

Inclusive Education in Georgia: Current Progress and Challenges

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Abstract:

Purpose and Originality: The paper provides a realistic picture about how the implementation process of inclusive education in Georgia is developing, about the problems that are encountered together with what needs are to be fulfilled for stimulating the process.

Today's challenge in the country is to make inclusive practices available to everybody, everywhere and all the time. This article discusses the status of the efforts being made to meet this challenge. In the course of that discussion, some comprehensive changes will be described that systemic efforts of school improvement must achieve to continue making progress towards fully inclusive learning.

Method: The study was conducted in Georgia. A qualitative research design was employed along with closed-ended and open-ended questionnaires, which allowed participants to express their point of views, skills and knowledge. Data collection methods were applied: semi-structured interviews and observation on respondents.

Results: The study uncovers those challenges that obstruct the implementation process: indifferent attitudes of teachers and parents towards inclusion, absence of self-awareness to the issue amongst educators, slightest involvement of parents and need to infrastructural development.

Society: The results should raise the awareness of the population of Georgia as well as increase the understanding of the problem.

Limitations / further research: There were quite enough informants on the school level (special teachers, principals), however, there are still many other possible respondents who could add something valuable to a better understanding of the process of inclusion at schools.

The theoretical approach employed in the study and the empirical research could be validated.

Keywords: Inclusive Education Policy; Learning barriers; Education for All; Special Schools; Policy implementation process; Raising awareness.

1 Introduction

In the majority of countries in Europe and America inclusive education began as a special education initiative in support of students with disabilities and various impediments just as early as the 1980s. At the present, more than three decades behind, schools in different countries are changing, as communities, parents, educators or politicians seek to get ready for the new challenges of "what is called" as the twenty-first century. Breakthroughs and innovations in knowledge, technology, the global politics and economy, the skills and abilities requested by the future industries - this all brings together to contribute much of our time to schools to grow into evolution. The recent educational centers in contact of how to arrange educational institutions and student learning processes for a future - many educators identify as practically unattainable to conceive indeed.

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In Georgia inclusive education has been announced as one of the priorities of the educational reforms since 2006 and presently it consists of the mandatory parts of the State policy. Starting from 2006 at the general education level and from 2013 at the vocational education level, practicing of the inclusive schooling model is regarded to be the obligation of the appropriate educational institutions (Tchintcharauli & Javakhishvili, 2013).

As for any innovation, inclusion of the persons with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in the mainstream schools and provision of inclusive learning model is quite complicated process; there are lots of new regulations that should be completed and introduced at both policy and practical levels. As reported by different experts and parents, there are many difficulties at effective employment of the afore-mentioned model and provision of high quality education (Tchintcharauli & Javakhishvili, 2013).

Viewpoints of Georgian population towards disability and their consciousness of disabled persons have not been yet deeply scrutinized. Therefore, there is no complete analysis of the problems connected with specific types of disability or educational dilemmas experienced by the persons with different categories of impairments.

The main idea of the study is to represent the prevailing situation in Georgian educational environment in keeping with inclusive education.

The intention of this research is to:

- Detect a degree of the problems that are experienced during the implementation process of inclusive education in Georgia;
- Observe if a general trend in inclusive education across the country is consistent with the aims of international documents/agreements?
- Examine what are the particular challenges for the realization of a ‘fully inclusive’ education system at a national level, plus what are those obvious examples of systemic imperfection in provision, effecting negatively on the educational experiences of learners with disabilities/SEN?
- Propose alternatives by which the problems should be overcome.

The inclusive education approach, in general, is a classic model of a policy that appears to be perfect on paper, however, it is difficult to accomplish. Despite the fact that this study will address basically to challenges that Georgia faces, the research will also look at the successes achieved regardless of those challenges.

The study has mainly been conducted in Georgia, its regions and the capital, Tbilisi. A qualitative research approach had been employed. Data collection methods that were applied are semi-structured interviews. Participants of the research were five teachers, five principals of several schools, NGOs and Director of the Department of Inclusive Education in the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia (MoES).

2 Literature Review

2.1 The European Approach

Since 1980 international conventions and agreements have had an important impact in the promotion of the inclusion of people with disabilities within mainstream society (Shah & Priestley, 2011, pp. 8-9). From 1975 onward, for instance, the UN Declaration of the Rights of Disabled Persons requires from the member states, including Georgia, to stimulate and promote the integration of people with disabilities into all aspects of the economic and social life of mainstream society (Smyth et al., 2014, p. 9). Apart from this, the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action for Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994) has been essential in developing the concept of inclusive learning environments for people with disabilities (Priestley, 2005, p. 21). It addresses the guiding principle which is that ordinary schools should accommodate all children, regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions (UNESCO, 1994). The culmination of the joint effort by the UN is given in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, 2006) to encourage and guarantee the right of people with disabilities for fully participation within mainstream society. It requires from the states to recognize the right of people with disabilities to education; it further calls for “ensuring an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning” (CRPD, 2006, Art. 24).

At the EU level, there are various non-binding statements on education of children with disabilities but no demand on member states to accept inclusive education policy. Technically, Article 13 of the Treaty of Amsterdam allows for appropriate action to combat discrimination on a range of grounds, including age and disability. This has produced the European Council Directive (2000) on equal treatment in employment and education (Treaty of Amsterdam, 1997). The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union has an enthusiastic right to education; it involves everyone and is hence inclusive of children and adults with disabilities; and it refers to parental rights too. The Charter has legal power only when challenging European Community Institutions or when nation states are implementing European Union law (Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union 2000, Art. 14).

A significant role have played also International human rights initiatives in conceptualizing the right to education for people with disabilities within the inclusion framework inside a mainstream learning environment (Hehir, 2005, p. 24). According to Hehir, few European states have decidedly introduced reasonable accommodation provisions to guarantee proper access to learning environments. They ascribe this insufficient conceptualization to the challenging policy governing educational arrangement in each EU state (Hehir, 2005, p. 27).

Even though nearly all European countries have passed or are going to pass new education legislation on children with disabilities, there is a noticeable diversity on support for full inclusion; official policy is apt to be pro-inclusion for children with disabilities. Countries differ on the extent of separate special educational provision though (Mittler, 2012, p. 14).

On the European level there are various successful precedents which show what kind of support has to be suggested to provide preferred resources and practices to achieve the goal. With regard to accomplish inclusion in the education systems, organizational changes are necessary as well as the development of reasonable tools (Ferguson, 2008, p. 113). Thus, a comparison will emphasize the different phenomena of inclusive education course in Georgia, and will reveal the challenges which have arisen as one country attempts to align international policy with provision in existing education systems, each with its own legacy interests, priorities as well as pressures.

Therefore, it is to show how new developments in European, national and local policies are influencing on the lives of young disabled adults in the country through the use of qualitative methodologies and policy analyses.

2.2 Soviet “Inclusive Education”

As one of the post Soviet Union countries, Georgia pursued and used the “medical model” also called diagnostic-therapeutic approach towards people with disabilities. This approach was progressed by the Institute of Defectology in Moscow (Ainscow & Haile-Giorgis, 1998, p. 4). However, this approach was far from the medical criterion. Developer of this theory (Vygotsky L. S.) disagreed with that disabled children ought not to be socially excluded from mainstream society and emphasized the significance of educating them with special needs together with their peers. Theory of Vygotsky follows the ideas of cultural-historical theories, during which parents, society and culture play a certainly important role in the children’s development.

Throughout the Soviet times the state policy toward people with disability was not aimed at their integration, but somewhat at creating possibilities for persons with disabilities to perform in a separate world. Subsequently, their living was remote but rather secure. By that time both deaf and blind people could be present at special schools and universities. People in wheelchairs were supported with free treatment and rehabilitation at regional resorts and special clinics (The World Bank, 2012).

There, all over the former Soviet Union, used to be a network of special enterprises where deaf and blind people and people with mental disorders could be employed. After the destruction of the Soviet, disabled people in Georgia could no longer have access to special university education or hospitalization resorts/centers because most of them were situated in Russia (The World Bank, 2012).

Nowadays all European countries believe that the key principles encompassed in the Salamanca Statement of equal opportunities in terms of genuine access to learning experiences that respect

individual differences and quality education for all focused upon personal strengths rather than weaknesses, are those principles that ought to support all education policies - not just those specifically dealing with special needs education (Meijer, 2010).

It is obvious that most challenges in today's society related to the inclusive education are embedded in negative attitude towards people with disabilities. Isolation of persons with special needs and the medical approach created and established stigmas and stereotypes in society (The World Bank, 2012).

Georgia provides some typical dimension of 'Southern' and 'transitional' state. In combination, the cases include diverse aspects of family, state and voluntary sector/church involvement in the lives of people with disabilities (Rose et al., 2016, p. 16). Georgia signed the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2009; it has also been ratified.

2.3 The Current Situation in Georgian Educational Institutions

After Georgia's independence, in 1991, the government's pro-western direction has motivated the issue of public adaptation and social integration of people with special needs.

Georgia has acknowledged and signed many of the international declarations and conventions with regard to the rights of people with disabilities that simultaneously serve as the basis for reinforcing inclusive education in the country.

US Government assistance to inclusive education reforms is provided by means of the USAID project Supporting Equal Opportunities for People with Disabilities, implemented by the Save the Children and its associates' Collation for Independent Living and World Vision Georgia (MoES, 2009).

Georgia does not have a long, practical experience of inclusive education. In 2008 various local, non-governmental organizations, by the financial patronage of international organizations, embarked on activities to change the existing system of education for learners with disability.

In the education sector of learners with special educational needs, Education Strategy and Action Plan was developed and approved by the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia, with the aim of establishment a coordinated and unified strategy, for the following years as 2009-2011 (MoES, 2009).

Presently implementation process of inclusive education mainly counts on educational institutions' organizational and administrative bodies (Chanturia et al., 2016, p. 55). They are in charge of providing lodging for educational equipments for learners with disability and accordingly, provide current tutorial trainings and supportive programmes for teachers. Directors ought to employ backing staff in order to support teachers include learners/children with special needs in the groups.

3 Methodology

The research of school teachers' viewpoints to include children with intellectual disabilities in the mainstream school settings predetermined the decision on the qualitative research method. The qualitative approach is a detailed study of a circumstance. This method provides probabilities to the researcher to penetrate deep into the participant's space and, by using various methods, search and describe meanings of specific spectrum of concerns. In addition, qualitative research's typical features permit the researcher to precisely manipulate and individually be engaged in the activity (Creswell, 2009, p. 55).

The major reasons for deciding on qualitative research design for this research are the following: firstly, in the common environment the examiner has direct facing interaction time and identifies individuals in their conditions without fake modifications. In the second place, a qualitative enquirer infrequently employs other researchers' work. In the qualitative examination researchers gather data on their own through considering documents, asking questions and evaluating participants or monitoring participants' behaviour, thus the role of the qualitative enquirer is certainly active. In addition, qualitative researchers attempt to establish a complex situation of the difficulty of study that includes describing different viewpoints, determining the several components engaged in a situation and eventually provides comprehensive descriptions - better picture that comes out from questioning (Creswell, 2009, p. 65).

The research was based upon the semi-structured interview and observations. In the research several target persons have taken part who had experienced difficulties connected with access to education and who has had obstacles with integration into the social life.

Semi-structured interviews have been organized individually with the authorities in the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia as well as with several NGOs and school/preschool teachers that are engaged in the pilot projects of the implementation of inclusive education in Georgia. The abovementioned interviews included gaining understanding into the state of readiness together with some progress that has had to be made in the educational institutions until implementation is concerned. Along with it the researcher applied the observation method on participants during visiting the surroundings of these institutions to gather more data with relation to the infrastructural development, cleanliness and the general atmosphere dominating in these institutions to decide whether it was favourable for the efficient implementation of inclusive education.

4 Results

The table (Table 1) summarises those difficulties and barriers that are experienced throughout the implementation process of inclusive education in Georgian schools. It also illustrates those major needs and requirements which should be satisfied by the Ministry of Education and Science. The main impediments for learners with SEN to successful inclusion are also presented.

Table 1. Difficulties and barriers experienced during the implementation of inclusive education in Georgia

The main difficulties that schools face in the process of implementation of Inclusive Education	The main duties and responsibilities of the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia	Public schools' needs in the process of implementation of Inclusive Education	The major barriers that learners with SEN are encountered
Lack of skilled special educators	To train so as mainstream as special educators on regular basis	Skilled mainstream educators	Their rights to education are violated
Deficiency of competency of mainstream teachers	To create appropriate environment for learners with SEN	Adapted environment	Absence of perception among mainstream pupils about Inclusive Education
Non-adapted environment for learners with SEN	To satisfy all needs for promoting Inclusive Education	Technical and financial support	Existence of “Soviet legacy”
Negative attitude of mainstream parents towards Inclusive Education	To effectively implement Inclusive Education	Having special educators, psychologists and speech therapists at schools	Technical barriers (non-adapted facilities)
Lack of special materials and equipments (resource classrooms)	To organize awareness raising actions	Society's positive attitude towards inclusion	System barriers (inconsistent steps from decision-making institutions)
Negative attitude of the society towards SEN children and their inclusion	To closely cooperate with parents and introduce them new reforms	Organizing events for raising public awareness	Dependent barriers (attitude-based obstacles)
Unstable financial system		Existence of SEN model	
Transportation problem		Financial support for arranging resource classrooms	
Absence of SEN standards		Adapted transport for transferring SEN learners	

Source: Own research

Hence, inclusive education in Georgia deprives of many things to get closer to European level, for that level there are a lot of steps to pass. However, great attention needs to be paid to society's unpreparedness to accept the people who are different from them. As already mentioned, Education of the children with Special Educational Needs was acknowledged by Georgia, as a priority, from 2004, when a reform of the education system began. Thus, the concept of Inclusive Education is a new phenomenon in the country that follows the rules that the national and international legislation applies, consisting of Georgia too. Furthermore, joining the UNICEF Convention on the Rights of a Child Georgia has recognized that the purpose of its education system would become flexible to all learners to "achieve the fullest possible social integration and individual development" (UNICEF, Article 23, point 3).

In addition, according to the Public Defender's report, a serious deficiency of teachers at schools of national minority areas and providing affordable and high-quality education at preschool institutions is problematic. It is obvious that the state internal policy cannot always provide on the same degree all the needs of ethnic minorities; that is why it is difficult to find in practice an ideal option which would regulate all the areas with the same quality.

5 Discussion

Disabled persons' needs and requirements, in Georgia, have hardly been examined to date and, as a result, there is no complete analysis of the problems connected with specific types of disability or educational dilemmas experienced by them (Samarguliani, 2016, 113). That is because inclusive education policy is being implemented from 2006, by the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia, and when a new field comes into existence in any area, it is sometimes connected with different difficulties. Before 2006 approximately 95% of Georgians never heard about the phenomenon of inclusive education and definitely did not know the meaning of the concept (Samarguliani, 2016, 116). It is regrettable that the state have signed and made a ratification of the European documents such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child and Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on the Special Need Education considerably before than it started to expand inclusive education policy across the country.

All the respondents of the research have known that, in accordance with the law learners with disabilities have the rights to receive education. Concerning this one of the informant principal noted that: "According to the law, they have legal right to be here (at school)". The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) claims that on the basis of inclusive education there are the principles of human rights to education (UN, 1948). Thus and so, respondent teachers and principals recognize that inclusion signifies the right of a learner with disabilities to be a full member of a group who can take part in entertaining and learning activities with other peers.

Inclusion is such a complex phenomenon that often requires frequent changes in people's attitudes and principles. Such a change sometimes takes time and includes consequential reassessment of perception and behaviour (Ellena, 2014). To raise awareness it ought to involve both greater comprehension of inclusive education and that more tolerance from societies and

appreciation. It is also very important to develop national policies on inclusion, regional/local support systems and relevant forms of curriculum and assessment for creating the needed framework to the development of inclusive education.

As we read on the UNESCO paper of “Policy guidelines on Inclusive Education”, teachers, other kinds of educators, non-teaching assistant staff, parents, communities, school authorities, curriculum planers, educational developers, training institutions and private sector are all among those actors which can act as helpful resources in supporting the inclusion. Some actors, like teachers, parents and communities, mean more than just a helpful resource - they are those key elements that support all aspects of the inclusion process. This has to be grounded on the enthusiasm to welcome and accept diversity and play an active role in the learners’ lives, both in and out of school (UNESCO, 2009).

As the researcher was told, there are several institutions which take part together with the Ministry in promoting inclusion over the country. One of the representatives of the informant NGO claimed that they, among other NGOs, organize training courses on inclusive education mainly for teachers of public schools. In addition, they arrange seminars for journalists to properly broadcast in the media. Besides the leaflets are published and distributed, international workshops on inclusive education in partnership with the Ministry of Education and Science are carried out. In agreement with the Head of the Inclusive Education Department, the Ministry is not able to organize frequent awareness-raising actions across the country so they are assisted by those NGOs, operating in this field, which equip population with relevant messages and create reasonable information space for the future development.

Inclusion - this is an ambitious and challenging concept, with its advantages and disadvantages. On the theoretical level, it is an optimal and appears as a determinant vehicle for building process of a socialized community in the long run; however, on the other hand, implementation of inclusion into the education system and its adopting in practice imposes a number of requirements on the state (Befring, 1997).

High quality education, from the perspectives of inclusion, involves a balance between progress and equality. Inclusion should be based on the ethical, social, educational and economic principles. Main challenge of inclusion is: guaranteeing education for all, for every individual and together with mainstream learners. Learning with inclusive education model, in Georgia, is considered as educational institutions’ obligation since 2006 on general education level and from 2013 - vocational education level.

Keeping respondents’ opinions, they provided their own examples about non-tolerant attitudes of the citizens towards disabled people. They explained this by a cultural peculiarity and the then Russian influence as the culture is shared by and transmitted to and among the members of social groups - usually culture is transmitted by means of ideas. Furthermore, culture is always product of human behavior; it continually tends toward integrating societies. In each country there are

several cultures co-existing, that is why one culture might impact on another. Relying on the research participants' responses, isolation of disabled people was habitual, society was reluctant to accept them and they were condemned to loneliness.

All things considered, Georgian population is still unwilling and hesitant to diversity and do not seem enthusiastic for playing an active role in integrating those persons in social life. In other words, parents of disabled children may be careful about placing their children in an inclusion programme because of fears that their children will be humiliated by other children, or be unable to develop regular life skills in academic classroom.

Talking about positive effects, one of the respondent principals even referred to scientific researches. Particularly, she stated that there are many practical effects of inclusion, namely learners with disabilities attain individualized education program goals, improve social and communication skills, they have many educational outcomes, increase positive peer interactions, and, of course, post school adjustments.

The innovative approach to the SEN pupils' education was introduced by the "Strategy and Action Plan of Special Educational Needs for the years 2009-2011". The proposed strategy brings about introduction of a thoroughly new model of inclusive education established to effectively meet the needs of learners with SEN.

6 Conclusion

People's pessimistic attitudes towards differences result in discrimination that can lead to a crucial barrier to learning. Those pessimistic attitudes may take the form of social discrimination, and classical intolerance. If the awareness of Georgian population, principals, educators, parents, pupils, etc. will not change it would be difficult to include learners in schooling processes.

As stated by Skogen in his innovation theory, it has an imperative meaning what we know and what we wish to change (Skogen & Sjovoll, 2010, p. 116). It is obvious that public awareness is quite low towards inclusion of the SEN children into mainstream schooling in Georgia and what we wish would be raising the awareness of society through different ways. In addition, we know that the infrastructural situation is in poor conditions so we wish to improve the physical environment at every school.

The implementation of inclusive education primarily should be considered as an obligation of a society to protect the rights of the members of their own community; to provide conditions so that the people regardless of their particularities, to be able to fully integrate into the community by receiving accessible education.

An approach to the implementation of inclusive education ought to be inclusive itself, which on the one hand should consist of target groups engagement, and on the other hand process planning, coordination and implementation requires the participation of other countries' institutions which are taking part in the same processes.

According to Johnsen, it is good to know to “improve for somebody” and if it is changed, one has to know to be “planned in advance”, because if it is changed it must be better than it was before (Johnsen & Skjorten, 2001). From this viewpoint it is apparent that not only caring of development but also improvement and further bettering is necessary.

I would add that inclusion is one of and not the only value, which should be established. The concept of inclusion, at some point, intrinsically excludes the discrimination factor. Therefore, in the modern world, where the supreme values stands for equality, tolerance and respect for each person's uniqueness, inclusive education model gains its significance, as far as it is based on the moral and ethical principles acceptable in a democratic society, enables all the people to feel as valuable and live active lives.

The significance of the study lays in that that it provides a realistic picture about how the implementation process of inclusive education in Georgia is developing, about the problems that are encountered together with what needs are to be fulfilled for stimulating the process. This research creates the fundament for further researches as it has been formed just on a small scale. Future researches on the identical topic would examine the implementation of inclusive education in Georgia more complexly and would portray whether the situation has changed since this research.

The following suggestions and possible actions are proposed for future research:

There is a shortage of researches and reports addressing at school-level inclusion in Georgia. Expectantly this report can encourage further researches on the school settings which would greatly strengthen the understanding of inclusive education process. For that reason, it would be thought-provoking to focus on other informants, grounded on this research, such as Minister of Education and Science, representatives from the EU institutions as well, who together with NGOs and other policy implementers are accountable to develop inclusive education on the school level.

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