

Providing Accessibility of Quality Education in War-Affected Areas: Case of the Georgian Village Avlevi

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ABSTRACT

Armed conflicts hurt children and youth's access to quality education worldwide. Russian invasion and occupation of Georgian entities in 2008 resulted in thousands of internally displaced people and refugees and ruined schools and infrastructure. Georgian schools near the occupation dividing lines with Russia face unique hardships. The authors examined these schools' educational needs and challenges using the Avlevi community schools as a case study. The findings indicate that a specialized strategy is required to guarantee continuous and quality education for the population living in these armed conflict-affected settlements. Based on an analysis of the research findings in conjunction with various academic sources, a set of recommendations has been formulated to address the critical components of such a strategy.

Keywords: Extracurricular activities, quality education accessibility, war-affected schools.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Children in war-affected areas want to learn and cannot wait to learn. Education is the way for them to a better future. Article 28 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that every child has the right to a formal education (OHCHR, 1984). Nevertheless, millions of children in armed conflict zones have no access to quality education.

Armed conflicts have recently affected the European continent. The full-scale invasion of Russia in Ukraine resulted in destructive consequences for the Ukrainian education system. Hundreds of schools were damaged or have suffered from human losses. Years earlier, in 2008, the Russian invasion and occupation of Georgian entities resulted in thousands of internally displaced people and refugees and ruined schools and infrastructure. Moreover, since then, the population living near the dividing lines with territories occupied by Russia has constantly faced significant social, economic, and security problems. Creeping annexation lasts, and more and more territories are gathered behind the barbed wire fences, causing a threat to the population of these settlements. The current

situation hurts children and youth in the settlements at dividing lines' access to quality education. Quality education requires proper infrastructure, skilled teachers, and a safe learning environment.

However, ensuring equal access to education becomes particularly challenging for students residing in areas adjacent to the occupation dividing line in Georgia. These students face unique hardships, such as passing through military block posts daily. At the same time, teachers are often burdened with concerns about their families' safety, and the future remains uncertain for residents of these conflict-affected settlements.

The academic literature addressing the educational needs of populations living in war-affected regions is notably limited. "Even though several initiatives have been launched to maintain education, scant information exists in the literature on how education is maintained" (Salha et al., 2024, p. 1).

Existing research predominantly focuses on conflict zones in the Middle East and Africa, with recent studies examining the educational disruption caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In Georgia, local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have conducted a few



studies on education in conflict-affected areas, but there remains a need for more comprehensive, in-depth research. Ensuring that children and youth living near the occupation dividing line are not denied access to quality education is crucial.

According to the 2014 census, 116 villages are situated near Georgia's dividing line, with an approximate population of 46,000 (GEOSTAT, 2016). Since Russia occupied part of the Shida Kartli region in 2008, villages such as Avlevi, Knolevi, and Tseronisi, which border the occupied Tskhinvali region, have found themselves along this dividing line. This paper explores the challenges schools face in these areas, using the schools in the Avlevi community as a case study.

In 2021 and 2023, the authors examined schools' educational needs and challenges within the Avlevi community. The findings indicate that applying the same educational policies used in other regions of Georgia is unsuitable for schools located along the occupation line. A specialized strategy is required to guarantee continuous and quality education for the population living in these conflict-affected settlements. Based on an analysis of the research findings in conjunction with various academic sources, a set of recommendations has been formulated to address the critical components of such a strategy.

2. AVLEVI COMMUNITY AND SCHOOL NEEDS

The last comprehensive study on the population living near the dividing line of the Russian-occupied territories in Georgia was conducted in 2019 (UN Women, 2022). The study revealed that a lack of access to education, including schools and kindergartens, was one of the most pressing concerns. Moreover, in settlements near the dividing line with the Tskhinvali region, only 11% had access to a library, 2% had a house of culture, 11% had clubs or art groups, and merely 13% had a sports field. The 2019 study also ranked settlements along the dividing line according to their need for state intervention. The Avlevi, Knolevi, and Tseronisi villages in the Avlevi community were identified as having medium to high levels of need (UN Women, 2022).

To better understand the current situation in the Avlevi community, it is helpful to consider some historical context. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Avlevi was a European-style village before the Bolshevik Revolution and the subsequent Russian occupation of Georgia in February 1921. At that time, Avlevi had an electricity supply, a coeducational school for boys and girls, agricultural machinery, cooperative and credit unions, forge workshops, and even a theatrical troupe. An agrarian college also operated in the village during this period. However, following the Bolshevik occupation, Avlevi became one of many ordinary villages in the region. The situation further deteriorated after the Russian invasion of Georgia in August 2008, when the villages of the Avlevi community became bisected by barbed wire marking the occupation line, and Russian army blockposts were established in these villages.

Today, the Avlevi community has three schools: Avlevi Public School, which provides primary and basic education and employs ten teachers for 15 students; Knolevi Public School, which also provides primary and basic education, employing 13 teachers for 12 students; and Tseronisi Public School, which offers primary, basic, and secondary education, with 18 teachers for 55 students (<https://skolebi.emis.ge/>). These villages lack any other educational or municipal institutions.

Within the framework of internationally funded projects, a qualitative study was conducted in 2021 and 2023 to assess the educational challenges and needs of the Avlevi community schools. The research in 2021 comprised two phases. The first phase involved a structured interview with the principal of Avlevi School to identify the need for teaching resources. In the second phase, a visit to the school was conducted, during which a focus group was held. The focus group discussion centered on prioritizing educational resources, identifying various challenges facing the school, and assessing the psychological and social attitudes of the respondents. The group consisted of 11 different subject teachers from all three schools within the community. Participants were encouraged to express their opinions freely. Transcripts of the interviews and focus groups were made and subsequently analyzed.

The analysis revealed a pressing need to create improved learning and development opportunities for the youth in Avlevi community schools. Key priorities identified included the provision of educational resources such as computer equipment, books for the school library, and visual aids for subjects like history and geography. As a result of the project, five laptops, books, teaching aids, and other learning materials were supplied to the school. Additionally, the analysis highlighted the teachers' sense of being on the front line, with feelings of constant danger and increased stress prevalent among staff.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the educational process was temporarily suspended, so a focus group with students was impossible.

In 2023, Avlevi School expressed an interest in implementing non-formal learning courses. The researchers revisited the school to conduct another study to determine the community's non-formal educational needs. This research phase involved two focus groups—one with 11 school teachers and another with 12 students aged 10 to 18. Both focus groups were asked the following questions:

1. What problems should be addressed first in your village to benefit young people?
2. What opportunities do you require for entertainment, leisure, and cultural-creative activities?
3. What non-formal training courses would you like to see offered at the school?

Participants were again encouraged to express their views freely, and the discussions were transcribed and analyzed.

The teachers identified the need to create opportunities for young people to engage in meaningful and enjoyable activities during their free time as a top priority. They wanted to construct a sports field in the community and facilities like children's attractions, a youth club, a cinema, and a library. Many teachers also highlighted the need

for musical instruments in the school so that students could participate in music lessons and events. Regarding non-formal education, teachers suggested courses to help students gain skills for future employment. These included courses on driving, agricultural equipment operation and repair, and information technology (IT).

Students similarly identified IT training courses as a critical need in their non-formal education, noting the presence of a highly qualified IT teacher in the community schools, helping the students to accomplish successful projects. They emphasized that, with better access to computer equipment, they could complete more advanced projects and enhance their skills, ultimately improving their employability. The school received three high-performance desktop computers, a television screen, and a projector as part of the project. The students unanimously identified the construction of a sports field as the most pressing issue regarding recreation and leisure.

Based on the visits to Avlevi School in 2021 and 2023 and the analysis of the focus groups, it can be concluded that the population of the Avlevi community lives in a distressing environment where a sense of danger constantly overshadows the teaching and learning process. From the windows of the school, the military bases of occupying forces are visible, and the sounds of gunfire and explosions are frequently heard from that direction. The military conflict continues in the form of a so-called “creeping occupation.” As a result, the population’s arable lands and pastures are gradually being absorbed into Russian-occupied territories, with individuals being arrested for alleged “border violations.” This situation has created significant social and psychological issues for the local population. During the focus group discussions, participants expressed sorrow over the fact that in 2008, Russian occupying forces destroyed the neighboring village of Avnevi, which had a two-story school, a kindergarten, a cultural center, a library, a gymnasium, and a football field, all of which were utilized by students from the Avlevi community. It was also noted that the settlement is gradually depopulated due to the ongoing situation.

The 2021 and 2023 focus groups revealed the community’s expectation for more significant support from state structures. The respondents believe all villages near the occupation line should receive the same financial benefits as those designated high mountain zone villages in Georgia. Additionally, they emphasized the need for funding to allow students from these villages to participate in international competitions, events, and training programs.

3. ENSURING QUALITY EDUCATION

“Although education in emergencies has historically prioritized more easily quantifiable outcomes regarding access, with the shift in focus to fragile states, scholars and international practitioners increasingly emphasize the need to evaluate the quality of learning in emergencies” (Burde et al., 2017, p. 631).

Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Advocates for International Development, 2022) proposes ten targets to ensure quality education for all. Among these targets are:

- Providing safe, non-violent, inclusive, and effective learning environments for all.
- Increasing the supply of qualified teachers.
- Building relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs, and entrepreneurship.

Achieving these targets in the schools of the Avlevi community faces clear challenges due to the following reasons:

- Ensuring a safe school environment in areas near dividing lines in Georgia, including Avlevi, is contingent on a highly volatile situation. Children in these communities live and study under conditions of extreme danger and stress.
- The schools in these areas struggle to retain qualified teachers across all subjects as the population in settlements near the dividing lines continues to decline (UN Women, 2022).
- Developing relevant technical and vocational skills for decent jobs in the 21st century requires adequate infrastructure and resources. However, the schools in these settlements lack the necessary resources. Furthermore, even basic needs such as water supply and internet access are often unavailable in areas near the dividing lines (UN Women, 2022).

The school authorization process is currently used to assess the quality of schools in Georgia. The authorization of public schools began in 2023 and is being implemented in a phased manner. Initially, it was planned that all 2,086 public schools would undergo the authorization process by the 2026–2027 academic year. However, recognizing the potential financial burden this posed to the state, it was deemed appropriate to extend the timeline, pushing the completion date to the 2030–2031 academic year. By the start of the 2024–2025 academic year, 351 public schools had successfully passed authorization. However, none of the schools in settlements along the occupation line had been included in this process.

As highlighted by an analysis of their compliance with UN standards, providing quality education in schools along the dividing line presents additional challenges compared to schools in other regions of Georgia. Consequently, the quality assessment of these schools and the necessary interventions to ensure educational quality must be expedited. It is important to note that at least two of the standards set for authorizing general educational institutions by Georgian legislation present significant difficulties in schools near the occupation line. As a result, immediate actions are needed to prepare these schools for the authorization process. The particularly problematic standards include:

Standard 2.2.2: This standard mandates that the educational process is supported by appropriate resources, with performance indicators including primary and auxiliary resources as outlined in the curriculum. One of the key performance indicators under this standard is that the school must possess the human resources necessary to implement the curriculum in compliance with legislative requirements (National Center For Educational Quality Enhancement,

n.d.). However, schools located along the occupation line face severe infrastructure challenges, further exacerbated by the depopulation of the surrounding settlements. This makes it difficult to attract and retain qualified teachers, creating significant barriers to meeting the requirements of this standard.

Standard 3.4.: This standard requires that schools protect the safety of individuals and ensure the continuity of their business processes. One of the key performance indicators under this standard is that the school should provide a psychologically and emotionally safe environment. (National Center For Educational Quality Enhancement, n.d.). Schools along the occupation line face distinct challenges in this regard, given the constant presence of a hostile border environment and the pervasive sense of danger experienced by students and staff. Therefore, establishing an emotionally safe school environment is significantly more difficult in these areas than in schools located in other regions of Georgia.

In conclusion, ensuring the quality of education in schools along the dividing lines requires additional and urgent measures. The state should prioritize these schools in the authorization process and address their specific challenges, including inadequate infrastructure, the lack of qualified teaching staff, and the psychological and emotional toll of living and studying in a conflict zone. Immediate actions in these areas are essential for creating an educational environment that meets national standards and gives students the opportunities they deserve.

Meeting the requirements of Standard 2.2.2 necessitates the mobilization of additional financial resources for schools located along the dividing line. However, the current voucher funding system for public schools in Georgia differentiates schools solely based on student enrollment numbers, with increased funding provided only to those in highland villages. Unfortunately, the settlements near the occupation line, including those in the Avlevi community, are not eligible for this preferential financing. Enhancing funding is critical to improving the resources these schools need to provide a quality education. In this regard, some political initiatives were introduced in 2024. Notably, the Democracy Research Institute (DRI) submitted an appeal to the Prime Minister and the Chairman of Parliament, advocating for the designation of villages along the occupation line as “special settlements.” Such a status would afford these villages socio-economic benefits that could alleviate their severe challenges. The DRI argues that all 116 villages along the occupation line should receive the benefits outlined in the “Law of Georgia on the Development of Highland Regions.” According to DRI, the situation in these villages has worsened following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. The most pressing issues for the population include poverty and unemployment, with residents forced to live in constant fear of abduction and illegal detention. To address these acute socio-economic problems, the population in these villages must receive benefits that would attract and retain qualified teachers. The allowances should also be extended to teachers, similar to those granted to Georgian language and literature teachers in non-Georgian schools.

Furthermore, an additional form of financial support for schools near the occupation line could be the provision of targeted funding programs or sub-programs by the Ministry of Education. There is precedent for such initiatives, with targeted vocational training programs aimed at reducing unemployment and targeted funding for schools to support vocational training for convicts.

Provide a psychologically and emotionally safe school environment under Standard 3.4.1. Meeting this criterion necessitates studying relevant international practices and their adaptation to the local context.

4. ENSURING A PSYCHOLOGICALLY AND EMOTIONALLY SAFE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

In the current context, where the Russian occupation army continues to control parts of Georgian territory, it is virtually impossible for students and teachers in schools near the occupation dividing line to feel entirely secure. However, efforts to improve their psychosocial well-being and sense of happiness remain possible and necessary. Research indicates that enhancing the well-being of students in schools situated in regions affected by conflict can have a substantial positive impact on the quality of education and students’ learning outcomes. “The ability to regulate negative emotions, such as fear, anxiety, and stress, and to facilitate a sense of general well-being and hope, are important in teaching conflict-affected youth to promote their learning abilities” (Forsberg & Schultz, 2023, p. 156). Moreover, “In Ukraine, online and blended limited sessions with an integration of social emotional learning, self-resilience and wellbeing, was an effective method to deal with children affected by war.” (Salha et al., 2024, p. 164). Additionally, the school itself plays a crucial role in fostering well-being. “School has been demonstrated to be important for children’s well-being and useful for the reintegration of armed conflict-affected children” (Ariyo et al., 2022, p. 1).

The question, then, is how to enhance the psychosocial well-being, happiness, and sense of security for students and teachers in schools near occupation lines, including those in the Avlevi community. What are the recommended approaches and methods to achieve this?

Our research reveals relatively limited literature on specific methods and strategies for promoting well-being in schools in conflict-affected regions. Studies on education in such areas focus on the negative consequences of war on the teaching and learning process, while “little is known about the factors that can help stimulate the well-being of conflict-affected children in school” (Ariyo et al., 2022, p. 1). Nevertheless, some studies and recommendations do exist. One notable suggestion involves introducing psychosocial support programs. For instance, with expert organizations such as War Child, the World Health Organization has developed the Early Adolescent Skills for Emotions (EASE) program. This psychosocial support initiative is explicitly designed for war-affected, low-resource settings and aims to improve the psychosocial well-being of children experiencing significant emotional distress (Dawson et al., 2019). Arctic University of Norway

highlighted the effectiveness of the Better Learning Program (BLP-2), which demonstrated positive outcomes in mitigating stress and improving the well-being of academically underperforming youth living in conflict zones. “The youths reported improvement and medium to large effect sizes in all the measured domains: self-perceived academic functioning, well-being, self-regulation, self-efficacy, executive function/study skills, stress-related symptoms, and hope” (Forsberg & Schultz, 2023, p. 158). Another research investigating the effectiveness of a short-term school-based psychosocial counseling program on the mental health of children and adolescents in war-affected regions offered “specific strategies (e.g., psychoeducation, psychodrama, role play, storytelling, and free drawing) that have shown positive effects on children’s well-being” (El-Khodary & Samara, 2020, p. 7).

In one more paper, a qualitative analysis of various factors affecting the sense of well-being of students affected by the military conflict is given in the example of Nigerian schools. According to the research, students stated the need for “recreation spaces and leisure activities within the school. Children perceived that school should provide them with opportunities to play and have fun. There were also requests for the introduction of extracurricular activities.” (Ariyo et al., 2022, p. 13).

Several studies show that students’ art-creative (Clarke & McLellan, 2022; Mak & Fancourt, 2019) and sports extracurricular activities (Abonga & Brown, 2022; Foster et al., 2016) have a positive impact on participation and improvement of their psychosocial condition, emotional well-being, and an increase in the feeling of happiness. These studies correlate with surveys conducted in Avlevi School in 2021 and 2023. The absolute majority of the students and teachers of the Avlevi community named the arrangement of a sports ground and music lessons at the school as a priority need for schools, as well as entertainment spaces, children’s attractions, a cinema, and a school club.

In our conclusion, the intensive implementation of specially selected psychosocial intervention programs and art and sports extracurricular activities in schools near the occupation line will improve the feeling of safety and well-being in these schools. Thus, a more effective learning environment will be created, and the quality of education and students’ academic results will be positively affected.

5. CONDUCTING NON-FORMAL LEARNING COURSES

The focus groups conducted at the Avlevi school highlighted a pivotal need for extracurricular activities, specifically emphasizing the introduction of non-formal learning programs. According to the respondents, non-formal learning courses would provide an opportunity for current students and young individuals who have already graduated and are seeking employment. These courses would enable participants to explore potential career opportunities, acquire new skills, secure local employment, and improve their financial and personal well-being. Moreover, such initiatives could mitigate depopulation by addressing the socio-economic challenges faced by these communities.

Numerous studies corroborate the necessity of non-formal education (NFE) in conflict-affected regions tailored to the needs and interests of the local population. “Educators sometimes advocate the use of non-formal education approaches, which give priority to basic education and vocational or life skills, and are flexible and adaptable in terms of age range in relation to level of course, siting of classes, grade structure within a class, regularity of attendance and other factors” (Boyden & Ryder, 1996, p. 3). “NFE (Non-formal education) programs provide a flexible, responsive education that is better suited to the unique circumstances of these groups, and it enables them to continue or to complete missed education, and/or to build necessary life and professional skills” (INEE, 2020, p. 7). This extracurricular activity aligns with the United Nations’ goal of promoting quality education by developing relevant skills for financial success.

However, the study on non-formal education needs in the Avlevi community schools had certain limitations. Respondents were instructed to identify only one or two priority courses, a restriction driven by the fact that the project could only finance one course, necessitating the selection of a top priority. Information technology and driving courses were identified as the highest priorities. As a result, within the project’s financial constraints, a theoretical and practical driving course was offered to the young people of the Avlevi community. Thirteen participants, aged 16 to 30, from the villages within the community enrolled in the course. While the demand for the course exceeded this number, the project’s budget did not allow for broader inclusion.

The apparent demand for non-formal education courses in the Avlevi community schools underscores the need for further research. The training courses the local population prefers are likely more diverse in content and delivery format, as suggested by personal conversations with community members. Therefore, a more detailed investigation into the non-formal education needs of schools along the occupation line is essential.

Moreover, it is worth noting that one of the performance indicators of school authorization standards directly pertains to the provision of informal activities in schools. Specifically, Standard 4.2.1. outlines that schools must offer academic and administrative support services, with an explicit indicator stating that schools must encourage extracurricular or informal activities and support student initiatives through appropriately qualified personnel by the law (National Center For Educational Quality Enhancement, n.d.). Consequently, the intensive introduction of non-formal education in schools should be prioritized as part of the state’s strategy to ensure the quality of education near the occupation line.

6. CONCLUSION

“When schools remain open during the war, the public interprets this as a message that things are under control” (Boyden & Ryder, 1996, p. 11). Continuous and high-quality education in schools located near the occupation line is essential. Ensuring the fundamental rights of children and young people in these regions to access quality

education is a matter of ensuring their fundamental rights and a critical component of providing moral support to these villages' entire population and preventing depopulation from these settlements. The state must develop a comprehensive targeted strategy to ensure the continuity and quality of the education process in schools along the occupation line. The key points for this strategy are as follows:

1. **Provision of Additional Financial Support:** Schools should receive supplementary financial resources to ensure they have the necessary human and material assets to guarantee the quality of education. This can be achieved by implementing financial incentive systems, teacher salary supplements, and targeted programs.
2. **Enhancement of Psychosocial Well-Being:** Psychosocial interventions, counseling services, and an expansion of extracurricular activities, such as art and sports programs, must be implemented to improve the psychosocial well-being of students and teachers. Targeted programs should also be utilized to support these efforts.
3. **Introduction of Non-formal Education Opportunities:** Providing non-formal education programs is crucial, as it allows the population residing in these villages to explore and develop new opportunities. These programs will equip individuals with the necessary skills for employment, enabling them to find local jobs and improve their material and moral well-being. This, in turn, can contribute to halting the depopulation of these settlements.

Further in-depth studies are required for each above mentioned point to design specific and appropriate measures to fully implement the strategy. We consider that this article offers a convincing foundation for such studies.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

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