

Inclusive Education: From Challenge to Opportunity

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Abstract

The number of students with special educational needs has been increasing annually, creating a need for additional consideration in developing ways to address existing challenges and to promote the positive growth of inclusivity. This paper discusses a range of research-based issues that emerge in educational institutions when interacting with students with special educational needs or disabilities. It also highlights the benefits of inclusive education for students with diverse abilities in terms of access to education, academic achievement, social-emotional development, increased independence, and other important areas. The paper identifies key priorities whose strengthening will significantly contribute to overcoming certain difficulties of inclusive education, ensuring students' smooth and high-quality involvement in the teaching-learning process, and ultimately improving their quality of life in the future.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Student with Special Educational Needs (SEN), Accommodation, Modification, Attitude.

Introduction:

In the 1980s, the term “integration” underwent a transformation. It had previously been used in relation to the placement of students with special educational needs in public schools and referred mainly to the child's physical inclusion, supported in a way that did not require changes to school life or modifications to the curriculum. The term “inclusion,” however, shifted the focus from the child to the school itself, emphasizing the student's full participation in all aspects of school life. This process involves modifying the national curriculum and providing various types of accommodations based on students' individual needs and abilities (Lia Kurtsikidze, Shoren Tkesheleshvili - A guide to inclusive education for teachers).

In relation to inclusive education, another important term is “special education,” which includes various educational models designed for students who require additional support (such as resource schools, integrated classes, and others). The placement of students in specialized schools or classes should occur only in exceptional cases and is recommended only when participation in a general education classroom cannot adequately meet the child's educational or social needs, or when such placement is necessary for the well-being of the child or other students. In such cases, parents have the right to receive qualified and comprehensive consultation regarding the form of education that best matches their children's needs, enabling them to make an informed decision (A guide to inclusive education for teachers).

Inclusive education aims to transform the modern education system in such a way that schools are fully prepared to meet the needs of every child and create opportunities to increase their level of independence

in various aspects, including academic, cognitive, functional, motor, and communicative development, as well as through the adaptation of the physical environment, the enhancement of staff qualifications, and the encouragement of parental involvement.

Globally, in 2018, after extensive discussion, Portugal succeeded in formulating a broad definition of inclusive education within its legislative framework: “a process aimed at responding to the diverse needs and potential of each and every student (Portugal Presidency of the Council of Ministers, 2018).” Every child has the right to education, including children with disabilities and special educational needs. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) regards inclusive education as a fundamental human right. Inclusive education is an equally accessible educational process within which access to education is ensured for all students.

According to the Salamanca Declaration (1995), “every child has the right to learn alongside their peers in the classroom; to participate in a child-centered educational process in order to meet their individual needs; the implementation of inclusive education with appropriate conditions ensures the involvement of children within it; and inclusive education contributes to the development and effectiveness of an inclusive society.”

In Georgia, within the framework of the Law on General Education, inclusive education is defined as “an equally accessible educational process through which all students are ensured to access education in accordance with their individual educational needs and abilities (Law of Georgia on General Education).

The National Curriculum provides categories (a list) identifying who may be considered a student with special educational needs and therefore may be involved in inclusive education. A student may be identified as having:

- a. a physical disability;
- b. an intellectual developmental disorder;
- c. a learning disability;
- d. a sensory impairment (hearing and/or visual);
- e. speech and language development disorders and communication difficulties;
- f. behavioral and emotional disorders;
- g. a need for long-term hospitalization;
- h. learning difficulties caused by social factors, resulting in an inability to meet the requirements of the National Curriculum;
- i. difficulties caused by a language barrier.

One of the important regulatory documents concerning inclusive education in Georgia is Order No. 16/N, which includes the regulations for the implementation, development, and monitoring of inclusive education, as well as the approval of the mechanism for identifying students with special educational needs (Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia, Order No. 16/N).

Procedure for Granting SEN Status

An important aspect of inclusive education is the process through which the status of a student with special educational needs (SEN) is determined or removed, as well as the identification of various specialists who support inclusive education within the school. Together with subject teachers, these specialists work on developing different skills according to the student's needs and abilities.

According to Order No. 16/N, the first individuals to identify a child's initial difficulties within the educational setting are the subject teacher or teachers. They may observe that a student is unable to meet the minimum requirements established by the National Curriculum in a specific subject (note: even difficulty in a single subject may become grounds for determining special educational needs). The teacher observes the student over a certain period of time, applies different teaching methodologies, and if the difficulties still cannot be overcome, informs the class tutor, school administration, the student's parent, and the special education teacher. Joint measures are then implemented. If the challenges persist, the parent/legal representative is advised to submit a formal application addressed to the school principal. Through the Resource Center, this application, together with the accompanying documentation, is forwarded to the Inclusive and Support Center (Department) of the Mandaturi Service. The documentation includes:

- The school referral form;
- information provided by teachers of all subjects regarding the student's academic performance in relation to the National Curriculum;
- the school referral form signed by the school principal;
- recommendations from the inclusive education specialist involved in the process (a special teacher, if the school already has one; otherwise, the responsibility is assumed by the class tutor);
- descriptions of the student's cognitive, academic, and functional skills.

The case is then referred to a specialist working within the department (the so-called psycho-educational assessment and counseling specialist). The psycho-educational assessment and counseling specialist contacts the parent and arranges the date, time, and place for the student's psycho-educational assessment. Afterwards, within the timeframes established by the order, the specialist sends the assessment report and recommendations to the school. This report becomes the basis for developing an Individual Educational Plan (IEP) for the student, based on the National Curriculum.

Responsibilities of a Psycho-educational Assessment and Counseling Specialist

According to the legislation, in schools and vocational institutions, the determination of special educational needs (SEN) status is exclusively within the competence of the psycho-educational assessment and counseling specialist. Therefore, the purposes of referral to this specialist may include:

- initial assessment and identification of special educational needs;
- re-assessment of a student with SEN in order to define additional recommendations;
- assessment for the removal of SEN status;
- assessment for transition from kindergarten to school;
- assessment for transition from school to a vocational education institution;
- assessment for enrollment in an integrated class;

- assessment for enrollment in a resource school;
- assessment to determine the need for a special education needs assistant, psychologist, and/or other specialists;
- transition from kindergarten to school;
- transition from school to vocational education institution.

After receiving the psycho-educational conclusion, the school takes into account the specialist's recommendations and, based on the child's needs, cooperates both with the Ministry of Education, Science and Youth, as well as with the psycho-educational assessment and counseling specialist on all relevant issues related to the student with special educational needs (SEN).

Key human resources supporting inclusive education in the school environment include:

- special teacher;
- psychologist;
- occupational therapist;
- speech and language therapist;
- sign language interpreter;
- sign language specialist;
- individual assistant for a person with special educational needs;
- mobility and orientation specialist.

Specialists support students within the scope of their competence and contribute to the development of their skills and the increase of their level of independence. Naturally, the mere presence of specialists cannot ensure effective outcomes if a supportive environment is not in place. This requires close cooperation among the school community—administration, subject teachers, and parents—because “inclusion means everyone.”

International and local research on inclusive education

Contemporary research shows that inclusive education is beneficial both for students with disabilities or special educational needs and for typically developing children, as it contributes to higher-quality teaching and pedagogy overall (Brantlinger, 2006; Layser & Kirk, 2007; Floarian, 2010; Hwang & Evans, 2011; Lindsay, 2011; Odom, Buysse, & Soukakou, 2012). .

A portion of studies has confirmed the positive impact of inclusive environments on the learning outcomes of all students (23% of studies), while the majority of research indicates that the inclusion of children with disabilities has no negative effect on the learning of typically developing students (81% of studies) (Kalambouka, Farrell, Dyson, Kaplan, 2007). According to one study, in inclusive environments where the learning process is based on cooperation, typically developing students develop stronger motivational skills and gain deeper knowledge (Hunt, 2019).

According to an Australian study, teachers' positive attitudes significantly contribute to the implementation of inclusive practices in schools, as well as to fostering acceptance of inclusion among

teachers, school staff, students, and parents (Carlson, Hemmings, Wurf, & Reupert, 2012). Teacher training is also essential, as it enables educators to effectively apply the knowledge they acquire in practice and ensure the benefits of inclusive education for all students.

Research also confirms the positive impact of inclusive education on typically developing students, particularly in terms of their social and emotional development. This is reflected in reduced fear of differences, increased social cognition, improved self-concept, and the development of stronger moral and ethical principles. It also contributes to warmer and more empathetic interpersonal relationships (Allport, 1979; Staub & Peck, 1995).

In the field of inclusive education, recent research in Georgia has placed particular emphasis on examining the attitudes and perceptions of society, teachers, special education teachers, assistants, and psychologists toward students with special educational needs. It has also explored whether the information provided about inclusive education influences changes in attitudes toward students with special needs or disabilities.

Findings confirm that training in inclusive education leads to positive changes in attitudes toward students with special educational needs. One such study, conducted in 2016–2017 across several educational institutions in Georgia, including universities and schools, revealed that the attitudes of individuals who initially held neutral or negative views toward inclusive education changed significantly after gaining relevant knowledge and experience. While teachers' attitudes toward inclusion are critically important, they are not sufficient on their own to ensure effective implementation of inclusive education (Kalandarishvili Maia, Eka Ninoshvili, Tamar Tukhashvili)

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For children with various types of learning difficulties, it is essential that educational institutions provide multi-layered support, including the adaptation of the physical environment, the retraining of human resources (especially teachers) in the field of inclusive education, and effective communication with parents—both of students with special educational needs and typically developing children—in order to raise awareness.

One of the challenges in the school environment is the insufficient training or attitudes of teachers toward inclusive education, which to some extent affects their interactions with students and, consequently, their academic performance. It should be noted that in Georgia, several initiatives are being implemented in this direction, such as training programs organized by the Teacher Development Center for subject teachers, special education teachers, assistants, and psychologists. Additional support is provided through recommendations from special education teachers and awareness-raising activities, as well as webinars organized by the Inclusive Education Department of the Mandaturi Service on various topics.

Despite these efforts, one of the remaining challenges is ensuring comprehensive support for teachers in working with students with special educational needs. Although attitudes have partially improved compared to previous years, further development is still needed.

Research conducted in various countries also shows that teachers who have insufficient knowledge, experience, or willingness/acceptance in working with students of diverse abilities may sometimes become a barrier to the successful implementation of inclusive education.

Surveys of teachers have found that this may be caused by a lack of adequate training. For example, studies conducted in the United States and Scotland revealed that the majority of teachers reported insufficient support in this area. While in theory they supported the concept of inclusive education, in practice they were less willing to have students with diverse needs in their classrooms.

Research indicates that the flexibility and adaptability of teaching methods is one of the most effective practices for ensuring the inclusion of all children in the learning process (Tomlinson, 2014). At the same time, the creation of a positive environment is crucial for promoting inclusive education. Recent studies emphasize that a positive environment—characterized by mutual respect, emotional safety, and a high level of cooperation—significantly increases students' motivation and well-being (Deroncele-Acosta, Ellis, 2024). The introduction of positive frameworks in education is fundamental to inclusivity. Only in such an environment can students' needs be recognized, taken into account, and adequately supported. A positive environment reduces barriers for children with disabilities, special educational needs, or those belonging to marginalized groups (Araujo Dawson, Kilgore, Rawcliffe, 2022). Flexibility and adaptability are fundamental to the success of inclusive education. Flexibility enables teachers to adjust teaching strategies, classroom management methods, and learning resources to meet the diverse needs of students. This, in turn, ensures equal access to learning opportunities. There are various forms of adaptation, depending on the area in which changes are made. In the case of curriculum adaptation, it is necessary to modify goals and content according to children's unique needs (Lübke, Pinguart, Schwinger, 2021). When adapting teaching methods, changes are made in instruction, strategies, and techniques, and so on.

It can confidently be said that inclusive education offers significant benefits in multiple directions for students with special educational needs (SEN) and disabilities, especially when children learn alongside typically developing peers in mainstream schools. In this regard, researchers have found that students with SEN and disabilities who are educated in general education settings and spend more time interacting with typically developing peers tend to achieve higher academic outcomes compared to those educated in specialized institutions (Baker, Wang, & Walberg, 1995; Katz & Mirenda, 2002). Similar findings are supported by a Norwegian study conducted over six years with approximately 500 students with special educational needs, which showed that Students enrolled in mainstream schools were 75% more likely to pursue vocational or academic education later on compared to students enrolled in special classes (Myklebust, 2007).

The particular benefits of inclusive education are also highlighted in relation to children with Down syndrome, especially in the development of literacy and mathematical reasoning skills. In a Swiss study involving 68 groups of students with similar characteristics—such as age, intellectual difficulties, living with parents, and comparable initial test results in reading and mathematics—two years of observation revealed that mathematical skills developed at a similar rate across groups, while reading skills were significantly better developed among students attending regular schools. The only key difference between

the groups was the type of school attended: some students were enrolled in mainstream education, while others attended specialized institutions(Dessementet, Bless, & Morin, 2012).

Beyond academic benefits, researchers also highlight the social advantages for students with special educational needs, who, through interaction, develop positive social-emotional skills such as self-help, conflict resolution, self-regulation, and others. This is significantly influenced by ensuring inclusion from an early age(Center on the Developing Child, 2007).

In conclusion, despite a number of challenges, research confirms the benefits of inclusive education for both students with special educational needs and disabilities and typically developing students across various dimensions. It is recommended that further research in this area continue in Georgia, focusing on large-scale populations to examine the attitudes of subject teachers, school administration, and professionals from different fields toward students with diverse abilities. Such research would help create an equal, accessible, and supportive environment for all, in line with the bio-psycho-social model.

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