Challenges And Functions Of Specialists Of The Regional Psycho-Pedagogical Support Centers In Armenia's Transition To Universal Inclusion

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ABSTRACT
In this article, we present the operational mechanisms of the inclusive education system in the Republic of Armenia, ongoing legislative changes, and preparatory activities towards achieving universal inclusivity by 2025. Within the context of Armenia's transition to universal inclusivity, we studied the functioning of regional psycho-pedagogical support centers (RPPSC) and the quality of services provided in Tavush, Lori, and Syunik regions. The study was conducted using observation, questionnaire surveys, and interviews. Participants included 1040 teachers, 740 parents, and 220 professionals from support services. The quality of professional services provided by special educators, social pedagogues, and psychologists, the specifics of creating individual educational plans for children requiring special educational conditions, existing difficulties, problems faced by teachers and teacher assistants, and the role of parents in inclusive education processes has been examined.
The findings of the study indicate that the quality of support services provided by specialists in schools and RPPSC cannot be considered sufficient. Constructive collaboration issues exist among supporting specialists, parents, teachers, and teacher assistants. The lack of narrowly specialized special educators in both schools and RPPSC is particularly concerning.
The study concluded that schools in the mentioned three regions of Armenia, even almost decade later, are not prepared for universal inclusion. According to all respondents, the existing school education system is incompatible for children with medium, severe, and profound educational needs, various emotional and behavioral disorders, or certain severe forms of autism, making an alternative model of inclusion essential for these children. Another important finding and conclusion is that while promoting universal inclusion ideology and transitioning to this educational system, the rights of children without special educational needs are neglected, despite emphasizing and valuing the rights of those who do.
***Keywords**: inclusive education, regional psycho-pedagogical support center, special educational needs (SEN), individual learning plan (ILP), special educator, teacher assistant, support team.*

INTRODUCTION

"Schools should accommodate all children, regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions." The Salamanca Statement emphasizes that **inclusive schools** are the **most effective means** of combating discriminatory attitudes, building an inclusive society, and improving the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of education systems (UNESCO,1994).
Inclusive education is a process aimed at meeting learners' diverse needs and reducing their exclusion from education and social life. It is characterized by six main features:

1. Education must be based on diversity rather than uniformity.
2. Educational processes should be organized using methods and approaches that address the unique needs of each child.
3. Schools should develop curricula balancing unity and uniqueness.

4. Schools must identify and neutralize factors hindering full participation in educational life for all students.
5. Inclusive education implies deep and long-term changes in the organization and management of educational processes.
6. Inclusive education involves creating supportive structures and resources for teachers, administrative staff, students, parents, and other stakeholders of the inclusive education system (Center for Educational Research and Consulting, 2013).

At the 48th session of the International Conference on Education held in Geneva in 2008, several key provisions directly relating to clarifying concepts such as "inclusive education," "education for all," and "integration in education" were discussed. Although these terms are often equated, they inherently have fundamentally different goals and objectives. Inclusive education should also not be equated with educational integration, as inclusive education ensures the participation of children with special educational needs (SEN) in educational processes, whereas integration secures the right to quality education for all (Center for Educational Research and Consulting, 2013).

Adopting these approaches implies deep transformations in the educational system and legislation, which should be clearly defined and developed to solidify the idea of inclusive education. The idea of inclusive education in Armenia emerged in 2005, 11 years after the Salamanca Declaration, when the law "On Education of Persons with Special Educational Needs" of the Republic of Armenia was adopted (RA National Assembly, 2005; repealed on 03.01.2015). After the law's adoption, inclusive education began to be implemented in several schools in Yerevan. At that time, NGOs significantly supported the Ministry of Education and Science in implementing inclusive education. There were numerous issues and difficulties; schools lacked an appropriate accessible physical environment, facilities, teachers experienced in working with children requiring special educational conditions, necessary methodological training, and society, parental communities, and students themselves were unprepared for emerging realities. Psychologists and social workers worked with children needing special educational conditions very often without having sufficient knowledge and skills. The definition of inclusive education in the law did not fully reflect its professional essence or ideological foundation. The law's formulation did not emphasize creating equal educational opportunities for all students and meeting their needs derived from their unique characteristics. Essentially, it only addressed joint education within general schools in the same building and classroom, without considering the development of methodologies for educational quality, educational needs, special conditions, planning, and implementation of related actions. Retrospectively, this practice could be described more as integration than inclusion.

In 2014, amendments to Armenia's "Law on General Education" redefined inclusive education as "ensuring maximum participation in educational processes and achieving results defined by state educational standards for every child, including those with special educational needs, by providing necessary conditions and an adapted environment in line with developmental specifics" (RA National Assembly, 2014). According to amendments enacted on December 1, 2014, the general education system must do the transition to universal inclusion by 2025 (RA National Assembly, 2014).

Given these legislative changes within Armenia's educational policy, it is pertinent to undertake comprehensive and systematic research on implementing inclusive education, identifying achievements, challenges, and readiness levels since 2005, and developing evidence-based methodologies for smoothly transitioning to universal inclusion, underscoring the importance and urgency of our research.

Methodological Framework of the current research is based the studies of M. Fullan (2016), P. Farrell (2000; 2007; 2008), F. Kiuppis (2014), G. Irokaba (2015), E. Barinova (2023), L. Belenkova (2011), O. Kozyreva (2023), T. Furiayeva (2023), E. Gerosimou (2025), M. Hong (2025), A. Rapp and A. Corral-Granados (2024), M. Jardines (2024), A. Kefalinou (2020), D. Chambers (2020), T. Chiu, C. Lim (2020), A. Collazo (2022), M. Poikola, E. Kärnä, and S. Hakalehto (2024), A. Svajyan (2013), foundational approaches, and relevant international and local regulatory documents.

Based on the all mentioned above, the research aims to assess the quality of inclusive education in Armenia, particularly in Tavush, Lori, and Syunik regions, and investigate the activities of schools and RPPSC within the context of universal inclusion transition challenges.

RESEARCH METHODS

In alignment with the stated research aim, the study employed a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the subject. Specifically, the research process involved the use of systematic observation, allowing for the direct examination of behaviors and practices within the studied context; questionnaire-based surveys, which provided measurable data from a broad sample of participants; and semi-structured interviews, offering deeper insights into individual experiences, perceptions, and challenges. This mixed-methods approach was chosen to capture both statistical trends and nuanced perspectives related to the research topic.

The research objectives were identified as follows:

1. To investigate the status of inclusive education in the Tavush, Lori, and Syunik regiona of the Republic of Armenia;
2. To identify the problems and necessities related to the concentration of professional resources required for the implementation of inclusive education;
3. To assess the role of the RPPSC in the universal inclusion process and the quality of the services (support) they provide;
4. To examine the activities, functions, provided services, and quality of cooperation of the multidisciplinary teams;
5. To highlight the obstacles to the implementation of inclusive education;
6. To evaluate the level of readiness of society, communities, and schools in these provinces regarding issues of universal inclusion;
7. To uncover and clarify the functions of teaching assistants and their participation in the inclusive education process.

Based on the objective the research methods were identified and implemented.

The observation method allowed to see the reality, the true picture of objects and phenomena in an unrestricted environment. By observing the school environment, the availability of certain inclusion-related resources, and the quality of the physical environment, the most objective data is recorded (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018).

The interview provides broad opportunities for qualitative analysis of the research data. Indeed, it may inhibit some participants, but with competent organization these obstacles are overcome. Participation in in-depth interviews is voluntary (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

The questionnaire survey makes it possible to collect quantitative research data (Schaefer & Presser, 2003). Surveys conducted using questionnaires were administered in group form and distributed to parents, teachers, members of the school-based multidisciplinary teams, teaching assistants, and members of the multidisciplinary teams working at the RPPSC. Although each group's questionnaire contained the same logical structure, some items differed in their specific content. The questionnaires for teaching assistants and teachers were identical. Respondents completed the questionnaires in separate rooms under researcher supervision, having first been given detailed information about the study's core purpose and having verbally expressed their consent (Table 1).

The questionnaire survey method in this study formed the basis for collecting the quantitative results of the research. However, in addition to quantitative data, qualitative analyses were carried out based on in-depth interview data. The interview questions were prepared in advance and derived from the research purpose and main problems. This data-collection method was conducted individually; an audio recorder was used to record the interviews. Interviews were conducted with school teachers and regional support teams, as well as with teaching assistants.

Table 1. *Research participants*

	Teachers		Parents		SSS		Total
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	
Tavush	324	31	221	24	74	2	676
Syunik	295	22	195	15	57	-	584
Lori	311	38	244	41	79	8	721
Total	930	110	660	80	210	10	2000
	1040		740		220		

Table 2. *General Statistical Data on Schools and Student Population*

Region	Total schools N	Schools N where SEN students study	N of SEN students	RPPSC N
Tavush	80	71	457	4
Syunik	118	59	382	3
Lori	149	94	903	4

To ensure the effectiveness of the study, a pilot investigation was conducted, during which the research instruments were clarified and refined. In order to preserve the objectivity of the research, participants' personal data were not recorded, and the audio recordings were not retained after the transcription of results.The chosen methods make it possible to register quite precise results, because the questions included both in the questionnaires and in the interviews developed and reflected in the instruments for both parents and teachers complement one another and provide cross-validating content for the findings. They supply both quantitative and qualitative data to the researcher and make it possible, for example, to calculate the interrelation of responses to the same question given by a parent, a teacher, a member of the multidisciplinary team, and a teaching assistant.

The data obtained through interviews and questionnaires were also combined with the observation findings, which were recorded as conclusions during the course of the study. This approach allows potential deviations in the research results to be minimized, which is a critical precondition for drawing valid conclusions. The quota composition of participants in the questionnaire survey was formed according to the following indicators: gender, age, education, and region.

According to these indicators, quota sampling was set to correspond to a 95% confidence level. Within the framework of this study, the complete sampling method was used when surveying specialists from the RPPSC as a form of purposive selection. Because the number of selected participants was manageable, the use of the complete sampling technique has both practical and informational significance (Crosman, 2018).

For the qualitative portion of the research, a list of potential interviewees was defined in advance, from which interview participants were then selected sequentially using the snowball method. This method allows studies to proceed even when there is a shortage of participants. The snowball method can also be useful for identifying participants with certain characteristics (Brais-Govan, 2004).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research findings make it possible to note existing differences in the operation of RPPSC across the three regions in Armenia. For example, in Tavush region, psycho-pedagogical support services are delegated to branches of the "Bridge of Hope" NGO in Dilijan, Ijevan, Berd, and Noyemberyan provinces (Government Decision No. 6 of 18 February 2016). And because these provinces have provided services for students with SEN for many years, for instance, the Ijevan branch has been operating for 16 years, they continue their

activities, and therefore a significant portion of the registered children in the province continue to receive services at the centers.

Thus, the Ijevan branch of the "Bridge of Hope" NGO provides school-based services to a total of 212 registered children, of whom 145 also attend the center. These visits have different rationales and pursue different goals; for example, a support specialist may visit the child at school once a week, while the child visits the center on another occasion. The same situation is observed at the other branches in Tavush province.

A completely different situation exists in Lori and Syunik provinces, where support services are delivered primarily in schools. Here, the problematic issue is that a small support team and a large number of registered children cannot, in direct proportion, guarantee quality services. For example, the Vanadzor RPPSC has 26 support specialists who serve 39 schools, supporting 337 registered students with SEN. Ministerial Order No. 370-N of 13 April 2017 on the procedure for providing psycho-pedagogical support services in educational organization stipulates that regional support centers must provide support to each child in school at least once a week (Ministry of Education and Science, 2017). But this provision of the above order is more than problematic, especially considering that there are schools without any support team, or where the only teaching assistant is, for example, an English teacher by profession. This demonstrates that students with SEN do not receive the appropriate quantity and quality of services, which in itself contradicts the philosophy of universal inclusion.

Government Decision No. 6 of 18 February 2016 approving the action plan and timeline for the implementation of the universal inclusive education system set the transition to universal inclusion in Syunik province in 2016 and in Lori and Tavush provinces in 2017. Then, in 2017, Ministerial Order No. 370-N of 13 April 2017 defined the type, timing, duration, and volume of support services envisaged by the individual learning plan (ILP). Here, the level of need for special eucational conditions is defined as mild, moderate, severe, or profound.

The order clearly specifies that in cases of mild needs, the monitoring is provided; for moderate need - frequent support; for severe needs - high-frequency support; and for profound need - the constant support. If, for example, the time period allocated for "frequent support" is divided across the days of the week, 25.7 minutes per day is obtained; for "high frequency support," 35.7 minutes per day is calculated. This raises a number of questions: first, whether support is actually being provided to these children for the prescribed duration, and second, even if it is, whether it is sufficient. According to expert opinion, the answer is unequivocally negative.

This is especially concerning given that families living in rural, and even some urban settlements in the provinces face serious socio-economic challenges, and in most cases, the only institution through which support services are provided to the child is the school.

The numeric data presented in the table make it possible to address qualitative questions, namely: is it possible for a support team with such a small number of members to provide quality services to students with SEN, while at the same time meeting the types and time frames of support services stipulated by Ministerial Order No. 370-N of 13 April 2017. The conclusion here is clear: absolutely not. And this is the view of all support-team members at every RPPSC involved in the qualitative research across the three provinces.

At the same time, that same Order specifically lists environmental adaptations as part of the support package, including adapted personal items and technologies for daily living, assistive devices, accessible literature, Braille-formatted books, manuals and audiovisual materials, large-print materials, simplified and easy-to-comprehend texts, portable and fixed ramps at entrances and exits, wide doorways, flush-floor thresholds, adapted restrooms, special signage, and related technologies; mobility-aid equipment and technologies; as well as personal assistance and additional time. It goes without saying that all of this should serve as the foundation for universal inclusion, and that the overall process should be built upon existing resources. However, today these environmental adaptations, both in schools and in support centers, are either completely absent or available only in negligible quantities. The foregoing raises serious concerns for both

public and private organizations working within the framework of inclusive education and the social and educational challenges of students with SEN.

One of the prerequisites for the effective implementation of any universal inclusive education activity is the presence of appropriate environmental conditions, which implies the accessibility of an object's geographic and physical location and the means of moving to and within it. From this perspective, we examined the geographic accessibility of the RPPSC in Tavush, Lori, and Syunik regiones by comparing each center's distance to the settlements it serves. The majority of parents surveyed in all three regions considered the geographic location of the psycho-pedagogical support center to be unfavorable in terms of the distance between the settlement and the center. These indicators give serious cause for reflection, since qualitative data show that students with SEN visit the regional centers only in Tavush region.

In contrast, in Lori and Syunik regions these studnets primarily receive services at their schools during visits by the support-team members. It is also worrying that, in urban settlements, children with special educational needs receive services at school twice a week, whereas in rural settlements they receive services only once, due to barriers preventing specialists from traveling.

The observation method also allowed to examine the geographic locations of the RPPSC and the accessibility of the roads leading to them. It should be noted that the specialized schools reorganized into regional centers and built during the Soviet period are quite distant from settlements, even when located within city limits. Examples of such centers include the Vanadzor, Alaverdi, Stepanavan, and Kapan regional centers, which are difficult to reach not only by private vehicle (there is no public transport) but are also nearly inaccessible on foot. Within the support teams at the regional centers, the majority of included specialists were pedagogical psychologists (37%), psychologists (18%), and social pedagogues (12%). Notably, according to the established regulations, the RPPSC's team should primarily consist of specialists providing special pedagogical services: speech therapists, typhlopedagogues, surdopedagogues, oligophrenopedagogues, and special educators to serve children with moderate, severe, and profound developmental disorders. However, the research findings show that in the provinces studied, these specialists remain under-represented in the team composition.

Given that the RPPSC serve an average of 158 registered children with developmental disorders, it is noteworthy to consider the average number of children served per day. Thus, the majority of center specialists (58%) serve 1–3 children per day. Moreover, these services are primarily delivered by special educators, psychologists, social workers, and psycho-pedagogical support specialists or educators. Referring to the qualitative data, it becomes evident that the support or specialized work conducted with each child averages 35–50 minutes in duration. On the other hand, specialists assert that the work carried out according to the prescribed time norms can sometimes fail to yield the expected outcomes, due to the child's individual characteristics and socio-economic and socio-cultural factors, forcing the specialist to deviate from organizational norms in order to increase effectiveness.

A total of 81 % of support specialists participated in courses and retraining aimed at improving and refining the skills and professional qualities of those serving these children. The chart shows that the majority of respondents (36 %) attend retraining twice a year (Chart 1). The remaining specialists undergo training irregularly on an as-needed basis or through self-education, and not very frequently indicating a lack of clear institutional direction regarding this issue.

Turning to the substantive content of the training, the majority of specialists emphasized the need for professional development focused on practical work and new methods (22%) as well as on speech disorders (22%). They also identified working with children who require special educational conditions as a current training topic (21%), highlighted the need for training on the characteristics of social-pedagogical practical work (10%), and named courses addressing autism-related issues (12%).

From the way these training topics were defined by field, it becomes clear that specialists do not have a precise understanding of these divisions: they treated work with children exhibiting behavioral disorders as distinct

from work with children on the autism spectrum. Participants did not specify thematic differences for training aimed at supporting children with complex and multiple needs or those requiring special educational conditions, instead referring to the latter as a separate field.

Chart 1. *Trainings of support service specialist.*
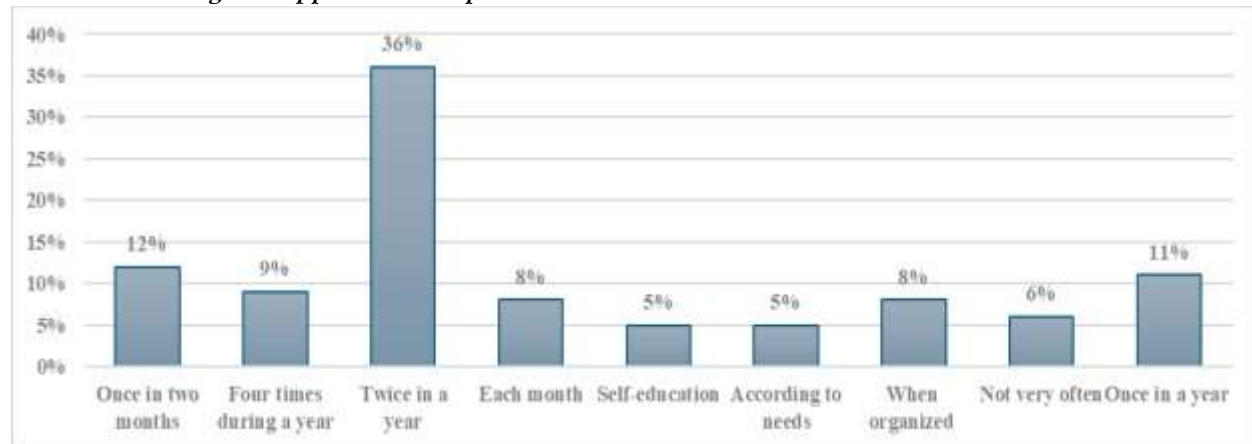
When analyzing the challenges that arise in supporting a student with SEN, the support service team particularly singled out the conditions necessary for effectively organizing inclusive processes in school. The greatest emphasis was placed on didactics and manuals (42%) and adapting the school physical environment (41%), society cognition development related to inclusive education (34%), organizing professional seminars and further training (33%), proper organization of specialists' cooperation (30%), schools' reformation and capacity building in line with inclusive-education standards (22%) (Chart 2).

In contrast to these substantial arguments, only 25% of respondents considered it important to ensure teaching assistants receive appropriate training and have clearly defined functions, and 42% pointed to the low number of children with SEN in classrooms. Nevertheless, a notable and concerning finding is that a large group of respondents (39%) continue to believe that special schools and specialized classrooms are necessary to organize the education of children with special educational needs effectively and properly.

This analysis also underscores the need to address the requirement for professional development and its thematic scope in order to effectively organize inclusive educational processes. Within this framework, survey results emphasize that the majority of respondents (28%) feel training on topics related to behavioral disorders is necessary. Following that, support-center specialists highlight the importance of training on speech disorders, particularly articulation difficulties and general speech underdevelopment (25%). As for the need for training on autism-related issues, 17% of respondents considered it important.

Chart 2. *Challenges of the support service specialist.*
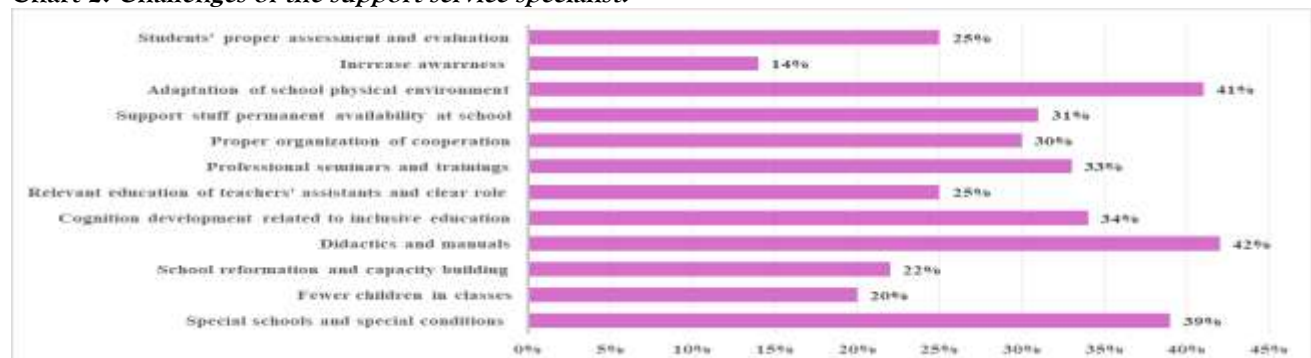
Summarizing the findings regarding challenges in supporting a student with SEN, it can be concluded that the limited accessibility of teaching aids and didactics as well as difficult accessibility of instructional support materials (31%), the lack of adapted physical conditions and environment (29%), barriers and obstacles related to geographical mobility (21%), and difficulties in working with parents (19%) are significant impediments to the work of the multidisciplinary team, clearly indicating the necessity for appropriate resources or assistive tools to improve the team's effectiveness (Chart 3).

Chart 3. *Challenges in supporting students with SEN.*

The
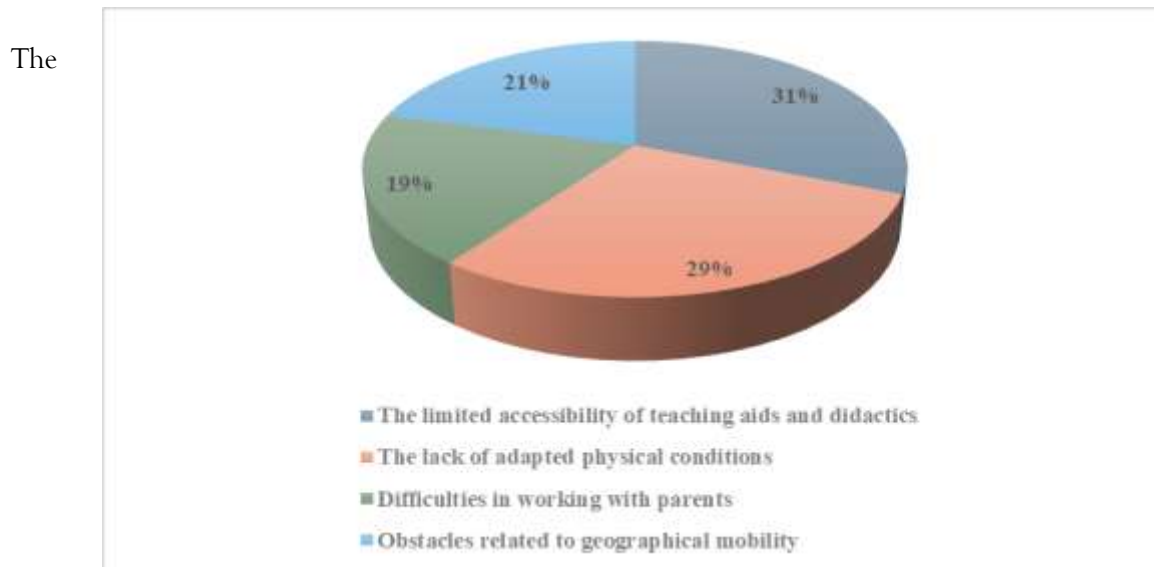
qualitative research also corroborates the need for these resources and tools: in-depth analysis shows that, according to support-center specialists, the absence of appropriate literature, where clear guidance, necessary criteria, and the most effective methods or therapies for working with students who have intellectual disabilities or autism spectrum disorders would be specified, constitutes a major obstacle to effective work.

When asked in interviews about which specific needs make service provision difficult, the majority of support service specialists pointed to children's auditory and motor impairments, since the physical environment is not architecturally adapted to their needs and there is a lack of appropriate auditory equipment and technologies. Specialists singled out the intractable difficulties encountered when working with children with autism spectrum disorders and those with severe intellectual disabilities. These challenges are primarily due to the fact that teachers lack the requisite skills and knowledge to work effectively with these students and cannot ensure their participation in the educational process, resulting in their exclusion from schooling. On the other hand, difficulties also arise because teachers do not master the mechanisms, skills, and techniques needed to manage the behavior of children with autism spectrum disorders: *"Sometimes the child's behavior becomes aggressive, manifesting in physical actions such as crying, screaming, or aggressive conduct in social settings. This, in turn, causes concern among parents, who feel that the presence of children with autism negatively affects the behavior and emotional well-being of non-disabled children."* Consequently, negative attitudes toward inclusive education develop and solidify among parents.

In contrast to this percentage breakdown, only 6% of support center specialists in the quantitative survey considered the activities of specialists themselves as the most important resource for improving service quality. However, during qualitative data collection nearly everyone noted that the support team is severely understaffed, which directly impacts the quality of services provided, a concern voiced by regional support-center directors, support specialists, school principals, and teaching assistants alike. Indeed, this is reflected

in the ratio of support-center specialists to the number of children requiring services: for example, the Vanadzor regional center has 26 support specialists serving 357 children in need of support.

The survey results regarding collaboration between parents of children with special educational needs and specialists from the regional support centers unequivocally show 100% validity and cumulative indicators. At the same time, when asked about the effectiveness of that collaboration, only 39% of support-team specialists rated it 4 out of 5 on a scale where one is the lowest score and five is the highest; 37% of respondents rated it 3.

While reflecting to the main difficulties and issues of interaction with children having SEN the majority of respondents (37%) outlined the organizational issues, 31% reflected to issues connected with professional proper role performances. Still, 19% responded that main issues are connected with wrong time distribution for service provision, which considered to be not effective, and the smallest number of respondents (13%) talk about insufficient services provided to SEN students in term of the quality (Chart 4).

Chart 4. *Main issues of interaction with students with SEN.*
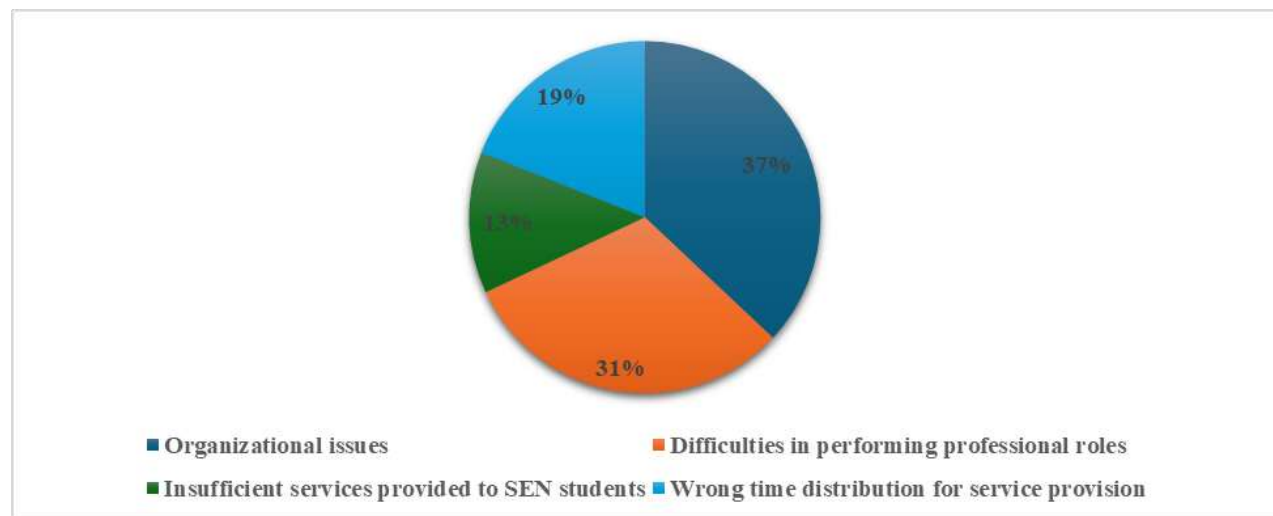
Surveys aimed at uncovering obstacles to using the regional support center's services revealed that the majority of parents consider the distance from their settlement to the center the greatest barrier (63%), followed by insufficient preparedness of the professional team (25%), and, as a factor, 12% of respondents cited a lack of awareness about the center's services.

In the same context, qualitative analysis of factors hindering the effectiveness of support-center activities shows that pronounced difficulties also arise during support-team visits to remote rural communities. Although specialists travel using a center-provided vehicle, the exhausting length (in kilometers) and duration of the journey present serious obstacles to efficiency. In adverse weather conditions, the challenge of travel and overcoming distance becomes even more acute. Parents reported: *"There are instances when the visit cannot take place due to weather conditions."*

Examining specialists' work with teachers, the main issues identified were organizational difficulties (37%), challenges in fulfilling roles and responsibilities (31%), and the provision of services inadequate to the needs of children with special educational needs (13%).

Interviews with support-center specialists indicate that disagreements and difficulties between center staff and the multidisciplinary school team most often stem from poorly drafted ILPs. Teachers frequently struggle with the paperwork and time demands of preparing an ILP, viewing it as a time-consuming process that is not an effective tool for inclusive education. Dissatisfaction is particularly pronounced among veteran teachers who do not see ILP preparation as part of their duties and consider it largely a formality. Respondents also linked dissatisfaction to functional shortcomings in the teaching-assistant role; some assistants, they said,

merely ensure a formal presence in the classroom, if they attend at all. Ultimately, specialists agreed that work will only be effective if all participants collaborate in defining the child's needs and determining appropriate methods and approaches.

During collaboration with teachers, difficulties were also recorded at the institutional level regarding the specialists responsible for work with students who require special educational conditions, which were due to their lack of awareness and insufficient information. Mostly (36%) have outlined organizational issues, while 31% of respondents reflect to the wrong recognition and interpretation of teachers' roles. At the same time, 14% of respondents mentioned not sufficient services provided to students with SEN. Still 9% think that there is no any problems or difficulties.

**Chart 5.** *Difficulties while cooperating with teachers.*
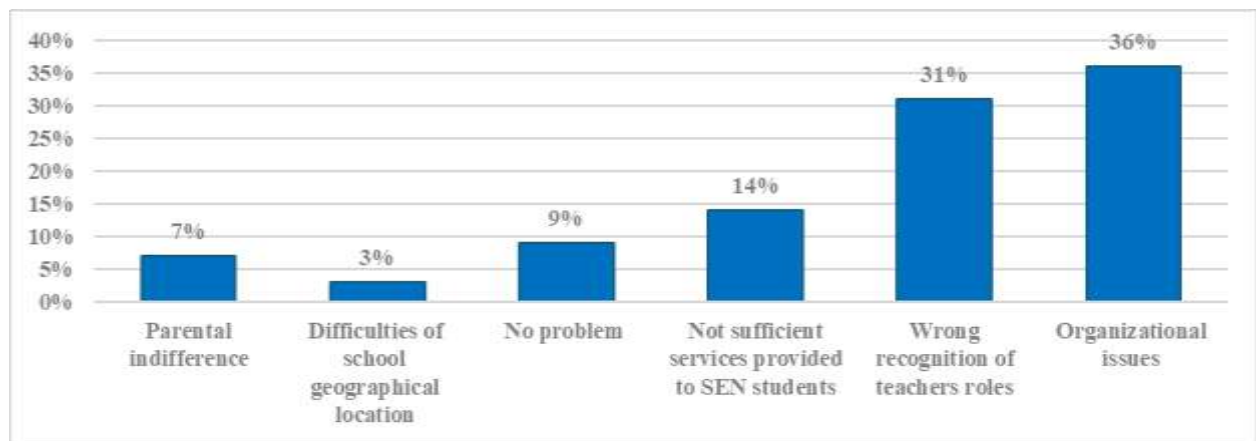
Thirthy two percent of specialists indicated that everyone is responsible in this matter, while 26% attributed responsibility both to narrow-specialist staff and to the vice-principal in charge of academic affairs. Only 18% believed that the teacher is responsible for the issue at hand, whereas just 4% of respondents mentioned the responsibility of the school and the support service. As for the responsibility of the parent there is only 8% responses (Chart 6).

Chart 6. *Responsible for work with students with SEN.*
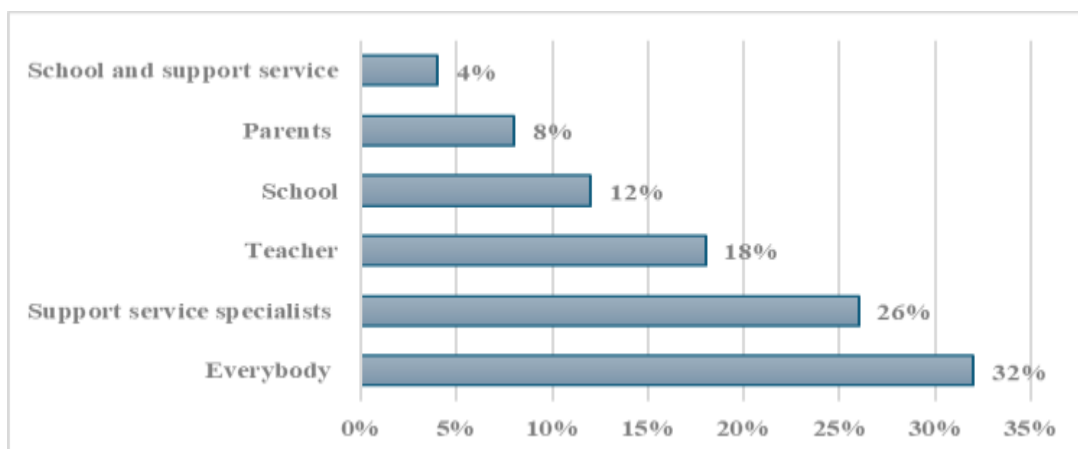
To the question of how they try to overcome the difficulties that have arisen, the responses given by members of the support service specialists are concerning in that the majority of respondents (27%) believe those problems, nevertheless, will not be overcome. Some consider that providing transportation will help the problems resolution (16%), applying to the school principal, deputy principal or coordinators (20%), and cooperating and consulting with various specialists (15%) can resolve the difficulties, while only 8% mentioned demonstrating patience and 10% cited that visits by regional-center specialists to the school are not coordinated and that is a problem requiring resolution. Notably, when perceiving these difficulties, participants primarily imagined them within the school setting and did not view them as issues originating in the regional center or as infrastructural problems (Chart 7).

Chart 7. *Overcoming difficulties.*
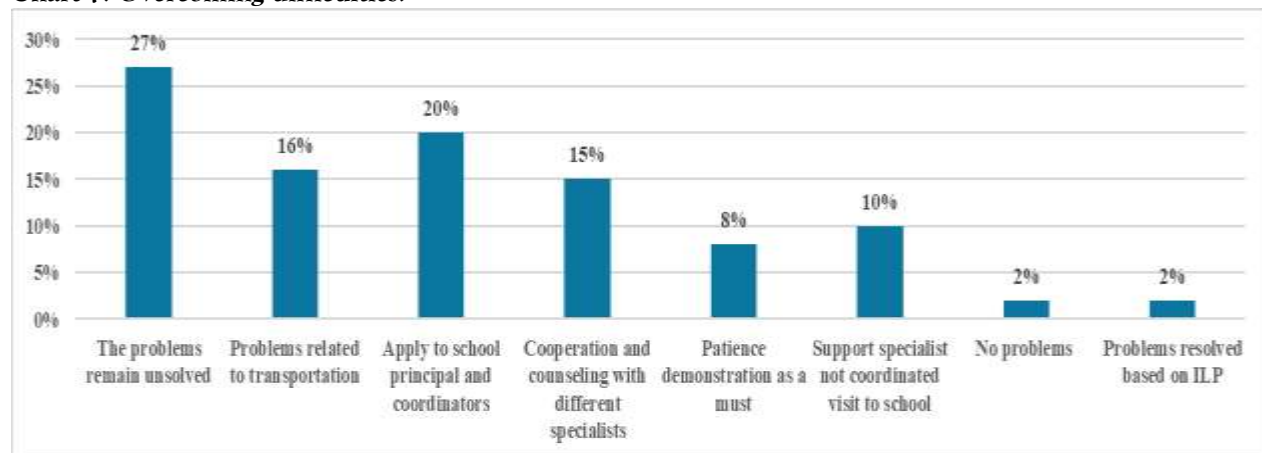
This analysis also reveals the need to address the requirement and thematic scope of in-service training necessary for the effective organization of inclusive educational processes. Within that framework, survey results emphasize that the majority of respondents (28 %) see a need for training on topics related to behavioral disorders, followed by support-center specialists who highlight the importance of training on speech disorders particularly articulation difficulties and general speech underdevelopment (25 %). As for the necessity of training on autism-related issues, 17% of respondents considered it important.

It is quite concerning that the existence of educational standards and the need to apply them in their work stems are either not being discussed or not known at all. The finding reflects, that psycho-pedagogical support specialists were unaware even, from a negative attitude that has developed in the field: the roles of narrowly specialized special-education experts have been marginalized within Armenia's educational-reform framework, with preference given to teaching assistants and attempts made to replace specialist work with underqualified personnel.

Consequently, most surveyed specialists had no knowledge of the staffing lists, job descriptions, or role definitions established during the transition to universal inclusion. This likely explains why they were unaware of the functions prescribed by the educational standards and lacked any legislative or legal guidance. Although educational standards and instructional materials serve as guiding indicators, specialists nonetheless identify their own preferred and effective support methods used with students who require special educational conditions. These methods, reveal that the primary method employed is developmental play (25 %), followed by conversational techniques (15 %) and art therapy (9 %). The qualitative data shows that many support-center specialists lack a clear understanding of what constitutes a "method," as evidenced by responses such as "*I cannot name the method; individual sessions, various verbal prompts, I create them myself, didactic materials, professional literature, etc.*" Indeed, the qualitative research results also confirm this: while

most psychologists surveyed had a clear sense of their professional activities, many other specialists struggled to name specific methods. For center psychologists, support content consists of various psychological tests (e.g., the DAP Test, Lüscher Color Test), behavioral approaches, psychological methods (conversation, observation), therapies (sand play therapy, music therapy, dance therapy), and the use of didactic materials tailored to the child's age and the severity of their challenges.

CONCLUSIONS

The research yielded the following conclusions:

1. Not all schools had a multidisciplinary team; there was a shortage of special-education specialists.
2. The quality of support-team activities and collaboration with teachers, parents, and teaching assistants was low.
3. There are procedural disagreements and role- and responsibility-confusion in many aspects of support-center and school operations.
4. Support-center specialists' visits to schools were also of low effectiveness: even they noted that reaching the school consumes too much time, which is unavoidable.
5. Both support-center and school multidisciplinary-team members possess very low levels of professional knowledge and methodological preparation.
6. The mismatch between the small support team and the large number of registered children cannot guarantee quality psycho-pedagogical services.
7. Due to the geographical inaccessibility of support centers, there are not only challenges in time management and professional capacity but also barriers for many children to reach the centers—exacerbated by poor weather or other external factors.
8. In the three provinces of Tavush, Lori, and Syunik, there are differences in the procedures for providing support services, which require regulation and clarification.
9. Children who are not registered are deprived of necessary services; their psycho-pedagogical support is either unregulated or not provided at all.
10. Parents largely do not perceive the need to assess their child's educational requirements.
11. Educators, school multidisciplinary teams, and teaching assistants often face a mismatch between formal assessment results and the child's actual abilities.
12. In all three provinces, teaching assistants need clearer role definitions and workload management; many work half-time as assistants and half-time in other roles (e.g., psychologist or social pedagogue), resulting in no constructive collaboration between teachers and assistants.
13. The teaching assistants' role is not expressed in student knowledge assessment systems or in organizing classroom, extracurricular, and after-school activities.
14. Most teaching assistants had not undergone professional development.
15. There is excessive paperwork and constantly changing requirements, which, according to teachers, support-team members, and all staff, overburden specialists and prevent them from fully understanding the demands and their purpose. Specialists believe this reduces work effectiveness.
16. The procedure for assessing the development characteristics of children with special educational needs requires revision: the system for evaluating developmental difficulties has shortcomings. Assessment scales provided by local authorities, which record children's characteristics and needs, produce distorted images often far removed from the child's real development and challenges.
17. Clear criteria for assessing the knowledge of children with special educational needs are missing; there are no instruments to determine what and how to evaluate. Teachers demand clear assessment standards—also a request voiced by teaching assistants.
18. The work carried out according to prescribed time norms for supporting children in schools and centers may fail to ensure expected outcomes.

19. Parents and teachers have an incomplete understanding of inclusive education's content and the goals and significance of support-team and center specialists' work. They rarely participate in completing IEPs, and when they do, their involvement is highly formal.

20. The philosophy of inclusive education is undermined by psychological misconceptions: even specialists believe that children with profound developmental disorders and autism do not comprehend their environment and are a burden to society and peers; they are unaware of the psychological needs of these children.

21. Inclusive education also generates psychological issues among parents, many of whom still avoid sending their children to school due to societal pressure. Interviews show that parents, teachers, and children themselves experience psychological challenges; teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education and children with special needs often depend on the school principal's stance.

22. Specialists' professional development occurs haphazardly and largely through self-study, which is inconsistent. Most training is organized by various NGOs, and many specialists find these sessions ineffective and pointless, indicating a clear lack of institutional direction.

23. The physical environment for inclusive education is inaccessible, signaling a need for substantial investment in physical resources.

24. Adult teachers are more resistant to the philosophy of inclusive education; they often display intolerance toward the presence of teaching assistants and the characteristics of children with special needs. These teachers do not view IEP preparation as part of their duties and regard it as purely formal.

25. Schools in all three provinces are unprepared for universal inclusion: all respondents agree that the general education system is incompatible with children who have intellectual (moderate, severe, profound), emotional, behavioral, or certain severe manifestations of autism; they demand an alternative inclusion model.

26. In the process of disseminating the philosophy of universal inclusive education and transitioning to this system—while valuing the rights of children with special educational needs—the rights of children without additional needs are neglected.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the analysis, interpretation, and summary of the research results, the following recommendations have been made:

1. Thoroughly review the existing legislative framework underpinning universal inclusive education, and clarify the requirements and conditions necessary for universal inclusive education by aligning them with the practical implementation of the educational and upbringing processes for children with special educational needs and with the existing resources in general.

2. At the inter-ministerial level, provide primary solutions for adapting school physical environments, addressing issues related to instructional support materials that are mandatory for ensuring the educational process, and for re-equipping professional resources, increasing the number of specialists, and expanding their activities in this process.

3. Reconsider the state-adopted model of universal inclusive education and propose alternative options for children with severe and profound special educational needs and for their families.

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