



Study on inclusion of children and youth with disabilities into the formal education system and barriers and supporting factors for completing the basic and secondary education levels in Georgia

(Results of Desk Research, Expert Interviews and Focus Group Discussions)

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Table of Contents

Introduction..... 4
 Relevancy of the Issue..... 4
Main Findings 6
Recommendations..... 11
 Methodology 14
Part One: Desk Research Findings 17
 1. Education Policy for children and youth with disabilities..... 17
 2. Defining the status of disability..... 23
 3. Right to Health 24
 4. Social protection and programs 24
 5. Forms of social assistance and programs for children and youth with disability in Georgia..... 25
 6. Employment..... 28
 7. Accessibility and support to independent living 28
Part Two: Expert Study Results 30
 Chapter I. Inclusive Education Policy 30
 Chapter II. Assessment of Inclusive Education practices..... 36
Part Three: Results of the Focus Group Discussions..... 42
 I: Information sources about the persons with disabilities in the inclusive education system and
 inclusive education 42
 2. Mechanisms and practices of inclusion in the inclusive education system..... 44
 III: Evaluation of the current practice of inclusive education 45

List of names and acronyms of institutions:

CwD: Child with disabilities

EOPAI: Equal Opportunities Policy and Advocacy Institute

MoLHSA: Ministry of Labour, Health and Social Affairs of Georgia

MoES: Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia

MoIA: Ministry of Internal Affairs

PwD: People with disabilities

SEN: Special Education Needs

TPDC: Teachers' Professional Development Center

Introduction

This study was carried out within the framework of the project “Support to Social Inclusion of Youth with Disabilities in Georgia”, implemented by the Czech non-governmental organization People in Need, Georgian Association of Social Workers, Children and Youth Development Fund. The project aims to contribute to improving quality of life of youth with disabilities through facilitating their inclusive education and employment in the social inclusion process.

The study was carried out in 2015 by the Georgian Association of Social Workers in partnership with the Equal Opportunities Policy and Advocacy Institute.

Relevancy of the Issue

Children and youth with disabilities are one of the most disadvantaged and the poorest group on the world. According to UNESCO data, in developing countries, 98% of children with disabilities do not attend school and 99% of girls are illiterate (<http://social.un.org/youthyear>). All over the world, children and youth with disabilities often leave school and remain outside the labor market and economy. As a rule, even in developed countries, young women and men with disabilities are victims of more discrimination and harsher social, economic and civil inequality than their peers without disabilities. In many countries, such isolation of children and youth with disabilities, lack of education and economic development opportunities is a daily experience.

Georgia has no accurate statistics of children and youth with disabilities. As of November, 2015, only 9,177 children with disabilities in the age group 0-18 were registered (source: Ministry of Labor, Health and Social Affairs). It should be noted that disability status is still given within the medical model and the child’s development-related disorders are never assessed and diagnosed and therefore no disability status is granted. This means that statistics are unreliable and incomplete and cannot be used to reveal the needs and potential of the disabled. As a result, the social and education policy and services of the state are not based on individual needs.

In 1994, Salamanca Statement¹ and, 12 years later (in 2006), the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities² significantly changed the approach to the education of people with special needs. The Salamanca Statement introduced inclusive education approach, a model that is recognized worldwide. By this model, every individual, regardless of his/her ability or disability, has the right to receive education together with his/her peers (the majority).

¹THE SALAMANCA STATEMENT AND FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION ON SPECIAL NEEDS EDUCATION, 2004
http://www.unesco.org/education/pdf/SALAMA_E.PDF

²2006, December 13, UN Convention on the Rights of the Persons with Disabilities
http://disability.ge/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=8685&Itemid=58

In Georgia, the inclusive education approach acquired significance in 2006, when, in the Law on General Education, Georgia recognized the right of persons with disabilities to attend general education institutions together with other children³. By the same law, the school has no right to refuse admission of a child with disabilities.

The main goal of inclusive education is to ensure an appropriate environment for children with special educational needs (the majority of which are children with disabilities) and to give them full access to education and social integration. Inclusive education is also important for children without disabilities, because they learn how to live with a disabled person and realize that some people may require special environment that meets their needs. This facilitates the development of public connections in future.

On March 6, 2009, the Minister of Education and Science of Georgia and the Ambassador of Norway to Georgia signed the project “Development of Inclusive Education in the Public Schools of 10 regions of Georgia”. The following activities were planned within the framework of this project: to develop physical environment and create relevant material-technical base; register and evaluate children with special education needs (SEN) and develop individual study plans for them; professional development of school teachers, administration and specialists (psychologist, logopedist); formation and training of multi-disciplinary groups for regions etc.

Regardless of the positive changes made by the Government of Georgia in recent years in the disability policy and ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2013), children and youth with disabilities still face numerous problems and barriers – poverty, non-adapted infrastructure, limited access to medical programs tailored for the needs of the disabled, supporting facilities, rehabilitation/habilitation and other social services, education and employment. It is worth mentioning that not all regions have essential social services for children with disabilities; these services help children and youth with disabilities to prepare for independent living and develop skills for inclusion in the education system; lack of such services obviously increases the risks related to the isolation and the negligence of the rights of the disabled persons. Today, none of the levels of the public education system meet the needs and the rights of children and youth with disabilities that often becomes the ground for children and their parents to leave school or get an incomplete education. Obviously, this creates serious impediments for social inclusion, employment of children and youth with disabilities and preparing them for independent living.

This study report aims to present what different stakeholders participating in inclusive education, think regarding the current situation as well as to identify the views/opinions of the education experts, policymakers and providers of education services regarding the negative and positive factors of the system. The study report also reviews the obstacles and difficulties that prevent persons with disabilities from getting proper secondary/basic education. The ultimate purpose of the study is to strengthen the

³Georgian Law on General Education, 2006
http://mes.gov.ge/content.php?id=193&module=legislation&page=detals&leg_id=63

mainstream education system for children with disabilities in Georgia and to elaborate needs-based recommendations to the relevant stakeholders.

Main Findings

Desk Research

- Desk review clarified that the right of children with disabilities to education is recognized by the national legislation – Law on General Education; however, the law requires amendments, such as regulation of the multidisciplinary teams of the ministry and monitoring of the quality of inclusive education
- Data analysis showed that Georgia still has a large number of children with disabilities who are not enrolled in mainstream education system and who are assumed to be left outside the education system, thereby increasing their degree of exclusion.
- Analysis of policies and programs showed that the general education system in Georgia is more inclusive than the other levels (namely, professional and higher education). However, there are barriers such as: absence of a mechanism for identifying children with disabilities, non-adapted infrastructure outside and inside the school, insufficient number of special education teachers and poor resources for their professional development, absence of a mechanism for monitoring attendance and early school leaving;
- According to the desk review, there are problems related to the issue of the school graduation certificate for children with moderate and severe intellectual disabilities etc. This certificate confirms that a pupil with severe intellectual disability attended the classes. Therefore, these children (even those who have moderate intellectual disability) do not have an opportunity to continue education at higher level.
- Review of conducted research made obvious that quite often, teachers who fail to solve problems in class with their own resources contact the special education teacher and ask him/her to take the child to the resource room, which obviously restricts the child's inclusion.
- The issues of inclusion of children and youth with disabilities are affected by external factors as well, such as the mechanism of defining the status of disability, healthcare system, social services that will help children and youth with disabilities with daily functioning and developing skills for independent living and an employment policy which is based on equal opportunities.

Expert study

- Experts in the field believe that institutionalization of inclusive education and development of the relevant legal basis for this practice is a great achievement in Georgia; the State recognizes the right of people with disabilities to receive education. No one has the right to refuse a person

with disability to be admitted to school. Another positive fact is that the MoES has established a department of inclusive education. Inclusive education needs a separate structure that will concentrate its efforts specifically in this field.

- The legal basis for inclusive education is the Georgian Law on General Education which denies schools the right to reject the application of a disabled person for admission to school. “National Study Goals” include specific provisions on how disabled persons can engage in the study process. From a legal perspective, inclusive education is supported by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Law of Social Protection and Anti-discrimination Law.
- Public school is practically a non-alternative source of formal education for children with disabilities. A very small percentage of disabled children use the home education service. From a non-formal education perspective, day centers (which are few in regions) play a very positive role.
- One of the main barriers for children with disabilities to adequately enroll and remain in inclusive education is the lack of qualified human resources. Experts believe that only a Master’s Degree program is not enough for preparing human resources; it is important to introduce Bachelor’s programs, motivate youth to show interest in this profession and have more qualified specialists. The situation of human resources is even worse in regions. The teachers who work in regions have less access than the ones in the capital to professional development courses provided by the Teachers’ Professional Development Center (TPDC).
- Along with human resources, poor material-technical base is a serious problem. Teachers do not have enough supplementary textbooks to work with children who have SEN. They also lack alternative books, such as audio books, Braille print literature etc. As a result, it is very difficult for them to address the needs of children with different disabilities. In terms of material-technical base, the situation is much worse in non-specialized public schools and slightly better in specialized schools.
- The specialists working in the field of inclusive education mention that the low level of public awareness is a serious problem. People lack sympathy for the disabled, which results in stigmatization and marginalization. Therefore, integration and socialization of people with disabilities become much more complicated.
- Many people with disabilities remain outside the education system due to various reasons (lack of information, fear of stigmatization and mistrust in the system). Experts point to the lack of coordination between the Ministry of Labor, Health and Social Affairs, MoES and Science and Ministry of Internal Affairs as one of the reasons. They also say that the MoES must have access to the database of children with disabilities to ensure their inclusion in the educational processes.

The MoIA shall also be included in the monitoring process. Exchange of information and collective responsibility on development and implementation of the common policy are the major challenges facing the government (MoES).

- Delegitimation of specialized teachers is another serious problem. Formally, they do not belong to the corps of teachers. As a result, they cannot participate in the scheme of professional growth and have the expectation of career success and improvement of financial conditions.
- Professional and higher education of people with disabilities is also named as a problem. Experts say that universities do not have sufficient resources (relevant infrastructure, study materials) to provide services for disabled students. The situation is difficult in the area of professional education as well, the main reason being impossibility to acquire some profession at the secondary school level. Despite the fact that since 2013 'second wave' of inclusive education has been institutionalized in the system of professional education, the labour market practically ignores people with disabilities and leaves them out of employment. The latter is one of the important factors for the process of social inclusion of these people.
- The experts think that children with disabilities, their parents and even the public schools need support. For the community of people with disabilities, it is critical to get information and to be accepted by society. Schools need a variety of resources to create appropriate environment for children with SEN.
- Experts believe that it is the primary responsibility of the non-governmental sector to work on increasing public awareness. As for the responsibility of the state, the government should develop professional human resources; create proper infrastructure and various resources for study.

Focus groups (with parents of children with disabilities and pupils with disabilities)

- The parents of children with disabilities have difficulties accessing comprehensive information regarding inclusive education, service providers and the rights of children with SEN to get education.
- The primary sources of information for parents of children with disabilities, in most cases, are informal (parents/close people of other disabled children); once they have it, they apply to the MoES. However, the initiative of providing information to the families of disabled children never comes from the state.
- There are problems related to admission procedures. The parents say that current mechanism includes vague, chaotic procedures that create impediments for their children to be included in

the system. Information received from the MoES is often unclear and did not provide comprehensive planning. Parents claim that they are confused concerning which schools – specialized or non-specialized – better fit to the conditions of their disabled child and MoES does not provide clear guidance.

- Children with various mental or physical disabilities are engaged in inclusive education, but their academic progress differs according to their capabilities. Therefore, it is critical to provide in-depth training to specialized teachers to ensure that they can adequately assess the capacities of CwD, address the needs of children and have sufficient sensitivity towards different capabilities. Current specialized teachers do not have such a level of sensitivity.
- Achievements and the needs of children with SEN are dynamic and changing. Therefore, it is important for the multi-disciplinary group to observe the child's development, make reassessments and modify the individual study plan as needed. As of now, the multi-disciplinary group makes reassessment of children only if the school or parent officially requests it. However it is important to make regular assessment an institutional standard of the MoES.
- Even though it is necessary to have an individual study plan for each child with SEN, some teachers do not prepare it of their own initiative unless requested by the parent.
- The study has revealed cases when parents do not want individual study plans for their children, because they fear that it may cause stigmatization of their child.
- Infrastructure of public schools is one of the most sensitive problems. In most cases, buildings are not adapted to the needs of disabled people; this becomes a serious impediment for inclusion of disabled children in the study process. The children who have physical disabilities are the most harmed because they cannot physically move in the school environment. This situation is a problem for schools too, because, on the one hand, they cannot reject admission of a disabled child to the school and on the other hand, they do not have adaptive environment for such children.
- Due to the lack of proper infrastructure, the majority of parents cannot leave their children at school and have to stay and help them to move around the school facilities.
- Non-disabled children tend to have more tolerance towards disabled children than some of the teachers and parents. Some teachers do not want disabled children to participate in the academic process because they think that it may hinder the learning progress for the rest of the class. Also, there are parents who do not want disabled children to be in the same class as their own children because they think that this will affect the quality of teaching.

- Not only negative discrimination, but so-called “positive discrimination” is also a problem: teachers, pupils and parents who treat disabled children with extreme attentiveness facilitate their marginalization. Under such approach, CwD seem to be ‘special’, which makes them somehow excluded from the ‘ordinary’ students at schools.
- The study revealed the problem of insufficient number of specialized teachers. Some of the specialized teachers have to work with a large number of children with disabilities; such workload makes their work unproductive. Some children with SEN do not have a specialized teacher at all, which makes the school and the pupil totally incompatible with each other and deepens the related stigma.

Recommendations

- Focal ministries (MoES, MoLHSA, and MoIA) should develop the joint strategy on inclusive education and enrolment of children with disabilities in mainstream education system, with clear procedures and roles for each part. Particularly, the MoES shall have the clear policy prioritizing inclusive education. The MoLHSA shall be supporting the educational processes through promoting non-formal education and providing family supporting services that better functional ability and social skills for children with disabilities. MoIA shall elaborate the mechanisms how to deal with the families having the CwD but refusing to take them in schools because of self-stigmatization. All three ministries shall share data and information of children with disabilities. Within this process the MOES should have a leading role.
- MoES should take more active role and become the major source for providing information about inclusive education to families of children with disabilities. For this purpose, the ministry can cooperate with local governments, preschool institutions, non-governmental organizations and media to make sure that all families of children with disabilities are aware about inclusive education.
- The MoES should promote development of the Special Education Programs at the university level; especially BA program. In addition, it is very important to expand these programs at the universities in the regions (Kutaisi, Batumi, Telavi and etc).
- Enhance and intensify trainings for special education teachers. Trainings should equip special education teachers with necessary knowledge and skills how to work with children with different types of disabilities. Trainings (at the university level and within continuing education program) of regular teachers should ensure that all teachers have knowledge how to communicate appropriately with children with disabilities and avoid discriminatory practices (or prevent discrimination).
- The status of the special education teacher should be equal to the status of regular teachers and they should be given opportunities to participate in the existing career development scheme established by the MoES.
- Current regulation of the MoES considers assessment of a children with disabilities by the multidisciplinary team of the MoES only at school admission stage, as the research made obvious, it is very important to provide well-defined and regular assessments of special educational needs of children to make individualized education plans more needs-based every year.

- Along with amendment of the National Education Plan by the MoES, the regular teachers should modify the individualized education plans of children with disabilities as well.
- All schools should have similar grading system for children with disabilities and it should not be varied from to school to school
- Involvement of parents in developing and evaluating the individualized educational plan must be increased. Therefore there must be preparation of future teachers on these topics as regular part of teacher's work. The parents should be provided with more information about the negative effects of institutionalization, in order to reduce the placement of disabled children in specialized boarding schools.
- All schools should be accessible including infrastructure and educational programs: children with mobile and sensory developments should not have problems with accessing the building, classes, bathrooms; children with blindness should have access to materials printed in Braille and audio books; and children with intellectual or sensory disabilities should have additional developmental materials. Special attention needs to be paid to ensuring the necessary resources (trainings, capacity building, supporting materials, etc.) for strengthening inclusion into the mainstream education in non-Georgian (e.g. Azeri, Armenian, etc.) schools).
- MoES should increase funding of public schools to allow them to hire personal assistants for those children with disabilities who experience severe self-care problems, as well as to provide trainings and professional supervision to these personal assistants. Consequently, the parents will not have to stay in the school during the day any more.
- Administration of schools should ensure that children with disabilities are involved in all events and activities of schools.
- MoES should have preventive programs in schools which could prevent stigmatization or discrimination. Different programs should be supportive to mainstream pupils and they parents and to promote positive, respective and inclusive atmosphere of schools and communities. The mechanism for identification of cases of discrimination and abuse of children with disabilities should be strengthened by providing additional trainings for teachers, school administration and staff, as well as statutory social workers on the specifics of working on child protection issues with children with disability.
- In order to increase the effectiveness of inclusion into the mainstream education system at the school level, it is important to direct more resources to the strengthening of the process of inclusion of CwDs at the pre-school level which includes, first and foremost, provision of trainings and capacity building to pre-school system staff and administration.

- In order to assess the quality of inclusive education, it is very important to establish the monitoring system by the MoES. The monitoring should be implemented by the multidisciplinary teams of the ministry.
- The MoES should develop and regularly update the database of children with SEN. In addition, it is very important to apply the monitoring system of attendance of children with disabilities to make sure that children really get education.
- Mainstream education system should revise the issue related to school graduation certificates of basic and complete secondary education for pupils with severe intellectual disability which becomes a serious impediment for further professional or higher education.
- It is very important to set up the referral system between the MoES and MoLHSA to monitor enrollment of children with disabilities in the mainstream education system. If a child with disability gets day care service, the service provider and school should cooperate and make sure that child gets education and does not spend all day in the day care center.
- The MoLHSA should promote expansion of family supporting services, such as early intervention, day care, and home-based care. These services significantly promote child's functional and cognitive development that is very crucial for proper enrollment of child with disability in education system.
- The state and civil society should cooperate and develop communication strategy for wider audience as well as for school actors (parents, teachers, children, etc.) in the field of possibilities of integration and social and educational inclusion.
- Best practices from other post-communistic countries should be mapped and considered in elaborating the system of mainstream education for children with disability.
- Awareness campaigns should be conducted for pre-school and school staff, as well as parents and peers of children with disability in general.

Methodology

The study was carried out using the following methods of the qualitative research:

- Group discussion (focus group)
- In-depth expert interview
- Desk Research

The study participants:

1. Policymakers
2. Experts (from state and civil society)
3. Service managers (school directors, managers of day centers, etc.)
4. Practitioners (members of the multi-disciplinary team, teachers, others)
5. Parents of children with disabilities
6. Youth of disabilities (16 years old and above)

Geographic coverage: The fieldwork was carried out in the capital and Mtskheta -Mtianeti

Number of in-depth interviews/expert interviews and respondents:

The in-depth interview was based on a semi-structured questionnaire. Five in-depth interviews/expert interviews were conducted, each lasting for about one hour.

The respondents of the expert interviews:

#	Category of the respondent	Authority	Name, surname, position
1	Policymaker	MoES	EkaDgebuadze
2	Policymaker	Social Service Agency	Maia Buchukuri
3	Sector expert	Expert of the non-government organization, Association of Disabled Women and Mothers of Disabled Children, DEA	Madona Kharebava
4	Sector expert	Independent expert with vast experience in the field, including experience at organizations Save the Children, UNICEF, etc.	Ana Lagidze
5	Sector expert	Representative of the donor organization (USAID)	Mako Kupharadze

The interviews were audio recorded with written transcripts made later.

Number of focus groups and participants:

A total 6 focus groups were conducted. Average size of focus-groups was 8 participants. Average length of each focus group was 1.5 hours. Group discussions were led by those researchers who afterwards

wrote an analytical report. The following criteria have been used while selecting the focus group participants:

1. In case of service providers: those representatives who are directly involved in the process of managing and implementing of inclusive education. (These are managers of early intervention programs, day centers, school directors, multi-disciplinary group members and school teachers and CYNIC trainers)
2. In case parents of disabled children: those who bring up disabled children and is actively involved in the process of their socialization.
3. In case of youth with disabilities: those who were able to express their opinions on the moderators' questions and had enough will to participate over the whole group discussion.

with the following respondents:

#	Category of participants	Authority, position
Tbilisi		
1	Service managers and practitioners	Managers of early intervention programs, day centers, school directors, multi-disciplinary group members, school teachers, CYNIC trainers
2	Parents of children with disabilities	Parents
3	Youth with disabilities	Youth
Tianeti		
4	Service managers and practitioners	Managers of early intervention programs, day centers, school directors, multi-disciplinary group, school teachers.
5	Parents of children with disabilities	Parents
6	Youth with disabilities	Youth

The audio records and written transcripts of the focus group discussions were prepared; the transcripts were analyzed with the help of methods like grouping, typology, accumulating new knowledge and building of theoretical models.

Desk research was carried out on the following legal acts and surveys:

International acts:

1. Salamanca Statement (1995)
2. UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (ratified by Georgia in 1994)
3. UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Ratified by Georgia in 2013)

National acts:

1. Law on General Education (2005)
2. Law on the Professional Education (2007)
3. Policy documents – concept on informal education , Ministry of Sport and Youth Affairs (2012)
4. Review of state programs – day centers (includes informal education component)-

5. Decree #41 of the Georgian Government, January 6, 2014 – “Decree on arranging the facilities for persons with disabilities and elements of architectural planning”

Surveys:

6. Indicators of inclusive education in Georgia - MoES , 2013
7. Evaluation of Accessibility to Inclusive Education in Public Schools -Accessible Environment for Everyone, 2014
8. Social Inclusion of Children with Disabilities, Sub-Regional Project of World Vision International, 2014
9. Availability of professional education for the vulnerable groups. Situational analysis in Georgia – May 4, 2015, Tbilisi

Part One: Desk Research Findings

1. Education Policy for children and youth with disabilities

Education is a basic human right. It greatly affects one's social-economic status and his/her ability to live independently. In Georgia, full access to the right of education for children and youth with disabilities is still hindered. According to UNESCO data, 98% of disabled children living in the developing countries do not go to school and 99% of girls are illiterate, which once again proves that for the majority of disabled children and youth, education is only a recognized but not a realized right due to various barriers.

1.1. Legislation

In Georgia, education is regulated by 4 local laws: Law on General Education (2005), Law on Professional Education (2007), Law on Higher Education (2004), and Law of Georgia on Social Protection of Persons with Disabilities (1995) and also UN Convention on the Right of the Child (ratified by Georgia in 1994) and Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (ratified by Georgia in 2013).

Georgian Law on Social Protection of Persons with Disabilities (1995) also underlines that it is the State obligation to provide Education and Professional Training of Persons with Disabilities (article 17): "The State shall provide persons with disabilities with necessary conditions for education and professional training. Educational institutions, together with healthcare and social security authorities, shall provide preschool and out-of-school education to children with disabilities in order to create favorable opportunities for providing them with appropriate rehabilitation assistance, as well as the secondary specialized education and higher education corresponding to their individual rehabilitation program."

UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities underlines the State's obligations towards children and youth with disabilities. To guarantee this right without discrimination and to ensure equal opportunities, the States Parties shall provide an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning. The States Parties shall ensure that Persons with disabilities are not excluded from the general education system on the basis of disability and that children with disabilities are not excluded from free and compulsory primary education, or from secondary education, on the basis of disability. In this respect, member States shall ensure that children with disabilities have access to alternative means of communication and technologies.

In Georgia, all levels of education, except for preschool education, are regulated by relevant laws. However, it is noteworthy to mention that the Government of Georgia is currently working on a draft Law on Preschool Education which emphasizes provision of education in pre-school facilities for children with SEN.

General, professional and higher education policies are regulated by relevant local laws and procedures.

1.2. General Education

Quantitative data on children with disabilities included in the general education system –Out of 9,127 children registered with a disability status, about 7,400 are aged 6 to 18. According to the data of the education system, the multidisciplinary team of the MoES⁴ have assessed 4,949 children and 626 children go to 8 specialized schools. Out of the assessed children, most live in Tbilisi (1,328) and the fewest in Racha (48 children). On the basis of this data, 1,825 children with disability status currently do not receive education. Besides, as it was mentioned, Georgia still has a large number of disabled children who are not registered as such and who are assumed to be left outside the education system, thereby increasing their degree of exclusion.

In Georgia, general education of children with disabilities is regulated by Law on General Education. One of its major components is inclusive education. Georgian Law on General Education defines inclusive education as “inclusion of children with disabilities in the general education process together with other children” (article 33). By the same law, it is an obligation of the school to “create all conditions for inclusive study”. The law looks at the modified curriculum as an integral part of the National Curriculum for children with SEN.

Within the general education system, children with disabilities are defined as pupils with SEN.

Pupil with SEN- children who have difficulties in learning compared to their peers and for whom the National Curriculum should be modified and/or the school environment should be adapted and individual study plans prepared and implemented.

A pupil with SEN can suffer from:

- a) Physical disorder
- b) Mental disorder
- c) Sensor impairment (vision and/or hearing)
- d) Speech disorder
- e) Behavioral and emotional disorder
- f) Need for long-term hospitalization
- g) Difficulties caused by social factors which prevent the child from coping with national study plan requirements.
- h) (Law on General Education, article 27, inclusive education)

⁴ Multidisciplinary team of the MOES is established by the Law on General Education. The multidisciplinary team is composed by various specialists: psychologist, occupational therapist, and special education teacher.

The law states that National Curriculum lists the achievements (skills and knowledge) the pupil should have in each school subject or group of subjects at the end of each class or level. The law also considers individual curricula under the National Curriculum for the pupils with SEN (article 5). The law determines the types of teaching positions and the Professional Standards for Teachers: “A SEN teacher – a teacher who teaches pupils with SEN at a primary educational level and facilitates their engagement in the educational process at a primary, basic or secondary educational level” (article 21:2). In accordance with the law, a SEN teacher can be an ordinary teacher who has passed a special accreditation program in compliance with the rule and number of credits defined by the MoES.

In addition to inclusive education, the Ministry of Education and Science implements the subprogram “Promotion of the Social Inclusion” that aims at contributing to social integration of children with special education needs with their peers and increasing tolerant attitudes toward children having different ability, religious or cultural backgrounds. The program supports of joint activities and provides resources necessary for children with various types of disabilities.

Apart from public schools, children with serious mental and sensor impairments study receive education in specialized boarding schools. Beside education, these schools also have a care function. There are 8 boarding schools in Georgia where 626 children study and live.

It is noteworthy to mention that, apart from the boarding schools, there are specialized (integrated) classes at public schools. The function of the integrated class is to strengthen transitional educational services. Currently, under the programs of the MoES 6 integrated classes are operating for autistic children. The integrated class is managed by internal multi-disciplinary group (psychologist, special teacher, assistant, nurse); the maximum number of children in the class is 10. Individual tuition plans are designed to develop academic skills and functional skills of these children. The main goal of this type of class is the integration of children in relevant classes of the public school by pre-defined schedule.

1.3. Current gaps in the inclusive general education system (according to studies carried out in Georgia)

One of the major weaknesses of the inclusive component of the general education system is that the education system fails to identify the children and if the family decides not to take a child with disability to school, the education system may miss such cases. The multi-disciplinary group only assesses cases that are referred to them. It shall also be mentioned that the general education system is still not able to issue school graduation certificates of basic and complete secondary education for pupils with severe intellectual disability which becomes a serious impediment for further professional or higher education.

Studies have also revealed significant shortcomings in the system – there is no communication between preschool personnel and the multidisciplinary group of the MoES when the child is admitted to school and assessed by the multidisciplinary group. Therefore, the latter cannot use the information the preschool teachers have about the child. Moreover, there is no cooperation between the multidisciplinary team of the MoES and social workers of the Social Service Agency; specifically, there is

no real monitoring of children who receive services in the education system and under the day center program (how long the child goes to school and how long stays day center). The Law on General Education guarantees the right to education to every child, however, not all schools are ready to accept these children; only formal admission takes place and, quite frequently, the child goes to the day center instead of the public school, which means that informal education substitutes formal education. None of these structures have been tasked to provide monitoring and therefore none of them does. Also, there is very insufficient monitoring system of attendance of children with disabilities to school and therefore, the ministry does not have statistics of real enrollment of children with disabilities in mainstream education system and reasons of missing classes.

A few studies conducted in the inclusive education sector in Georgia show that, regardless of the progress, there are still many gaps and shortcomings requiring systemic and programmatic changes for children with disabilities to have access to free and full general education.

In 2013, a study carried out by the MoES called “Indicators of inclusive education” in Georgia showed the need for changes to ensure further development of the inclusive education model in Georgia. Changes should be made to the legislation and to the areas where it is vital for the law to be enforced. First of all, it is critical to establish a monitoring system for inclusive education. This will facilitate timely identification of problems policy improvements. It is extremely important to have a systematic approach to data collection and exchange. In particular, collection and storage of information regarding children with disabilities should be systematic and coordinated. For this purpose, it is important to for the relevant agencies to coordinate their work, to create a list of clear requirements for data collection (e.g. what statistical data are needed) and to develop a clear system of data storage and exchange. At the very least, the Ministries of Education and Science and Labor, Health and Social Affairs should coordinate in the process of creating a central system of data collection and storage. Other agencies such as the National Office of Statistics, professional and non-governmental organizations should also be involved. At legislative level, it is important to include the inclusive component in the laws on higher and professional education in order to increase the responsibility of service provider organizations towards people with SEN and/or disability (Indicators of inclusive education in Georgia, Study report, 2013). The above mentioned recommendations have not been implemented by MoES.

The international organization World Vision conducted a survey in 2014, aiming to study how children with disabilities live in Imereti and Samtskhe-Javakheti regions. In total, 32 communities of four municipalities were studied, 30 experts and other stakeholders, 108 children with disabilities and their parents, 112 children without disabilities and 110 teachers were interviewed within the survey frames. One of the key objectives of the survey was to assess the education sector. It turned out that 85% children participating in the survey go to school⁵, but this indicator decreases proportionally to the severity of disability. In the group of upper class children with disabilities, literacy and mathematics

⁵ Interestingly, 75% of children who do not go to school cannot get even non-formal education at day care centers due to limited numbers of the centers.

skills were only at 50-60%, while their peers showed much better results, meaning the school program is not properly modified according to the educational needs of students. The survey also studied how interested children with disabilities were in the study process. It turned out that 42% of children with disabilities didn't like the process; while only 4% of children without disabilities did not like the education process. The difference was significant because it proves that the process does not meet the needs of children with disabilities and fails to support their inclusion (survey report, project "Sub-regional social inclusion of children with disabilities in the Caucasus", 2014).

In 2014, the organization Accessible Environment to All carried out monitoring of inclusive education in 22 public schools. The assessment showed that the number of special education teachers was insufficient and the teachers were not adequately trained. The monitoring also revealed that, quite often, teachers who fail to solve problems in class with their own resources contact the special education teacher and ask him/her to take the child to the resource room, which obviously restricts the child's inclusion. Many special teachers prefer to enter the class themselves, which does not harm the study process at all; this means however, that the pupil is not as independent as his/her peers and cannot get fully involved in the study process. The study report concludes that "teachers simply cannot deal with the problems; quite often, they are not properly trained; one or two trainings are not enough for people who have a different profession; they need more support for development. All this proves that special education teachers as well as general teachers need more training for working with children who have special educational needs. The organization also assessed the schools' infrastructure. It turned out that the infrastructure does not really meet the requirements of children with mobile and sensor impairments. Out of the 22 schools, 3 did not have proper road access. The school entrances, in most cases, are partially satisfactory. The monitoring report states that "almost none of the schools meet the standards for children with visual and hearing impairments. The schools have children with hearing impairment who use so-called Cochlear Implants, but the children who use body language are completely excluded from the study process. The resource rooms are the most suitably equipped spaces while class rooms and libraries are less accessible. Toilets are a problem in all schools, especially for children with disabilities; they are far beyond the standards" (www.ertad.org).

1.4. Inclusive vocational education

One of the major factors for ensuring independent life is vocational education. Inclusive vocational education in Georgia started with the help of the Norwegian Government in 2012. It was free and required no centralized exams. Since 2012, 481 students have enrolled in vocational education institutions. Inclusive vocational education is provided by almost all vocational education and training (VET) centers under the MoES. The Ministry has provided the necessary infrastructure for preparing the inclusive vocational education program and the training courses for the teachers and personnel.

Inclusive vocational education is regulated by the Georgian law on Vocational Education and Training. The objective of the law is to determine the function and place of professional education, to develop a

professional education system which meets rapidly changing labor market requirements. Article 7 of the law states that children with disabilities have the right to get professional education only if they have completed general basic education – “A person shall have the right to receive VET in accordance with the knowledge, skills and values necessary for performing a professional activity on the basis of completing the basic level of secondary general education, passing professional testing and, proceeding from the profession specifics, complying with the additional requirements envisaged by the professional standard”. The requirement of having basic education before commencing vocational education is a serious barrier for children and youth with disabilities, who have not attended the basic education.

The law provides (Article 20) the forms of education, professional education and qualification development for persons with disabilities - “Education, professional and qualification trainings for people with disabilities are carried out through various forms, including, with or without attendance, in special groups, in classrooms and by “disability” curriculum, including home learning”.

The State shall ensure all necessary conditions for education and vocational training of people with disabilities (Articles 17-20). It should be mentioned that employment of disabled people and creating relevant working conditions for them is poorly implemented in Georgia.

1.5. Higher education

Since 2005, 284 young people with SEN have enrolled in the higher education system under special conditions. Higher education of youth with disabilities is regulated by the Law on Higher Education. Article 3 of the law states that the system “will create all conditions for students with disabilities to study”. Article 43 enlists the rights of students, last and not least “Higher educational institution provides benefits for the students with disabilities in order to create essential conditions for their education as prescribed by current legislation, the charter of the higher education institution and the statute of a relevant faculty”.

It is noteworthy to mention that the vast majority of state universities are still physically inaccessible for persons with disabilities. Only some of the buildings have been adapted to the disabled; obviously, this restricts young people with disabilities to choose the faculty they want. None of the universities have an “office for issues of the disabled” that would provide support to undergraduates and students with disabilities in case of need.

Analysis of policies and programs shows that the general education system in Georgia is more inclusive than the other levels (namely, professional and higher education) However, there are barriers such as: absence of a mechanism for identifying children with disabilities, non-adapted infrastructure outside and inside the school, insufficient number of special education teachers and poor resources for their professional development, absence of a mechanism for monitoring attendance and early school leaving;

there are problems related to the issue of the school graduation certificate for children with severe moderate and severe intellectual disabilities etc. The issues of inclusion of children and youth with disabilities are affected by external factors as well, such as the mechanism of defining the status of disability, healthcare system, social services that will help children and youth with disabilities with daily functioning and developing skills for independent living and an employment policy which is based on equal opportunities.

2. Defining the status of disability

The status of disability is determined in Georgia according to the medical model of disability and in conformity with the Georgian Law on Medical-Social Expertise. The stated objective of The Law of Georgia on Medical-Social Expertise is to protect the health of population of Georgia, to determine disability status, to create conditions conducive to rehabilitation and social integration of people with disabilities. The law on Medical-Social Expertise defines legal, economic and organizational conditions for carrying out medical-social expertise.

The Law on Medical-Social Expertise defines the disability as: “a health disorder with functional impairment of the body which is caused by illness, trauma, anatomical or mental deficiency rendering a person incapable to work temporarily or permanently and in need of social protection”(10.1). As you can see from the definition, disability is still oriented on the “deficiency” and ignores the role of the social environment. Paragraph 2 of Article 11 of this Law states: “The MoLHSA will develop and approve the list of illnesses, anatomical or mental deficiencies that allow a person with disability to work in special or individual conditions”.

The Georgian Law on Medical-Social Expertise states that a person with disability under the age of 18 will be granted the status of “child with disability” in compliance with the regulations of the MoLHSA. The “disability from childhood” status is given to a person whose disability occurred before being 18 years of age. Apart from the fact that the system of defining the disability status is based on the medical model, within the active system, the status of disability is not commonly given to children with certain types of mental disorder (Down syndrome, autism) resulting in wrong statistics about the number of children with disabilities.

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), ratified by the Georgian Government in 2013, defines disability as: “Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others”. The local legislation has not been amended in accordance with this definition of the CRPD.

Moving to the social model of disability⁶ could provide an opportunity to better identify the needs and the number of children and youth with disabilities. It would also enable the MoES to improve the system of identifying the children left outside the education system and engaged in home learning, to find potential beneficiaries for inclusion in the system.

3. Right to Health

At the moment, persons with disability are insured under the universal state healthcare program which came into force on February 28, 2013. The program provides the citizens of Georgia who have no health insurance (including citizens with disabilities) with medical services. The universal healthcare program has significantly increased access to healthcare service for children and youth with disabilities who have official disability status or do not have an official status but have some form of impairment. However, it should be mentioned that the insurance does not cover some services that are not urgent but are critical for regular diagnostics and treatment of children with disabilities.

It is important that the universal insurance packet consider the needs of children and youth with disabilities with regard to regular health examinations or other types of preventive healthcare. This would prevent further deterioration of their health as well as leaving such children outside the education system due to health-related problems.

4. Social protection and programs

In Georgia, social protection of children and youth with disabilities is guaranteed by the national legislation and international acts which become ground for social policy and programs. Persons with disabilities receive social assistance: financial (pensions, allowances, etc.), in-kind (motor vehicles, wheelchairs, prosthetic and orthopedic appliances, special script publications, sound amplification devices and signaling system) and medical, social and professional rehabilitation services and domestic services. Besides, there are social programs for children and youth with disabilities, such as early intervention and home care. These programs are funded through materialized vouchers and can be obtained based on certain rating scores. It should also be mentioned that these services (all of them) are not available in all regions of Georgia but only in a few big cities.

⁶“According to the social model a person does not ‘have’ a disability – disability is something a person experiences. The disability experienced is often caused by the approach taken by society/individuals which fails to take account of people with impairments and their associated needs. This can result in people with impairments being excluded them from mainstream society” - <http://www.ombudsman.org.uk>

Georgian Law on Social Assistance defines the grounds for granting the social package/pension to persons with disabilities. The social package is given to persons severe disability, including children with disabilities and persons with disabilities since childhood who received the moderate disability status after the age of 18.

Georgian Law on Social Protection of Persons with Disabilities defines the basis of the state policy towards persons with disabilities and aims to provide them with social protection and create the necessary conditions for their individual development, quality of life, participation in the economic and political activities and attainment of their creative and production capabilities. The State shall provide additional guarantees to children with disabilities to allow them exercise their rights and legal interests (Article 3).

It is worth mentioning that the above obligation of the State is fulfilled only to some extent. Within the rehabilitation framework, children and youth with disabilities are provided with basic assistive devices, but not with instructions on how to use these devices. No further monitoring takes place and there is a risk that the health condition of the child or youth with disabilities deteriorates.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Persons with Disabilities underlines the significance of social protection of persons with disabilities:

1. States Parties recognize the right of persons with disabilities to an adequate standard of living for themselves and their families, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions, and shall take appropriate steps to safeguard and promote the realization of this right without discrimination on the basis of disability.
2. States Parties recognize the right of persons with disabilities to social protection and to the enjoyment of that right without discrimination on the basis of disability, and shall take appropriate steps to safeguard and promote the realization of this right.

The social protection rights of children and youth with disabilities are only partially provided in compliance with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. As mentioned above, social programs that correspond to their needs are not accessible to all children and youth with disabilities. As for the pension, it was only in September, 2015 that the disability pension reached minimum wage, but it is still much less than the value of a consumer basket.

5. Forms of social assistance and programs for children and youth with disability in Georgia

5.1. Pension

The pension for people with disabilities is between 100 and 150 GEL. People with moderate disability receive 100 GEL and those with severe disability receive 150 GEL. In September 2015, the pension for children with disabilities increased from 100 to 150 and equaled to the pension of adults with severe disability.

5.2. Social Programs

- **Early Childhood Development Sub-program** (early intervention) – this program has been carried out on the basis of state vouchers since 2011. In 2015, the State allocated 495 vouchers, among which 335 for children (regardless of the place of living) who receive the service in Tbilisi. The sub-program aims to stimulate development of children who are at the risk of development disorders or development of children with disabilities, encourage their social integration, strengthen the child and family and prevent child abandonment.

The sub-program provides support to the families of the children who have mental development disorders and inclusion of the children in the early development program, identification of early childhood development disorders, individual development plans and development of motor, creative, self-care and communication skills and support to their social integration.

In view of the needs of the child and the parents, one or more (if needed) specialists (early childhood development specialist, psychologist, occupational therapist, logopedist, special teacher and others) shall provide no less than 8 services a month which can be individual and/or group services for children of the age 3-7 and only individual service for children under 3. Moreover, the number of group sessions shall not exceed four in one month. Depending on the individual needs, the service can be provided at the child's home, medical institution, provider's premises or preschool institution.

The target group of the sub-program covers no more than 495 children of the age 0 to 7 with mental disorder (including down syndrome, cerebral palsy, autism, general (pervasive) mental disorder, speech development impairment, mental deficiency, etc.), among them, 335 children (regardless of their place of residence) receive the service in Tbilisi.

This program is extremely important for the development of children with disabilities and their inclusion in the preschool and general educational systems; however, the service is provided only in Tbilisi, Kutaisi, Batumi, Telavi and Lagodekhi. The important thing is that a child does not need to be registered as disabled in order to be eligible; s/he can participate based on a doctor's diagnosis which, on the one hand, is a result of the dominance of the medical model, while on the other hand is ensuring access of children who have not yet been granted disability status.

The Day Center sub-program is the biggest social program for children with disabilities. The sub-program

aims to support families of the target group children and prevent child abandonment. The sub-program activities include daily (excluding weekends and holidays) service with meals; evaluation of the academic needs of beneficiaries and support to the development of their life and professional skills, their inclusion in cultural and sports/recreational activities; if needed, the sub-program provides outpatient medical and psychological services. The day center sub-program for children with severe and profound mental development disorders requires intensive involvement of specialized teachers and other specialists. The target group are children from 6 to 18 whose families receive reintegration allowance or who are in foster care. The number of beneficiaries is limited to 637 at a time; the sub-program provides services to children who have severe and profound mental disorders, other types of mental disorders expressed by behavioral disorder (including children whose families receive reintegration allowance or foster care service). The number of beneficiaries referred to in this sub-paragraph shall not exceed 66.

The day center program is not accessible to all children and youth with disabilities who are in need of this service. Besides, there is no referral system or procedure between the school and the day center; therefore, there is a risk that formal education may be substituted by informal education, i.e. day center program: the child will be formally enrolled in the school, but instead will spend the day in the day center. The parents give preference to the day center, because it has safer environment and specialized programs for children with disabilities. Finally, the child will remain outside the formal education system.

It should also be mentioned that due to the limited number of vouchers, the day center program is not accessible to youth with disabilities who are over 18. There is a risk that youth with disabilities who cannot get professional education and who are not employed will be fully isolated.

- **The objectives of the sub-program for children's rehabilitation/habilitation** are the following: specific rehabilitation, habilitation, improvement of physical health, strengthening of adaptive abilities and support for social integration.

The target group of the sub-program includes children with cerebral palsy, spinal –muscle atrophy and related syndromes, muscle dystrophy, inborn myopathies, other damages of muscles (included, unspecified ones), hemi -, para- and tetraplegia, inflammation of the central nervous system and related diseases, results of inflammatory polyneuropathies, birth traumas of the periphery nervous system of the disabled children over 3 (including children in foster care/residential institution), as well as children with disabilities under 3. The service is provided to 600-700 children per year.

Rehabilitation/habilitation is extremely important for each child with disability; however, it shall be mentioned that the sub-program is available only in 3 cities – Tbilisi, Kutaisi and Batumi and parents of children who live in regions have to go to these cities and stay there while the child receives the service. Even though the parents of socially vulnerable children do not pay for the service and get these vouchers for free, they cannot always afford transportation and accommodation in the city. Besides, some children

cannot be transported to a long distance or the parent (especially, single parent) cannot leave other children and/or work and take the child to the city where the service is provided.

- **Home care program, i.e. providing care to children who have severe or profound mental development disorder** – the program aims to help rehabilitation of such children and improvement of their physical and social condition by providing the care service at the child’s home.

The target group consists of children between 7 and 18; only 40 children (all in Tbilisi) are reached. These children need permanent assistance and are unable to attend the day care center.

This service is extremely important for development and for ensuring the quality of life of children who cannot get any service and education because they are permanently at home. It is important to replicate this service in other regions/towns because it is one of the most important family support services that prevents institutionalization of children and supports social inclusion of children with severe disabilities.

6. Employment

Employment of youth with disability is still a serious problem in Georgia. Access to the education system and state programs still remains a challenge. The employment policy is also faulty – the law promotes anti-discrimination practices; however, its enforcement and providing disabled people with information about their rights is still quite low. There is lack of awareness on the part of employers as well as of funding for adapting work spaces to the needs of people with disabilities. In 2015, the Ministry of Labor, Health and Social Affairs launched a program that aims to create equal opportunities for people with disabilities on the labor market. According to Ministry data, only 21 disabled persons were employed throughout the year. It will be impossible to implement the employment policy for the disabled without developing and strengthening the general and professional education systems.

7. Accessibility and support to independent living

For the purposes of inclusion of children and youth with disabilities, it is very important to prepare them for independent living, the major precondition of which is accessibility. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities defines accessibility as: “To enable persons with disabilities to live independently and participate fully in all aspects of life, States Parties shall take appropriate measures to ensure to persons with disabilities access, on an equal basis with others, to the physical environment, to transportation, to information and communications, including information and communications technologies and systems, and to other facilities and services open or provided to the public, both in urban and in rural areas. If we consider the Convention requirements, Georgia still has a lot of barriers in

terms of accessibility – public institutions are not truly adapted to the needs of the disabled; people in wheelchairs can hardly move on the streets due to non-adapted infrastructure. Besides, no one takes into account the requirements of the Decree #41 of the Georgian Government on “Arranging the facilities for persons with disabilities and elements of architectural planning” in new or old constructions. Due to the poor technologies, children with sensory disorders do not have much access to information and their right for education is therefore restricted.

According to the experts’ and parents’ opinion, the education system and psycho-social programs do not properly prepare persons with disabilities for independent living, which is one of the rights under the Convention (article 19): “Living independently and being included in the community - States Parties to this Convention recognize the equal right of all persons with disabilities to live in the community, with choices equal to others, and shall take effective and appropriate measures to facilitate full enjoyment by persons with disabilities of this right and their full inclusion and participation in the community”. Due to the barriers in the education and employment system and poor social welfare system, youth with disabilities are practically deprived of independent living opportunities.

The given analysis proves that the legislative basis and the education system in the country recognize education as the basic right of children and youth with disabilities; besides, there are supportive social programs operating in the country. Nonetheless, it is important to study the barriers and factors which facilitate or prevent actual implementation of the policy and legislation and full-fledged attainment of the right to education for disabled children and youth.

Part Two: Expert Study Results

Chapter I. Inclusive Education Policy

1.1. Formal and Informal Education

One of the focus points of the research was to define what types of formal and informal education are available in Georgia for persons with disabilities. Providers of inclusive education (MoES) and experts in the field have defined several different possibilities. Public schools were named as the main source of formal education. Specialists engaged in inclusive education note an important amendment to the law on general education, according to which any person, notwithstanding physical or mental disability, has the right to study at a public school nearest to their place of residence. Thus, public schools are not allowed to refuse admission to a child with disabilities. Inclusive education experts regard this fact as a big achievement, as it means that the state, at least on legislation legislative level, gives people with disabilities the chance to integrate in society (in this case into the sphere of school education).

Public schools are divided into specialized and non-specialized educational institutions. As a rule, specialized public schools are more adapted to the requirements of persons with disabilities and they create a better environment for studying. There are teachers with competencies corresponding to the requirements of children with disabilities working in specialized public schools, making the studying process more effective. They have a lot of resources to act according to the requirements of children with disabilities. However, there is one serious problem: such special educational institutions are very few in number and few children have access to them. The majority study in non-specialized schools, where there is an acute lack of appropriate resources.

According to the representative of one of the schools, there is an item in the National Curriculum, in compliance with which, a person with disabilities can **receive formal education at home**. But this is a special case and needs a combination of certain conditions. In order to have the right to use this service, the child must have a health problem or physical disability that makes him/her stay at home for at least one month. The child, parents or school have to notify the MoES on the situation. The MoES sends a multi-disciplinary team to assess the student and, in case of the appropriate recommendation, the child starts receiving education at home. Initially, based on this recommendation, an individual education plan is drawn. Afterwards the Ministry appoints an additional salary to the teacher and the teacher starts visiting the student at home. However, according to the same expert, this service is rarely used by children with disabilities in Georgia. In the majority of cases, the reason for this is the lack of information; or parents do not wish to use this service. Another reason can be avoiding social stigma.

As to informal education: in this regard, inclusive education experts highlight the significance of the so-called “**day centers**”. A day center is a place where people with special competencies work with disabled children; their aim is to rehabilitate and integrate them through engagement in different informal activities. Day centers are a good possibility for children with disabilities to develop the cooperation and social skills. According to the representative of the Social Service Agency, one specific amendment was very important in this regard. In particular, there used to be a practice according to which day centers were only open to families of children with disabilities who were assigned a certain score in the database of socially vulnerable persons. Today, this limit is no longer enforced and all children are fully financed to attend the day centers.

In regard to informal education, a representative of the MoES highlighted the role of the Ministry of Sports and Youth. According to them, the Ministry has various programs through which it attempts to create an enabling environment for children with disabilities to receive informal education.

Regarding informal education, sector specialists also mention the role of non-governmental organizations. They say that, as a result of attracting various donors, NGOs attempt to divert persons with disabilities from a standard, monotonous atmosphere and engage them in various informal activities which help them socialize.

It seems that there are certain possibilities for persons with disabilities to receive formal and informal education. However, experts in the field also highlight some problems. For example, a specialist working in one of the regions notes that there are problems in providing inclusive education in non-Georgian language schools:

“What I want to highlight here is probably a big problem in connection with non-Georgian language schools. I mean Azeri language schools, Armenian language schools and Russian language schools – these are mainly the schools in Georgia with less inclusive education, where the process develops much slower than in other schools of Georgia.”

According to them, non-Georgian language schools require additional support and resources for the development of inclusive education.

Is there a difference between the capital and regions concerning provision of inclusive education? The same legislation basis regulates individual education system both in the capital and in the regions. Process planning is performed according to the same plan. Special teachers are selected under identical procedures. However, according to the experts, there are more human and material resources in the capital for the provision of formal and informal education to persons with disabilities. Also, information exchange and access for persons interested in inclusive education is much better in Tbilisi.

1.2. Legislation and State Programs for Inclusive Education

Legislation is one of the determining factors for inclusive education. It is the legislation that provides the basis for preventing of discrimination and for integration into society of various minorities. Naturally,

only legislation is not enough; there should be appropriate state programs to ensure practical application of the law.

According to sector experts, the main legal documents are the Law on General Education and National Curriculum developed by the MoES. The Law on General Education defines the right for children with disabilities to be included in the studying process of a desired school (located near their place of residence). At the same time, the goal of the National Curriculum is to regulate the process of admission of children with disability to the general educational programs. This envisages engagement of a multi-disciplinary team, development of an individual study plan etc.

The mentioned legislation is in accordance with the UN “Convention on the Right of the Child” ratified by Georgia in April 1994. The day centers are regulated by the Law on Social Protection. There is a provision in the Law on General Education, according to which the specialized educational schools have the right to use sign language and Braille during the studying process. According to the representative of the Ministry of Labor, Health and Social Affairs, of great significance here is also the newly adopted Anti-discrimination Law that excludes discrimination of a person on any basis.

As to the state programs which promote enforcement of the active legislation, a representative of the MoES talked extensively on the topic during the in-depth interview. In addition to the universal introduction of inclusive education in public schools, other programs have also emerged. According to the Ministry representative, there is a program called “Social Inclusion”. The program is targeting students with special educational needs. It aims at integration of students with disabilities into the school environment and their socialization. Within the framework of the mentioned program, non-formal activities are carried out alongside the formal educational process. As a result of mutual cooperation, various schools attempt to include persons with disabilities into the joint projects or activities. The Ministry representative mentioned that inclusion in non-formal activities often encourages children with disabilities and their parents to get involved in the formal education program too:

“Such activities convince the children and their parents that it is good for them to receive formal education.”

Integrated studying in public schools, work of the multi-disciplinary groups, capacity building of special teachers, planning of various non-formal programs – these are the main state programs through which the state attempts to include persons with disabilities into the educational process.

1.3. History of Inclusive Education in Georgia: Challenges and Achievements

One of the focus points of the research was to learn more about the development process of inclusive education in Georgia, the related challenges, obstacles and achievements.

For the majority of experts participating in the research, inclusive education in Georgia dates back to 2005. In 2005, the MoES, with support from the government of Norway, developed a project that

introduced inclusive education in ten Tbilisi public schools. It was a pilot project and its main goal was to develop the state policy on inclusive education. After the end of the project, the MoES conducted a survey in the pilot schools and identified the needs related to the development of inclusive education. As a result, in 2009, a state strategy and plan on inclusive education were developed, for the first time in Georgia's history, a very important milestone according to the experts. The state made a big step in the field of inclusive education. The next stage was training of special education teachers; psychologists were also included in the process. Another challenge for the MoES was adapting the school environment and developing the material and technical facilities. However, this was not an easy task and incurred certain difficulties (see below).

After the development of the state strategy, inclusive education was rolled out to public schools in 9 regions. The Government of Norway continued active participation in the process. In 2013, an inclusive education unit was formed within the MoES– a separate structure directly responsible for the development of inclusive education. One of the tasks of the research was to determine the factors impeding the implementation of the inclusive education in Georgia.

It is worth mentioning that the majority of specialists and experts interviewed in the survey name public awareness as one of the most important challenges. According to them, stigmatization is still a serious problem in the society; people with disabilities are still perceived as incomplete citizens who cannot exercise the same rights as other citizens. Some schools do not wish to accept them as students in order to avoid various inconvenient situations resulting from the infrastructure incompatibility or lack of human resources. There are cases when parents of other students oppose admission of a student with disabilities in the same class as their children. According to the representative of the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, no state program can function if the society rejects people with disabilities:

“Children and adults with disabilities will not feel comfortable even if they are forced to go to school and study together with other children; they will not be considered full-fledged members of that society. This has always existed and continues today. Although it's true that stigma decreased in the last years because of increased public awareness, it has not been eliminated and to me, this is the biggest problem.”

The next important barrier for experts is the lack of special teachers and their competencies. According to them, this problem can be justified by the fact that Georgia does not have much experience in the field of inclusive education. There is no Bachelor's Program to produce specialists with relevant professions. There is only a Master's Program at the Ilia University. One of the experts mentioned that people currently engaged in the inclusive education are the ones who had received the status of a “speech pathologist” at the Pushkin Tbilisi State Pedagogical Institute, which is in a way close to the present principle of special education teachers. According to the same expert, these specialists do not have enough competencies. They often use incorrect, discriminatory terminology; for example: calling persons with disabilities “defective”.

The problem of lack of professional staff is recognized by the representative of the MoES as well, who says that the ministry tries to allocate additional funds for this purpose:

“Professional staff is one of the challenges today; it has become a serious challenge for us, and we plan active work in this direction. Financing is scarce and insufficient; it is also necessary to develop a correct model of financing.”

One of the experts also says that the MoES started implementation of inclusive education too early. According to them, there was no systematic approach that would provide inclusion of persons with disabilities who have special education needs. They also named the problem of lack of staff. The majority of teachers do not know how to handle children with Down syndrome, autism specter, mental development impairment and other similar disabilities. The experts think that the lack of knowledge sometimes results in negligence of rights of other students, reflecting in frequent disruptions of the studying process.

Experts also speak about poor school infrastructure and lack of necessary material and technical facilities.

In conclusion, we can say that today public awareness, lack of various resources (professional staff, inadequate school infrastructure, insufficiency of material and technical basis), as well as the short history of inclusive education are perceived as the main problems. Naturally, all of these negatively affect the quality of inclusive education.

As to achievements in the area of inclusive education – in this regard specialists and experts engaged in the process unanimously name amendments to the legislation according to which schools no longer have the right to refuse to admit a person with disability. Law protects persons with disabilities and if a headmaster refuses admission of a child with disability to their school, a representative of the child can defend his/her rights in court.

1.4. Requirements of children with disabilities, their parents and schools

According to the opinion of most of these experts, it is important to start by raising awareness of persons with disabilities and their parents about the provision in the law that guarantees their right to inclusive education. Also, it is important to provide more information about the mechanisms and procedures for involvement in inclusive education. Sometimes parents do not know about their child's rights and existing programs or they may not even think about taking their child to inclusive education. Lack of information is extremely problematic in regions. In the capital, there are more sources of information.

Education experts, education policymakers and education providers agree on the fact that schools need support, in order to increase quality of teaching in inclusive education. Support, in the first place, implies an increased number of professional special education teachers, as well as increased engagement of additional specialists. In particular, an important factor of inclusive education is participation of child psychologists and therapists in the educational process. Their recommendation plays a big role in the development of individual study plans. The regional schools need more support in this area too. Lack of staff in the regions is an even more acute problem than in Tbilisi. Compared to teachers in the capital, school teachers in regions have less access to training and seminars for professional growth. They need assistance in the training area too.

According to the opinion of several experts, alongside with human resources, increase of the material and technical basis is also very important. No matter how good and professional the teacher is, without adequate teaching materials that are adapted to the needs of the pupils s/he may not be able to help. By this we mean literature published in Braille, audio books, auxiliary text books for students with mental disabilities etc.

Some of the experts find it important to develop pre-school programs for children with disabilities, meaning kindergartens. They say that a child needs to be taught various skills before the age of 6, which later will help him/her start their academic life. There are cases when a child is brought to school not being able to participate in the educational process, which is an additional difficulty for the school. A representative of the MoES stated:

“Very often, a person with disabilities comes to school and the school has to start with the work that had to be done from the age of 1 till 6 – they start upon this road at school and the work of development of academic skills stays aside; it is the responsibility of the parents and the state to prepare the child for school.”

Experts engaged in the field of inclusive education think that it is necessary to inform parents on how they can help their child in developing various skills, whether independently or with the help of state services.

Adjustment of infrastructure is very important for the support of children with disabilities, their parents and schools. It implies, in the first place, adaptation of the school environment to the needs of children with disabilities. At the same time, it is important to repair roads leading to the school. Students with problems related to physical movement, especially in regions, can hardly reach the school, as it is hard to move on the damaged roads in a wheelchair.

A representative of one of the NGOs voiced an opinion that it is necessary to have alternative services accessible to those who cannot attend school due to various reasons. This requires a flexible and adjusted system that will ensure that such children are identified and included in the home study service.

According to the study participants, it would be extremely helpful to have day centers in regions. Compared to Tbilisi, children with disabilities in regions have fewer alternative environments to school, which is a significant problem for their integration into society.

The specialists find it important to provide moral support to children with disabilities and their parents. According to them, the state and public solidarity can play an extremely important role in the social integration of persons with disabilities. For this purpose, it is critical to raise public awareness in order to eliminate stigmas and stereotypes which hinder adaptation of persons with disabilities to the environment. This is especially important in the conditions when the lack of professional staff, insufficiency of material and technical base and non-adapted infrastructure or other frustrations prevent adaptation of persons with disabilities to the environment.

1.5. Role of the Government and Civil Society

What role do education experts assign to the government and the civil society in resolving various problems?

The study has revealed two possible roles for the civil society. The first – facilitate increase of public awareness in terms of attitudes towards the persons with disabilities. Second – play the role of mediator between persons with disabilities and the government, especially the MoES. Public awareness cannot be raised in a day. This requires long-term support and many NGOs actively work in this area and support the state. The role of mediator is also very important. The non-governmental sector can play a positive role in informing families on inclusive education procedures and rights of persons with disabilities. In experts' opinion, NGOs can also create enabling environment for children with disabilities, alternative to school and day centers, providing an additional tool for their social integration.

However, a special role in support of inclusive education is assigned to local and central government. According to the education policy-makers, it is vitally important that the local government work on adjustment of the infrastructure. This implies repairing roads leading to schools, adaptation of school infrastructure. As to the central government, the MoES is the main responsible actor in the process of inclusive education. The responsibility of the MoES is to act upon revealed needs and the developed strategy. A representative of the MoES said that they work in this direction:

“As we saw the challenges facing not only the schools but also the children and parents, we decided to regulate inclusive education in schools and define/create a framework of obligations and responsibilities that the school has to take upon itself. The Ministry developed a regulatory document which is being reviewed now and hopefully will be adopted soon; the regulation will resolve and systematize the child's stay at school from the day of admission.”

The representative of the MoES also noted that they cooperate with NGOs in implementation of various projects. Exchange of information and ideas between different actors plays an important role in the development of inclusive education.

According to the specialists, involvement of the local government in regions is extremely important, since they have the possibility to define priorities in the budget.

Chapter II. Assessment of Inclusive Education practices

2.1. Procedures for engagement in Inclusive Education

School registration for children with disabilities is a standard process. They have to go through same procedures as other 6-year old children when they are registered electronically by their parents. However, according to the Ministry of Education employee interviewed, there are plans to make this procedure more adapted to their specific needs.

Before the child comes to school, the school administration does not have any information on their limited abilities (physical or mental). After the child is enrolled to school, the school administration or the parents of the person with disability write a letter to the Ministry of Education with a request to send a multi-disciplinary group for the child's assessment. The multi-disciplinary group, in turn, consists of 3 psychologists, 2 occupational therapists and 2 special teachers. After assessing the student's possibilities and potential, they write a recommendation and assign the status of special educational needs (SEN). Afterwards, the head teacher of the child with SEN requests a meeting, where the teachers and parents of the child with SEN develop an individual study plan. The individual study plan reflects the aims and tasks, fulfillment of which is monitored by parents and special education teacher. The latter works with children in the resource rooms after the end of the lessons. Resource rooms are specially equipped. Since 2014, the number of special teachers has increased: one special teacher is assigned to maximum 6 pupils with SEN and the schools receive additional funding (GEL 3,000 per special teacher per year).

This is an official standard procedure. However, the experts talk about the cases when the procedure is violated. A person with disabilities requires a SEN status. However, sometimes, due to the negligence of the parents or the school, the child remains without this status. Some parents think that assignment of a SEN status to their child will cause certain stigma and their child will be perceived as "defective" in the eyes of the society. Assignment of the SET status requires parents' consent. According to the expert, besides the parents' consent, permanent monitoring of the educational process is also necessary, otherwise accomplishment of the child's individual study plan might be at risk. Furthermore, if there is no initiative from the parents, most schools do not address the Ministry for assignment of SEN status to the student.

As to the teachers, many of them do not want the additional headache. They prefer to follow the standard program, as the individual study plan requires more concentration. Often, they lack the competence to develop and carry out an individual study plan and try to avoid it.

When asked what the MoES does in cases, when parents hide their child at home and do not enroll them to school, the Ministry representative replied that it is the responsibility of the Social Service Agency to reveal such cases and identify why parents violate their child's rights – in this case, right for education.

2.2. Statistics of persons with disabilities engaged in and left outside the inclusive education system

According to the MoES employee, 4842 children currently have SEN status, all of whom are engaged in inclusive education. However, not all of them are the children with disabilities, as the SEN status is also assigned to students with special talents who require a non-standard program. Up to 600 children out of 4,842 SEN students study at specialized public schools, while the rest study at non-specialized public schools. The Ministry representative also explained that there are currently over 9,000 persons with disabilities of school age registered with the social protection service who receive pension, but are not included in the educational program. They named confidentiality of the information of the social protection service as the reason. According to them, the Ministry of Education does not have access to this data and therefore, the ministry is unable to analyze it.

The question arises as to what is the reason for some persons with disabilities to remain outside the educational system? One of the reasons has already been discussed: the MoES does not have access to the Social Service Agency database and thus does not know who has disabilities and where s/he is located. A representative of the Social Service Agency said at the interview that there are negotiations going on between them and the MoES, in order for the MoES to receive the right to access the above mentioned data. Another reason for persons with disabilities to remain outside the educational system, named by specialists interviewed, are the parents. According to them, parents of some persons with disabilities need the status from the Social Service Agency only to receive the financial aid. They “hide” their children from the system, as they think their children cannot receive education. Experts noted that there is unverified data according to which, besides the already mentioned 9,000 children with the status of person with disabilities, there are others who are not registered. For example, according to UNICEF information, this number is almost up to 10,000. If we take these statistics into account, there are 20,000 persons with disabilities of school age in Georgia and only up to 5,000 are included in the educational system. One of the experts also noted that a certain number of persons with disabilities study at church schools and their access is limited, which means that MOE cannot properly monitor how many of these children are enrolled, in which circumstances they obtain education, are they under the care of so called special teachers, etc.

As to the share of persons with disabilities left outside the school system, according to the experts, MoES is eligible to have access to such statistics. The MoES representative mentioned that they work on this issue together with the MoHLSA and UNICEF; however, because of ongoing internal discussions, data is not accessible at the moment. It was also mentioned that later absolutely all persons interested will have the possibility to view this statistics.

2.3. Higher and Professional Education

It is interesting to know whether children with SEN have the possibility to continue their studies in a higher or professional educational institution after completion of general education. The experts mention that the Ministry of Education works with the government of Norway in this area. In 2013, there was a project that aimed to introduce and establish inclusive education in the professional education system. The regions have also joined the professional education program. Persons with disabilities register in the professional institutions and study their desired professions.

According to the experts, preparation at the secondary school stage is very important for professional education. Unfortunately, this does not take place. The schools do not have courses for teaching the persons with disabilities (and not only them) various professions. Though, it should be mentioned that since 2013, so called ‘second wave’ of inclusive education has been introduced in the system of professional education (the first wave covered secondary schools). In 2013-15 30 different study programmes accepted persons with disabilities in 23 professional education institutions. Moreover: in 2016 a special unit has been created within MoES, where one employment coordinator and 10 employment consultants are hired in order to promote employment possibilities of disabled and people with SEN. Nevertheless, according to MoES representative interviewed, only 31 persons are employed

out of 170 graduates. It shows that modern labor market in Georgia has serious problems with regard of employment of people with disabilities. Though, experts mentioned also that, due to very high rate of unemployment, average citizen of Georgia able to work is facing rigidity and even hostility from labor market. As one of the expert interviewed says:

“There is a lot of work to be done with employers too. The labor market is very limited for persons with disabilities. Employment is very important for their socialization, increase of independence and self-esteem. Quite often, these persons have comparatively lower self-esteem due to the conditions in which they live.”

As to the possibilities for higher education, according to the Ministry of Education employee, there are currently 200 registered SEN students and 200 undergraduates, which is a good result. However there are a lot of problems concerning resources of higher education institutions. They do not have a material and technical base adapted to the needs of persons with disabilities. Audio or Braille versions of educational literature do not exist. Therefore, students with disabilities often need help to understand the teaching materials. Infrastructure is also not adjusted, creating additional difficulties for persons with physical movement impairment.

It seems that besides general education institutions, the problem of inclusive education exists at professional and higher education level too, mainly associated with the lack of human and material resources.

2.4. Training of special teachers and their competence

One of the main challenges of inclusive education in Georgia is the lack of professional staff, including special teachers. It is important to determine how teachers acquire the status of special teachers, how adequate their skills are and what are the problems in this area.

Some experts say that higher education policy is not regulated in this regard. The universities do not train enough special teachers. A study program for the special teacher module exists only at the Ilia State University and that also only for Master's Degree. At the Bachelor level, pedagogy students only collect 5 or 6 credits for inclusive education. This is absolutely not enough. Experts think general education teachers of any level should acquire certain competences for their work with SEN students. The existing reality is disturbing. Many of the teachers have an unclear notion of inclusive education and apply all effort to avoid development of an individual study plan and the non-standard processes related to its implementation

The problem of lack of university study programmes and, correspondingly, deficiency of special teachers is highlighted by the MoES representatives too. According to them, this is partially balanced by training courses at the Teachers' Professional Development Centre. It is after these courses that teachers receive the right to work with SEN students. Experts and officials also said that special teachers are not sufficiently appreciated at school. Based on the fact that special teachers do not fit to the formal teaching grid and cannot fulfill obligatory weekly load in schools (18 hours teaching), school headmaster's office

officially (institutionally) perceive them simply as members of administration and not teachers. In other words there does not exist a structured syllabus for special teachers where each obligatory hour would be scripted. This is why special teachers (since they are not considered as 'proper' teachers) remain outside the teachers' professional development scheme. According to the MoES employee, this inadequate practice must be changed and the Ministry is working on it.

The representative of one of the NGOs noted that qualification of special teachers is a decisive factor for the success of inclusive education. It is necessary to create a central database with data of existing special teachers and plan their professional growth as well as preparation of more teachers. According to them, it does not matter what subject the teacher specializes in, s/he can develop the skills to assess needs, including that of the pupil with disability, and develop the individual study plan based on individual capabilities of the child. The expert mentioned that special teachers need special support, first of all, in terms of the educational policy. It is necessary to create a system oriented towards them and increase the number of courses for qualification and professional growth. It is also important to provide them with various material and technical resources, such as auxiliary textbooks, audio books, literature in Braille etc., otherwise the teachers will find it difficult to adapt to the individual needs of different students.

According to the experts, in order to work with persons with disabilities, the schools need to mobilize additional technical employees. This is especially important for children with physical movement limitations. Currently, the role of auxiliary employees is largely played by parents. They have to stay at school with their children and help them in various activities.

2.5. Attitude of the Educational System towards Persons with Disabilities

From legislation legal point of view, there is no longer discrimination of against children with disabilities in the educational system. Schools were deprived of the right to refuse admission to children with different forms of disabilities. Schools and parents are required, in cooperation with the MoES, to take care of each pupil with special needs in consideration of the child's capabilities. However, a legal base is one thing and real practice is another. Experts think that legal regulations alone are not enough. Until corresponding environment and conditions are created, children with disabilities will remain discriminated:

"From a formal point of view, discrimination does not take place anymore. Like I told you, this is rather strictly regulated. Nobody will tell you that they won't admit your child to school because s/he has Down syndrome. Such things don't happen anymore. However, other forms of discrimination still take place. If we don't provide this child with all necessary educational conditions, materials and corresponding approach, this is already discrimination."

If the child is admitted to school, but the school environment is not ready to provide him/her with the conditions corresponding to their special needs, discrimination is unavoidable.

One of the experts thinks that intolerant attitudes towards persons with disabilities still exist among other pupils, some parents and teachers. It turns out that the attitude towards children with mental

development disorders is problematic. Some of them face cynical attitudes from teachers and other students. There are cases of bullying. However, there are other situations, so-called “positive discrimination” when the school, its staff and others show excessive attention to the person with disability, as s/he is “different”, which makes the child feel uncomfortable. However, the conditions gradually change and acceptance in society grows. The expert thinks it is necessary to work on that from every direction, whether it is through media or other sources of communication. Inclusive education requires awareness raising.

Part Three: Results of the Focus Group Discussions

I: Information sources about the persons with disabilities in the inclusive education system and inclusive education

1.1. Information sources about inclusive education

On this regard study focused on the parents of children with disabilities, because they are the ones who decide whether to use inclusive education services for their children and which particular service to use. The majority of parents say that their main sources of information are the parents of other children with disabilities. Some parents say that they normally get information from their own relatives and friends; the role of the MoES was also mentioned. Specifically, when parents get some primary information they normally contact the MoES to verify it and get more information about the available services and criteria for inclusion.

As for the school, the parents of disabled children choose the school based on different criteria: one major decisive factor is experience which school has in the area of inclusive education and whether their approaches have turned to be successful. This factor has mainly stressed by participants of Tbilisi focus-groups. The study focus group participants also mentioned the importance of the location of the school. This factor is especially important for pupils who have physical disability.

1.2 School experience of children with disabilities

The study showed that inclusive education is used by pupils with various forms of disabilities, including children with Down syndrome, autism, epilepsy, spinal hernia and cerebral palsy. There are children who have several disorders which affect their development; they have behavioral disorders and, quite often, speech disorders. There are children with only physical impairment who can cope with school materials.

Children with disabilities and their parents participating in the study admit that the majority of inclusive education users go to non-specialized public schools. Only a few children in the study tend to go to special public schools. Disabled children who go to non-specialized schools are involved in inclusive education process. Usually specialized schools attend those children, who have mental disorders, also blinds, deaf-and-dumb children, etc.

The parents of children with SEN who go to specialized schools say that they are satisfied with the quality of study. The parent of one of the children with visual impairment said that the school is fully adjusted to the needs of children who have SEN. Materials that are difficult for children to understand are removed from the standard curriculum for ease of the study process and for making the process more fun.

Some parents trust specialized schools because they think they have the competence and facilities to receive children with disabilities and create an enabling environment. Specialized schools have staff who can help children move around the school and participate in various activities. Specialized schools provide various informal activities and after-school hours to do homework.

With regard to the study progress of children with disabilities, the study shows that most of the participants who have only physical impairments usually participate in the study process and cope with lessons. One child with visual impairment from specialized school says that he has no problem learning school subjects as long he has Braille print books or audio versions of textbooks. He said that sometimes the teacher or the parent helps him with materials that are not adapted for the blind people.

The standard school program seems to be a problem for children who have mental and development disorders. They need an individual study plan (which we will discuss later in this study).

The children with some intellectual disorders interviewed talk about the problems they have in coping with some of the subjects, especially, in mathematics and biology. They said that some teachers do their best to help them and explain the lesson in simple terms, but others do not. Children with mental disabilities also talked about how their peers help them with homework. This is what one of the children said:

*"We have difficult tasks. The teacher of chemistry helps us, but other teachers do not. Also, my friend helps me in writing and my classmates in writing essays."*⁷

Other children with disabilities also talk about lack of attention from some of the teachers:

"I wish the teachers were helping children who fall behind; there were cases I desperately wanted to write something, but the teacher ignored my enthusiasm and I felt disappointed and discouraged".

One pupil with Down syndrome (primary school) says that her teacher gives her separate homework. This is related to the individual study plan.

As for the evaluation, some of the children with disabilities say that their teacher evaluates them in the same way as other children. Another child with mental disability said that his teacher writes marks in the journal and they do not know what mark they get. The child from primary school (also with intellectual disability) said that their evaluation is distinguished, non-standard.

"We often get stars and "well done" marks, but sometimes we get "sad smileys", if we fail to do the homework"

The parent of the child with Down syndrome said that her child finds German difficult and becomes agitated, so he is usually spending this time outside the class with a psychologist or specialized teacher, so as not to disturb the other students. The child has no problems with other subjects and attends the classes.

⁷Note – the respondents' comments are written with bold and italic shift.

The parent of a child who has autism and intellectual disability says that her child goes to a specialized school but the materials are not adapted to the children with SEN so she has to help her child and explain the lessons in simple words.

“Every year, they give us books. We have 8 books still unpacked at home. I bring them home and take them back to school again, nothing else. For example, the Georgian teacher gives my child some text to read. I cannot explain it to my child; she has not reached that level yet. It is a text for public schools. Because our school is public, even though it is a specialized public school, they use the same books as other public schools. My child has a mental development problem and cannot cope with the material. For example, they gave her a writing assignment as homework in the Georgian language subject. So I had to read and explain with simple words and dictated what to write. I have no patience to read all texts”.

The same parent said that it would be good if the teachers had assistive textbooks to work with children with SEN.

The parents of the disabled children also talk about the insufficient number of teachers. They think that it is very important to increase the human resources in order to support the academic progress of their children.

2. Mechanisms and practices of inclusion in the inclusive education system

2.1. Procedures for inclusion in the inclusive education system

Research revealed that there are certain problems regarding procedures of enrollment in inclusive education. One of the parents from the focus group, whose child has mental development disorder, mentioned that her child had to go through difficult procedures to be enrolled in inclusive education: information received from the MoES was unclear and did not provide comprehensive planning. Obtaining the necessary information and enrolling the child in inclusive education requires many bureaucratic procedures, running for obtaining different documents. Another parent spoke about the weak mechanisms for inclusion and stated that their child was not assessed properly. The assessment only meant interviewing the parents, but not evaluating the child. As a result of assessment, the child was enrolled to a non-specialized public school. However, in the parent’s opinion, the child should be in a specialized school.

Some parents of children with disabilities say that special education teachers are not sufficiently paid and their work requires a lot of efforts. Their salaries are too low compared to what they do, which affects their motivation negatively. They start to look for another job. Parents also say that some teachers do not take the recommendations of psychologists and special teachers into account:

“Psychologists and special teachers are looked down upon by “ordinary” teachers. Their opinion is often not taken into account.”

2.2. Assessment process for children with disabilities

An inclusive education multi-disciplinary group is a team of specialists that includes 3 psychologists, 2 occupational therapists, 2 special teachers. On the basis of the school's request or parents' application, the MoES sends such a team to the school to assess the student(s). In case special needs are identified, the multi-disciplinary group gives recommendations to the school on developing the individual study plan for the child. As a rule, the children with mental disorders do not know the real purpose of the exercises they do with the special teacher. The process is carried out in a fun atmosphere and is not associated with any type of examination, in order to avoid stress or deterioration of self-esteem among students with disabilities.

A focus group participant who is also a member of the multi-disciplinary group mentioned that they recommend developing an individual plan even in case of small deviations, in order to avoid the risk of a greater need in the future. However it is possible that after a certain period the individual plan might no longer be required. According to them, the school bears responsibility for that. The school must provide the student's further assessment.

Members of the multi-disciplinary group say that one of the problems related to the assessment procedure is the large number of children in the specialized schools who are subject to assessment. Sometimes, one group has to assess 200-300 children with disabilities, which is a time- and energy-intensive process.

Thus, inefficiency of mechanisms for inclusion in inclusive education is partially caused by the lack of human resources and the insufficient number of specialists engaged in inclusive education to provide services to a large number of children with disabilities.

III: Evaluation of the current practice of inclusive education

3.1. Individual study plan for persons with disabilities

Individual study plans are the most important part of integrated education. The plan is critical for the children with disabilities who have various forms of mental disorder and development limitations. As a rule, pupils with physical disabilities do not need individual study plans, although there are exceptions(e.g. blind children).

Some parents say that individual study plans should be designed at the initiative of the teacher. However, quite often, there are cases when the parent's lack of initiative has left the child without the individual study plan. A few parents said that they had to force the school administration to call the multi-disciplinary group for evaluating their child. After the multi-disciplinary group made the assessment, the head teacher called a meeting where teacher and parent jointly designed the individual study plan considering the abilities and interests of the child. The parent of a child with Down syndrome mentioned that when they had no plan, the teacher used to give her child more than she could cope with and this made the child distressed. The same parent said that there were opposite cases too. Some other teachers

didn't ask the pupil to do homework at all when they had no individual plan. Consequently, the child had no feeling of discipline and it took months before the child developed this skill. The parent also recalls that she kept an eye on the study process:

“There was a hole on the door of the classroom and I was observing the teacher from that hole for one and a half year. I wanted to be sure that the teacher followed the rules and made no exceptions for my child. The teachers knew that I was there watching “.

She said that in the observation process, she discovered other children with SEN and informed the school administration. The school designed individual study plans for these children,

The parents of children with disabilities say that the head teacher's skills are extremely important. They believe that much depends on the attitude of the head teacher towards each child. They can closely work with other teachers to better protect the interests of children with disabilities, request additional meetings if necessary for extra clarifications, etc.

Some parents say that, often, making individual study plans is a time-consuming process. They think that the main reason is the low competence level of teachers because, according to them, many teachers simply do not know how to make an individual study plan, which obviously delays the process. The parent of a child with mental impairment said that she had to move the child to another school because of confusions regarding the individual plan.

Practitioners of inclusive education have a different approach to this issue. They say that the problem in the course of designing the individual plan is the approach of some parents. Particularly, they say that some parents are reluctant to have individual plans for their children for fear of stigmatization. The parents think that their child may be humiliated in the eyes of their peers, so they prefer not to have an individual study plan.

The director of the school where the first integrated study model was piloted said that some parents have wrong expectations regarding the individual plan design. They want positive results in a short period, which is practically impossible. Some parents ask to add many different components to the plan, which sometimes exceeds the actual abilities of their children.

The study revealed problems with regards to the attitudes of some parents as well as to the feelings and competence of some teachers.

3.2. School infrastructure

School infrastructure was one of the major problems named in the study as an impediment for integrated study. This study proved how sensitive this problem is. Children with disabilities, their parents, specialized teachers and other people engaged in this field, all discuss this problem.

One of the parents said that her child has a physical impairment and uses a wheelchair, but the school refuses to install an elevator, despite repeated requests. Their argument is that the school infrastructure

does allow the installation of the lift, but the parent argues that it can be attached to the façade of the building. Besides, the school stairs have a 45 degree slope and building a ramp would not be effective. Among the severe infrastructural problems, the parents name non-adapted and ill-equipped toilets.

The representative of the MoES (who is the parent of child with cerebral palsy and autism) says that one of the reasons for the poor infrastructure is that the ministry does not have the authority to improve it. The responsible authority for infrastructure is a legal entity of public law and they have to go through numerous and slow bureaucratic procedures. However, according to her, some schools still manage to adapt the infrastructure to the needs of the disabled children because their budget is high enough. This mostly refers to large size schools with more than 1000 students, since their budget is bigger because of vouchers given by State for educational needs of each pupil. Additionally, if these schools have children with SEN, their budget is designed individually according to the number of children with SEN, special teachers, etc. The practitioners taking part in the study (teachers, multi-disciplinary group members etc.) think that the school environment is not adapted to the needs of disabled persons. Access ramps alone are not enough. Quite often, the school places the children with disabilities in the classrooms on the ground floor, but in some schools, the toilets are on the second floor and, due to the absence of ramps and elevators, the children cannot use them.

The current infrastructure problems raise questions as to how the child with disability, the parent or school personnel can cope with these problems. The study shows that most of the parents of children with disabilities do not leave their children alone at school and have to stay there to help with physical movement-related activities. Some active parents require the school to mobilize some budget to recruit additional staff to help the children move around and participate in the activities. However, such initiatives and their corresponding solutions are rare.

One of the children interviewed says that he used to move around the school with the help of his parent while he was in the primary class but later, his class was moved to the ground floor and he could move independently.

“My parent was helping me move around. The parents often had to stay in the school in our first years but later, in sixth grade, they moved our classroom to the ground floor and we didn’t need parents’ assistance anymore. I had to miss classes in second grade because of this problem”.

The parent of another child with disability says that it is important to distribute children in classes by the difficulty of their disability. Even though this seems to be a simple issue, the schools still find it difficult to have classes with disabled children on the ground floor. The representatives of school administration say, that ground floor belongs to the primary classes due to the security reasons. Upper classes even having disabled students are always located on higher levels.

Thus, the infrastructure problem seems to be one of the serious challenges for children with disability and for the inclusive education system.

3.3. Attitudes towards children with disabilities in school

Attitude towards children with disabilities is one of the key factors which influence their socialization process and their integration in the school environment. The study revealed that other pupils show the positive feelings towards their peers with disabilities. The fact was confirmed by the children with disabilities and their parents as well as by the teachers.

The pupils with disabilities said, during the focus group discussions, that they all play together during the breaks and have contact after the school hours. They also go to birthday parties together and other children come to their birthdays. There are cases when children with disabilities cannot go to the class gatherings mainly because of difficulties with physical movement.

The fact that other children treat their peers with disabilities in such a non-discriminative manner has not occurred “on its own”, it is the result of discussions, knowledge and awareness-raising efforts. On the contrary, parents of other children do not have the same attitude towards children with disabilities. They do not want their own children to be in the same class as the disabled. One of the directors of Tbilisi schools said that the parents of other children normally say positive and tolerant things in the presence of the parents of the disabled children, but behind their backs they complain to the school administration that inclusive classes prevent their children from getting good education; they do not want to have children with physical or mental disabilities in the same class as their children. However, there are parents who see positive outcomes of the integrated learning process and even see it as an advantage. One of the parents of a child with Down syndrome recalls what another parent said:

“The relationships with children with disabilities made our own children better persons“

Some participants in the focus groups mentioned unhealthy attitudes towards children with disabilities. One of the pupils recalled a story how he got irritated when the teacher pointed to his physical impairment:

“When I was in 10th or 11th grade, a new teacher came to the class. She looked at me and said: “what happened to you?”. I said, “Nothing”. “Why are you like that?”. I asked “like what?”. She was a teacher of Georgian language. My classmate asked me not to pay attention but how can I not pay attention when the teacher had such a reaction. It was only the teacher; I have never felt the same from my classmates”.

Some parents complain about the discriminative terminology used by the teachers. The parent of a hyper-active child said that the teacher asked the parent to provide a document that the child is not “crazy” and, even worse, the teacher did it in the presence of the child. Another parent said that one of her child’s teachers said that the child was hindering the academic process and he did not belong in school.

Other inadequate attitudes from the teachers are related to the so-called “positive discrimination”, when some teachers pay extra attention to the children with disabilities and address them in a pathetic tone. They even check their homework every day (not doing the same for other children), when it is not even required by individual learning plan.

3.4. Engagement of children with disabilities in informal activities

There was a question regarding participation of children with disabilities in various events and informal activities. Excursions seem to be some of the informal activities where children go together. Some children with disabilities said at the focus group that they go to the excursions, cinema and theatres together with other children.

Some children who participated in the study also go to various sports and art classes. Others get engaged in different cultural events.

The study also showed the trend that children with disabilities are more engaged in rehabilitation day centers. Parents say that they try to use the services offered by the State in order to facilitate development of their children. They also say that the school cannot fully satisfy the interests of children with disabilities and the day center somehow compensates this. Art, painting, embroidery, clay modeling etc. are the types of informal activities the children with disabilities normally do at the day centers.

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