

**INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN ARMENIA.
REGIONAL PEDAGOGICAL-PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT CENTERS:
RESPONSIBILITIES AND CHALLENGES**

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ABSTRACT

Reforms in the field of education first of all implies adoption of relevant educational policies by upholding certain problematic issues and their practical implementation. Still, any kind of reform besides the positive changes, cause certain problematic issues, which is essentially a pattern. All issues certainly need to be examined, because the innovations in the educational field refer not only to the school students, their teachers and parents but also penetrate into the school life and the entire society become the most effective means to combat discriminatory attitude, to develop and create favorable conditions and to build an inclusive community to ensure the educational process of all students.

From this perspective huge reforms have been done in Armenia and transition to universal inclusive education model has been initiated. New services like pedagogical-psychological support service come into the force bringing up the statement of responsibilities and challenges.

The aim of this study is to analyze the responsibilities of multidisciplinary team members working in pedagogical-psychological support service and raise the challenges of the latter. Based on the analyses to develop ideas and solution to make the smooth transition possible.

Key words: inclusive education, pedagogical-psychological support service, multidisciplinary team, educational reforms, transition.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Inclusive Education

The right to education is universal and should include all children, youth and adults with or without disabilities. This right is defined in the “Convention on the Rights of the Child” (UN, 1989) and is reflected in a number of internationally recognized declarations, including “World Declaration on Education for All” (UNESCO, 1990), “The Salamanca statement and framework

for action for special need education” (WCSNEAQS, 1994) and other field related international statements.

Inclusive education is a global concern aimed at promoting inclusion and equity, influencing education policies and practices around the world (Ainscow, 2020). Inclusion emphasizes existence of persons with different abilities and diverse developmental problems in the society. Therefore, inclusive education considered to be a multifaceted and multidimensional conception that has been the subject of extensive research worldwide.

From another perspective, inclusive education implies the creation of assisting structures and resources for teaching, administrative staff, pupils and parents, and other stakeholders in the system of inclusive education. At the same time, inclusive education aims to provide qualified education through exclusion of any form of discrimination, it is rather than participation and accessibility, and is designed to promote the individual capacity building of each person through the provision of qualified education (Educational Research and Consulting Center, 2013).

Still, inclusive education cannot be identified with the understanding of integration in education, as it assures the participation of students with special education needs (SEN) in the educational process, as for the inclusion, it states the right of everyone to receive a qualified education. Integration implies that students should adapt to the existing school system themselves (curriculum, teaching methods, values, etc.) and in case of inclusive education, the school itself is transformed to meet the SEN of each child. That is, in this case, not the child adapts to the school, but the school adapts to each child (Educational Research and Consulting Center, 2013).

Analyses of the existing topic related literature

At the starting point, the inclusive education movement, being focused on meeting the educational needs of persons with disabilities and those with SEN, has been clearly included in literature covering vocational and educational reforms and a number of policy statements (Ainscow, Booth & Dyson, 2006). However, at present, the concept of inclusive education has changed and expanded and includes all those who may in or out of the boundary situation for any reason, considering it as overcoming obstacles of learning and participation, or allocating resources for learning and participation. Focusing only on educational needs most often a number of other circumstances have been ignored that led to the deprivation of children from the educational system (Gerschel, 2003). Therefore, inclusive education is more than the process of solving students' problems that fall outside the school system, i.e., it gives equal opportunities to all students, unrelatedly of their needs, disability, sex, age, ethnicity, knowledge or social status. Based on this approach, every student at any stage of his studies may need additional support except special educational needs conditioned by other various factors that also need to be evaluated and clarified in the educational process implementation (Farrell, 2002). Additional support to learners is an important component for constructing real inclusive education and it need to run in a proper educational framework.

Namanyane and Shaoan (2021) have explored different viewpoints on the definitions, attitudes, and pedagogical challenges related to the concepts of inclusive education. They address attitudes from the perspectives of pupils, educators, parents and society, and explore the dilemmas that teachers and students with disabilities face in the modern education systems within the frame of inclusiveness. In conclusion they highlight social and medical models and describe the situation based on those two models with relatively strong and weak points.

Effective Teaching in Inclusive Classrooms also widely discussed within the literature review paper developed by Sakarneh and Nair (2014). They widely discuss the outcomes of the inclusive education and effective teaching in inclusive classrooms, as well as identify the factors that can influence students' achievement. They came to conclusion, that students with SEN need to be educated in an inclusive classroom rather than educating them in an isolated environment. But still, they reflect only teachers and students as a global role player within the concept and do not reflect on supportive staff or multidisciplinary team (special educator, speech therapist, psychologists, occupational therapists, social worker, etc.) that work with students with SEN and in many cases is responsible for student's achievements.

Armstrong (2018) emphasizes several key aspects of inclusive education such as (a) the significance of recognizing the diversity within the classroom, including various abilities, cultural backgrounds, languages, and learning styles; (b) creating an inclusive environment that accommodates diverse learners, ensuring equitable opportunities for all students to participate and succeed, (c) encouraging collaborative efforts among educators, administrators, families, and communities to support students with diverse needs effectively, (d) adapting teaching materials, curriculum, and instructional methods to address the diverse learning needs present in an inclusive classroom setting. While going deep to the Armstrong's developed concepts it becomes clear that the author highpoints the importance of supportive staff working with students with SEN in different settings and structures.

Inclusive Education overview in Armenia

In 1996, the Law on the Rights of the Child was adopted in the Republic of Armenia. In 1999 the Law on Education of the Republic of Armenia entered into the force and later on many amendments were developed. In 2005, the Law on the Education of Persons with special Education Needs of the Republic of Armenia entered into force, which in fact was completely contrary to the ideology of inclusiveness. And only in 2015 this Law was declared void. Educational reforms launched including global reforms in the field of special education system. Inclusive education, respectively, was defined as a process aimed at meeting the needs arising from diversity of students through reducing isolation in education.

First steps towards transformation of education and inclusive education in Armenia has begun since the early 2000s and this process is still under the development. Legislative bases for inclusive education have begun to be formed since 2005, whereas sectoral practical work by public and non-governmental organizations has started since 2001. According to the data provided by the Educational Research and Consulting Center (2013), in 2007 there were 10 officially registered

inclusive schools in Armenia, but then, five years later, in 2012 the number has increased and reached 98.

In 2012, the RA Ministry of Education and Science made an initiative according to which there would no longer exist inclusive schools and Armenia would undergo universal inclusion. That means that all secondary schools in the country should implement inclusive education and provide education to students with SEN. Nonetheless, it was not possible to achieve unless at the ideological level. First, it was extremely important to calculate accurately state budgetary funds, the sufficient quantity and quality of supportive staff as professional resources in schools and in other related institutions, the level of teachers' education and the level of preparedness and of students with and without SEN and their parents, etc. In other words, the readiness and awareness of the Armenian society on the global scale should have been basis for this process.

Based on the Protocol Decision of the Government of the Republic of Armenia (18.02.2016) the plan and relevant timetable of implementation of universal inclusive education in the Republic of Armenia was regulated. According to this decision regional pedagogical-psychological support centers were structured and formulated in all regions based on the outlined timeline; staff of new formulated regional pedagogical-psychological support centers was trained by the professionals from National Institute of Education, students with SEN from special schools were transferred to inclusive schools, and the raised scale of funding for children with special educational needs in accordance with child needs was implemented. Those were the main important points of the reform started in Armenia in 2016. The Decision of the Government of the Republic of Armenia N1058-N (13.10.2016) "Providing exemplary charter and list of Republican and Regional Pedagogical and Psychological Support Centers" was adopted for regulating the frame of activities performed by these new created centers. At the same time, the services provided by republican and regional pedagogical-psychological support centers were expounded in the Order of Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Armenia N370-N (13.04.2017).

In Armenia, like in many countries worldwide, there are a lot of data gaps regarding persons with disabilities, hindering the possibility to make informed policy choices in fulfilling their rights. Inclusion is currently one of the most dispute and controversial topics involving current education practice. Success with inclusion of students with SEN often depends on the perspectives of the teachers implementing the inclusion and multidisciplinary teams or so-called supportive team working with these children and their families. The process of inclusion can easily fail if the required supports and teacher commitment aren't presented.

Based on this it is very crucial to understand the responsibilities of multidisciplinary team members working in regional pedagogical-psychological support centers and identify the challenges they face while providing services to students with SEN.

METHOD

Data Collection

Desk review has been used for understanding the roles and responsibilities of multidisciplinary team members (special educator, speech therapist, psychologists, occupational therapists, social worker, etc.) working in the regional pedagogical-psychological support centers in Tavush, Lori and Syunik regions in the Republic of Armenia. In this regards one main statement was reviewed: Order N 370 of the Minister of Education and Science of the Republic of Armenia as of 13.04. 2017 “On approving the procedure for providing pedagogical and psychological support services for the organization of education”.

Survey Research as a quantitative research method have been used for collecting the data from multidisciplinary team members (special educator, speech therapist, psychologists, occupational therapists, social worker, etc.) working in the regional pedagogical-psychological support centers in Tavush, Lori and Syunik regions in the Republic of Armenia. The questionnaires given to multidisciplinary team members were conducted in groups in separate rooms in the presence of researchers, getting acquainted with the aim of the research in advance and expressing their consent expressly. The questionnaire served as a tool for collecting quantitative research data.

Participants

Within the framework current study as total 218 participants from regional pedagogical-psychological support centers took part in the survey (Table 1). Three regions of the Republic of Armenia were included in the current research.

Table 1.
Number of research participants from regional pedagogical-psychological support centers in Tavush, Lori and Syunik regions.

Region	Female	Male
Tavush	74	2
Lori	79	7
Syunik	56	-
Total number	209	9

Detailed data regarding the total sampling of multidisciplinary team members providing support services from regional pedagogical-psychological support centers of three targeted regions in Armenia is provided in Table 2.

Table 2.
Detailed data about research participants from regional pedagogical-psychological support centers in Tavush, Lori and Syunik regions.

Region	Total number of staff	Number of centres	Cities
Lori	81	4	Spitak, Vanadzor, Stepanavan, Alaverdi

Tavush	58	4	Dilijan, Ijevan, Berd, Noyemberyan
Syunik	67	3	Sisian, Goris, Kapan
<i>Total number</i>	206	11	

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Desk review

Pedagogical-psychological support services are implemented for the organization of education for children with SEN and provided on 3 main levels: School level, regional level and Republican level (Order of Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Armenia N370-N, 13.04.2017).

School-level services are provided to students who have been evaluated and recognized as students with SEN by the official evaluation conducted by the specialists from pedagogical-psychological support services (special educator, speech therapist, psychologists, occupational therapists, social worker, etc.). Besides, the duration, load, and the logistic schedule of the support services provided to each student with SEN is suggested by the support team and approved by the principal who is responsible for ensuring the efficiency and quality of the provided services (Order of Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Armenia N370-N, 13.04.2017). All this goes in line with the dimension called to meet the educational needs of persons with disabilities or with SEN suggested by Ainscow, Booth and Dyson (2006).

Regional-level services are provided by the regional pedagogical-psychological support centers based on the application of the school administration or the child's parent/legal representative. Regional pedagogical-psychological support center specialists visit schools and provide support to the student as well as assistance to teachers. If a student is not able to attend a school/kindergarten, the pedagogical-psychological support is provided in the regional center. The provision of services to the child at the regional center is provided free of charge, after school day, according to the schedule timeline and load.

On these two levels pedagogical-psychological support team is responsible for development of student's Individual Learning Plan. At the end of each day, the regional pedagogical-psychological support service staff members record the intervention in the Individual Learning Plan. Besides, the regional pedagogical-psychological support centers provide consulting and professional support for parents of students with SEN, the support specialists working in schools and teachers.

Before starting the intervention by the order of the principal of the regional pedagogical-psychological support center, a group of multidisciplinary team members (at least 3 specialists) conduct so called regional assessment. This assessment lasts at least a week after which the child assessment report and conclusion is compiled and submitted to school (Order of Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Armenia N370-N, 13.04.2017).

All mentioned above very briefly describes the legal functions of the regional pedagogical-psychological support centers. However, it should be noted that the analysis of the situation allows to specify the differences between the centers functioning in three targeted regions. For example, regional pedagogical-psychological support centers in Tavush region are the branches of “Bridge of Hope” NGO functioning in four main cities of the region - in Dilijan, Ijevan, Berd and Noyemberyan. And since these branches have been providing services to children with disabilities and/or with SE for quite a long time, they continue their work and most of the children continue receiving services in the centers. Consequently, for example, Ijevan branch “Bridge of Hope” NGO provides services to 212 students with SEN in schools, 145 out of which attend the center as well. These visits have various justifications and goals. For example, support specialists may visit the child at school once a week, and for the second time the child himself/herself visits the center. The same situation is observed in other branches of Tavush region.

It is quite another situation in the regions of Lori and Syunik, where regional pedagogical-psychological support centers are very new and do not have any previous background. The services here are provided mainly in schools. Number of staff in these centers is small and number of children needed this support is large. This mismatch can't guarantee high qualified services. For instance, Vanadzor Regional pedagogical-psychological support center has 26 support staff providing services in 39 schools, serving 359 certified children. According to the statement of psychological and pedagogical support service provision regulations refers to the clause that regional support centers must provide support to the child in school at least once a week (Order of Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Armenia N370-N, 13.04.2017).

But this point is more controversial, especially given the fact that there are schools that do not have any multidisciplinary support team member. This demonstrates the fact that students with SEN who need professional support do not receive proper quality and quantity of relevant services, which denies the ideology of universal inclusion implemented within the educational main reforms in the Republic of Armenia.

What deserves attention is how the document allocates the time of a particular service for students with SEN. Order of the Minister of Education and Science of the Republic of Armenia definite the type, period, duration and load of support services according to the Individual Learning Plan of the student with SEN. The degree of SEN is defined within this document as mild, moderate, severe and profound. At the same time the order evidently clarifies different kinds of supports for each type: mild - control, moderate- frequent support, severe- high frequency support, and profound- constant support. Inappropriately, the same order does not clarify on what grounds, for example, for a mild degree 90-minute support is provided on a weekly basis, including special pedagogical intervention - 45 minutes, psychological intervention - 20 minutes and socialization services - 25 minutes.

For frequent support up to 180 minutes per week is provided, including special pedagogical intervention - 90 minutes, psychological intervention - 40 minutes and socialization services - 50 minutes. For frequent support 250 minutes is provided, including special pedagogical - 100

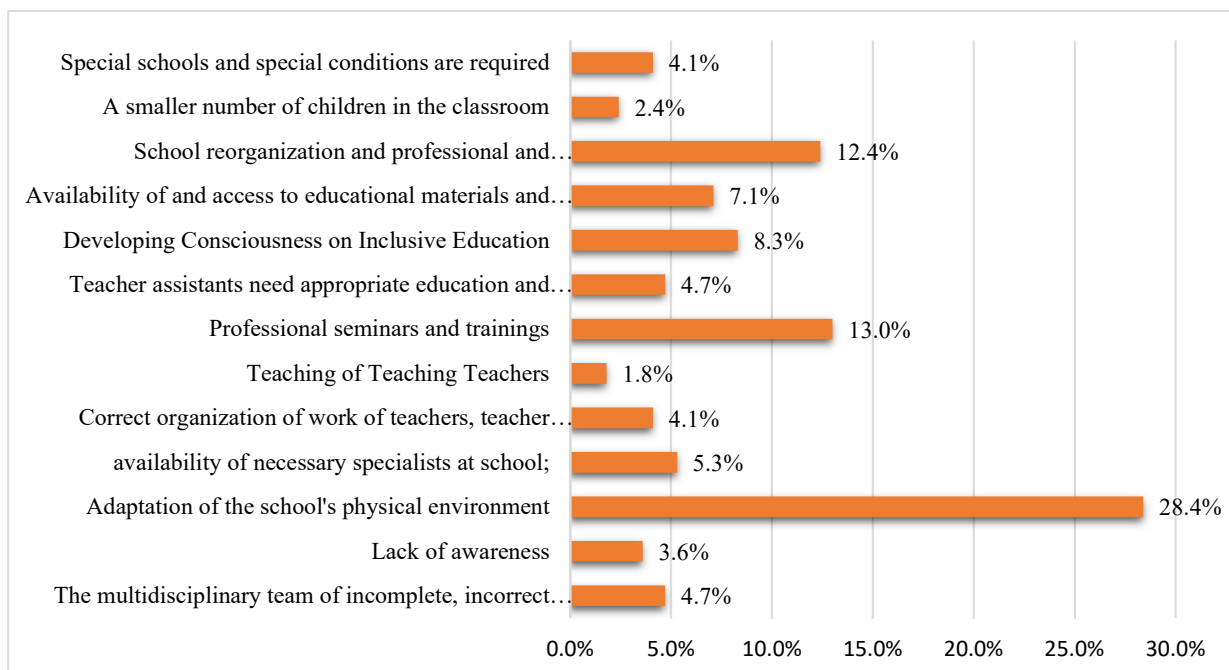
minutes, psychological - 60 minutes and socialization services - 90 minutes. For constant support 390 minutes is provided, including special pedagogical - 130 minutes, psychological - 60 minutes and socialization services - 200 minutes. In this regard, the mean time for the period of service for a student with SEN having frequent support on a weekly basis is 25.7 minutes per day. While talking about the student who is required of a high frequency assistance, the mean is 35.7 minutes. This situation is quite controversial. Given the fact that families in villages and even in the urban areas from the regions have serious socio-economic issues, and in most cases, the only opportunity to receive child support services is the school.

Survey Research

Examining the problems that rise in the process of supporting the students with SEN, it is principally remarkable that the conditions for the effective organization of inclusive processes in the school mentioned by the multidisciplinary team members working in regional pedagogical-psychological support centers are particularly significant, with the adaptation of the physical environment (28.4%), professional seminars and trainings (13%), reorganization of schools, professional and environmental re-equipment based on inclusive education standards (12.4%), development of conscious regarding inclusive education (8.3%), presence and accessibility of didactic materials and manuals (7.1%) (Figure 1).

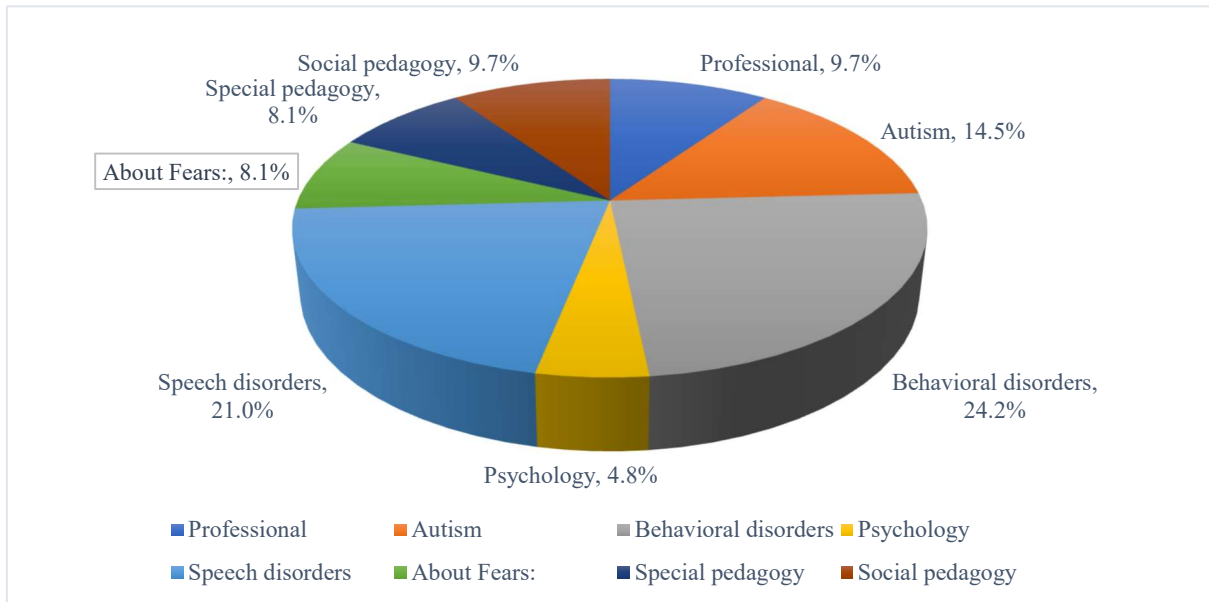
In contrast to these weighty arguments, only 4.7% of the respondents emphasized the need for clarifying the consistent education and functions of the teacher's assistant, and only 2.4% of the respondents mentioned the need to decrease the number of students with SEN in the classrooms.

Figure 1.
What is needed for effective organization of inclusive processes in the school?



One of the main topics mentioned was professional seminars and trainings organized for multidisciplinary team members. From the analysis it becomes necessary to refer to the need for the trainings and clarify the thematic description necessary for the effective organization of inclusive educational processes and providing necessary support for students with SEN. For this purpose, the sufficient question has been formulated and the results of the survey are summarized in the Figure 2.

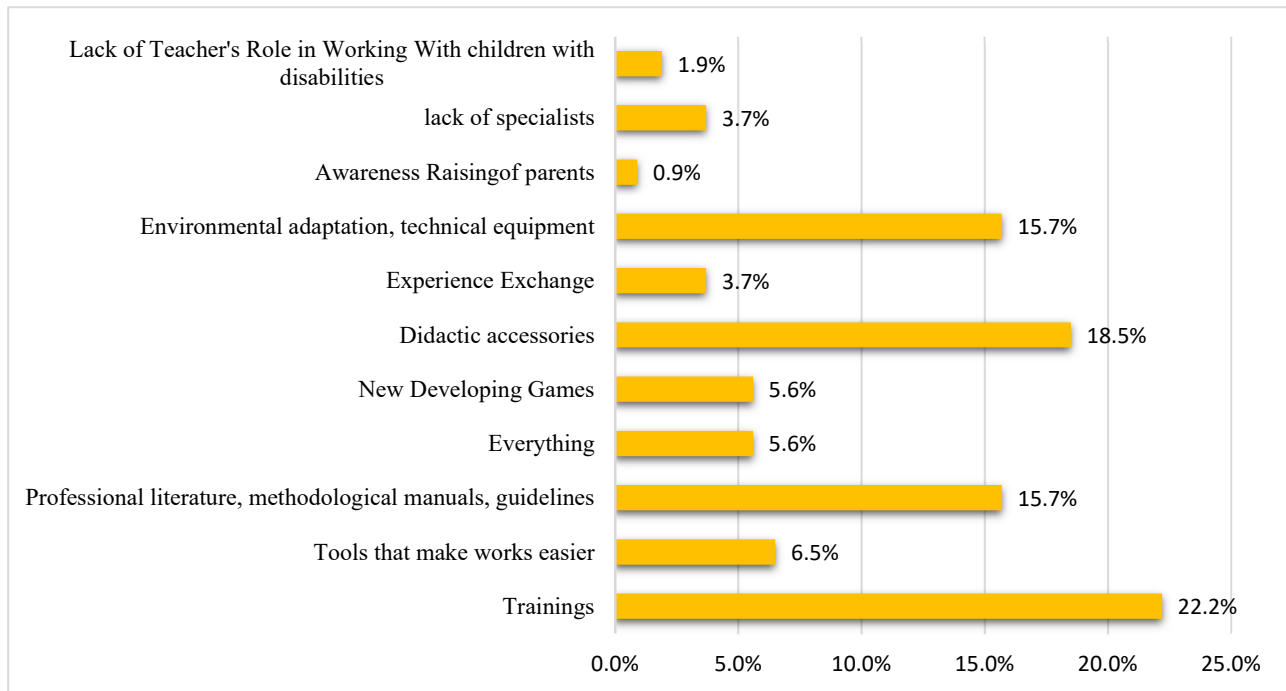
Figure 2.
Required topics of the trainings.



The figure shows that the majority of the respondents (24.2%) are in need of trainings related to behavioral disorders, after that the multidisciplinary team members from regional pedagogical-psychological support centers have mentioned the importance of having deep knowledge and get acquainted with new methods and techniques related to speech disorders, especially stammering and speech general underdevelopment (21%). As regards the need for training on topics related to autism, it has been identified by 14.5% of the respondents. Still, it is very crucial that even specialists lack the knowledge and skills related to behavioral disorders, and very often Autism is recognized as a severe problem, because dealing with behavior problems seemed to be very difficult to be solved.

Based on the results of the survey data, the multidisciplinary team members from regional pedagogical-psychological support centers emphasize the need for appropriate resources or supportive tools to improve the quality of support services provided and as a result the quality of inclusive education: need in didactic materials (18.5%) and professional literature, manuals, guides (15.7%), necessity in existence of environmental adaptation and technical equipment (15.7%), tools to facilitate the work (6.5%) and importance of new developmental games (5.6%) (Figure 3).

Figure 3.
What is needed work improvement?



Besides all the above stated, the majority (58%) of multidisciplinary team members from regional pedagogical-psychological support centers have mentioned the low effectiveness of provided services. Reaching school itself was indicated as a great loss of time, which is impossible to avoid. Very often the specialists can manage to have only 15 minutes to support one child, which, is unproductive and does not go in line with the acting legislation (Order of Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Armenia N370-N, 13.04.2017). Due to geographical location of regional support centers the actual disposition of the time management and the professional capacity right usage was not conducted. Correspondingly, the possibility of access support centers by many children with SEN, misrepresentation to specialist access, outstanding to bad weather conditions or other external factors is transpire.

CONCLUSION

Analyses of the research data including universal inclusive education policies and legal decisions allows to state the need for clarification of the requirements and conditions for universal inclusive education in line with the practical arrangements and educational resources needed for the children with SEN in general. Related to this, general commentary of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities describes the problem as follows: "...placing students with disabilities in school grades without constructive changes, such as organizing programs and learning strategies, is not considered to include. In addition, integration does not automatically guarantee the transition to inclusion through segregation" (article 24, paragraph 11, UN, 2006). That shows the clear picture of the situation and creates floor for further discussion.

The initiative adopted by the RA Ministry of Education and Science in 2012, according to which the inclusive schools will no longer exist, and the transition to universal inclusion in Armenia will be organized, of course should be implemented not only on ideological level. The absolute truth is the fact that the state budgetary resources, the sufficient number and quality of professional resources in schools and other related institutions, the level of readiness of the school teachers and children with and without SEN and their parents' readiness and so on are not accurately calculated.

Today, passing quite long way and implementing universal inclusive education in the country, the problem continues to be more than actual, since it can generally be stated that in the regions where transition to universal inclusive education model has been already done the serious difficulties are existing. The implemented model almost has no any grounds, the preparatory work was not carried out or was implemented very incomplete and superficially: the system has changed in one day, the system running rings have increased or decreased. Here new approached needed already for the running system adjusting and new calculations for providing necessary support for the transition period.

At the state interagency level, it is important to give primary solutions to the issues related to the adaptation of the physical environment of the schools, to the problems of the educational materials which are the basic requirements for organization of the educational process, as well as to the trainings of specialists of regional pedagogical-psychological support centers and increase in their number and to the questions related to the expansion of their activities.

Review the universal inclusive education model adopted by the state offering alternative options for children with SEN having moderate and severe profound disabilities and their families. In this way, the parents will be able to determine which model of education for their child is most preferable, taking into consideration environmental accessibility, the availability of narrow specialists as well as the availability of technical and learning support tools.

First steps toward universal inclusive education are implemented nowadays throughout all country, and now it is time to research the field and understand the strong and weak points of the system.

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