

LANGUAGE COMPETENCE IN EDUCATION: RE-THINKING MINORITY ISSUES IN LITHUANIA

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Abstract. This study was inspired by long-lasting debates in the Baltic states, Lithuania in particular, on the assessment results of study subjects in minority (Russian and Polish) schools, including proficiency in Lithuanian. The article presents solid evidence to the effect that national and international school examination results differ significantly with respect to disciplines (Lithuanian language vs. other subjects), ethnicity (titular vs. minority), and municipality (large cities vs. rural areas). The case study of Visaginas shows that the sociolinguistic environment and proficiency in an official language are significant defining factors of this town.*

Keywords: minority schools, language-in-education, national language assessment, STEM, Russian speakers, Baltic states, Lithuania, Visaginas

1. Introduction

It is beyond doubt that education has a huge impact not only on the development of an individual's intellectual capacity and better career achievements but also on the greater socio-economic and cultural potential of any society. Modern societies exhibit notable heterogeneity in ethnic composition, demographic characteristics, and literacy competences due to intensive processes of mobility, urbanization, technological innovations, and the effects of the new economy. Despite many advancements, even developed countries, like the Baltic states, still register many facts of social inequality, especially when it comes to minority issues. The present study focuses on the cornerstone of the society's wellbeing – education – from the perspective of national and international standardized test results in schools with a minority language of instruction (Russian or Polish) in Lithuania. Specifically, we will discuss pupils' academic achievements in Visaginas – a geographically,

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ethnically, and culturally isolated Lithuanian town with a very peculiar sociolinguistic situation. This study was inspired by long-lasting debates in the Baltic states, Lithuania in particular, on the examination results of study subjects in minority schools, including proficiency in Lithuanian.

The Baltic states have been described as a unique case among European nations because of their ethnic composition and the history of russification in the Soviet period. Thus, linguistic integration of Russian speakers has been one of the central topics of social and political discourse in the region for many years (Vihalemm et al. 2011: 116–118). However, the global dynamics of multilingualism and multiculturalism have started to penetrate the language practices of the region with salient “inclusion” of English and language commodification trends. Moreover, although languages and societies in the post-Soviet transition era with a special focus on language policies and ideologies are still debated intensively, integration based on 21st-century reality where questions such as nation-building based on a common language and culture are doubted (cf. Lazdiņa, Marten 2019, Giordano 2019) starts to get prominence, especially in the themes of education, economy, and social studies in general. The last decade marks salient dynamics towards more tolerant and open dialog between majority and minority groups, and the language “issue” seems to be not as crucial as it was two decades ago. Moreover, the slow but steady increase of more positive attitudes and the competences in the titular languages among Russian speakers in the Baltics shows a favorable trend. The language practices from the user perspective have become more important in the last decade, as recent studies and surveys demonstrate (cf. Lauze, Kļava 2016, Ramonienė et al. 2010, 2013, Šliavaitė 2019, Zabrodskaja 2015, IMES 2017, SISCE 2020).

Although Russian speakers of all age groups in Lithuania value Russian cultural heritage, this attitude does not guarantee the maintenance of the language; on the contrary, it is reported in many studies that Russian speakers use Lithuanian quite extensively, especially the younger generation. Despite the fact that senior and less educated people still use Russian in everyday communication, they demonstrate rather positive attitudes towards Lithuanian and Lithuania (Brazauskienė 2013, Lichačiova 2013, Lichačiova, Markova 2014, Šliavaitė 2019, Dabašinskienė 2021). These facts suggest that Lithuanian Russian speakers have the lowest vitality amongst Russian speakers in the Baltic countries, which is reflected in the relatively extensive language and identity shift towards the Lithuanian mainstream (Zabrodskaja 2015: 225–230).

2. Language policies and education in Lithuania

The language policies, linguistic integration, and education of ethnic minorities across the Baltic states have been addressed in many publications (Hogan-Brun et al. 2005, Siiner 2006, Druviete 1997, Druviete, Ozolins 2016, Rannut 2008, Hogan-Brun, Ozolins, Ramonienė, Rannut 2009, Muiznieks 2010, Potashenko 2010, Vihalemm 2010, Marten et al. 2012, Vihalemm, Hogan-Brun 2013, Veisbergs 2013, Lauze, Kļava et al. 2016, Vaicekauskienė, Šepetys 2016, Lazdiņa 2013, Lazdiņa, Marten 2019). However, there are indications that there still exists a need for more systematic and interdisciplinary research of sociolinguists, educational

scientists, sociologists, and practitioners to understand the dynamics of languages in education.

As we know, in 1991 the Law of the Republic of Lithuania on Education was adopted, and the educational system went through fundamental systemic and structural changes. Since then it has been continuously “in progress”, introducing never-ending reforms and modifications, depending on the ruling political party. The reforms affected all areas of education, changing both educational content and organizational forms of pre-primary, primary, secondary, and higher education.

Teaching in primary and secondary schools in Lithuania is carried out both in Lithuanian and in the languages of ethnic minorities, i.e. Russian, Polish, Hebrew, and Belarusian. The beginning of this practice in school education goes back to the Soviet period and it has been largely maintained since the restoration of independence in 1990. Lithuania’s two largest ethnic communities, the Russians and the Poles, have responded differently to the pressure for integration. The Polish minority showed stronger links to their ethnic networks and were eager to maintain their identity and linguistic practices (Frėjutė-Rakauskienė et al. 2016); Russians, on the other hand, demonstrated more positive attitudes towards the mainstream society and demonstrated tendencies not only to assimilate (Kasatkina 2007, Leončikas 2007) but to find a more balanced way for integration (Šliavaitė 2012, Labanauskas 2014). Russian parents, as claimed in Hogan-Brun and Ramonienė’s (2005) study, show a pragmatic approach and preferences towards education in Lithuanian, as they are in favor of their children continuing studies in Lithuanian universities. Moreover, Russians constitute the highest proportion of university graduates amongst the minority groups in Lithuania (15.9% as opposed to 6.3% of Poles) (Hogan-Brun, Ramonienė 2003: 38). This is because Russian schools are mainly located in cities and towns, while Polish ones are in rural areas, where the quality of secondary education tends to be somewhat poorer (Bulajeva, Hogan-Brun 2008).

Despite these rather positive tendencies, the results of Lithuanian language competence in minority schools were not satisfactory, therefore in 2011 the Lithuanian parliament adopted the Amendment of the Law of the Republic of Lithuania on Education¹, which granted more importance to the Lithuanian language in non-Lithuanian-language schools to improve the proficiency of the titular language. The arguments provided were of instrumental nature emphasizing the importance of better career and social mobility opportunities for young people. The Amendment has sparked hot debates, even protest strikes among the minority communities; some doubts were voiced by academic people as well (Salienė, Vilkienė 2006), thus it became an arena of political tensions. Until 2011, all disciplines at minority schools (except for Lithuanian language classes) were taught in the language of instruction of a minority school, but the reform aimed to introduce the teaching of certain disciplines (Lithuanian history, Lithuanian geography, Lithuanian social science) in Lithuanian at all schools of ethnic minorities. It is obvious that minority communities have different attitudes towards education in Lithuanian; nevertheless, more and more families prefer Lithuanian schools to minority ones, therefore, we observe a tendency that the number of pupils learning in minority schools is gradually decreasing (Bulajeva, Hogan-Brun 2008). The decrease can only be partly explained by the demographic situation, including emigration, while other

¹ 17 March 2011 No. XI-1281. These Amendments introduced the teaching of some subjects (geography, history) at ethnic minority schools in Lithuanian in order to equalize the final examination of the Lithuanian language requirements at ethnic minority and majority schools.

reasons are related to more inclusive minority attitudes, the prestige of Lithuanian, and better opportunities for social mobility (Ramonienė, Gaben 2015: 246–247).

Research indicates (Hogan-Brun, Ramonienė 2003) that in general, the Lithuanian government has introduced inclusive policies reflecting the language and education needs of the minority groups. However, controversial debates concerning Baltic language and education policies from the perspective of linguistic rights (Phillipson 2011, Pavlenko 2013, Muižnieks 2010, Šliavaitė 2019) have expressed criticism towards the lack of pluralism, a true multilingual approach in education, and social harmony in the society. Moreover, the sociolinguist A. Pavlenko (2013) claimed that most of the post-Soviet societies have introduced policies of *nativisation*, with intended assimilation of Russian speakers, which she called ‘the monolingual turn’.

The claim that majority language proficiency correlates with the social integration of ethnic minorities is not new. However, as we see, the question of what factors underlie bi-/multilingual language proficiency and achievements at schools receives considerably less attention, especially in the context of new debates on inclusiveness, recent research findings on multilingual individuals’ linguistic system (Gathercole 2013, Grosjean 1985, 1998, Paradis 2000) and the educational policies of a neoliberal approach focusing on competition, standardizations and “outputs” (Hargreaves et al. 2011, Autio 2011, 2017, Sahlberg 2011).

3. Examination results in Lithuania: the main tendencies from 2017 to 2020

Our study is based on secondary sources, i.e. national examination results and surveys. A comparative approach is applied to analyze the dynamics of pupils’ academic achievement results in diverse disciplines in minority schools, with a special focus on Lithuanian as a national language. Moreover, the data show that there are great differences in academic performance between the big cities and rural areas, including native speakers of Lithuanian. Therefore, we aimed to look at the results comparing different age groups, regions, and the language of instruction.

The education system in Lithuania is similar to many other European countries. General education in Lithuania includes three main stages: primary education, basic (lower secondary) education, and upper secondary education. The achievements of young schoolchildren are measured by standardized tests that are given to 2nd, 4th, 6th, and 8th graders. The standardized tests (called the National Pupils’ Achievement Testing, NPAT) are optional and are organized every year by the National Examination Centre of Lithuania. 10th graders must pass Basic Education Achievement Testing (BEAT) in order to get their basic education certificate. In addition, every three years pupils from Lithuania take the international PISA test. PISA (The Program for International Student Assessment) is an international assessment, organized by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which measures 15-year-old students’ reading, mathematics, and science literacy every three years (National Centre for Education Statistics, 2019). After completing the program of upper secondary education, graduates or 12th graders must take matura examinations. It is obligatory to take and pass at least two exams to complete upper secondary education and to get a maturity certificate.

The Lithuanian language and literature exam is the only exam that is obligatory to finish secondary education and to attain the diploma.

To begin with, the general situation of education in Lithuania is accurately presented by the PISA results of 2018. PISA measures 15-year-old students' reading, mathematics, and science skills and this testing is carried out worldwide. Therefore, the results of PISA might give very important insights into the educational system of a country and pupils' skills – or lack of certain skills. In 2018, almost seven thousand pupils in Lithuania took tests in reading, mathematics, and science. After analyzing the results of all three disciplines, Lithuania scored 476 points and took 29–36th place out of 79 countries together with Latvia, Croatia, Russia, Italy, Hungary, Iceland, Belarus, and Israel. Comparing with the results of 2015, Lithuania made progress by 8 points, which is statistically significant. However, Lithuania is still below the average of other countries with 487 points (OECD 2018).

A few important observations were made after analyzing the results of PISA. First, pupils from the capital and bigger cities showed significantly better results than pupils living in rural areas (Valavičienė, Dukynaitė 2019). While test-takers from urban areas scored more than the OECD average, pupils from small towns and villages showed worse results (see Chart 1 below).

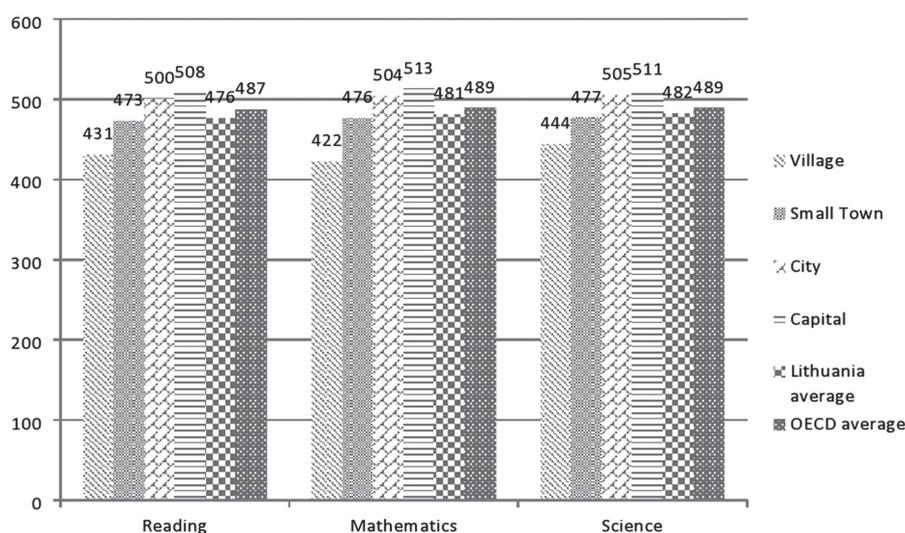


Chart 1. Distribution of the proficiency level of students by region (OECD 2018)

After analyzing the results of PISA it was noticed that schools with different languages of instruction also differ in their results as is shown in Chart 2 below.

As Chart 2 demonstrates, Polish and Russian schools underperform in all three disciplines compared to schools where Lithuanian is the language of instruction. While Russian schools seem to be only slightly below Lithuania's average or even reach it in mathematics, the results of Polish schools are significantly lower than the average.

The situation in schools where Polish or Russian is a language of instruction has been regularly debated by politicians, teachers, and parents. The results of NPAT, PISA, and matura examinations reveal that pupils from minority schools

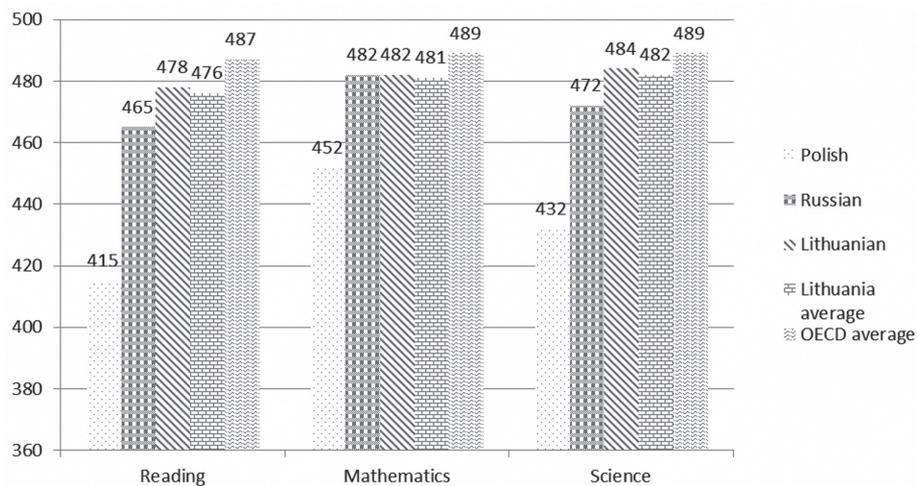


Chart 2. Distribution of the proficiency level of students by language of instruction in school (OECD 2018)

often show worse results, especially in Lithuanian language tests, than their peers from schools with Lithuanian as the language of instruction. What is more, this tendency is extremely prominent in rural areas (Raudienė 2018: 104). According to the Population and Housing Census (2011), the majority of Polish people are settled in South-East Lithuania and Vilnius district (Šalčininkai – 77.8%, Vilnius – 52.1%, Trakai – 30.1%). The largest number of Russians live in Klaipėda (19.6%), the third-largest city in Lithuania, the seaport, and other smaller towns in East and East-South of Lithuania, like Visaginas (51.9%), Zarasai (18.7%), and Švenčionys (13.3%) municipalities. In Lithuania, there are more than one hundred primary and secondary schools where the language of instruction is Russian, Polish, Russian and Polish, or other. According to the Law on Ethnic Minorities (2011) and the Guidelines for Improving the Teaching in National Minority Languages and the Teaching of National Minority Languages (2012), minority schools must have a certain number of hours of Lithuanian literature and language lessons per week to achieve a satisfactory level of Lithuanian. However, schools can organize the teaching in various ways. For instance, some of the lessons might be given in minority languages and others in Lithuanian. In other words, there are no strict rules on how the teaching process in minority schools should be organized. CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning), EMILE (EMILE – Enseignement d’une Matière par l’Intégration d’une Langue Etrangère), and other language-integrated learning methods are quite common in Lithuania. Around 50% of schools in urban and rural areas use such methods (OCEL 2018). However, there is no clear evidence yet of the effect on language competences (Būdvytytė-Gudienė et al. 2010: 6). Moreover, there is no specific data or studies which could show the correlation between language-integrated learning methods that are used in certain schools and PISA results. Undoubtedly, this could be a great topic for further research.

Due to different policies and teaching methods adopted in minority schools, pupils tend to have significantly lower skills of Lithuanian. The regular analysis

of the situation reveals that pupils from Russian or Polish schools underperform from quite a young age. Some interesting observations were made after analyzing the National Pupils' Achievement Testing (NPAT) results. NPAT includes the same standardized tests that are taken by pupils in grade 2, grade 4, grade 6, and grade 8. NPAT in 2018 showed some thought-provoking results when it comes to schools with different languages of instruction. First, the results of the standardized test of 4th and 6th graders from schools with Polish or Russian as a language of instruction did not show a significant difference compared to schools where the language of instruction is Lithuanian. The results of all subjects, including reading and writing, met the standards. However, the situation was quite different with 8th graders: this group from schools where the language of instruction is either Polish or Russian performed worse than students from Lithuanian schools. 8th graders from non-Lithuanian schools show the worst results in reading and writing. The explanation for this significant difference probably is the language. For 4th and 6th graders all the tasks, including reading and writing, are given in their mother tongue (Russian or Polish). Meanwhile, for 8th graders, all the tasks are given in their mother tongue, except for writing and reading, which are given and must be completed in Lithuanian. The fact that pupils from minority schools underperform in writing and reading in Lithuanian undoubtedly harms their performance in other exams in the 10th and 12th grades as all the exams are given and must be completed in Lithuanian.

Moreover, the overall results of 8th graders from minority schools are also significantly lower than those of pupils from Lithuanian schools. It is an interesting tendency noticed both in PISA and in NPAT, which cannot be related only to different languages of instruction (see Chart 3).

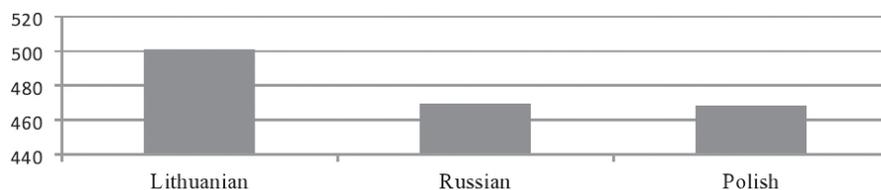


Chart 3. Comparison of schools with Lithuanian and non-Lithuanian language of instruction: average scores of the generalized achievement indicator (8th grade) (EMIS 2019)

According to previous studies, the poor results of minority schools might be caused not only by linguistic factors, but also by the lack of professional teachers and lower quality of textbooks in Polish or Russian, as well as other reasons (AEEML 2018).

4. The case of Visaginas: education and the socio-linguistic situation in a mono-industrial atomic site

Visaginas represents a unique ethnic, cultural and ideological region of Lithuania (Baločkaitė 2010, Mažeikienė, Gerulaitienė 2018). It was built in 1973 as a satellite settlement to the Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant. The great Soviet town has become a symbol of industrial progress of the country and workers from different areas of the Soviet Union came to build the atomic town. The tragic catastrophe in Chernobyl in 1986 and therefore the emergence of the Green movement and other protests in the dawn of the re-establishment of Lithuanian independence temporarily stopped construction works with the suspension of the third reactor and its demolition process that started in 1989 (Baločkaitė 2010, Kavaliauskas 1999). The precondition for the accession into the EU was the requirement to gradually close the atomic plant, therefore the first reactor was stopped in 2004, the second in 2009. The two reactors are currently undergoing a decommissioning process. Visaginas was the most rapidly growing city in Soviet Lithuania due to immigration and a high birth rate, but today, due to the emigration in 2001–2011, the number of inhabitants has decreased drastically dropping down to only around 18,000 inhabitants (from 30,000), of which almost 80% are Russian speakers. The process of emptying is reflected in the educational landscape: the number of Russian-medium secondary schools and pupils attending them is decreasing, with some Russian-speaking families sending their children to Lithuanian primary schools and Lithuanian kindergartens (Šliavaitė 2012).

The ethnic composition of the town is still reminiscent of the former Soviet Union with 52% of the population being ethnic Russians, Belarusians (9.89%), Poles (9.32%), and Ukrainians (5.16%), the rest belong to almost 40 different nationalities that mainly speak Russian. Lithuanians are a minority group with only about 15%. Russian is still dominant in both the in-home environment and the public sector. Therefore, this practice becomes the main obstacle to learn and use Lithuanian (Šliavaitė 2012: 119). As Visaginas is quite a remote area, young people here might be lacking exposure and opportunities to communicate in Lithuanian thus improving their skills in the national language. The majority of pupils enroll in Russian schools as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Schools in Visaginas in 2018–2019 (EMIS 2019)

Visaginas		
Language of instruction	Number of institutions	Number of pupils
Russian	2	896
Others	2	659
Total	4	1555

In Visaginas there are also five pre-primary education institutions and in three of them, the language of instruction is Russian. It is compulsory to have at least 4 hours of Lithuanian language classes in preschool education. However, educators claim that this is not enough to develop sufficient skills of Lithuanian, especially in such districts as Visaginas where youngsters lack exposure to Lithuanian outside of school or preschool. The majority of children are mainly educated in Russian from

a very young age, therefore a significant percentage of 1st graders have no skills in Lithuanian (Šeina, Daniėnė 2018). Thus, knowing the socio-economic situation, historical past, and the educational state of Visaginas, it is not surprising that Visaginas is one of the regions where school leavers have shown the worst results of the Lithuanian language and literature assessment for years (see Table 2 below).

Table 2. The Lithuanian literature and language examination in Visaginas: comparison of the results from 2017 to 2020 (NEC 2017–2020)

Year	Graduates that passed the exam	Top performers
2020	75%	3%
2019	89%	7%
2018	82%	1.5%
2017	75%	2.5%

In 2020, only 75% of Visaginas graduates passed the Lithuanian literature and language national exam, the worst performance across all sixty municipalities of Lithuania. According to the National Examination Center (NEC) data, only 3% of graduates scored more than 85% and fitted into the top performers group. Interestingly, the percentage of top performers in other exams was significantly higher. This is the fourth-lowest result across all municipalities. Similar results were observed in the last four years. In 2017, only 75% of the graduates from Visaginas municipality passed the Lithuanian literature and language exam. The results seemed to be slightly better in 2018 (82%) and 2019 (89%). However, the results have dropped again in 2020. The exact causes of this decline in exam performance have not been studied in detail yet.

In comparison, pupils from other municipalities that are about the same size as Visaginas showed considerably better results. For instance, all of the school leavers from Palanga (which has the same amount of citizens as Visaginas) passed the Lithuanian literature and language exam in 2020. 100% of pupils in Birštonas and 97% of graduates from the Zarasai district passed the exam this year, as the data in Table 3 show.

Table 3. The Lithuanian literature and language examination in 2020: a comparison between Visaginas and other municipalities (NEC 2020)

Municipality	Graduates who passed the exam	Top performers
Birštonas	100%	23%
Palanga	92%	15%
Zarasai district	97%	17%
Tauragė district	93%	11%
Utena district	92%	10%
Visaginas	75%	3%

Table 3 demonstrates that pupils from other districts outperform school leavers from Visaginas in the Lithuanian literature and language exam quite significantly. There is a clear difference between Russian and Lithuanian schools in Visaginas with respect to the exam results (see Table 4).

Table 4. The results of the Lithuanian literature and language matura exam in Visaginas in 2020 (Overview of Matura Examinations in Visaginas (NEC 2020))

School	Number of graduates who took the exam	Number of graduates who passed the exam
Visaginas Atgimimas gymnasium (Russian)	28 (100%)	17 (61%)
Visaginas Verdenė gymnasium (Lithuanian)	15 (100%)	14 (93%)
Visaginas TVPMC (Lithuanian)	17 (100%)	14 (82%)

It is obvious that graduates from Atgimimas school, where Russian is the language of instruction, underperformed comparing with graduates from the two Lithuanian schools, Verdenė and the vocational school TVPMC. Pupils from Visaginas who enroll in Russian schools have even more limited experience communicating in Lithuanian and that is observable in their deficient performance in the Lithuanian language. Interestingly, graduates from Visaginas are usually quite successful in other national-level exams as shown in Table 5 below.

Table 5. The scores of Visaginas school leavers in 2020 (NEC 2020)

Exam	Percent of graduates who passed the exam	Percent of top performers (86–100)
Mathematics	81%	2%
English language	98%	27%
History	100%	9%
Information technologies	100%	8%
Biology	100%	13%

Their scores in IT, biology, English language, and history examinations usually are similar to those in the other municipalities and are in line with the national average. What is more, school leavers from Visaginas stand out in mathematics. For instance, in 2020, 81% of all graduates passed the exam. This percentage was the second-highest in all municipalities of Lithuania in 2020. It is worth mentioning that all examinations are taken in Lithuanian. In 2019, 89% of graduates in Visaginas passed the math exam and this was the best result in Lithuania that year (NEC 2019). The fact that pupils from Visaginas perform very well in other exams might be related to the socio-economic environment of the town. As the majority of the older generation is well-educated, has worked in the power plant, and values education in general, the younger generation might be motivated and encouraged by their families to study, especially STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) subjects.

The fact that graduates from Visaginas underperform in the Lithuanian literature and language exam is presumably closely related to their poor performance in NPAT taken some years ago. As might be presumed, it would be hardly possible for pupils to reach the needed level of proficiency in Lithuanian in just a few years and perform well in matura examinations. Speaking of NPAT, it was noticed that the skills of writing and reading of pupils from Visaginas tend to decrease from the 4th to 8th grade (OCEL 2018). Reviewing the results of national matura exams

and NPAT, it is seen that pupils from Russian schools underperform compared to those from Lithuanian schools. Significant percentages of pupils, especially from Russian schools, do not reach the minimum requirements in NPAT reading and writing tasks. For instance, 12% of all 8th graders in Visaginas did not reach the minimum requirement of reading in Lithuanian in 2017 (20% of these pupils were from schools with Russian as the language of instruction). The situation was even worse in 2018 when 27% of all 8th graders from Visaginas did not pass the reading test. Not surprisingly, only 10% of pupils from Lithuanian schools did not reach the minimum requirements; meanwhile, 35% of pupils from Russian schools failed. The national average of students who failed the test was 5.7% in 2017 and 9.6% in 2018 (NEC 2018, Šeina, Danienė 2018).

The results show that every year around one third of all the pupils from Russian schools in Visaginas fail to reach at least the minimum requirements of reading and writing in Lithuanian, thus showing a marked difference from schools with Lithuanian as the medium of instruction. As the results of both the NPAT and matura examination of Lithuanian literature and language are quite weak, it might be presumed that Russian schools do not provide sufficient training in Lithuanian and thus pupils do not progress properly, especially from the 8th to the 12th grade.

In conclusion, pupils from Visaginas seem to perform very well in STEM subjects, English, and social disciplines. However, due to the unique linguistic environment, they lack Lithuanian language skills, especially in writing and reading.

5. Conclusions and discussion

The article has presented evidence to the effect that national and international school examination results differ significantly with respect to disciplines (Lithuanian language vs. other subjects), ethnicity (titular vs. minority), and municipality (large cities vs. rural areas). This means that in most cases children from minority schools located in small towns and/or rural regions underperform compared to the average national result. The consequences of this state of affairs are poorer academic achievements in general, worse possibilities to enroll in an institution of higher education, and, therefore, lower chances to pursue better careers in a labor market.

The case study of Visaginas shows that the sociolinguistic environment and proficiency in an official language are significant defining factors of this town. The socio-history of Visaginas has developed the awareness of fundamental benefits of education; therefore, the general level of education has remained rather high, as pupils perform very well in STEM subjects, English, and social disciplines. However, due to the unique linguistic environment, they lack Lithuanian language skills, especially in writing and reading. Presumably, only the national language exam results may become an obstacle for young people to pursue higher education and therefore forces them to emigrate.

Politicians, experts, specialists from the NEC, and other educators recommend introducing more Lithuanian language hours on the level of pre-primary education and hiring more highly qualified language specialists to teach in ethnic minority schools. However, some of them have doubts as to whether the assessment system properly reflects the actual skills and abilities of pupils. The chronological

comparative data suggest that the 'language in education' sector requires a different approach to develop long-term policies and strategies that would be relevant to a multicultural and multilingual reality of education, and positive examples from our Baltic neighbors could be considered (see Tire 2020, Tóth, Hercz 2016 for Estonian progress in education).

The global education reforms and practices are criticized by many education experts. Their concerns target competing and controlling systems, standardization, and testing. The market ideology fosters competition among schools, pupils, and teachers, instead of cultivating creativity, diversity, curiosity, and moral values (Hargreaves et al. 2011, Autio 2011). The atmosphere of competition and measuring is even more harmful to minority children as they are always put in an unequal position as compared to monolinguals, titular language users. Recent research on bilingual acquisition alert educators that the bilingual mind cannot be compared to the monolingual. If minority children do not receive the same language input as monolinguals, it is difficult to find the rationale for the comparison of results, especially in language tests.

Lithuania, as a developed democratic and modern country, has to reconsider carefully the bilingual approach to education – the true inclusive model – when introducing an adequate number of Lithuanian language hours in pre-primary, primary, and secondary education, but also ensuring balanced exposure to the minority language. In all the debates about minorities' education and language issues, many actors should be involved, and dialog is the only appropriate strategy for the future agenda. The new paradigm of the sociology of education (see Epstein 2001) calls to reconsider the traditional approach to school and emphasizes "partnership" as a framework for collaboration: school, family, the surrounding community, and other interested agents can be particularly influential in advancing bilingual education.

It is time for Lithuania to support a genuinely inclusive approach to education, with more pluralistic, community-oriented, and multilingual effects.

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KEELEPÄDEVUS HARIDUSES: LEEDU VÄHEMUSKÜSIMUSTE ÜMBERHINDAMINE

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Uurimuse ajendiks on pikaajaline debatt rahvusvähemuste hariduse üle Leedus, aga ka Balti riikides üldiselt. Artiklis vaadeldakse riigieksamite hindamistulemusi Leedu vene ja poola õppekeele koolides. Uurimistulemused kinnitavad, et riigikeelsete ja muukeelsete koolide eksamitulemuste erinevus sõltub oluliselt nii õppeainest (leedu keel vs. teised õppeained), etnilisusest (enamus vs. vähemus) kui ka omavalitsusest (suurlinnad vs. maapiirkonnad). Geograafiliselt, etniliselt ja kultuuriliselt eripärase Visaginase juhtumiuuring näitab, et sotsiolingvistiline keskkond ja riigikeele pädevus on olulised määratlevad tegurid.

Võtmesõnad: vähemuskoolid, keel hariduses, keeleoskuse riiklik hindamine, vene keele kõnelejad, Balti riigid, Leedu, Visaginas

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