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Minority Education in Hungary

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1. BACKGROUND

In most of the minority families, channels of passing on the mother tongue and minority culture have been significantly narrowed, with the Hungarian language and culture becoming dominant. The various dialects spoken by minorities living in Hungary are incapable of continuous renewal, and therefore, have a decreasing role in social communication. The importance of schools in passing the mother tongue and helping children in finding and retaining their identity has grown, along with the responsibility of educational institutions to respond to the special needs of Roma children. It has become evident that the improvement of the content and quality of minority education, one that is responsive to changing demands, is of special importance for members of Hungary's national and ethnic minorities.

The amendments to Act LXXIX of 1993 on General Education came into force in 1996, and in accordance with its prescriptions, the National Base Curriculum was introduced in 1998. In conjunction with the changes in the structure of general education, the Government also considered the reform of minority education timely and necessary and introduced the Directives to Minority Education in 1998.

Yet, shortly after the introduction of regulations as regards the education of national and ethnic minorities, serious shortcomings and malpractices have emerged both in legislation and in the application of the law. Although education rights are protected at the constitutional level, there are often delays in integrating domestic legislation, policy and practice in line with these principles. Most of these malpractices and discrepancies between policy and practice may be remedied by the appropriate application of already existing guarantees or by the modification of legal guarantees or by the introduction of new guarantees, while others involve a more profound change in attitudes toward the entire teaching-learning process.

The aim of this paper is to provide policy guidelines for educational institutions, Foundations, Network Programs and for the Ministry of Education in relation to the most important aspects of the education of minority pupils in Hungary. Since an effective policy must recognize the complexity of the issue of minority education, the Policy Paper was

written on the basis of a needs assessment¹ that was realized in the frame of a comprehensive survey on the prevalent minority school system.

2. MAIN PRINCIPLES OF THE POLICY

Taking into account the results and experiences gained in the course of the needs assessment, the international norms in regard of the treatment of minorities, and the values of the mission of the Soros Network in education, a list of principles connected to minority education awaiting resolution can be laid down. These principles apply equally to the policies of development agencies and to the policies of the Government.

- ✍ All minority education strategies should be based on an approach that is responsive to changing demands, is vital to social and economic development and takes into account all aspects of the entire teaching-learning process.
- ✍ Pupils belonging to minorities should have the opportunity to learn their mother tongue and minority culture in the school as well as the language and culture of the majority. To guarantee the right for students to learn their mother tongue and their own cultural heritage is central not only from the point of view of minority rights in education, but also from the point of view of the pedagogical effectiveness of the teaching-learning process. At the same time, equal access should be provided for minority pupils to mainstream education in the majority language.
- ✍ A re-definition of quality in relation to minority education is critical. Quality of the teaching-learning process is a general requirement. Students belonging to minorities should have the same quality education as their peers belonging to the majority.
- ✍ The great number of Roma children in catch-up programs is not a sign of the intellectual insuitability of Roma, but of the discrimination that is practiced toward them and of the pedagogical failure of the general education system. The systematic channeling of Roma pupils into special schools or classes organized for mentally handicapped children is a method of discrimination and segregation that should be

¹ The results gained in the course of the needs assessment carried out on minority education are presented in the Research Paper.

prohibited and terminated. Special legal measures should be thus adopted and implemented in order to eradicate this phenomenon and to improve the capacity of general educational institutions to integrate Roma pupils.

✍ Maintaining and supporting separate minority schools and programs does not necessarily lead to the ghettoisation of minority education. When it is possible however, (for example when it does not decrease the effectiveness of mother tongue education) efforts should be made to provide the integration of minority pupils into the mainstream education. A certain level of separation, nevertheless, is not against the overall goal of integration. However, in case there is a need for separate or special catch-up courses, they must be organized in such a fashion that they should comply with legal regulations and with the approval of parents.

✍ The acceptable supply of textbooks, teaching manuals and study materials which are in harmony with the National Base Curriculum and with the aims of different minority education programs is a basic condition, without which it is not possible to organically integrate minority education to the system of general education.

✍ Efforts should be made to strengthen the inclusive environment of minority education. It is thus inevitable and necessary to involve parents, teachers, social workers and social educational experts in the educational work in order to increase the efficiency of the teaching-learning process and to attain more efficient communication and co-operation.

✍ Many of the institutions (schools, local and minority self-governments) and actors (teachers, head of schools, parents, social workers, etc.) taking part in the organization of minority education do not have sufficient information about their rights and duties. Therefore, it is of vital interest to ensure the regular information, preparation and training of the actors concerned.

✍ Teacher training and the further education of teachers play a key role in the future of minority education. It seems inevitable to introduce new skills and competencies into initial and in-service training in such a way, which could also initiate communication, co-operation, and networking among minority teachers and schools. From this respect,

not only minority teacher training should be reformed, but the multicultural content of mainstream education should also be strengthened.

3. IMPLEMENTATION OF THE POLICY

3.1. Recommendations for the Hungarian Ministry of Education

The role of the Ministry of Education is central to both the recognition of problem areas related to minority education and to their solution: by directing reforms and by securing the quality and relevance of the introduced provisions. Therefore, to influence the formulation of state policies to the greatest extent possible and to promote a good co-operation between the Government, other state organizations and the Soros Network is of crucial importance. The present policy paper makes the following proposals to the Ministry of Education.

- ✍ As the Minister is in charge of the preparation of the legal regulations of general and minority education, the Ministry should be influenced in order to accelerate the process of legislation in issues of minority education. In addition to this, before a law of higher importance comes into force, the Ministry should provide educational institutions with a sufficient amount of time to make the necessary preparations to implement the new law in an appropriate manner.
- ✍ The Ministry of Education should elaborate a strategy for making more efficient the flow of information between the actors concerned in minority education. One way of doing so would be to regularly issue and circulate information booklets and directives, organize open local professional forums, public discussions with the participation of teachers, public administrators, educational specialists and policy makers. The Ministry should also circulate information in order to help publicize those educational programs, which have been operating and proved to be successful.
- ✍ The Ministry should elaborate legal measures in order to eradicate discriminative and segregative educational practices detrimental to the interests of Roma students. Moreover, the Ministry should conduct investigations to monitor whether the rights of children belonging to Roma or to any minority to receive the same quality education as their peers belonging to the majority are ensured in a proper way.

- ✍ Without an appropriate offer of textbooks and teaching supplements, it is impossible to properly implement educational programs and local curricula. Therefore, the Ministry should introduce a system of competitive support for minority textbook publishing, in order to remedy the present chaotic situation in minority textbook supplying.
- ✍ The Ministry of Education should significantly improve the organization of minority education in such a way that the study sessions - as defined by the Law on General Education - should remain within the available time-frame and, at the same time, they should answer the requirements of the Directive for the Education of Ethnic and National Minorities and of the National Base Curriculum.
- ✍ The Ministry of Education should legally ensure that the state budgetary resources allocated to the institutions of minority education reach their target and are utilized for the purpose of minority education.

3.2. Recommendations for Minority Education Institutions and Programs

In the present decentralized system of education, the educational and cultural self-management of minorities plays a significant role. In order to well utilize the indisputable benefits of this system, teachers and school managements should adopt to the recent changes in the organization of minority education and of the teaching-learning process. The present policy paper makes the following proposals to minority education institutions and programs.

- ✍ Minority education programs, besides providing minority pupils with the same quality of education as their peers participating in non-minority education, should be also engaged with the teaching the history, traditions and customs of the minority communities, with the teaching of their mother tongue and with the contribution to the development of the child's personality by strengthening the feeling of belonging to this community.
- ✍ Teachers should maintain a continuing dialogue with pupils, to get to know them better and give individual advice. The teaching-learning plan should be clearly

presented to students and should be discussed with them. Teachers should regularly assess student progress.

- ✍ Teachers should be committed to students and to their learning. They should recognize differences among their pupils and adjust their teaching strategies accordingly, but, at the same time, they should treat students equally. Their mission should extend beyond cognitive development and should focus on the overall development of the child.
- ✍ Schools should maintain a system of values, which recognizes on an equal footing the contribution of everyone who works with the children and their families. Schools should not isolate themselves from the communities whom they serve. They should maintain regular contacts with parents and recognize that parents are the main educators of their children. The school thus should be open to parents, to work with them as equal partners so they can support together the education of children more effectively.
- ✍ School management should recognize that local minority and municipal self-governments can be of great help in their work. Schools heads should co-operate with representatives of self-governments since it is in their joint interest that minority interests should be enforced within the system of general education and that minority education should function in an adequate fashion.
- ✍ Teachers should rely on a 'team teaching' work. They should contribute to school effectiveness by collaborating with other professionals and they should conduct an education in close co-operation with a network of other schools' staff.
- ✍ All schools should share a positive view about the potential of all Roma pupils to achieve better results and to continue their studies. They should share the understanding that Roma children need strong support not only for their education at school, but also at home and in their community.
- ✍ General educational institutions should strengthen the multicultural content of education in order to help the acquisition of knowledge about minority cultures.

- ✍ Teachers should participate in continuous teacher training activities and schools should link these trainings to a school development plan. Moreover, teachers should have the opportunity to participate in the planning and management of the school and they should express their opinions on different aspects of the quality of education in the given institution.
- ✍ Schools should regularly measure the effectiveness of their educational programs. School heads and teachers should analyze and evaluate their own and each other's work, the results of their own and each other's decisions, they should reflect on their own each other's experiences and built these into the future work. Teachers should participate in the local development and adaptation of curricula and teaching methods.

3.3. Recommendations for Foundation and Network Programs

The primary aim of the education policy development in the Soros Network is to ensure that minority education programs effectively serve the mission of promoting open societies. Equal rights and equal opportunities for all pupils in terms of access to, and treatment in education are the core values of this mission. The task thus remains to develop and maintain ways and shape discourse in order that this goal should be reflected not only in theory, but also in the every-day practice of teaching. To address this issue, the present paper recommends the following strategies for Foundations and Network Programs.

- ✍ All development programs designed for the education of minorities should serve the central goals of the educational strategy of the Network.
- ✍ Network programs should meet the quality standards of international and national educational development schemes.
- ✍ Programs should not only target minority education institutions and programs, they should, at the same time, address and incorporate general educational institutions where children with minority affiliation study.
- ✍ Development programs should involve the representatives of minorities in program-design and in decision-making procedures related to issues of minority education.

- ✍ Foundations should continue establishing scholarships funds at school level, distributed for the families of those children for whom schooling causes a significant financial burden. Such funds, distributed in a less bureaucratic manner than social state packages, are crucial for the integration of all children in the system of education.
- ✍ Good educational practices and civil initiations aimed at the education of minority pupils should be promoted and publicized by Foundations. These alternative educational practices can not be successfully integrated in an organized form into the school system, if they appear as exceptional endeavors involving only a very low number of students.
- ✍ As the future of minority education is clearly tied with the development of minority teacher training scheme, national Foundations should promote and publicize in-service teacher trainings in order that professionals get familiar with the most recent methodologies and become capable of meeting challenges beyond those of their traditional, every-day teaching activities.
- ✍ The Network should recognize the common features of the present situation of minority education in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and apply the regional experiences in solving the problems of minority education at local levels.

4. CONCLUSION

While the Research Paper identified and explored the problems of minority education to be overcome, the Policy Paper tried to offer guidance of ways in which the task of improving the quality of minority education can be carried forward.

The policy recommendations were based on the assumption that a real transition in minority education can only take place if all participants of the system are clearly aware of their rights, duties and opportunities. For this, however, the reformulation of legal framework in itself is not sufficient. It is also crucial that the actors establish a high degree of cooperation with each other and that the identified problems could be translated into needs that the different actors of minority education can respond to. Key to achieving such a goal is ensuring

that all parts of the system of minority education sustain a focus on the central goal of educational development: the improvement of the quality of education.

Naturally, it is not possible to respond to all the needs at the same time. The diversity of problems implies that different issues should be handled by different actors, partly because none of the agencies have the necessary resources available for adequate action and partly because not all the responses to the needs coincide necessarily with the mission of all parts of the system. Nevertheless, it is to be hoped that problems and strategies identified by this policy research will be translated into real action in the near future with the active co-operation of the actors of the minority education system themselves.