

CHALLENGES OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN GEORGIA

Nino Samarguliani (MA)
Grigol Robakidze University, Georgia

Abstract

The objective of this paper is to present the challenges that inclusive education system faces nowadays in Georgia. The paper reviews several issues connected with programs developed for supporting and further development of inclusive education in Georgia. The paper is aimed to describe the main problems and challenges and suggest their possible solutions.

Keywords: Inclusive education, Assistive programs, Disabilities, Special Education Needs, Integrated Classes

Introduction

In the last ten years, there have been significant changes in Georgia in the educational sphere. Since 2003, the government initiated reforms to change the entire system of education. Inclusive education has become mandatory for every public school in Georgia since 2012. Accessibility of education for children with disabilities has been prioritized by the Ministry of Education and Science Within the framework of “Inclusive Education Support Program”. The main goal of the direction is to support establishment of inclusive education in Georgia. The Ministry aims at making the education space more inclusive and adapted to receive persons with various disorders. The aims include developing the standard for Special Education Needs Teachers, supporting the increase in knowledge and skills of teachers at public schools about inclusive education, and supporting the establishment of public schools specializing in special needs education. However, According to several surveys and reports, there are many flaws in the implementation process. Although the results were not disappointing, there are some topics which need to be considered.

Although the Ministry of Education and Science has introduced inclusive education system in public schools since 2005, it has been prioritized in 2013. During this period several programs have been created:

In 2009 Inclusive Education Assistive Program was created by the Ministry of Education and Science, which considers realization of the following objectives:

- Identification and assessment of SEN children; Identification of their needs and abilities.
- Assessment of academic achievements of SEN children already enrolled into mainstream schools;
- Development of the National Model of Education of SEN children;
- Piloting of the tools (tests) for assessment and identification of educational needs of SEN children;
- Development of recommendations for university curricula of special education and related specialties;
- Financing of activities for provision of full participation of SEN children in educational environment: special education teachers, equipment of the resource rooms, transport facility for 2 schools (mini-bus, driver).

In parallel to all above said, the program considers sophistication of the policy on special education and development of recommendations for changes in legislative base.

Another program run by the Ministry of Education and Science is 'Development of Inclusive Education in 9 Regional Public Schools'. Project was implemented in accordance with State Strategy and Action Plan on Education of Children with Special Educational Needs,⁴⁷ aiming at introduction of inclusive education throughout Georgia and reinforcement of existed inclusive education practice. Presented project is 3 years project (2009 -2011), being implemented with assistance of Norwegian Ministry of Education and research.

The aim of the project is development/introduction of inclusive education in 9 regional public schools and creation of sustainable system supporting future development of inclusive education.

To achieve the goal, project envisages realization of the following activities:

- Preparation of local educational authorities and their involvement in project implementation;
- Selection of target schools and adaptation of physical environment;
- Identification, Assessment of SEN children and development of IEP-s;
- Training of school teachers, administration and professionals (psychologist, speech therapist);

⁴⁷ Action Plan on Education of Children with Special Educational Needs, (2009 -2011).

- Formation and training of inclusive education supporting teams for targeted regions: regional coordinator, multidisciplinary team members;
- Public awareness rising;
- Foundation of the Summer School at University base.

Project objectives

- Enrollment of SEN children in regional public schools;
- Improvement of special education teaching in higher education system;
- Rising of public awareness and creation of inclusive education friendly environment.

In 2012 Georgia hosted its first international conference on inclusive education; the aim of the conference was to discuss inclusive education issues and to provide a forum for sharing international practices. In April 2015 the conference was held for the second time.

From February 2013, The Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia has launched the introduction of inclusive education model at vocational education level. 10 VET centers with 51 students with special educational needs participated in piloting of inclusive education at this stage of educational system.

There are also several programs currently running for financing integrated classes in public schools, teacher trainings, building infrastructure and supporting multidisciplinary team for inclusive education.

In 2013 the survey was prepared by Ilia State University within the Project “Implementation of Inclusive Education in Vocational Education and Training System of Georgia“.⁴⁸ The questionnaire and methodology of the wide-scale survey, “Pathway to Inclusion – Barometer of Inclusive Education”⁴⁹ conducted in the European countries in 2009-2011 has been used as one of the tools in the survey. The questionnaire “Pathway to Inclusion – Barometer” defines the process of inclusive education implementation in several categories: legal, practice and future development.

The goal of the project was to assess inclusive education reform in Georgia. Therefore, the goal of the survey was to study the considerations of the field experts and different groups of the stakeholders (administration of the public schools and Vocational Education and Training (VET) centers, teachers, pupils/students with special educational needs (SEN) and their parents, pupils/students with typical development and their parents)

⁴⁸ Inclusive Education Indicators in Georgia, Survey Report 2013, Tinatin Tchintcharauli – Associate Professor at Ilia State University PhD Nino Javakhishvili- Full Professor at Ilia State University PhD

⁴⁹ Pathway to Inclusion (P2i) (2012): European Project

It can be said, that as a whole, inclusive education is not at the frozen point that is proved by the comparative analyzes of situation with other countries. In 2011, the amendment was made to the Law on General Education, in 2013 activity was started for making amendment to the Law on Vocational Education. Georgia has signed the Salamanca Statement and by the end of 2013, ⁵⁰ the ratification of the EU Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is planned. In 2009-2012 significant changes were made in the procedures and tools applied in the assessment of special educational needs. The national model of the education of persons with special educational needs stresses the advantage of considering of the individual needs and inclusive education over the other models. It can be said, that in this regard Georgia has the same picture as in most European countries.

The questionnaire “Pathway to Inclusion – Barometer” has revealed that changes in legislation and important spheres of practical implementation are required for further development of inclusive education in Georgia.

Conclusions and recommendations of the survey, summary

First of all, it is necessary to develop inclusive education monitoring system, contributing to timely identification of the problems, enabling the decision makers to make the step-by-step development scheme more visible.

Consideration of inclusive education model in the laws on higher and vocational education is necessary at the legal level, enhancing the responsibility of the institutions providing these levels of education toward the individual with special educational needs and/or disabilities.

As for the consideration of the parties directly involved in realization of inclusive education model, the respondents report on quite positive situation in terms of inclusive education system, considering the lack of the financial resources as insufficiently developed.

In terms of the financial resources, the situation is not favorable. Therefore, additional funding is needed for the improvement of conditions in schools and VET centers. State funding should not be considered as the only source, as the private donation should be also considered. It will be beneficial for the administration of schools and VET centers to get trainings for the development of fundraising skills.

The attitude among the students is still not on a desired level. The relevant recommendation for this will be realization of special measures directed at teachers’ awareness rising in schools. It can be conversations of school administration and teachers with parents; invitation of the field expert

⁵⁰ Salamanca Statement; Source „Learning Together. Inclusive Education“, 2008.

to the meetings with parents or conducting of the lesson/lessons on topics of “human diversity”.

There are some challenges in strategic approach to inclusion e.g. according to the majority of respondents (about 80%), there is no clear vision on how the society, local communities, external services can support the schools and VET centers. This data shows that the information related to the issue is not clear and accessible for everyone and that the part of the population, especially those having no direct interest in it, has wrong information. The recommendation for the improvement of situation is organization of the training for the staff of Schools and VET centers on topics: participatory democratic principles, collegiality in the decision making, team working and strategic planning. The schools and VET centers are less adapted to the needs of pupils/students with special educational needs and that is clearly visible for those, having direct interest - parents of the students with special needs. It appeared, that VET centers have better position than schools in terms of the materials and moral conditions: better infrastructure, more help provided to students in coping with a new environment, but at the same time, in terms of the attitudes, the situation is much better in schools: the teachers are more aware of their responsibilities in assisting children with special educational needs and are more careful in treating them; acknowledge the diversity of their interest, knowledge and competence. The survey results show that trainings on inclusive education topics are needed for the educational professionals of VET centers as well. (Inclusive Education Indicators in Georgia, Survey Report 2013, pp.51-52; 71-71).

Society and SEN Children

As for judging from the perspective of the people involved in inclusive education system, situation is not favorable, as there have been many flaws during implementation of programs supporting inclusive education. The topic is still controversial in society and it is no wonder that there have already appeared conflicts in public schools between the parents of SEN children and the rest of the parents. The disagreement between parents in schools drew the attention of the media and several articles were published describing the arguments. The reaction of society was sometimes harsh, especially for the parents of SEN children, but there was also a wave of support for them and as the current situation shows, it has showed slight positive results. Conflicts seem to arise when parents try to use their right to choose any public school that is nearby and demand a special teacher for their children. It appeared, that there is not enough number of teachers provided for schools. This results in the fact that when there is more than one child with special needs, special teacher cannot sit individually with them

during the lesson and then the teacher cannot always control that the studying process is not interfered by a child with special needs. Although class teachers are also being trained, they cannot replace special teachers who should be sitting with SEN children individually and sometimes parents have to sit themselves or hire a therapist, which is quite expensive and not everyone can afford it. As one of the parents says during the interview with the portal www.17maisi.org it is rather stressful for a parent having to sit next to their children and it is not very effective for a child too. According to her, parents still struggle to demand more trained staff to schools and they hope for public support as it is rather important that society gets used to treating people with disabilities with respect. Some of the parents even joined NGOs to get support in overcoming various challenges while dealing with different institutions.

As for the parents of children who do not need special education, it needs to be mentioned, that majority of conflicts arise due to lack of awareness in issues connected with disabilities in general and their rights in society. Considering the views of both sides, it is worth mentioning, that giving them the right information about the subject would help a lot. Moreover, it may prevent arising new conflicts and support their further relationship. Moreover, as the studies and several surveys showed, it may be even beneficial that each class has SEN children, as diversity in class can play a crucial role in their further integration in society. It is interesting that some studies proved that Students who provided peer supports for students with disabilities in general education classrooms demonstrated positive academic outcomes, such as increased academic achievement, assignment completion, and classroom participation. (Cushing & Kennedy, 1997) In a meta-analysis of research conducted by Kalambouka, Farrell, & Dyson (2007), 81% of the outcomes reported showed including students with disabilities resulted in either positive or neutral effects for students without disabilities. Students with intellectual disabilities that were fully included in general education classrooms made more progress in literacy skills when compared to students served in special schools (Dessemontet, Bless, & Morin, 2012).

Conclusion

Although there are still many challenges to overcome for people involved in inclusive education system, situation is slightly better than in previous years which means that the progress is ongoing. It is very important that there is collaboration between all the parties involved, as it prevents from further conflict. Rising public awareness is vital, as more people are aware of the rights of people with various disabilities, the easier it gets to defend them. The most important fact to be considered while promoting the

rising of public awareness in society seems to be spreading more information regarding studies and surveys conducted in the field of inclusive education that are favorable for parents of children with or without disabilities.

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