



**Improving State Services
Supporting Inclusive Education in Georgia**



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Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

Providing affordable and high-quality education to children with disabilities is a major challenge for many countries, including Georgia. Implementation of inclusive education reforms in Georgia was initiated in 2005. Today, inclusive education is provided in 67% of all public schools. Since 2013, support for inclusive education has also grown in vocational colleges. The ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities by the Parliament of Georgia, in 2013, facilitated implementation of inclusive education throughout the country.

With the development of inclusive education in Georgia, the number of SEN pupils in schools has steadily increased. According to the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport, currently there are 8,685 SEN pupils across the country. By comparison, in 2013, there were just 3,365 such students enrolled in Georgian schools.

For Georgia, mentioned increase in the number of SEN pupils in public schools represents an important step ahead towards social inclusion. However, the process is accompanied by number of challenges, primarily related to the quality of education received by pupils with SEN. Studies in this area have revealed that schools often fail to provide SEN pupils with high quality education, leaving them without the essential knowledge and skills required for employment. This fact, in turn, does not equip them to find jobs in a competitive labor market. Accordingly, even though increasing numbers of people with special educational needs attend and complete school, their subsequent quality of life and economic well-being do not necessarily improve.

Inclusive education in schools is regularly highlighted in the annual reports of the Public Defender's Office of Georgia. These reports emphasize that the quality of education for pupils with SEN remains a significant challenge for the country.

The given study examines the impact of public services on the progress and quality of inclusive education in public schools; in particular, the process is analyzed from the perspective of two subprograms of the State Program for the Promotion of Inclusive Teaching – 'Supporting a Multidisciplinary Team' and 'Financing Integrated Classes in Public Schools'.

For the purpose of the study, the following research objectives were identified:

- Analyze the educational needs of pupils with various developmental disabilities (mobility, hearing, visual, intellectual, behavioral difficulties), and determine whether these needs are addressed in the learning process;
- Analyze relevant international experience and identify best practices using the examples of Poland and Germany.

The research is based on qualitative research methods, specifically, in-depth interviews and focus groups. The target groups included school administrators, teachers and parents, along with the representatives of the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport of Georgia, and the members of its multidisciplinary team. The study was conducted in four different cities: Tbilisi, Telavi, Kutaisi and Batumi.

An analysis of the Polish and German experience shows that these countries place a special emphasis on the development of a non-segregated learning environment for children with SEN. However, parents/care-takers are provided with educational choices. For example, there are three different types of study environments for individual pupils with SEN in Germany, from which a school may be selected:

- Public schools, where inclusive teaching takes place – children in such schools study together regardless of disability status. Anyone with a developmental disability receives the assistance of the necessary specialists.

- Public schools that specialize in education serving those with certain developmental disorders, such as visual or hearing impairment. – In this case, the school has more resources to work with pupils with the specific developmental disabilities, which it focuses on.
- Special schools, which often work together with other counseling and service centers, mainly serving pupils with developmental disabilities.

Poland shares a similar experience; by organizing special resources and conditions, pupils with SEN are able to study in public schools, together with their peers, in integrated classes.

As a result of the development of inclusive education, today pupils with SEN in Georgia are provided with a similar opportunity – public schools increasingly express readiness to accept pupils with SEN. Across the country, inclusive education is offered in 1,400 public schools (out of a total of 2,100); pupils with SEN can study in resource schools, as well. There are integrated classes in 13 public schools for children with autism spectrum disorders. It should be noted that 67% of pupils with SEN study in public schools. Access to the required human resources and professional competences are crucial to the effectiveness of inclusive education. Countries significantly differ in this aspect. Poland and Germany have a wide experience in special-needs pedagogy. Since Germany does not have a unified educational system and its educational institutions vary significantly region by region, teacher training programs differ within the country. Usually, there are three or four courses in special education required within the educational program curriculum designed for future teachers (topics may include: basic principles, didactic methods, developmental violations, ethical and legislative issues, etc.). In order to train special education teachers, specific programs are developed – thus, according to their specialization, students choose one or two areas, for example, visual and cognitive development disorders. Special educators work in ordinary public schools and special schools, as well as in the regional counseling and service centers. Moreover, recently, they have been greatly involved in the vocational education system. Along with the necessity of a university degree, significant emphasis is placed on continuing education for staff involved in the system. The state programme provides professional development opportunities for teachers. There are also various possibilities to share best practices and experiences with colleagues.

Training of qualified special education professionals in Georgia is not supported at the local universities. Currently, there is no academic program available, focused on the preparation of special education teachers. A lack of academic courses related to special education hampers the curriculum of university-based teacher education programs from providing effective professional training in this field. In the field of inclusive education, the National Center for Teachers' Professional Development provides teachers with the related trainings and seminars.

Parents and caretakers play a significant role in education of children. Their role is even more crucial in case of pupils with SEN. Experience of both – developed and developing countries shows that parents' individual response to their children's special needs may vary from complete denial – to full support. Pupils with SEN show better academic results and are better integrated within the school environment in countries where parents of children with special needs are supported by different social services. Both in Poland and Germany, state programs provide information and psychological support to parents. Additionally, the state – central and local governments – substantially contributes to the development of parents' self-help groups and to organizations providing consultancies for them. The effectiveness of inclusive education is shaped not only by the educational system of the country, but by its social policy as well. International experience shows that with increase of the

diverse social services available for SEN pupils and their families, academic achievement improves. In Poland and Germany, a special focus is placed on providing rehabilitation and social services to pupils with SEN from an early age. Significant attention is paid to the psychological state of caregivers, too. Individual psychological counseling is available to parents/caretakers in both countries.

The information obtained from the qualitative research carried out within the framework of the research project was categorized according to the following topics: (1) Identifying special educational needs and developing an individual curriculum; (2) Teaching process, and the monitoring and evaluation of progress; (3) Qualifications and attitude of staff working with pupils with SEN; and (4) Roles and attitudes of parents and caretakers.

Identifying special educational needs and developing an individual curriculum

The learning process of a pupil with SEN begins with identification of the individual's educational needs, as implemented by a multidisciplinary team of the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport of Georgia. Within the country, there are 47 members of the multidisciplinary team. The multidisciplinary team's assessment of a pupil's educational needs implies a multi-profile evaluation of the child's developmental characteristics, as well as academic, functional and social skills. During the evaluation process, different types of assessment tools are used.

The following challenges arise during the evaluation process: (1) In most cases, the assessment is carried out by only one member of the team, instead of the whole team; (2) In general, the assessment process includes only one or two meetings with the child; (3) Often, during the assessment process, multidisciplinary team members rely mainly on parental information to formulate their findings; (4) Assessment tools are not adapted for pupils with all types of disorders. Attitudes of school administration towards an assessment of pupil's educational needs by the multidisciplinary team differ. Some believe that the assessments often do not reflect the learners' needs and requirements, while others argue that the conclusions are quite valid and objective. However, observers point out that misconduct may still occur. Both multidisciplinary team members and special education teachers note that it is especially difficult to assess pupils with autism spectrum disorders. Even though multidisciplinary team members use special assessment tools for children with autism spectrum disorders, the process still remains complicated and ambiguous. Generally, the challenges are caused by the problematic behavior of children with autism spectrum disorders.

Teaching process, and the monitoring and evaluation of progress

The school team begins working with a pupil with SEN by development of an individual curriculum. Mainly, subject and special education teachers, together with a psychologist (where such exists), are involved in this process. Schools significantly differ in this aspect. Differences in the process depend on factors such as the existence of a competent and experienced special education teacher in the school; the existence of subject teachers with experience of working with pupils with SEN; the existence of a school principal who shares values and beliefs that support the philosophy of inclusive education; and effective cooperation with parents and caretakers of children with SEN. Special education teachers, subject teachers and parents are all involved in the development of an individual curricular. However, interviews with parents reveal that in many cases, parents were less involved in the process of the development of an individual curriculum and were not aware of the contents. The study shows that school administration and teachers pay considerable attention to the development of necessary documentation related to the pupils with SEN, including the preparation of the time-

frame for the individual curriculum. However, shaping the teaching process in accordance with the curriculum remains a problem. Pupils with SEN significantly differ from one another according to their involvement in the learning process. Their involvement in the learning setting is influenced by number of factors, including their developmental disabilities. The extent to which a pupil with SEN is involved in the learning process also depends on the professional competences of the special education and subject teachers. Even though some teachers have undertaken many training courses, they may still find it difficult to work with pupils with SEN. A great number of research participants highlight that the inefficiency of working with pupils with SEN is caused not only by lack of knowledge about the specific features of special needs pupils, but also because of educators underdeveloped general teaching skills, such as classroom management, lesson planning and more. The amount of time that a pupil with SEN spends in a classroom greatly depends on whether the individual 'interferes' with the teacher. Often, while talking about a SEN pupil's engagement in classroom activities, respondents concentrated on SEN pupils' participation in drawing or painting lessons in the classroom. Study findings show that it is not always possible to adapt academic classroom assignments for pupils with SEN. For a majority of teachers, working with pupils with behavioral problems is the most challenging. Generally, behavioral problems occur in children with autism spectrum disorders. Almost all research participants believe that integrated classrooms in schools significantly assist autistic pupils in their integration process. However, as research has shown, teaching in integrated classes is not always carried out according to the required approaches and principles. First of all, the problem of insufficient space should be highlighted; the physical characteristics of the integrated classroom setting make it unwieldy to conduct individual classes for pupils with SEN. Also, most of the schools surveyed do not have the resources necessary for educating pupils with autism spectrum disorder, in long term.

Different challenges arise when educating pupils with sensory disorders. Integrating deaf and hard of hearing pupils in high school is quite difficult. Learning in high school implies continually adding new subjects and having new teachers. These changes make learning more difficult for SEN pupils. Pupils find it hard to tackle new, complex subjects without the necessary technology and human resources that are often lacking within integrated schools. During the adolescent years, problems in relationships can arise, as well. The sign language teacher is an important resource at school. The early placement of cochlear implants and subsequent rehabilitation from properly guided surgery will significantly assist SEN pupils with hearing impairments to develop their learning skills. A sign language interpreter also plays a vital role in the learning process of pupils with hearing impairments. In elementary school, pupils can receive sign language instruction –in the secondary-education setting, a sign language interpreter can be involved in the process of teaching and learning. However, some parents have negative attitudes toward sign language; they believe that because of the continual use of sign language, the development of speech becomes less important.

Across the country, there is only one boarding school for pupils with visual impairments; these students mainly live in Tbilisi. Paralleling the case of the hearing impaired, it is quite difficult to teach high school pupils with visual impairments. The reason is similar – they also require significant technological and professional resources that are often unavailable at schools. First of all, Braille typewriters and Braille teachers are essential; at the very least, a special education teacher should know Braille in order to facilitate the communication process between a pupil and teacher. This resource, however, is not available. The only boarding school for pupils with visual impairments also experiences challenges related to limited budgetary resources; the school has old-fashioned Braille typewriters that do not work properly. This makes it hard for pupils to learn how to work with Braille typography. Besides the quality of the available typewriters, their number is limited as well. The school does not have available modern equipment that will assist pupils with visual impairments to learn natural sciences. There are also no audio devices designed particularly for pupils who cannot learn Braille. Qualified and professional staffing is another important issue. Even in the mentioned specialized boarding school, some

teachers do not have enough professional training or competence to work effectively with pupils with visual impairments.

According to current regulations, in order to analyze pupils' progress and learning outcomes, internal and external monitoring of the learning process is required. Internal monitoring is provided by the school and carried out under the school principal. As for the external monitoring, it is carried out by the multidisciplinary team of the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport of Georgia. As the study findings show, both internal and external monitoring processes face significant challenges.

Qualifications and attitudes of staff working with pupils with SEN

The collaborative work between subject and special education teachers may lead to effective education of SEN pupils. The service of psychologists is mainly found in resource schools and public schools with integrated classes. In resource schools, sign language translators are involved in the learning process of pupils with hearing impairments. In a parallel specialized school environment, created for visually impaired pupils, most teachers know Braille fonts and special learning techniques. Research findings show that both public and resource schools lack adequate numbers of competent specialists. In case of pupils with visual impairments, there was a shortage of staff in necessary fields, such as: occupational therapist, mobility-orientation specialist, ophthalmologist and special education teacher with knowledge and experience in visual impairment. A personal assistant is a new position at schools, and while everyone agrees on its importance, associated job functions are not always clear. In most cases, the position of a personal assistant is occupied by a person without any prior training.

Many members of the schools' staff have undertaken vocational training at different times; the majority has completed 120 hours of training provided by the National Center for Teachers' Professional Development. The training receives a positive evaluation, however, problems often arise in the process of dealing with the following factors: (1) Subject teachers still think that working with pupils with SEN is the primary responsibility of special education teachers, rather than theirs; (2) Subject teachers find it difficult to put theoretical knowledge into practice; (3) There are not enough competent, trained professionals for the position of special education teacher; (4) Both subject teachers and special educators do not have the chance to receive effective supervision; (5) For staff it is still problematic to understand the importance of individual curriculum and design the teaching process according to it; (6) In actual classroom settings, teachers are unlikely to give classroom assignments that are adapted for pupils with SEN.

Despite the challenges, the research participants note that the acceptance towards pupils with SEN in schools has increased significantly among teachers, parents and student peers.

Roles and attitudes of parents and caretakers

Research participants agree that parents/care-takers play a crucial role in the teaching and learning process of pupils with SEN. There are often cases where, due to the lack of information, parents are not able to work effectively with their children. There are also instances when parents have unrealistic expectations towards their children with SEN. For example, although SEN pupils may not be able to acquire certain subject materials in adaptive forms, some parents nonetheless wish that their children would participate in every subject studied daily. Some parents who participated in the research are actively involved in the educational process of their

children. Others noted that using daycare and/or extended class services is of great assistance to them. It should be noted that the majority of parents of pupils with SEN are well aware of the rights of their children and make a significant effort to protect them. They also collaborate and exchange information with other parents. Research has shown that many parents experience emotional distress and need psychological support. The economic problems of many families exacerbate their psychological state of distress. As research shows, collaborative work between school personnel and parents/care-takers is not a common practice.

Based on research data, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- The number of pupils with SEN is increasing steadily at schools, indicating the practice of “hiding” children with disabilities and SEN – thus keeping them in a social isolation – has been decreasing.
- School administrations, teachers and parents have developed more favorable attitudes overall towards pupils with SEN; less prejudicial and discriminatory language is being used. However, researchers still encounter values and approaches that are not consonant with the philosophy of inclusive education.
- Teachers’ interest and involvement in inclusive education has been increasing; however, many subject teachers still feel that special education teachers should bear the main responsibility for educating pupils with SEN. Sometimes teachers’ interest towards special education is superficial and related to obtaining credit scores necessary for career development. In a process of evaluating children’s special education needs, some challenges have arisen related to the lack of a valid multidisciplinary approach. Because of this, it is impossible to make a deep and comprehensive evaluation of every single case.
- The following factors influence the involvement of pupils with SEN in the learning process: the school personnel’s attitudes and professional competences, the learning material and environment, the monitoring and supervision system and the parents’ involvement in the learning process.

According to the research data, there is a difference between the capital city, Tbilisi, and target locations (Batumi, Kutaisi and Telavi) with regard to availability of relevant human resources professionals, such a psychologist, occupational psychologist and child psychiatrist. There is no distinction in terms of availability of opportunities for professional development for motivated teachers; also, there are no considerable differences among the parents in terms of informational level and their involvement in the learning process.