DISTANCE INCLUSIVE EDUCATION CHALLENGES

AND WAYS TO OVERCOME THEM AT FAMILY

AND SCHOOL LEVEL

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KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE STUDY

The systemic reforms undertaken in the education system, including development of curricula and educational resources, professional development of teachers and other support specialists, and the completion of infrastructural projects, have significantly contributed to changing the awareness and attitudes of schools and all of society regarding inclusive education. As a result, support for students with special educational needs has become an integral part of the education system.

Growing demand for inclusive education is evidenced by the annual increase in the number of students with special educational needs at the general education level. According to 2019 data, more than 7000 students with different needs are educated in 1244 public schools. Additional services are provided by more than 1400 support specialists (special education teachers, psychologists, inclusive education coordinators, etc.). Despite the implemented reforms, even before the pandemic the education system failed to ensure equal access and quality inclusive education for everyone at all stages of education.

The 2020 pandemic and distance learning have become serious challenges for the whole education system. However, ensuring access to education for students with special educational needs and providing the necessary support have become particularly difficult.

Inclusive education implies all students' inclusion in a unified, well-planned, and structured educational process, considering their special and individual needs. Due to changing the usual educational routine, isolation, and the non-existence of supportive services, the risk of leaving students with special educational needs out of the educational process emerges, significantly increasing these students' vulnerability.

Considering the varied needs of inclusive education and students, the realization of distance inclusive learning in the conditions of isolation and limited resources requires significant efforts both from the state and also from each family.

For the process to be correctly planned, introduced, and developed, it is necessary to study and analyse all the difficulties of introducing/implementing distance inclusive education and the varied needs of students with special educational needs and their families. **Analysing the results of the needs study provides an opportunity to plan intervention strategies appropriately and rationally distribute the limited financial and human resources available in the country.**

The study of distance inclusive education's challenges and the ways to overcome them, which involved 1406 parents of students with special educational needs and 718 teachers/school administrators, showed that despite slight differences, parents of students with special educational needs and school representatives give the same assessment of the existing difficulties and the measures necessary to overcome them. Namely:

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✓ The level of satisfaction of parents and school representatives before the pandemic was quite high, especially in school representatives (91%); and 80% with parents;

✓ With the pandemic, the level of parental satisfaction with distance inclusive education dramatically decreased. The same trend is seen with school representatives, although their dissatisfaction rate was slightly lower. Only 58% of parents were satisfied or very satisfied with the educational process; meanwhile, 65% of school staff evaluated the education as successful or very successful.

✓ 5% (71) of parents and 2% (14) of interviewed teachers reported that distance inclusive education was not accessible at all;

✓ For the majority of parents interviewed (63%), distance learning was accessible online, though this process was associated with many difficulties: paying for internet, poor internet quality, a malfunctioning computer, or not having their own computer. Nearly half of the parents reported on two alternatives for getting an education: the internet and phone. 29% of parents preferred TV-school.

✓ As for the teachers, the majority (70%) had access to the online teaching process. The same number of teachers were involved in phone communication.

✓ Both parents and teachers involved in distance learning gave preference to the Teams and Facebook online platforms; the share of other platforms was not significant. Nearly half of the parents involved in distance learning were using Facebook and Teams (56% and 53% respectively). The picture was the same in the case of school personnel –the majority of them were using Facebook and Teams (79,9% and 59,3% respectively). The share of other platforms was not significant.

✓ Among the difficulties faced by students with special educational needs concerning distance teaching/learning, the most frequently named (by parents and teachers) were: having no internet at home (23%); not having a computer (21%) and also having no skills of working on a computer (26%).

✓ The main challenge named regarding the educational process itself is the involvement of a student with special educational needs in the distance class process together with their peers (19%); and one of the most acute issues is the management of the behaviour of a student with special educational needs (23%).

✓ Education of students with special educational needs in the pandemic and distance learning conditions requires 100% parental involvement. The most difficult for parents, among other obligations, is the management of time and the child's behaviour. The list of acute problems in this area also included: confusion/lack of information (14%), having no knowledge of teaching methods/strategies, and independent teaching (30%); stress management was also reported as a problem.

✓ Assistance provided by the relevant agencies is seen as an opportunity for parents to overcome the challenges of distance learning/teaching. There is special demand for individual lessons and special education teachers; there is also high demand for psychologists. Parents also stand for periodic use of school resource rooms and the assistance of other specialists involved in the inclusive education process (personal assistant, sign language interpreter);

✓ Both parents and teachers similarly assessed the difficulties of returning to school. The study demonstrated that the most stressful problems include a shortage of educational

resources, where both groups considered technical appliances (computer, internet at school and students' homes), as well as the equipment, visual aids, and educational materials of resource rooms. Once again, the difficulty of managing students' behaviour was reported as a burning issue, especially in terms of following the regulations (masks, distance during breaks); Teachers' qualifications and the lack of human resources in the process of inclusive education management is also very important.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the study's findings, it became possible to develop appropriate recommendations for inclusive education needs at the family and school levels.

Recommendation #1 – Close cooperation between the school and parents of students with special educational needs is necessary with the purpose of continuously identifying existing needs and informing parents, both in terms of facilitating the student's learning process but also in stress management and positive parenting;

Recommendation #2 - It is necessary to mobilize additional financial and human resources in the education system for the provision of technical aids as well as individual assistance (special education teacher, psychologist, tutor, etc.)

Recommendation #3 – For the purposes of further strengthening the inclusive education system, it is crucial to take the following steps:

1. To enhance access to inclusive education throughout Georgia, including in small towns and villages;

2. To define the budget necessary for this purpose and obtain relevant funding from both the state budget and donor organizations – in this regard, application of Save the Children International's Public Investment in Children Common Approach shall be deemed essential;

3. To ensure inter-agency cooperation to cover the costs of different services, e.g., social programs can provide funding for psychologist and personal assistant services for students with disabilities;

4. Develop and widely disseminate models of alternative assistance (university students, professional organizations, etc.);

5. Ensure the continuity and sustainability of inclusive education supportive services after the completion of the pandemic through the development of a relevant monitoring system.

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