and discussions we heard opinions that it is wrong to take a child out of school, and that such a common approach in the community should be changed.

...not as if they force her to leave school to marry her off, but they say “what a shame for our child to attend school at such an age, what if she is kidnapped? A girl of such age should be sitting at home, like, not go here and there, not talk to guys, and so on”, maybe this is what they think.

*Quote, interview
with a parent, Tandzut
(village in Armenia)*

It should be noted that, in any case, the age threshold for marriage has increased recently. While they used to marry their daughters very often before they were 16, now the pattern has changed, and the marriage age is above 16.

Of course, it does not mean that the issue of early marriage is addressed, and there are no cases of kidnapping of girls. It only

suggests that visible changes occurred in the community in recent years. And, as interviews and discussions held during the survey illustrate, such changes are significantly supported by the government activities, efforts of nongovernment organizations, and active youth recognized in the community, who succeeded thanks to education. Children also speak against forced child marriage. A group of parents, mothers mention that in marriage, they take into consideration the opinion of their children. However, we can conclude that the problem is still relevant, as it mostly relates to reproduction of the community culture as well.

The reasons behind leaving school include socio-economic problems – the child’s family roles. The child does not attend the school to help parents around the house, with farming, and to take care of younger sisters and brothers. Moreover, it is true both about boys and girls.

For boys, the lack of motivation is also the reason for leaving school; moreover, the parents,

in such case, often make their male child go to school, but it is not the case with girls. When the female child has good academic performance and wants to continue learning at high school, college, and then university, the parents prevent her from further studies. Here too, the issue is closely related to the existing gender role expectations in the community.

In primary school, the community children are motivated to learn; however, such motivation decreases in the middle school, as they know that their parents will not let them continue school until grade 12 or parents have different plans for their child's future.

In elementary school, motivation to learn is driven also by the fact that parents follow up on their kid's schoolwork/homework. In middle school parents' involvement decreases due to their literacy level and increase in children's independence. Parents do not dedicate adequate time to their children's homework preparation in middle school. Children do not commit

to doing homework: autonomy translates into lack of parental involvement, and children gradually find themselves not keeping up with the content taught. One of the reasons is also the fact that elementary school curriculum is easier and attainable, and children internalize the content with ease, with most parents being able to easily help them at this age with schoolwork/homework. In middle school, however, the curriculum becomes challenging for children, with most parents being unable to help them due to lack of knowledge and skills, and learning process becomes unattainable and challenging. And as children start failing at learning, their motivation falls.

The children essentially want to finish the school, and they want to learn a profession or handcraft in upper secondary grades. Some children have agreement with their parents about it, while others have put up with the idea of dismissing learning.

After finishing the school, we will go to the army, and I would like to study after army, but I have not made up my mind yet. I mostly like history and geography. I know that I must take admission exams, but I haven't made up my mind yet. I don't know the ways of how to get admission, but I would ask others who were admitted. My family told me, that if you want to study, go, do it, and I am also motivated to do it.

*Quote, group discussion
with pupils, Zartonk
(village in Armenia)*

Indeed, the compulsory K-12 education in Armenia has affected the continuity of children's education in Yezidi communities. In Yezidi communities, where they believe it is a compulsory law, they have started to send

their children to high school. Of course, only the law does not prevent early school leaving, but significant effect has been observed.

School dropout rates are driven also by the concern in Yezidi communities that education may develop the kind of qualities and skills that may conflict with the community norms and traditions and contribute to assimilation.

Main findings

Over the last decade, the attitude toward education in Yezidi community has significantly changed, and this has manifested in a variety of ways. Previously, the community would not consider being removed from school or a repulsive attitude toward education as an issue, whereas now, dropping out and not attending school is seen as a problem.

- ◆ In the community, they started to prioritize education not only in terms of having a fu-

ture specialty, being engaged in professional work, but also for acquiring life skills.

- ◆ In elementary grades, children from Yezidi communities are interested in education, which declines over years because of the level of parents' literacy required for lesson preparation. The issue is indicative of a clear link between poverty and educational advancement that is typical not only for Yezidi communities but also for socially vulnerable families.
- ◆ The level of parents' satisfaction with the quality of education, as well as the issue of professional orientation and awareness, has an impact on the continuity of education. Children are not informed about vocational education institutions, specialties, and admission procedures.
- ◆ In terms of access to education, there is a number of issues in Yezidi communities:
 - ◆ No kindergartens and pre-schools
 - ◆ Inadequate professional qualities of the teaching

staff, including discrimination against Yezidi pupils

- ◆ Inadequate physical facilities and equipment
- ◆ Low quality of teaching Yezidi language
- ◆ Complexity of curricula
- ◆ Distance of education institutions – school, high school, vocational institution – from the communities
- ◆ Impossibility to pass admission exams
- ◆ Lack or absence of out-of-class study groups.

The problem of withdrawal of Yezidi children from education is attributable to national and cultural background, as well as socio-economic and organizational issues.

In Yezidi communities not only girls but also boys drop out of school. Note that the issue of dropping out of school is exacerbated in the upper secondary school – in grades 10-11.

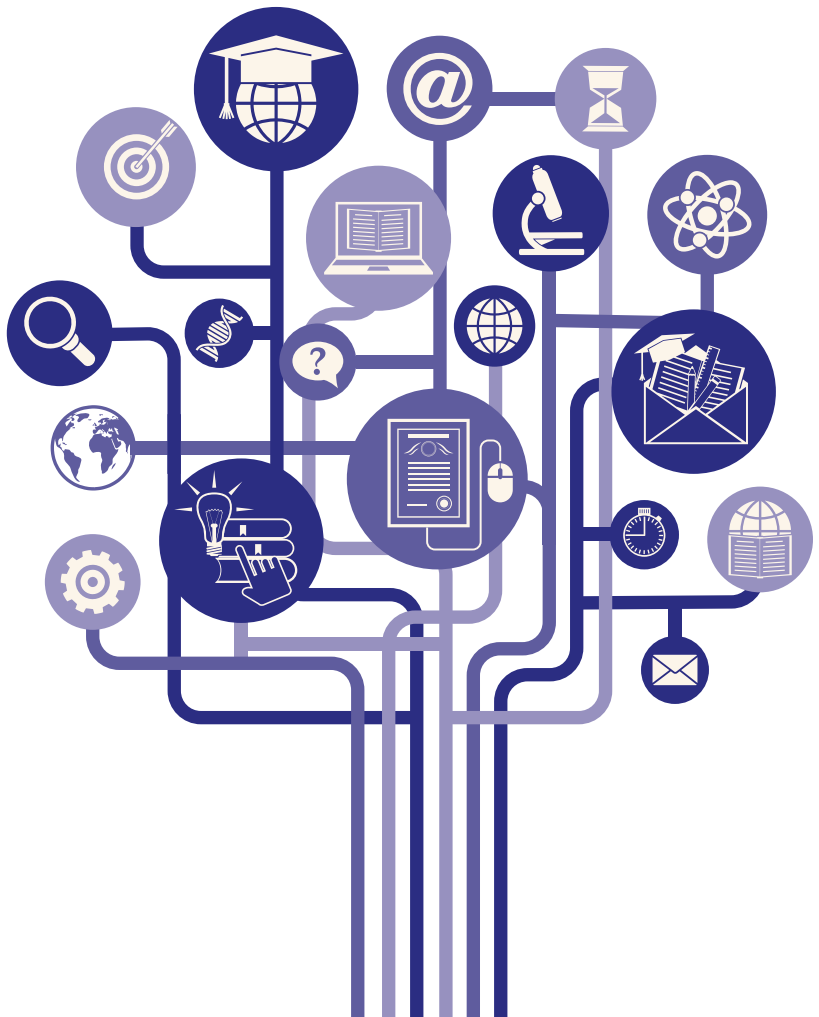
The main reasons behind school dropout among the children from the Yezidi communities

are as follows:

- ◆ The community has a fear of being assimilated, and as a result, education is seen as a process contributing to assimilation.
- ◆ There is a custom in the community to leave school while under the age of 16, which is attributable to marrying at a young age or avoiding that, in case of a female, and the family roles or disposition to migration, in case of a male.
- ◆ Education, especially in the upper secondary school, is not accessible in all communities.

The complete research findings are presented in the “Problems of Early Marriage and School Dropouts in Yezidi Community in Armenia” publication.

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