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INCLUSION OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS IN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY

Chisinau, 2024

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Abbreviations

FGD – focus group discussion

IDI – in-depth interview

NGO – non-governmental organization

p.p. – percentage points

RCIE – Resource Centre for Inclusive Education

RPCA – Republican Centre for Psycho-Pedagogical Assistance

RM – Republic of Moldova

SDG – Sustainable Development Goals

SEN – special educational needs

SP – support teacher

PAS¹ – Psycho-Pedagogical Assistance Services

UN – United Nations

UNESCO – United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

UNICEF – United Nations Children's Fund

Disclaimer

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¹ Territorial structures of psycho-pedagogical assistance (GD1042/2023 of 21.12.2023)

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Authors: Vasile Cantarji, Natalia Vladicescu, Patricia Vieru, Veaceslav Batrinescu.

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Executive Summary

The Republic of Moldova, by ratifying a number of international human rights instruments, has made basic commitments to inclusive education.

In the last decades the RM (Republic of Moldova) authorities have developed a normative framework in the field of inclusion of children with special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities in the education system.

In order to implement the legal provisions, the Program for the Development of Inclusive Education in the Republic of Moldova 2024 - 2027 is currently being implemented, which succeeded a similar program implemented in the period 2011 - 2020.

The Republic of Moldova has made progress in recent years in the field of education, especially in terms of the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream schools, resulting in a considerable increase in the number of children with SEN being enrolled in mainstream schools.

This study aims to analyse the situation regarding the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream schools in the Republic of Moldova by analysing policies in the field, assessing public perceptions of inclusive education, analysing practices of assessing children's school performance. Importance is also given to the comparison of the core indicators of the research of similar studies conducted in 2009, 2012 and 2018 in order to capture possible developments.

The following sociological methods were applied to achieve the study objectives:

- Analysis of the normative frame of reference, policy documents and national statistics in the field of inclusion of children with SEN and/or disabilities;
- Quantitative study – opinion survey among key stakeholders concerned by the implementation of inclusive education (pupils, parents/caregivers, teachers);
- Qualitative study – focus groups discussions and in-depth interviews with targeted stakeholders (parents of children with disabilities, parents of typical children, teachers), as well as categories of people involved in the implementation process (representatives of state institutions and civil society).

The methodology of the study was adapted to the complex nature of the subject of the study, the multitude of actors involved and the fact that the assessment of the situation required both quantitative and qualitative expressions.

Main findings:

Public perceptions on the inclusion of children with disabilities still remain predominantly exclusivist, with the majority of respondents maintaining the view that children with disabilities should be cared for in the family or in specialized institutions.

Over the years, however, there have been improving trends, expressed by an increasing proportion of respondents who accept that these children should be placed in general education institutions and a decreasing proportion of those who opt for placing children with disabilities in residential institutions.

At the same time, there is still a greater degree of rejection of inclusion in the case of mental/intellectual disabilities.

The perceived disadvantages resulting from the inclusion of children with disabilities are determined by a number of both objective and subjective factors, namely:

- Difficulties inherent in the process of implementing inclusive and child-centered education;

- Mechanisms in the process of formation in terms of inter-disciplinary, inter- and intra-institutionalization models of cooperation for ensuring inclusive education;
- Lack of mechanisms for mentoring and monitoring of the transition of children with disabilities from one educational level to another and from education to the labour market;
- The fragmented level of teacher training, the particularities of work in inclusive education;
- The still incomplete level of technical and material equipment of the institutions;
- Persistence of misconceptions about the inappropriate behaviour of children with disabilities, especially integrated children from residential institutions and children with mental/intellectual disabilities.

The general problems faced by the education system – the shortage and fluctuation of teachers, the ageing teaching staff, the inadequate level of teachers' salaries and the inadequate level of equipment of the institutions, also present difficulties in implementing inclusive education.

Recommendations

Continuing efforts to promote the concept of inclusive education among the population, combating misperceptions. Publicize positive practices accumulated over time.

Comprehensive and systematic training of teachers and management in the field of educational inclusion and the particularities of working with children with disabilities in the institution. Developing a student-centered educational process.

Adequate equipping/adaptation of institutions for the inclusion of children with disabilities remains a necessity to be fulfilled. Periodic evaluation of the level of technical equipment and educational resources in institutions to support the inclusion of children with special educational needs.

Regular assessment and adjustment of the roles and tasks of the institutions/actors involved in the implementation and realization of inclusive education.

The general reform of the education system, aimed at addressing current general deficiencies (staff shortages and turnover, aging teaching workforce, inadequate salary levels, and insufficient institutional resources), is also a necessary condition for the successful implementation of inclusive education.

INTRODUCTION

Context of the study

The topic of inclusive education is addressed internationally through a series of conventions, declarations, and resolutions that provide the foundation for processes in this field and serve as references for the development and implementation of inclusion policies at the national level.

In the Republic of Moldova, based on international standards and policies, the regulatory framework governing specific aspects of children's rights in general, as well as the inclusion of children with special educational needs and/or disabilities in the education system, was developed between 2005 and 2011. The Constitution of the Republic of Moldova, other organic laws, and government decisions enshrine the right to education regardless of ethnic, racial, or religious affiliation, as well as explicitly affirming the right to education for persons with special educational needs and those in difficult situations.

The Republic of Moldova has undertaken several commitments to ensure the effective right to education by:

- Ratifying a series of international conventions, such as the UN Convention on Human Rights, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities;
- Participating in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Regarding the SDGs, the inclusion of persons with disabilities is specifically addressed within two goals: Goal 4 (Quality Education) and Goal 10 (Reduced Inequalities).

Additionally, Moldova has developed a series of normative acts explicitly regulating the deinstitutionalization of children and ensuring the right to education for all children. Over time, significant efforts have been made toward the deinstitutionalization of children, including those with disabilities.

The most relevant national legislative acts in the field of inclusive education are:

- **The education code²**, which explicitly regulates inclusive education and establishes that education for children with disabilities is an integral part of the education system. The Code includes a chapter dedicated to education for children and students with SEN and inclusive education.
- **The "Education 2030" Strategy and its Implementation program for 2023–2025³**, which explicitly acknowledges that the education system faces challenges in ensuring the effectiveness of inclusive education, particularly for children with SEN. One of the priority areas under general Objective 2. *Ensuring access to quality education for all throughout life (SDG-4)*, focuses on guaranteeing inclusive education for all children, students, and learners, including those with special needs, vulnerable groups, individuals at high risk and/or with deviant behaviour, as well as refugee children from Ukraine. This strategy promotes and ensures inclusive education at the systemic level, in line with specific Objective 1.6. It also aims for the socio-educational reintegration of children in residential institutions, targeting a 50% reduction in the number of children in these institutions by 2030 and transforming at least 25% of residential educational institutions into general education institutions by the same year.
- **The Development program for inclusive education in the Republic of Moldova for 2024–2027⁴**, which establishes the regulatory and strategic framework for creating adequate conditions to ensure access to education at all levels.

² https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=110112&lang=ro

³ https://gov.md/sites/default/files/document/attachments/subiect-02-nu-900-mec-2022_1.pdf

⁴ <https://gov.md/sites/default/files/document/attachments/subiect-03-nu-765-mec-2023.pdf>

Between 2011 and 2020, the **Development program for inclusive education in the Republic of Moldova for 2011–2020**⁵ was developed and implemented, addressing objectives related to inclusive education, its specific functions, and the criteria educational institutions must meet to achieve the goals and functions promoted for inclusion. Action plans for implementing this program included:

- The **2015–2017 Action plan for implementing the Development program for inclusive education**⁶, detailing the actions, responsible institutions, costs, and funding sources.
- The **2018–2020 Action plan for implementing the Development program for inclusive education in the Republic of Moldova for 2011–2020**⁷.

Currently, the **Action plan and the Development program for inclusive education in the Republic of Moldova for 2024–2027** are in the process of implementation.

Additionally, the Law on the social inclusion of persons with disabilities⁸ regulates the rights of persons with disabilities to ensure their social inclusion, guaranteeing their ability to participate in all areas of life without discrimination, on an equal basis with other members of society. This is based on respect for fundamental human rights and freedoms.

At the beginning of the 2022/23 school year, 10.5 thousand students with SEN and disabilities were enrolled in primary and secondary general education institutions in the country. The majority of these students attended general education institutions (94.8%), while 5.2% were enrolled in schools for children with intellectual or physical developmental challenges⁹. This number has remained relatively stable in recent years but is double compared to 2013 (5,481), the end of the period during which basic measures for the inclusion of children with SEN in the network of general education institutions were implemented.

At the same time, the number of children with disabilities in special schools has significantly decreased, reaching approximately 500 students in the 2023/24 school year¹⁰, compared to 1,807 in 2013/14¹¹.

Moldovan legislation on the right to education guarantees the right to general education, which is largely state supported. Primary and lower secondary education levels are mandatory and provided by the state. However, full inclusion in education is not yet ensured for various reasons, with general enrolment trends showing a decline (Figure 1).

The inclusion of children with special educational needs is the main focus of this study, particularly regarding the integration of children with disabilities into mainstream education institutions¹². Of all study respondents, 5.7% (compared to 4.4% in 2018) stated that their household includes at least one child with a disability.

Additionally, the study focuses not only on the inclusion of children with disabilities in the education system but also on their enrolment in mainstream educational institutions, alongside other children from the community.

The differentiated treatment required in this context is expected to pose challenges for teachers, students, and parents. Key questions include the extent to which the education system is technically and methodologically prepared for the inclusion of these children, whether the teaching staff possess the necessary competencies, and whether parents and students are mentally and emotionally prepared for this transition.

⁵ https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=21997&lang=ro

⁶ <https://gov.md/sites/default/files/document/attachments/subiect-03-nu-765-mec-2023.pdf>

⁷ <http://particip.gov.md/proiectview.php?l=ro&idd=5511>

⁸ https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=83915&lang=ro

⁹ https://statistica.gov.md/ro/situatia-copiilor-in-republica-moldova-in-anul-2022-9578_60434.html

¹⁰ https://statistica.gov.md/ro/activitatea-institutiilor-de-invataman-primar-si-secundar-general-in-anul-de-st-9454_60865.html

¹¹ <https://mecc.gov.md/ro/content/strategia-sectoriala-de-cheltuieli-2018-2020>

¹² We use the notion of "mainstream educational institutions" to distinguish these institutions from those within the residential system.

As a legacy of the Soviet past, even after independence, children with disabilities were and, in some cases, still are enrolled in special schools. Prior to the efforts aimed at ensuring inclusive education, the reform of the residential childcare system was implemented to minimize the number of children living outside a family environment. In 2007, the National strategy and Action plan on the reform of the residential childcare system for 2007–2012 was adopted. During its implementation, nearly the entire network of residential institutions was reorganized or closed.

Subsequently, a minimum package of inclusive education services was created, including the establishment of resource centres for inclusive education and the introduction of support teacher positions in general schools. This radical reform, with a positive impact during the initial phase of inclusive education development and promotion, was made possible by the Government's approval of a mechanism to redirect financial resources from the reform of residential institutions toward ensuring the minimum package of inclusive education services¹³.

Later, this mechanism was replaced by the creation of the Inclusive Education Fund, established at the district and municipal levels, amounting to 2% of the total education budget¹⁴. Financial resources from this fund are distributed or allocated to educational institutions based on their specific needs.

With the approval of Government Decision No. 732 of 16.09.2013, the Psycho-pedagogical assistance services (SAP) were created in all districts of the country and the Republican Centre for Psycho-Pedagogical Assistance (RCPA) to support the inclusion of children with disabilities in regular schools¹⁵.

Children with severe disabilities are the most excluded from educational services, often kept at home or in residential care facilities, with little or no access to education. Including children with severe disabilities in mainstream schools remains challenging for several reasons, including: the attitudes of parents, students, teachers, and other professionals toward educating children with disabilities in regular classrooms; the level of infrastructure adaptation in institutions; and the skills of teaching staff to work with this category of children, etc.

Parents often worry about teachers' ability to manage time effectively in classrooms that include children with disabilities, while teachers are concerned about their lack of knowledge on how to meet the needs of children with disabilities in regular classrooms. There are also limited guidelines and knowledge about assessing and evaluating children with disabilities.

Aim and objectives of the study

The aim of the study is to analyse the situation regarding the inclusion of children with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream schools in the Republic of Moldova.

Objectives of the study:

- analysis of existing policies, procedures, and practices regarding the inclusion of children with SEN in typical classes/groups;
- to assess the attitudes/views of parents/caregivers regarding the inclusion of children with SEN in typical classes/groups and to compare the results with the 2018, 2012 and 2009 survey data;

Study methodology

The following sociological methods were applied to achieve the study objectives:

- Desk review of the normative frame of reference, policy documents and national statistics in the field of inclusion of children with SEN and/or disabilities;
- Quantitative study - opinion poll;
- Qualitative study - focus groups discussions and in-depth interviews.

¹³ <https://www.legis.md/cautare/downloadpdf/111914>

¹⁴ https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=18958&lang=ro

¹⁵ https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=22066&lang=ro

The desk review served as a basis for initiation in the field, presentation of the national framework, finalization of research tools.

The quantitative study focused on three categories (audiences) of stakeholders who have a tangent with the education system, namely:

- primary and secondary school teachers;
- students in grades 6-9;
- caregivers (parents or other caregivers in the absence of parents) of children aged 0-15 years.

Opinion polls have been conducted within each category and the results are nationally representative.

At the same time, the sampling method, research instruments and data collection were carried out in a similar way to the 2009, 2012 and 2018 studies, with which comparisons are made in the analysis.

Teacher opinion survey

The sample was established on the basis of the distribution of educational establishments in territorial profile (areas of residence, administrative territorial units), size and type of school. Statistical data produced by the National Bureau of Statistics were used for the sample design.

The development of the sampling scheme included the following steps:

- to establish a proportional distribution of the sample by types of educational establishments;
- the proportional distribution of institutions by medium of residence;
- the selection, by means of the table of random numbers, of the schools in each predetermined group.

The groups of institutions have been formed according to the type of educational institution (primary school, middle school, high school, high school) and the area of residence (urban or rural).

Sample distribution within the selected educational establishments. In order to achieve the sample distribution within the educational institutions in proportion to the number of teachers in each institution, all the selected institutions were contacted in advance, asking for the number of teachers currently working in the institution. The proportional distribution was carried out according to the formula:

$$n_c = \frac{p_c}{N} \times 400,$$

where n_c is the number of teachers to be interviewed in the educational institution; p_c - the total number of teachers in the respective institution; N - the total number of teachers, 400 being the projected sample size.

Respondent selection. Within schools, teachers were randomly selected from the list of teachers through a statistical step. This step was set according to the formula:

$$p_s = \frac{n}{n_r}$$

where p_s is the statistical step; n - the total number of teachers in the list; n_r - the number of persons to be interviewed in the institution and the respective level of education.

Subsequently, the step was applied to the full list of teachers, sorted alphabetically, with the numbering starting from number two in the list.

Final sample: 413 interviews, maximum margin of error for this sample size is $\pm 4.8\%$.

The data was collected between May 14 and May 25, 2024.

Pupils' opinion survey

In the case of pupils, the study was carried out in schools with secondary classes. These schools were selected from the multitude of schools, which were included in the sample for teacher interviews.

Stratification. The student sample was stratified based on the distribution of students by background, grade, and school type.

Selection of respondents. In the schools, the number of pupils interviewed was based on the total number of pupils in grades 6-9 according to the formula:

$$n_e = \frac{p_e}{n_{te}} \times 600$$

where n_e is the number of pupils to be surveyed in the institution under study; p_e - the total number of pupils in the secondary classes of the institution under study; n_{te} - the total number of pupils in the secondary classes of all sampled schools, 600 being the designed sample size.

Only pupils in grades 6-9 were interviewed in each school. The total number of interviews was evenly distributed across grades. Where this was not possible, pupils were selected as follows:

- for schools in which 7 pupils were to be interviewed, one year of study was randomly selected, from which only one pupil was interviewed, and for the other years of study 2 pupils were interviewed each;
- for schools in which 6 pupils were to be interviewed, two school years were randomly selected, from which only one pupil was interviewed; from the remaining school years, two pupils were interviewed.

Class selection. If there were several classes in the school from the same year of study, class selection was carried out in a similar way to the selection of years of study from which only one pupil was interviewed.

Selection of the pupil in the class. The pupil has been interviewed, whose number in the register is given by dividing by two the total number of pupils in the class list.

The second pupil in the class, where two pupils were to be interviewed from that class, was designated as the pupil, whose order number is given by dividing the total number of pupils in the class list by three.

If the selected pupil was absent, or if the number was not a whole number, the next pupil on the list was interviewed.

Final sample: 614 interviews, the maximum margin of error for this sample size is $\pm 4.0\%$.

The data was collected between May 14 and May 25, 2024.

Caregivers' opinion survey

The caregiver survey followed a typical methodology for a nationally representative survey.

The research was conducted on a stratified, probabilistic, multistage sample.

Stratification criteria: 13 geographic regions (based on former counties), place of residence, size of settlements according to the number of inhabitants (two types of urban and four types of rural settlements).

Stratification was performed as follows:

1. The distribution of the sample by geographical regions depending on the distribution of the total number of households with children under 15.
2. Selection of study localities using a table of random numbers.

3. Distribution of localities into roughly equal areas, from which sampling points were then randomly selected. The number of selected areas was based on the total number of interviews to be conducted in the locality divided by six. A maximum of six persons were therefore interviewed at each sampling point.

4. Next, the household addresses where the interviews were conducted were selected using the random route method.

5. Within each household, the parent interviewed was selected based on the answer to the question "Who is most often in charge of the children's schoolwork?". In the absence of both parents, the person in charge of the children was interviewed.

The survey was conducted in 126 localities, including Chisinau and Balti municipalities. Number of sampling points - 248.

The methodological *screening* procedure was used to eliminate households without school-age children. According to this procedure, households that were selected according to the statistical step but had no children were recorded by the operator in the routing sheet as 'uncontacted' households. The same procedure was applied to households with children of school age but not in the education system.

Final sample: 1253 interviews, the maximum margin of error for this sample size is $\pm 2.8\%$.

Data were collected from April 26 to May 24, 2024.

For the [profile of the survey respondents](#) see Annex 1, Tables 1-3.

Qualitative study

The aim of the qualitative sociological study was to investigate the opinions, attitudes and perceptions of pupils, parents, and teachers regarding inclusive education of children with SEN.

The research was carried out through 7 focus group discussions with pupils (grades 6-9), teachers and parents and 9 interviews with decision-makers, directors of pre-school and school institutions, representatives of civil society. The focus group discussions were attended by 59 respondents. For more details on focus group participants see Annex 3, Table 1.

The study used a theoretical sample with pre-established criteria, and the selection of study participants was done using the *snow-ball* method. In line with the research aim, the basic criterion for the selection of respondents was experience with children with SEN. For teachers and pupils, both people who had experience of studying in the same class with children with SEN and those who had not had such experience were selected. Other criteria that were taken into consideration, in order to ensure heterogeneity of the groups, refer to: living environment, educational cycle, gender of the children (in the case of the groups of pupils and parents).

Qualitative data were collected between May and June 2024. Focus group discussions were conducted in May and in-depth interviews in June.

Study limitations:

The study found a low level of knowledge or discrepancy in the definition of the concepts of disability and special educational needs, especially by the general public (caregivers) and students. Because of this, in addition to the notion of disability, several formulations were used in the research instruments to keep the topic of discussion in the direction of disability: 'special needs/disabilities', 'developmental challenges'.

On the other hand, in the case of teachers, the qualitative study found that the notion of special educational needs was used and that they tended to refer to SEN instead of disability in the interviews. As a result, in the report the notion of special educational needs is used more often if the respondents in the study, when asked about disabilities, gave answers through the prism of SEN.

Some teachers gave formal, expected, desirable answers although they were assured of confidentiality and anonymity.

Qualitative data were collected online via the ZOOM platform. In conducting face-to-face focus group discussions, the research team can also make observations, which is difficult to do remotely.

Study management

The study was conducted by the team of the Centre for Sociological Research and Marketing "CBS-Research".

Three senior researchers were responsible for developing the methodology, research tools, training the data operators, analysing the data, and drafting the report.

Quantitative data collection was carried out by a team of 56 interviewers, coordinated by one national and two regional network managers. Focus group discussions and interviews were conducted by 3 sociologists specialized in this field.

A team of 5 quality managers supervised the field works.

Ethical considerations

The study was conducted in accordance with the UNICEF Procedures for Ethical Standards in Research, Evaluation, Data Collection and Analysis¹⁶, as well as with the ethical requirements in sociological research¹⁷. In particular:

When designing the research instruments, questions and phrases that could be harmful to the participants in the study, as well as to other categories of people, were avoided.

After the interview, the participants were given the contact details of the study coordinator for any further questions or complaints, with information about the project and its purpose.

The following requirements were conditioned for the interview:

- Initial briefing of the potential respondent about the research, the project, the interview procedure, his/her rights (non-obligation to give the whole interview or to answer particular questions), anonymity of participation and answers, the particularities of the project and its purpose.
- Informed consent of the respondent (*Annex 5*).
- In the case of students, likewise the informed consent of the school manager and the teacher (in addition to the student's consent).
- Appropriate conditions for anonymity.

CBS-Research has secure storage facilities for electronic data storage of surveys and questionnaires. For security purposes the contact data of the respondents, collected for fieldwork quality control purposes, is noted separately and not linked to the completed questionnaire. In this way it becomes impossible to identify the questionnaire answers given by a particular respondent.

¹⁶ <https://www.unicef.org/media/54796/file>

¹⁷ ESOMAR Code - <https://esomar.org/codes-and-guidelines>

STUDY RESULTS

I. General views on children with SEN and inclusion in the education system

The study reveals the continued persistence of the general population's definition of SEN primarily in terms of disability, impairment, and support needs.

Children with SEN are most commonly associated with children with disabilities - *"children with certain illnesses" / "have speech, hearing, walking or thinking impairments", "children with problems / disorders", "children with ADHD / attention disorders", "special children", "who need help",* and in this context it is considered that *'more care', 'more attention', 'acceptance'* should be shown to them, and some interviewed pupils mentioned that they are given more attention - *'children who get more attention than us'.*

In some cases, the references to SEN are made expressly through the prism of the difficulties of inclusion in the regular education system and even in society - *"it is hard for them, many questions/problems arise", "big problems for parents and teachers, it is a hard problem for all of us".* A few interviewed pupils mentioned that children with SEN are the *"isolated"* ones, *"who are a bit more removed from the rest of society", "excluded"*.

"Children with SEN are excluded from circles of friends, I came to this conclusion because these children are always alone, they don't communicate with anyone, sometimes they are made fun of, they don't have friends to be there for them." (F, 7th grade, rural, 5FGD)

Also, some students emphasized that children with SEN are *"the ones who are harder to understand", "learn worse"*. Some teachers said that for them the notion of children with SEN refers to *"effort", "a lot of work"*, how to organize the educational process, adapted curriculum and an inclusive environment for them.

"This year I will be a first grade teacher and I remembered the last student who enrolled in this class. I think as much help as possible is needed because this student may need special support. We are from a village and the pupil can barely count to 3, doesn't know his age and needs a lot of work and help from me. This is what came to my mind: it takes a lot of effort to achieve success." (F, teacher, 34 years of experience, rural, 1FGD)

"When I think of children with SEN, a modified curriculum comes to my mind, how I should develop it for each child." (F, language teacher, 7 years of experience, rural, 2FGD)

"I think about the actions that need to be taken on my part to make the student feel comfortable, not to be treated by peers in a special, discriminatory way. I would rather think of it as a fear of discriminating against them, of not being hurt and left aside." (F, history teacher, 30 years of experience, rural, 2FGD)

Sometimes the positive connotation of the condition is expressly referred to, such as that children with SEN are *"more sensitive", "more empathetic", "more loving", "more friendly", "positive", "I imagined a smile that we have to understand or interpret in our own way"*. It was also mentioned that these children have an even greater need for attachment, love - *"I would compare a child with SEN to a flower that needs warmth and light. Light represents my knowledge and warmth symbolizes my kindness"*.

"Children who need a lot of affection - a hug, a cuddle, a caress, a kind word, these children are often rejected by their healthy peers, which amplifies their suffering." (F, preschool teacher, 20 years of experience, urban, 1FGD)

"We have a little girl in our class who is deaf-mute, but lip-reads. It happened that my little girl, being pushed, fell. Out of all the children, only this little girl reached out and helped her. Maybe because they are more special, they understand pain and suffering differently, they are gentler. This little girl is very friendly with everyone. As far as I understand, her classmates don't differentiate, they befriend her, they help her. My daughter is in kindergarten with this little girl. They need more care, but in society it is quite hard for them." (F, 40, rural, 2 children, 3FGD)

"Most of them are even friendlier than the people you may see every day. I even came across a personal case where one person was much kinder at heart than the average child. The thing is that they see the world differently, they always see in every person a hope, they see help, which is actually very good, I would actually promote these children with SEN, because they can even make a good future." (F, 9th grade, urban, 6FGD)

Although not directly, in several contexts, it has been pointed out that children with SEN are ignored or it is promoted that their emotions/behaviours should be ignored. Ignorance due to lack of knowledge and existing stereotypes, prejudices contribute to the perpetuation of exclusion and marginalization of children with SEN.

"If talking about my child, she has neurological and hearing problems. What I have noticed, these kids feel left aside. We understand that they require a separate attitude, but the kids accept them very hard. They, for the most part, don't have friends, you can see this in their behaviour, you can see that they are suffering in one way or another... I understand parents (with typical children) that they don't know the situation and can't explain it to the child, but we feel this. The child, in the collective, is not integrated, my daughter has two girls with whom she converses in the class." (M, 41, 3 children, 4FGD)

"There is a student in our class who is constantly given some easy homework there, no one ever bothers him, but it is still unfair. At least give him something to raise his grades, not just have the teachers say, 'Leave him alone, he's not learning anything anyway.'" (F, 9th grade, urban, 7FGD)

"We have some teachers who only work with a certain group of children (the better learners) and in case a child with SEN would come to our class, they may generally not pay attention to them. In addition, there is a high likelihood that this child will not make friends because children are cold and indifferent." (F, 6th grade, Chisinau, 5FGD)

Some students, from Chisinau and Balti municipalities, especially those who study in classes with more than 30 children, pointed out that there are no children with SEN in their high schools. In their opinion, children with SEN could not even learn in their school, since typical students face difficulties both in class and during breaks, and it is complicated to move around on the stairs because of the crowdedness. Including the pace of teaching new stuff, homework assignments require a lot of effort and many of the children are over-scheduled. The stereotype is perpetuated that high-performing schools cannot be inclusive.

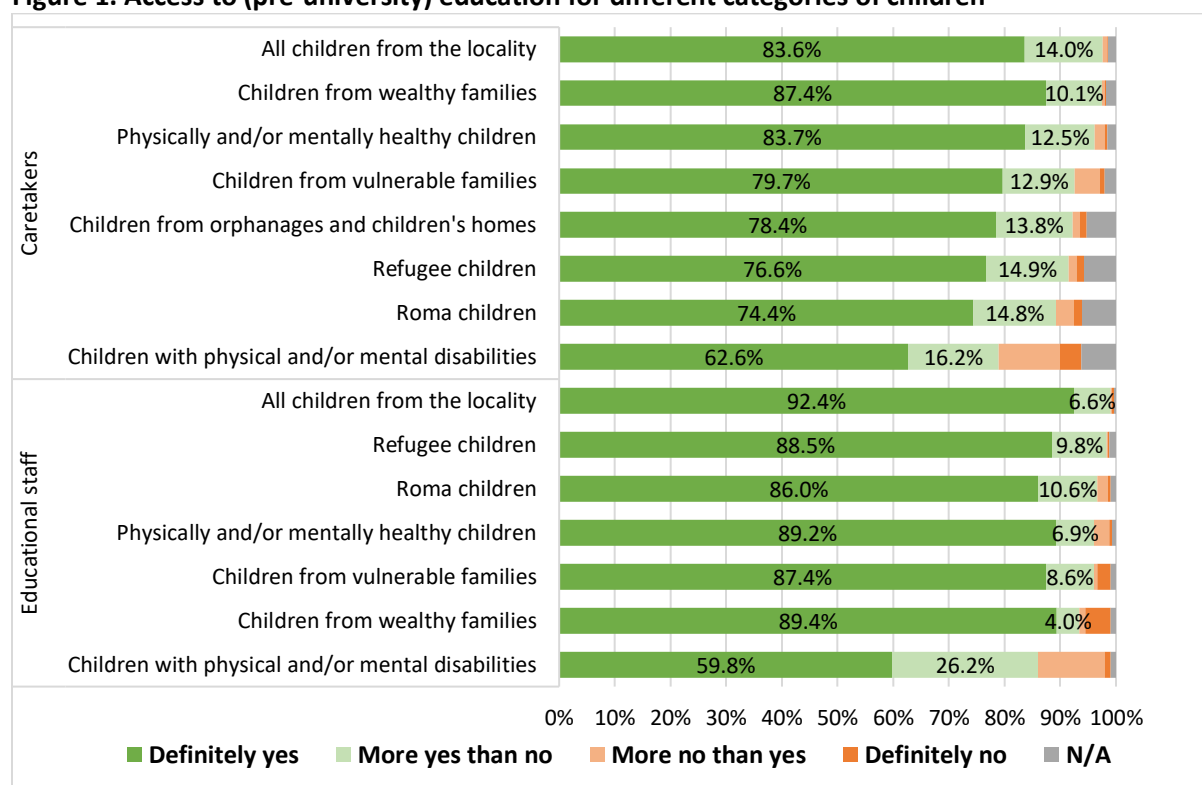
"If a student like that were in our class, I don't know if he would get enough attention from the teachers, because if you want to learn and respond to the lesson, you have to be very active, because the teachers explain the information very quickly, and if for a second you don't pay attention to what the teacher is saying, you fall behind. And yes, it would be kind of hard for him to maintain the learning tempo, even for a normal child it's hard." (F, 7th grade, Chisinau, 5FGD)

The results of the surveys highlight the perceptions of caregivers and teachers about the acceptance and integration of different groups of children in their communities and schools. Overall, there is high acceptance for most groups, but there are significant variations between the perceptions of the two categories of respondents. Social factors that restrict access to education for all children remain to be reflected. Teachers and caregivers were asked to rate the extent to which different groups of children (demarcated socially - low income, with unemployed parents, with parents with disabilities, etc., health or ability) have unrestricted access to education.

Caregivers generally seem to agree that children from various categories, such as those from 'well-off families', 'physically and/or mentally healthy' and 'all local children', are well accepted in the community. However, for more disadvantaged groups, such as 'children from socially vulnerable families', 'children in boarding schools and orphanages', 'refugees', 'Roma children' and in particular 'children with physical and/or mental disabilities', there is still a lower level of acceptance. This suggests a persistence of stigma and social barriers for these groups, indicating the need for further awareness-raising and inclusion measures.

Compared to caregivers, teachers have more positive perceptions of acceptance of children. Remarkably, they consider that all children, including refugee, Roma, and children from vulnerable families, are more accepted. However, children with physical and/or mental disabilities remain the least accepted, even among teachers, suggesting the need for in-service training programs for teachers and better infrastructure to support inclusive education.

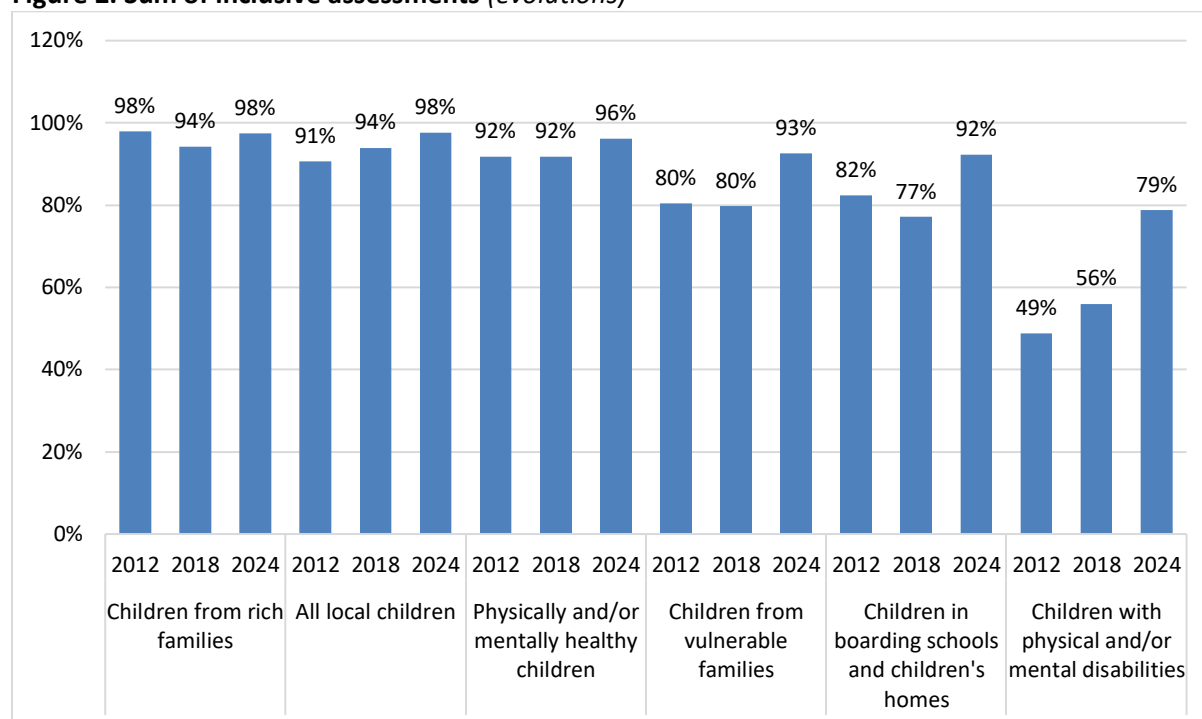
Figure 1. Access to (pre-university) education for different categories of children



Formulating the question in the questionnaire: Do you consider that they have free access to educational institutions (school, kindergarten)...?

The following figure highlights progress in ensuring free access to education for different groups of children. There are notable improvements in overall perceptions of equal access for categories of children such as children with disabilities (+30% since 2012), institutionalized children (+10%) and children from vulnerable families (+13%). However, it is worth noting the persistence of the still huge gaps between the perceptions of inclusive conditions between the categories of children for whom "positive discrimination" ("children from rich families") or the "standard" category ("all local children") and the most disadvantaged category of children ("children with physical and/or mental disabilities"). This gap, even if it has narrowed considerably, remains a notable one (19% in 2024).

Figure 2. Sum of inclusive assessments (evolutions)



Formulating the question in the questionnaire: *Do you consider that they have free access to educational institutions (school, kindergarten)...?*

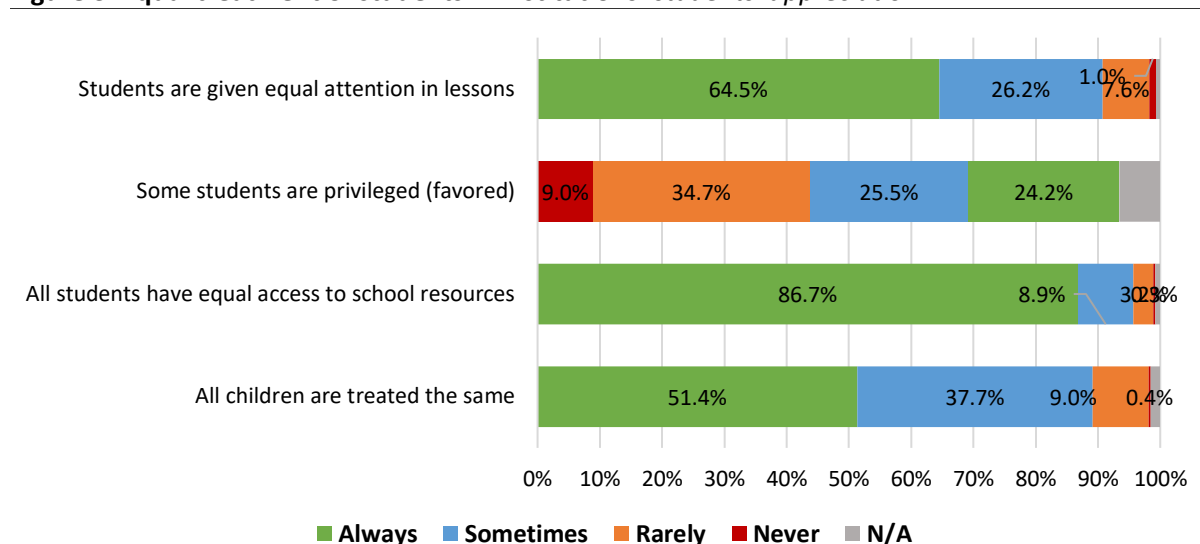
There is little significant variation in the perceptions of different socio-demographic groups regarding free access to educational institutions for disadvantaged children. Where they are observed, we find the traditional variations found in previous studies. For example, with reference to children with physical and/or mental disabilities, older, more highly educated, and urban caregivers show less strong inclusive beliefs.

The selective nature of the provision of the right to education is rather denied by pupils. Almost 90% said that all children are treated equally at school. Over 90% said that pupils are given equal attention in lessons and over 95% said that pupils have equal access to school resources.

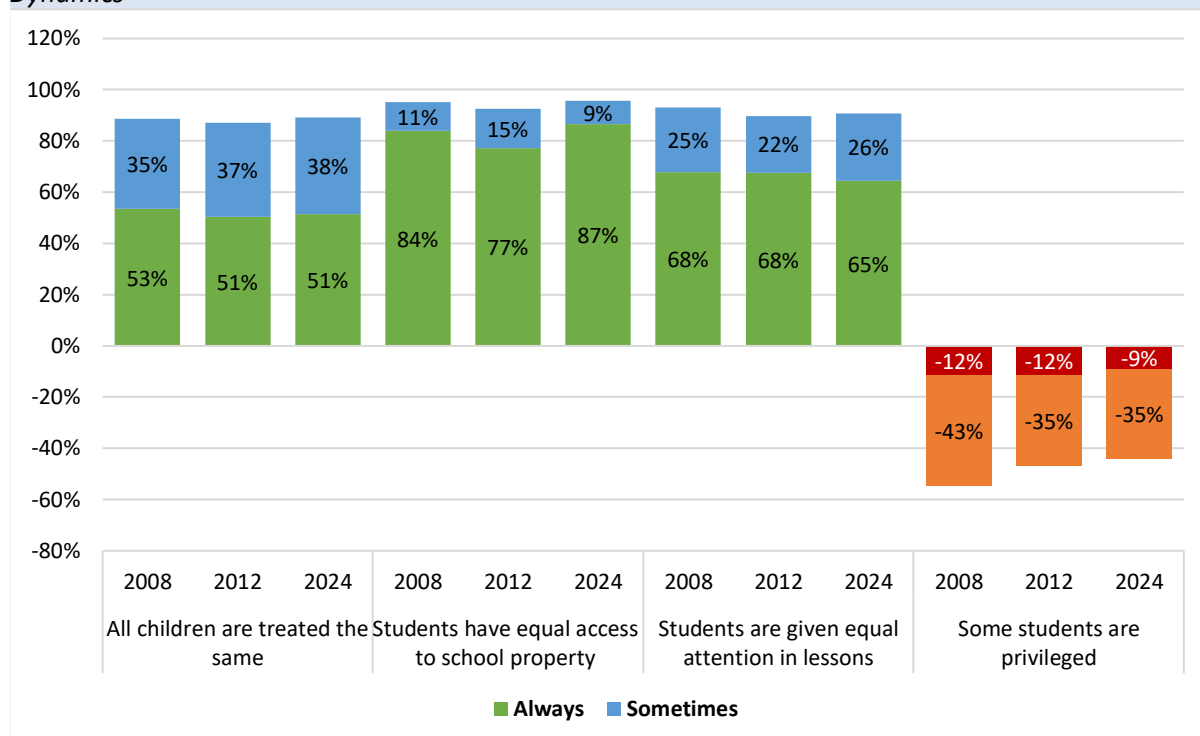
Yet things are not as good as they seem. One element that underlines the inequality in the treatment of pupils can be seen in the distribution of the ratings given by the surveyed pupils to the statement "some pupils are privileged". About 9% believe that this is always the case, while another 34.7% say that this attitude is sometimes emphasized. At the same time, there has been an improvement in this aspect over time, with the overall share of assessments confirming privileged treatment at school decreasing over time by more than 10%.

In the case of the other aspects assessed, developments over time are practically absent.

Figure 3. Equal treatment of students in institutions: students' appreciation



Dynamics



Formulating the question in the questionnaire: Do you think that in your school...

It should be noted that boys are more reserved in their assessment of the equal treatment of pupils in some of the allegations of selectivity in the provision of the right to education.

There are some differences depending on the language of study, with students in Russian-language schools giving more positive ratings.

Similarly, 67% of pupils in schools where the number of children with disabilities is higher and 63% in schools with a lower proportion of pupils with disabilities (less than 4%¹⁸) claim that "pupils are given equal attention in lessons". This is the only differentiation in the responses according to the presence of children with disabilities in the school.

¹⁸ In the 2017/2018 school year, the average share of pupils with SEN per school was 2% of the total number of pupils (Integrated Education Management System, www.sime.md).

Table 1. Equal treatment of students in institutions: by categories of students

| | | All children are treated the same | Students have equal access to school resources | Students are given equal attention in lessons | Some students are privileged |
|----------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------------|--|---|------------------------------|
| | | <i>Always (%)</i> | | | <i>Never (%)</i> |
| Total: | 2012 | 51% | 77% | 68% | 35% |
| | 2018 | 53% | 84% | 68% | 23% |
| | 2024 | 51% | 87% | 65% | 24% |
| Sex of respondent: | Male | 47% | 82% | 62% | 25% |
| | Female | 54% | 90% | 66% | 24% |
| Language of communication: | Romanian | 48% | 86% | 62% | 21% |
| | Russian | 65% | 90% | 75% | 37% |
| Residential environment: | Urban | 55% | 90% | 61% | 25% |
| | Rural | 49% | 85% | 67% | 24% |
| Year, class: | 6 th grade | 49% | 80% | 68% | 20% |
| | 7 th grade | 58% | 90% | 68% | 27% |
| | 8 th grade | 54% | 89% | 62% | 29% |
| | 9 th grade | 45% | 87% | 61% | 22% |
| Share of SEN children: | Less than 4% | 51% | 87% | 63% | 25% |
| | More than 4% | 52% | 87% | 67% | 23% |

Formulating the question in the questionnaire: Do you think that in your school...

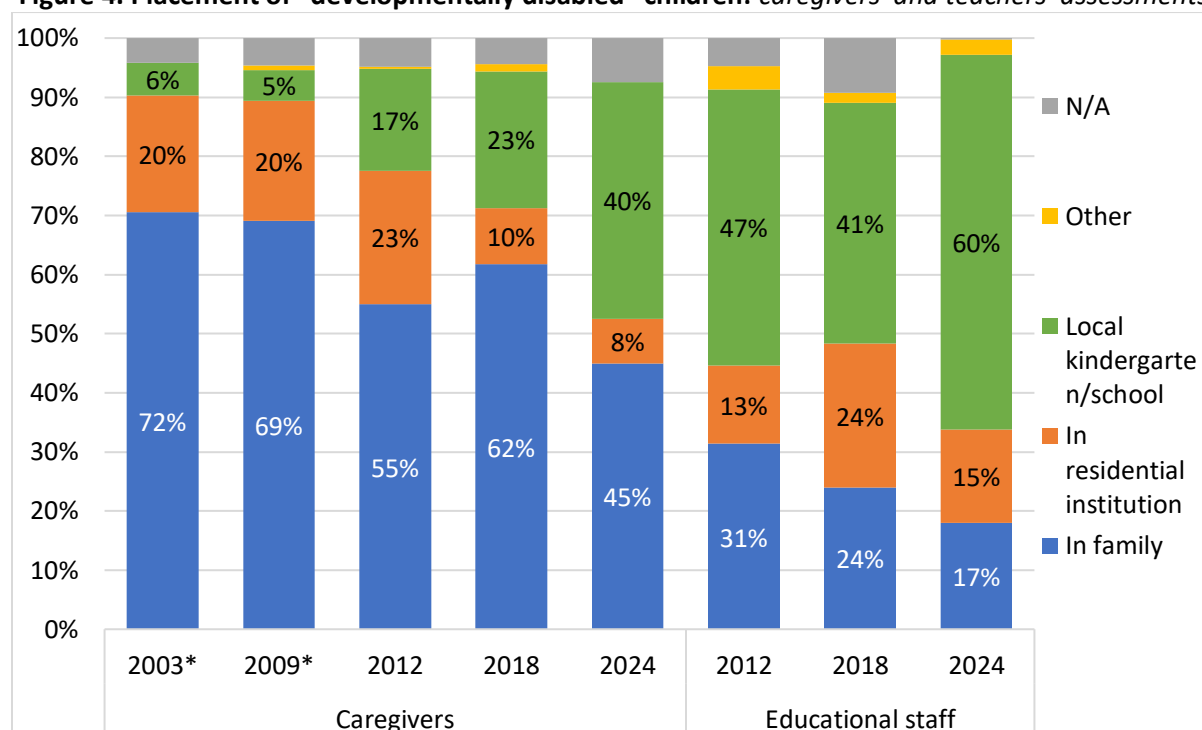
II. Attitudes towards the inclusion of children with SEN

Survey data show improvements in attitudes in society regarding the inclusion of children with special educational needs in mainstream schools. Respondents were asked how the family with a child with a disability should proceed in order to provide for his/her education. The option for an inclusive approach, where respondents treat the inclusion of these children in mainstream schools as the most appropriate form, doubled compared to previous surveys (among caregivers).

At the moment, 40% of the interviewed **caregivers** are of the opinion that the family should enrol the child in a mainstream educational institution, a trend is observed, thus a double increase compared to 2012 (17%) and 2018 (23%), starting from 5%-6% in the first measurements of the indicator (Figure 4). A further 45% believe that these children need to be cared for in the family, with the share also decreasing and at the lowest level in the history of the measurements. The most pronounced decrease is in the share of those opting for placement in residential institutions (10% in 2024 compared to 23% in 2018, 17% in 2012 and 20% each in 2009 and 2003)¹⁹.

Teachers are more open to the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream institutions compared to caregivers and are also the group among whom the inclusive approach predominates. Six out of ten respondents in this target group opted for inclusion of children with disabilities in their local educational institution, compared to only 41% in 2018 and 47% in 2012²⁰. Attitudes favouring isolationist approaches though remain quite widespread, with 17% of the teachers surveyed (24 in 2018 and 31% in 2012) believing that these children should be cared for in the family, and 15% (24% in 2018 and 13% in 2012) opting for placement in residential institutions.

Figure 4. Placement of "developmentally disabled" children: caregivers' and teachers' assessments



* Source: Knowledge, attitudes, and practices of families in early childhood care and development, UNICEF, 2009

Formulating the question in the questionnaire: In your opinion, if a family had a child with developmental problems, how would it be best to proceed...?

We notice that male **caregivers**, Russian speaking, with low socio-economic status, with more children, aged 40+ years, low education, and low socio-economic status to a greater extent support

¹⁹ National Survey of Family knowledge, attitudes and practices in early childcare and development 2009, UNICEF, 2010

²⁰ Basic education in the Republic of Moldova from the perspective of child-friendly schools: a study / Arcadie Barbararosie, Anatol Gremalschi, Ion Jigau [et al.]; Inst. de Politici Publice/ UNICEF

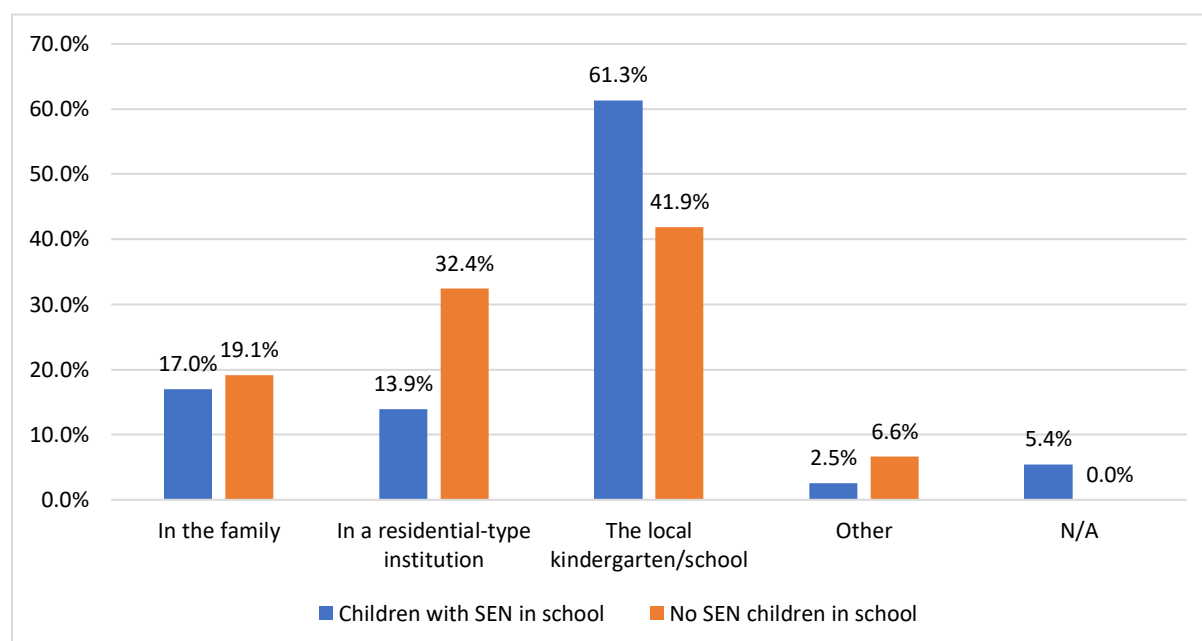
that children with *developmental problems should be cared for in the family*. Women tend to be more inclined towards inclusive approaches (42.3% compared to 29.7% among men (Annex 2, Table 2).

In the case of teachers, the differences recorded show that *the care of children with developmental problems in the family* is supported to a greater extent by primary school teachers with more than 20 years' seniority in urban areas. The discrepancy by language of communication is enormous. Thus, 12.8% of teachers with Romanian as the language of communication opt for family care compared to 35.0% of Russian-speaking teachers. A higher proportion of male teachers (31.1% compared to 13.9% of female teachers) are of the opinion that these children *should be placed in special institutions*. And finally, a higher proportion of secondary school and high school teachers, teachers with average years of service (11-20 years), Romanian-speaking teachers and teachers from rural areas are in favour of *including children with developmental problems in mainstream institutions* (Annex 2, Table 3).

Depending on the presence of children with disabilities in the school, the variation in opinions is insignificant (Annex 2, Table 3).

The presence of children with SEN in school increases by about 20% the option for their integration in mainstream school (Figure 5). Thus, among teachers in schools where there are children with SEN, there is a trend towards openness to their integration in mainstream schools, expressed by an increase in the proportion of those who opt for the inclusion of this category of children in local schools (61.3% compared to 41.9% among those who do not have such children in school). The latter are also more often in favour of institutionalizing these children (32.4% compared with 13.9%).

Figure 5. Options for the placement of children with developmental disabilities: teachers' ratings of the presence of children with disabilities in school



Formulating the question in the questionnaire: *In your opinion, if a family had a child with developmental problems, how would it be best to proceed...?*

At the same time, the relationship between the teachers' answers regarding the presence of children with disabilities in school and the statistics provided by the institutions on the number of children with disabilities is very weak. In both groups of institutions, depending on the presence of children with disabilities (less than 4% of all pupils and more than 4% of all pupils) more than 90% of the interviewed teachers stated that there are children with disabilities in their institution.

The data on the acceptance of children with disabilities in mainstream schools, we observe an interesting evolution of attitudes over the years, including between 2018 and 2024. Overall, acceptance of children with disabilities increased in 2024 compared to 2018. Even though the percentage of those who strongly agree with the inclusion of children with disabilities remained at the

same level (36% in 2018 to 35.2% in 2024), the share of those who strongly disagree decreased significantly from 19% to 15.9%.

By socio-demographic categories, the differences are notable. By gender, girls showed an increase in acceptance, with an increase of 4 percentage points among those who strongly agree. In contrast, among boys, the percentage of total agreement decreased by 3 percentage points and the percentage of partial agreement increased by only 1 percentage point, so we have a net reduction in acceptance of 2%.

According to the language of communication, students who communicate in Romanian showed a decrease of 7 percentage points among those who strongly agree and an increase of 3 percentage points among those who partly agree, so a net decrease of 4%, this is probably the most pronounced negative aspect in this chapter.

By grade, we also observe significant variations, in the sense that the rejection/disagreement with the statement that "children with disabilities should learn in mainstream schools" decreases with increasing grade.

In conclusion, the 2024 data show a slight upward trend in the acceptance of children with disabilities in mainstream schools, with interesting variations by gender, language of communication and year of study. This indicates a positive but still slow change in societal attitudes towards educational inclusion, so more work is needed to continue this trend and reduce remaining resistance in some disadvantaged groups.

Table 2. Acceptance of children with disabilities in mainstream schools: by categories of students

| | | 2012 | | | 2018 | | | 2024 | | | Difference 2018-2024, p.p. | | |
|----------------------------|-----------|----------------|------------------|-----------------------|----------------|------------------|-----------------------|----------------|------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------|------------------|-----------------------|
| | | Tot ally agree | Part ially agree | I stro ngly disagre e | Tot ally agree | Part ially agree | I stro ngly disagre e | Tot ally agree | Part ially agree | I stro ngly disagre e | Tot ally agree | Part ially agree | I stro ngly disagre e |
| Total | | 34% | 30% | 36% | 36% | 45% | 19% | 35,2% | 45,4% | 15,9% | -1% | 0% | -3% |
| Sex: | Male | 33% | 28% | 39% | 35% | 46% | 19% | 32,0% | 47,0% | 17,7% | -3% | 1% | -1% |
| | Female | 35% | 31% | 34% | 37% | 44% | 19% | 41,0% | 42,5% | 12,8% | 4% | -2% | -6% |
| Language of communication: | Romanian | 34% | 31% | 35% | 36% | 45% | 20% | 29,5% | 47,8% | 18,5% | -7% | 3% | -2% |
| | Russian | 34% | 23% | 42% | 37% | 46% | 17% | 38,3% | 44,0% | 14,5% | 1% | -2% | -3% |
| Residence environment: | Urban | 37% | 29% | 35% | 35% | 45% | 19% | 34,2% | 45,8% | 16,0% | -1% | 1% | -3% |
| | Rural | 33% | 30% | 37% | 37% | 44% | 19% | 39,5% | 43,5% | 15,6% | 3% | -1% | -3% |
| Year, class: | 6th grade | 37% | 26% | 36% | 36% | 46% | 17% | 32,8% | 47,6% | 16,3% | -3% | 2% | -1% |
| | 7th grade | 29% | 33% | 37% | 39% | 43% | 19% | 36,9% | 43,8% | 15,7% | -2% | 1% | -3% |
| | 8th grade | 34% | 25% | 42% | 34% | 47% | 19% | 39,2% | 44,2% | 12,8% | 5% | -3% | -6% |
| | 9th grade | 36% | 34% | 30% | 36% | 44% | 21% | 36,6% | 46,6% | 11,7% | 1% | 3% | -9% |

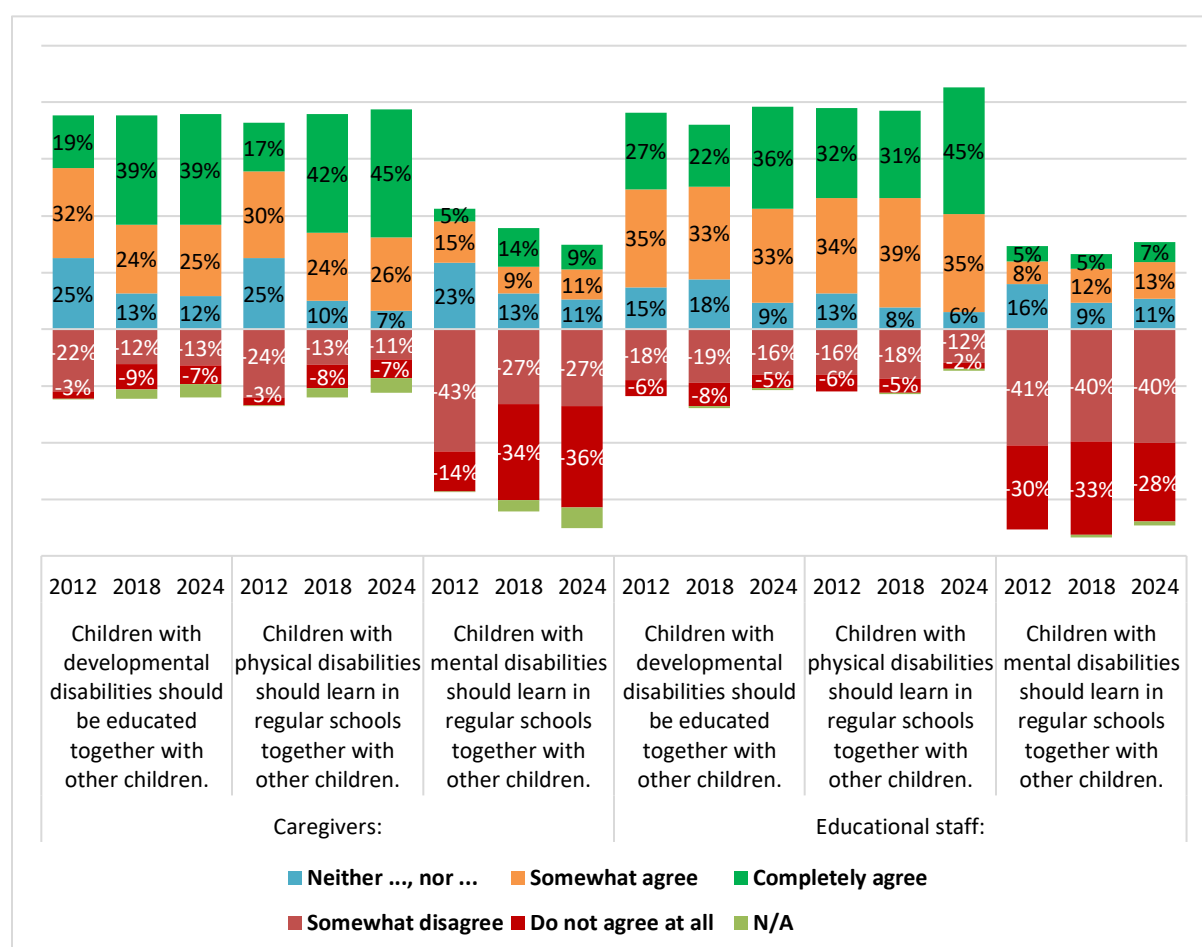
Formulating the question in the questionnaire: Do you think that children with disabilities (invalids) should learn in mainstream schools together with other children?

The survey data demonstrate many subtleties in the acceptance of children with disabilities, and respondents' statements should be treated with caution, as the type of disability determines the extent to which children with disabilities are considered to be included in the education system.

Overall, more than half of the caregivers and teachers fully or partly agreed with the statement that children with disabilities (the term "developmentally disabled" was used in the questionnaire) should be educated together with other children. In 2024 the level of the indicator recorded in 2018 is maintained, being about 12% above the 2012 result. Among caregivers there was also a decrease in those who, compared to previous surveys, expressed an uncertain position - neither agree nor disagree. Those who oppose the inclusion of children with disabilities are in a numerical minority, remaining at around 20% (Figure 7).

There are still huge discrepancies in acceptance, depending on the type of disability, which makes it possible to conclude that the generally declared acceptance is in fact only for physical disabilities. The idea of inclusion of children with mental disabilities is strongly opposed, with *disagreement, or rather disagreement*, still constituting more than 60% among caregivers and almost 70% among teachers.

Figure 6. General views on the inclusion of children with disabilities in pre-university education institutions



A summary index based on the assessments of the admissibility of inclusion of children with SEN in mainstream schools (three categories tested - developmental disabilities in general, physical disabilities and mental disabilities) allows us to observe that the differentiated, much less favourable attitude towards children with mental disabilities is characteristic of all caregivers, regardless of socio-demographic characteristics. Otherwise, younger, more educated caregivers have slightly more inclusive attitudes (*Annex 2, Table 4*).

In the case of teachers, the observations described above are equally valid. In addition, we find that the presence of children with SEN in the school, especially in an above average amount (4%) has a beneficial impact on the teachers' openness to inclusion, in the sense that teachers in schools with more than 4% pupils with SEN have higher index values. Younger teachers are more open. In particular, female teachers in Russian-language schools in urban areas are more open to the inclusion of children with learning disabilities (*Annex 2, Table 5*).

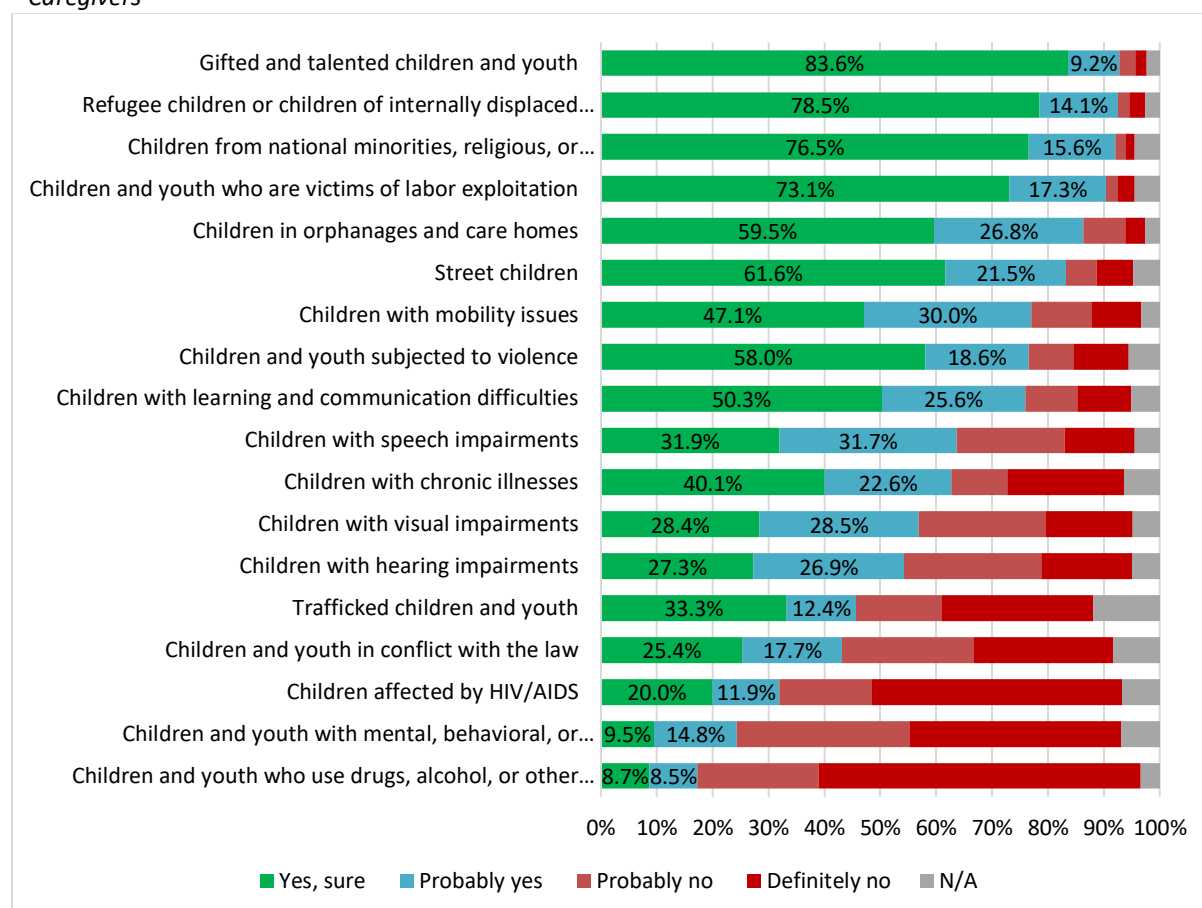
Figure 7 illustrates the views on the inclusion of children with different types of disabilities in pre-university educational institutions. Overall, the data show the varied attitudes of caregivers, teachers, and pupils towards the acceptance of children with disabilities in mainstream schools.

In the caregiver survey in 2024 the list of categories of children with different special educational needs was expanded to include the broad list of categories (14 listed in the terms of reference for this study).

The reference to a wide list of different types of SEN and more develops highly selective approaches. The variation in acceptance among caregivers ranges from 17.2% acceptance for young people who use drugs, alcohol, etc. to 92.8% acceptance for young people and over-talented children (Figure 8).

Among the least accepted groups are children and young people with mental, behavioural, or emotional disorders or other pathological conditions (24.3% acceptance), children affected by HIV/AIDS (31.9% acceptance), children and young people in conflict with the law (44.1%), trafficked children and young people (45.7%).

Figure 7. Views on inclusion of children with different types of disabilities in educational institutions
- Caregivers



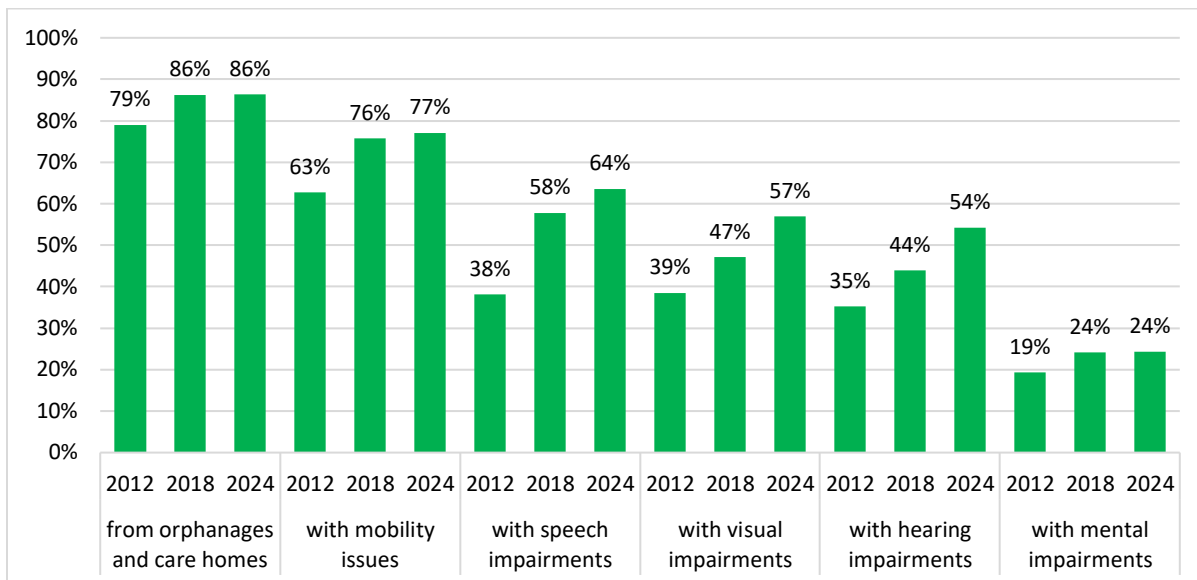
Formulating the question in the questionnaire: Do you think that (*categories are listed in the figure*) should learn in regular schools/kindergartens with other children?

The comparison between the target groups shows relatively similar levels of acceptance, as well as similar discrepancies according to the types of disabilities and SEN. At the same time, a positive element of the study is the continuing upward trends in educational acceptance for all three target groups of the study, as well as across all disability types.

For example, in the current survey, 85% of teachers (68% in 2018 and 70% in 2012) and 77% of caregivers (76% in 2018 and 63% in 2012) do not consider mobility issues as barriers to inclusion, and 64% of caregivers (58% in 2018 and 38% in 2012) and 75% of teachers (55% in 2018 and 53% in 2012) do not consider speech issues as barriers to inclusion.

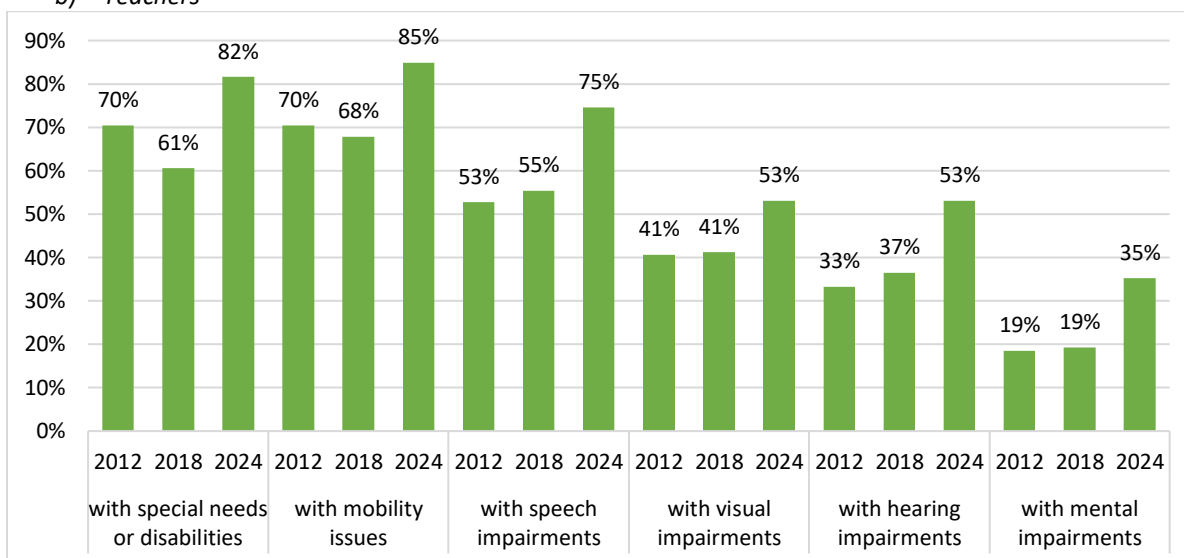
Traditionally, less accepted are children with mental disabilities, in all surveys, only 24% of caregivers, 50% of pupils and 35% of teachers accept their inclusion (Figure 8), although even with reference to this impairment there are improvements in the group.

Figure 8. Acceptance rates of children with different types of disabilities in educational institutions, in dynamics (answers: Yes, Sure, Probably Yes)
a) Caretakers



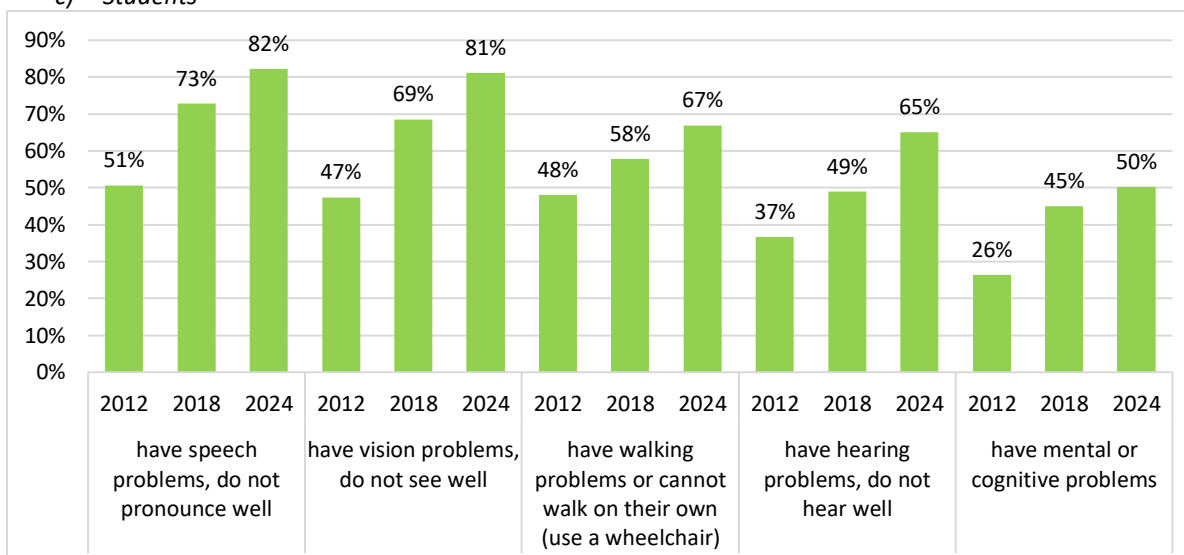
Formulating the question in the questionnaire: Do you think that (categories are listed in the figure) should learn in regular schools/kindergartens with other children?

b) Teachers



Formulating the question in the questionnaire: Do you think that (categories are listed in the figure) should learn in mainstream schools together with other children?

c) Students



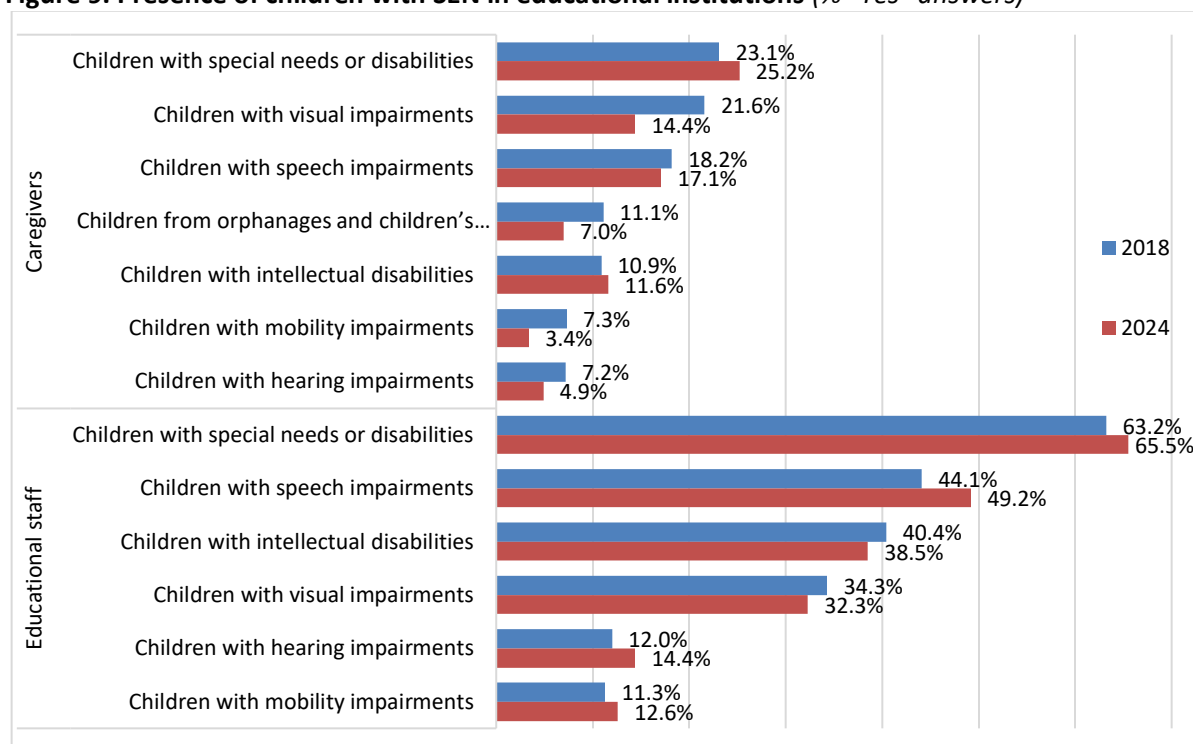
Formulating the question in the questionnaire: Do you think that children who ... should learn in mainstream schools with other children?

A summary index conducted among caregivers based on these indicators shows that categories such as highly educated, urban parents and younger fathers are more open to accepting children with SEN in the classroom where their own children are learning (*Annex 2, Table 6*).

The study also established the extent of the presence of children with SEN in mainstream schools. In the case of the caregivers, 42.1% reported the presence of such children in the class where their children were studying. Figure 9 shows the proportions by type of SEN.

Six out of ten teachers have children with SEN in their classrooms, 49.2% with language problems, 38.5% with mental disabilities, 32.3% with visual impairments.

Figure 9. Presence of children with SEN in educational institutions (% "Yes" answers)



Wording of the question in the questionnaire: for caregivers: Please tell me if your child's class has children...
For teachers: you personally teach in classrooms where there are students

The study also measured the de facto acceptance of children with SEN in general and by type of impairment by projecting the situation at the respondent's personal level. Respondents were asked whether they accept the inclusion of children with disabilities in their own class/school. It can be seen that here again the opinions by type of disability are different, with a high level of acceptance for children who have previously been in residential institutions and for children with mobility problems and low acceptance for children with mental disabilities.

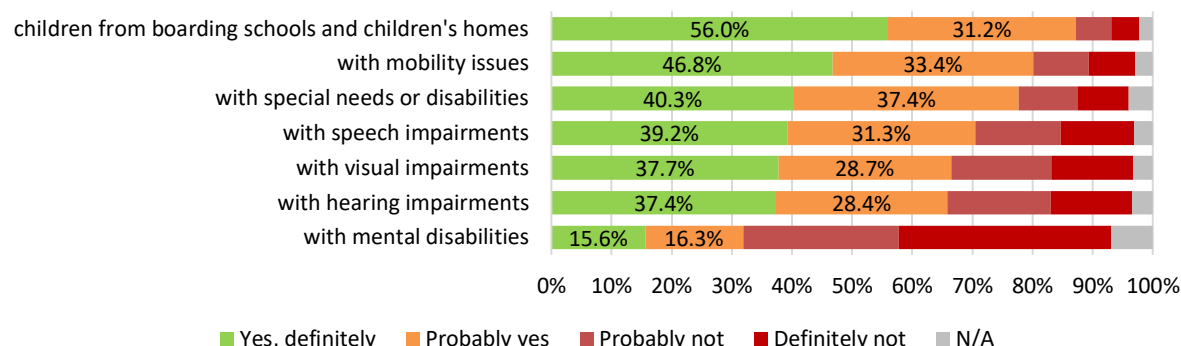
A higher level of acceptance is observed among caregivers - 87% (86% in 2018 and 81% in 2012) would accept in their own children's class, children from boarding schools and children's homes, about 80% (78% in 2018 and 63% in 2012) - children with mobility problems, 78% (73% in 2018 and 55% in 2012) - with SEN and disabilities, just over 65% (65% in 2018 and about 45% in 2012) would accept children with language, vision, hearing impairments and only 31.9% (28% in 2018 and 23% in 2012) would accept children with mental disabilities.

Teachers were asked to comment on the advantages and disadvantages for other children of including children with various types of SEN in the classrooms where they teach. For most of the categories, the proportion of responses with a positive connotation predominates. The most pessimistic answers also in this case are with reference to children with mental disabilities, only 13% consider that inclusion would create any advantages while the majority - 71.5% (79% in 2018) consider that it would predominantly bring disadvantages, and in the case of the formulation "children with special needs or disabilities", with 49% negative and 46% positive assessments.

In the case of pupils, the question on inclusion was answered with "it would be good for all", "it would be bad for these children", "it would be bad for the other children" and "it would be bad for all children". The study reports that the basic concern reflected in the responses is that inclusion would harm children with disabilities in particular (similar to the 2012 study), which is much more frequently given (weights range from 14%-40%) than the responses that inclusion of these children would harm other children (weights are below 10% in all cases except for children with mental disabilities). However, compared to previous studies, there is a trend towards higher weights for "it would be good for all" in all cases.

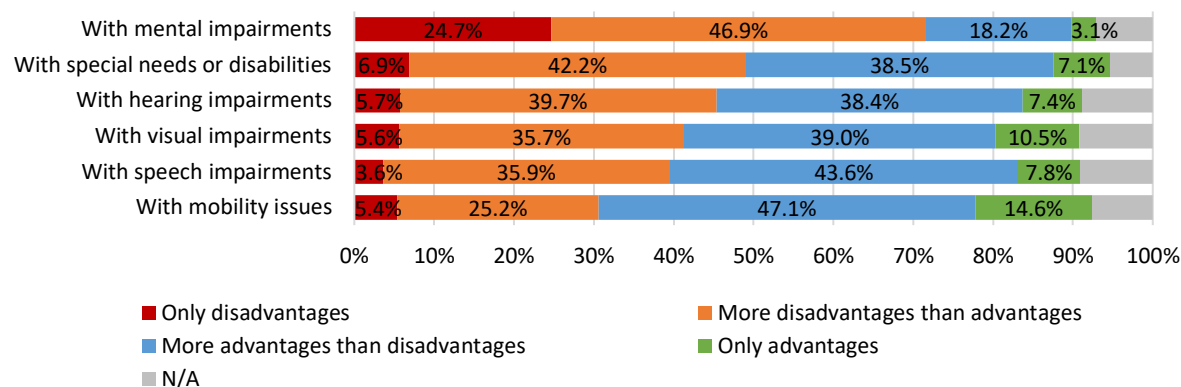
Figure 10. Acceptance of children with different types of disabilities in own classes

a) Opinion of caregivers (in the class where their children are studying)



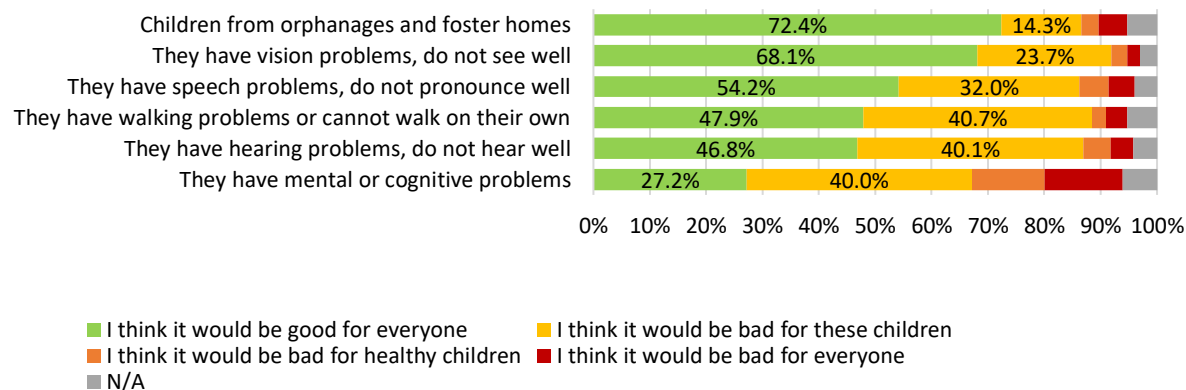
Formulating the question in the questionnaire: Would you accept that your child's class also include children (categories are listed in the figure) ...

b) Teachers' opinion (in the classrooms where they teach)



Formulating the question in the questionnaire: Do you think that if there were pupils in the classes where you teach (the categories are listed in the figure) this would create for the other (healthy) children...

c) Student opinion (in the class where they study)



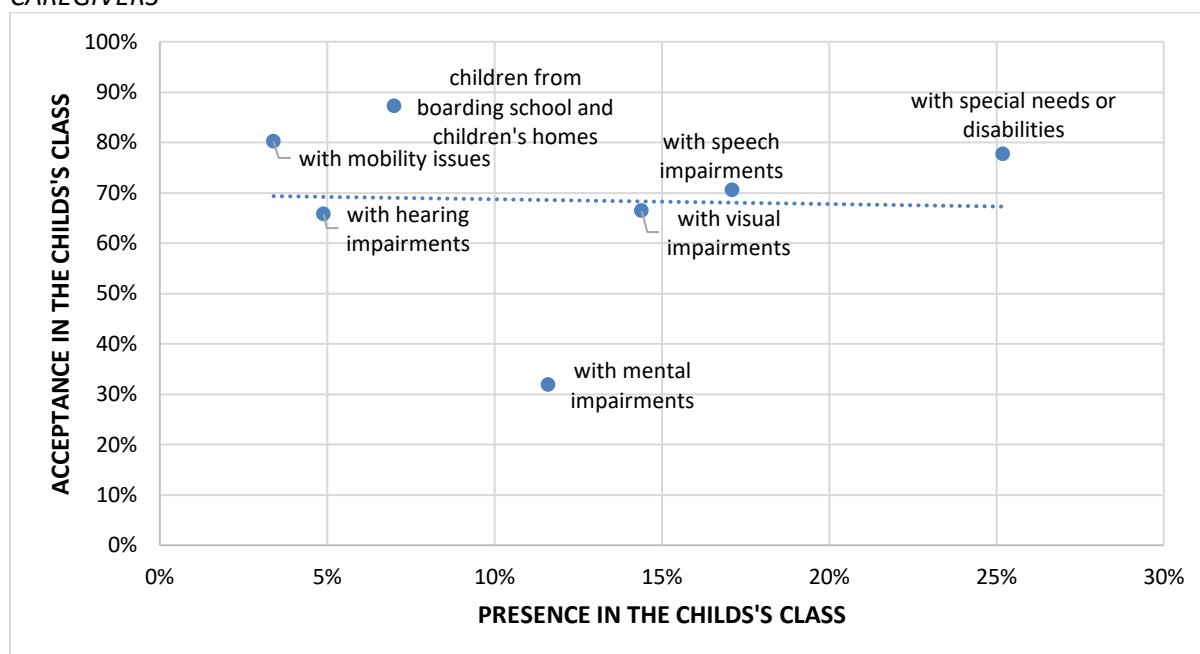
Formulating the question in the questionnaire: Do you think it would be good if your class included children who... (categories are listed in the figure) ...

Girls, pupils in Russian-language, urban schools are the categories of pupils who have more positive expectations from the presence of children with SEN in their class (*Annex 2, Table 7*).

An observation of major importance would be the lack of correlation between the presence of children with SEN in the classroom (where the child learns, where he/she teaches or in his/her own classroom in the case of pupils), which literally signifies the experience of contact with such children, and the degree of acceptance of such children in the classroom. That is to say, the acceptance or rejection of children with SEN in one's own classroom is not based on a real experience of them but are largely induced imaginary constructs.

Figure 11. The relationship between the presence of children with SEN in class and their acceptance in the same class

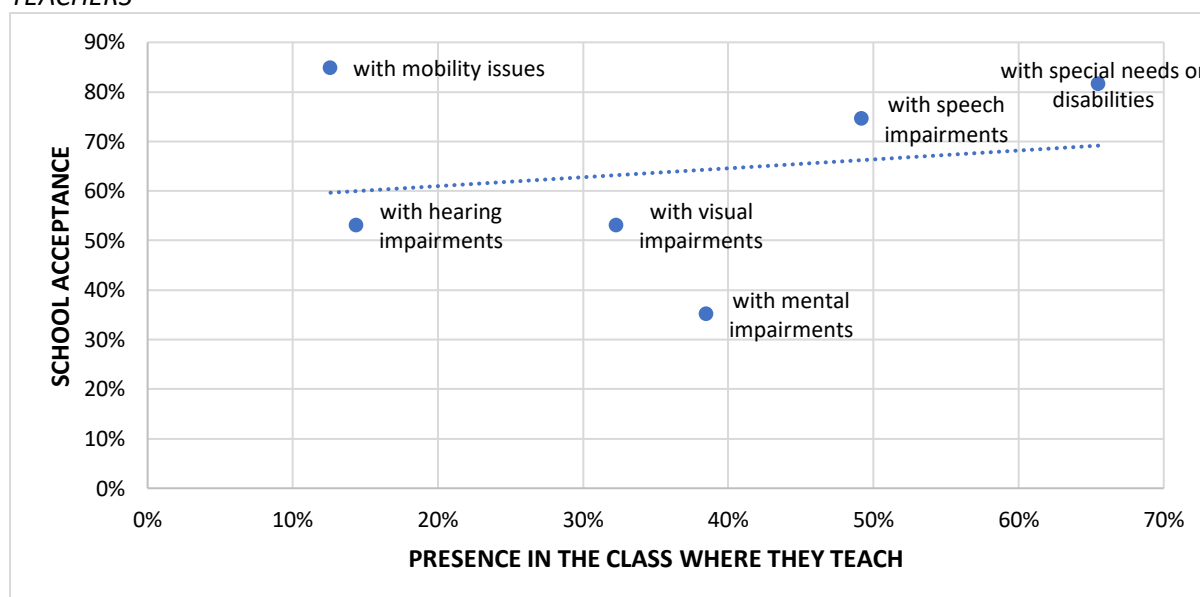
CAREGIVERS



Wording of the question in the questionnaire: for caregivers: Please tell me if your child's class has children...

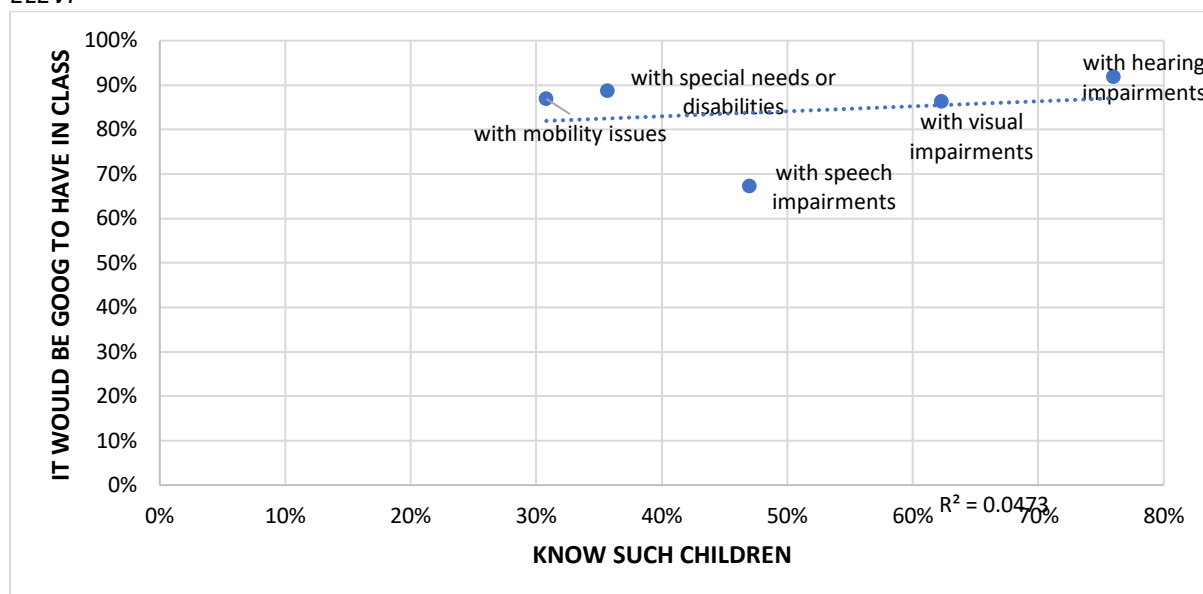
Formulating the question in the questionnaire: Would you accept that your child's class also include children (categories are listed in the figure) ...

TEACHERS



Formulating the question in the questionnaire: do you personally teach in classrooms where there are students

Formulating the question in the questionnaire: Do you think that ... should learn in mainstream schools with other children?



Formulating the question in the questionnaire: Do you think it would be good if your class included children who.... (categories are listed in the figure) ...

Formulating the question in the questionnaire: Do you know children who ...

The qualitative study highlights a number of differentiated approaches/attitudes according to special educational needs, beyond the presence of a disability and its nature.

Children with learning difficulties

If teachers and parents were more reserved in describing the situations of other children with special educational needs than those with disabilities, then pupils were more open in this respect and highlighted the following categories:

- Alcohol and tobacco users;
- Social network/phone addicted children - who are absent a lot;
- Children exploited through labour and/or forced to care for younger siblings;
- Children with learning difficulties because the teaching language is other than their mother tongue;
- Children from socio-vulnerable/poor families;
- Anxious, depressed children.
- Children who were previously in residential institutions.

Box 1. The situation of children (other than children with disabilities) with special educational needs

"I have a friend who, they're five in the family and a young child with disabilities, and that's why her mom works, and she stays at home with her little brother, sometimes her sister stays, she stays or her sister changes like that and one day she misses, one day she doesn't miss. She may sometimes come for two days, but she may sometimes miss a week." (M, 8th grade, urban, 6FGD)

"We have another case where the parents don't allow the child to go to school. They force her to work. She has a very big family, 11 people. And her mom and dad are Baptists. And they make her work growing flowers and selling them at the market. So, she may come two or three times a month, then she disappears again for a month, then she comes again." (F, 9th grade, urban, 7FGD)

"We have a boy who is the oldest in the class, he is 17 years old, he is already working and because of that he sometimes misses lessons. He is already working, but there is basically a very dysfunctional situation there, because he lives with his grandmother, his grandmother doesn't

really take care of him, he smokes, he drinks, but again I think it's because there is something broken in his psyche, because apart from that he is very nervous and it's very easy to get him angry." (M, 9th grade, urban, 7FGD)

"A classmate of mine, she doesn't really want to go to school either, but they make her, the teachers call her, the police are sent to her... She wants to sleep, because she's up until two-thirty at night on Tik-Tok, she's texting with everyone, sending different pictures and stuff like that. She's not on that special needs list, she's fine, she just doesn't come to school." (F, 8th grade, rural, 7FGD)

"We have a child who graduated 1st grade and he drinks alcohol. We have referred the matter to the multidisciplinary committee of the administration, we have invited the parents many times, tried to tell them about the danger. We discussed with the child that he might not make it to the age of 20. The parent has no influence over him. I saw him using, I raised the question: why is he selling alcohol to children! Who buys them alcohol?! I personally saw him with beer in his hand?!" (IDI, school manager, rural)

In one of the group discussions with students, they reported situations in which Russian speakers who learn in Romanian classes face difficulties in learning and relating to other children - *"I have a classmate who misses a lot, he is a Russian speaker, he is not sociable, has no friends and speaks Romanian with difficulty."* (F, 7th grade, Balti, 5FGD)

A few teachers mentioned that in the category of children with SEN who benefit from the support of the support teacher there are also children who, although physiologically they do not have any special needs, but the environment in which they were/are (residential institution, vulnerable family) have caused delays in the development of children and usually these children make significant progress if there is a collaboration between teachers and family/guardian. However, as children continue to be in a disadvantaged environment it is difficult to make academic progress when the pupil does not have basic needs such as nutrition, safety, etc. covered.

"In my class, I have a little girl who has been taken under guardianship from a children's home. Although the little girl is not mentally retarded or disabled, she still learns the material according to a special, more simplified program. The reason for this was that the children's home did not teach her the necessary amount of material, and she did not meet the requirements of the 7th grade program. For example, if we were to analyse the reading level, she reads like a 4th grader and narrates at a 3rd grade level. I'm glad that her classmates are receptive and helpful." (F, art teacher, 12 years of experience, Chisinau, 2FGD)

"We have child who graduated 4th grade, he lives in an alcoholic family. They abuse alcohol excessively and the child sees nothing but bullying, filth. We, with the teacher, go to the family even though we have no right without the police, we go to remind the mother that the child needs to wake up and come to the national assessment. The teacher and I drove him to the national assessment. The parents are not at all appropriate. I see his face yellow, and I ask him if he has eaten today, and he says that he hasn't eaten for 2 days... We have made a request to the multidisciplinary committee at the public administration level, and they are dealing with it, but they cannot deprive the mother of her rights because she consumes alcohol." (IDI, school manager, rural)

The situations of integration and acceptance of children without parents differ greatly from one context to another, however in some situations changing the educational institution is a solution for the child to escape bullying.

"We had a boy who had no parents and no one, just an aunt left, and he was constantly being picked on and abused. And because of that he stayed with us for a year and then transferred to another school. So, it was difficult for him to fit in, everybody insulted him, he had no friends. He was alone for a year." (M, 7th grade, rural, 7FGD)

The students interviewed also raised mental health issues, in their opinion many teachers refer to students suffering from anxiety or even depression as *'spoiled', pampered'*. In group discussions with

pupils, cases were presented where pupils find it psycho-emotionally difficult to come to school and interact with others.

"I have a classmate who suffered from social anxiety. She has been going through a very difficult time and doesn't like being around lots of people at all. As a result, our school is very crowded but has very little space, which always makes her feel insecure and anxious. Although she does not feel comfortable in our school, for personal reasons, her parents won't allow her to move to another school, because then they would have to send her to a private school which would mean extra expenses. I was very good friends with her for a long time. I also knew her mother, I even used to drop her off at home to make sure she would get well. I found out about her diagnosis from her mom." (F, 6th grade, Chisinau, 5FGD)

The behaviour of some students provokes some teachers, so in some situations it is difficult for them to control their emotions and behaviour, even applying physical punishment as a disciplinary method.

"I have a colleague who is close to SEN, he has abilities, but he doesn't learn and is noisy in lessons. In addition, he can get up and wipe the blackboard without being asked. This annoys the teachers a lot and they therefore grab him by the ears. He reads very hardy and practically doesn't respond to lessons, arguing more with teachers." (M, 6th grade, rural, 5FGD)

Talented children

The study noted that children with certain talents - whether sporting, musical or otherwise - are virtually neglected by the current education system. Some children participate in various sports competitions. On the one hand these children devote a lot of time to training in the area in which they excel, on the other hand they may miss a long period of lessons to participate in various competitions, and the education system does not provide some ways for them to catch up with the school curriculum, and/or participate in national school-leaving exams.

"We have a little girl who is supposed to go to the European championship, but due to the fact that she is in the ninth grade and has exams, she could not take advantage of this opportunity, refusing to participate... I believe that these talented children, who can bring the country's fame all over the world, should have a special educational program that allows them to enhance not only their learning skills, but also their talents, the additional skills that the student possesses. In European countries, children who represent the country at certain championships have the alternative of learning online, making it possible both to learn the school material and to develop talents. Unfortunately, our education system does not have such offers and opportunities for children who are talented and gifted." (F, Romanian language and literature teacher, 14 years of experience, rural, 2FGD)

Favoured children

The interviewed students also highlighted in the focus group discussions the aspect of students who are favoured. For the most part this refers to pupils who are more successful and teachers, according to some pupils, do not always judge them objectively.

"Usually, the favoured kids get higher grades, and the rest of us are underestimated and not given the full showcase of all the abilities we have. In this way, we are demotivated and discouraged. As a result, our results do not reflect our level of intelligence and do not express the abilities we have." (F, 6th grade, Chisinau, 5FGD)

III. Inclusion of children with SEN in mainstream education: advantages and disadvantages

The reasons given for or against the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream schools are manifold, although they can be further grouped into a few categories. However, all three interviewed groups usually refer to the same arguments. The qualitative study identified several advantages and disadvantages perceived by the respondents regarding the inclusion of children with SEN in mainstream schools (Table 3).

Table 3. Advantages and disadvantages of inclusion of children with SEN in mainstream education²¹

| | Benefits | Disadvantages |
|------------------------------|--|---|
| For children with SEN | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Socializing with peers; - Social adaptation; - Acquiring skills, knowledge. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Discrimination (humiliation) of children with disabilities; - In mainstream schools, children with disabilities do not acquire enough life skills compared to those who learn in special schools adapted to their needs; - Accidents and/or acts of violence against students with disabilities by other students. |
| For other children | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Forming tolerant attitudes and behaviour towards people with disabilities; - They are more sociable, more empathetic. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Disruption of classes (students are distracted, teachers have difficulty teaching), with reference to students with behavioural problems; - Other pupils may be disadvantaged, as pupils with disabilities require a special approach; - Accidents and/or acts of violence by students with disabilities against other students; - Taking on inappropriate behaviours from children with disabilities and children with SEN. |

a) Benefits

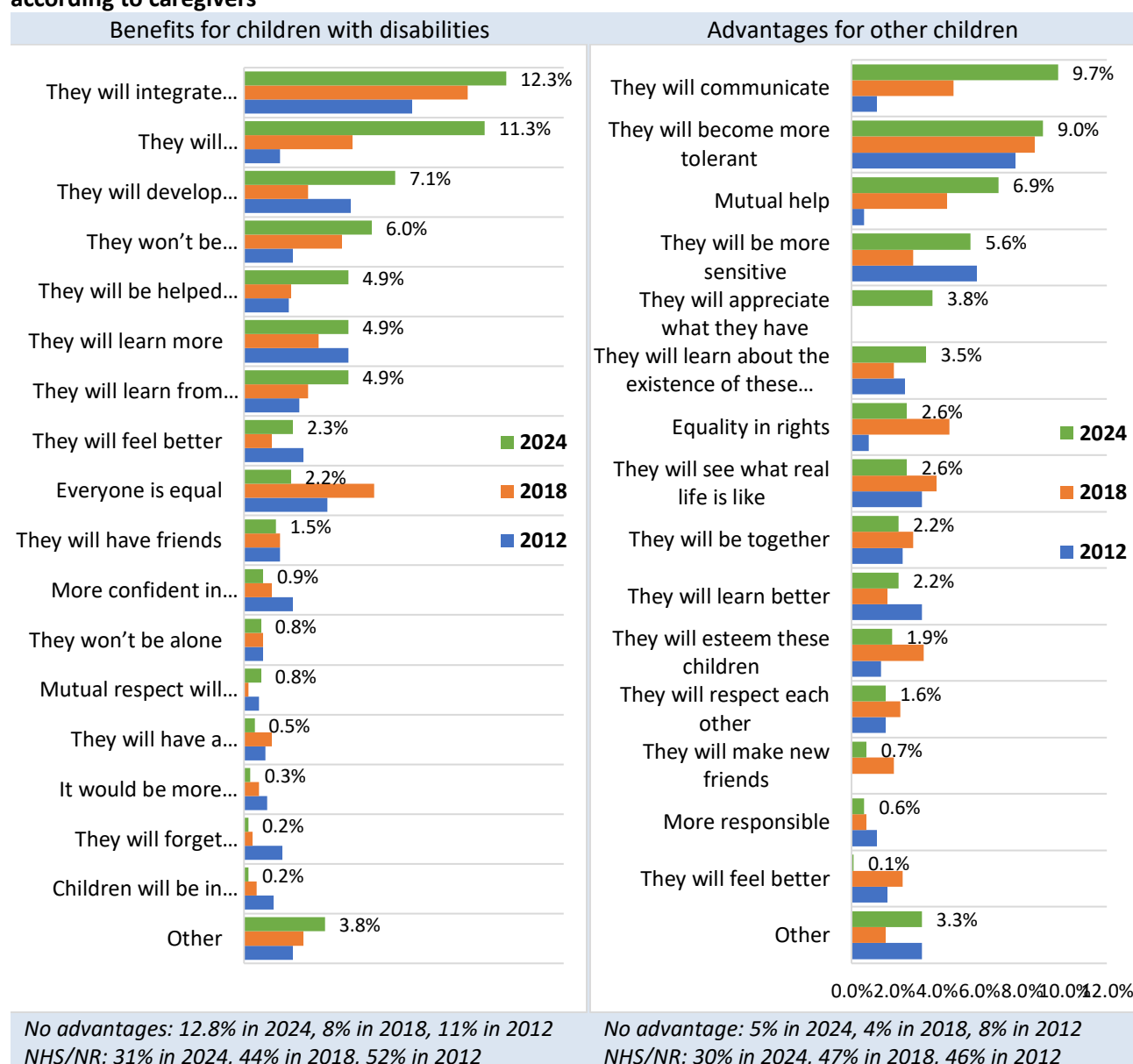
²¹ These are the opinions of the respondents who were interviewed in the focus group discussions.

Caregivers have come up with a rather complex set of benefits for both sides. They claim that as a result of integrating children with special educational needs into mainstream schools, they will integrate more easily into society, communicate more, develop better, not be isolated and that they will be helped by other children. All these benefits markedly increased compared to previous studies.

The other children will benefit from more communication, become more tolerant, learn to help each other, all of which is also on the increase from previous studies. Looking at the whole list of benefits we can conclude that the inclusion of children with SEN in mainstream schools is a means to educate in all children a number of human qualities such as tolerance, helpfulness, sensitivity, esteem, responsibility (Figure 12).

Note the gradual decrease from one survey to the next of caregivers who do not see any benefits from integrating children with SEN, with the share of non-responses to the question decreasing from around 50% to almost 30%.

Figure 12. Advantages of including children with disabilities in pre-university education institutions according to caregivers



Formulating questions in the questionnaire: What do you think are the advantages of including children with disabilities in mainstream schools? Please refer to the advantages for other children. / Please refer to the advantages for children with disabilities.

Teachers largely cite the same things as advantages, just with different emphases. First of all, they see far fewer advantages for children without SEN, and far more for children with SEN as a result of the

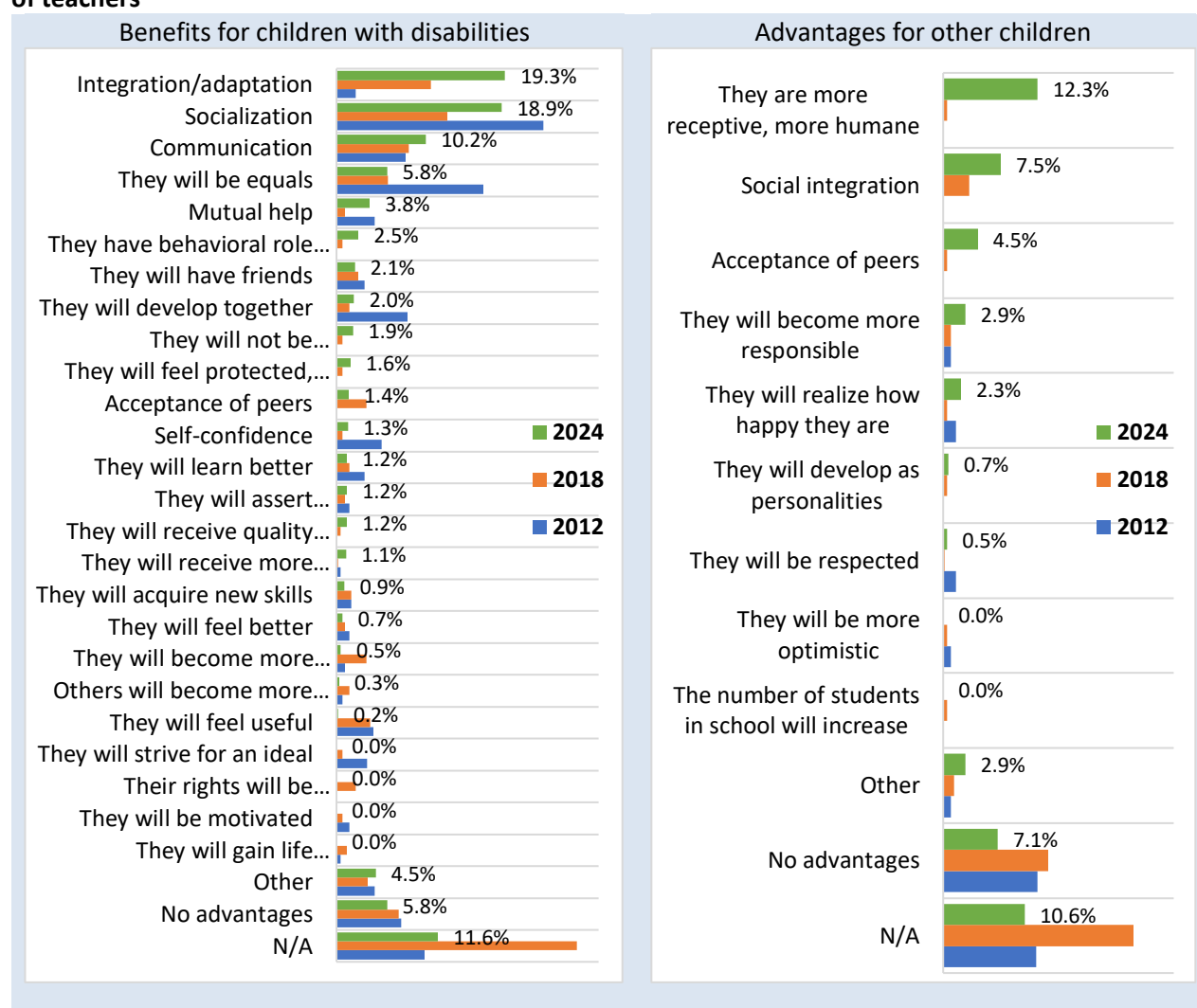
latter's integration into schools. For the rest, among the benefits for children without SEN, the most frequently cited aspects of tolerance are that children will become more receptive.

The benefits for children with disabilities relate to integration (up markedly from previous studies), socialization and communication.

We note that 7% (12% in 2012 and 14% in 2018) of teachers do not see any benefits for other children and 5.8% (7% each in 2012 and 2018) do not see any benefits for children with disabilities from their inclusion in mainstream schools.

It is important to note the many advantages mentioned by the respondents, even if the proportion of responses is not representative. This relates to the psycho-socio-emotional, but also educational, benefits seen by the population that would result from the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream education.

Figure 13. Advantages of including children with disabilities in mainstream education in the opinion of teachers



Formulating questions in the questionnaire: What do you think are the advantages of including children with disabilities in mainstream schools? Please refer to the advantages for other children. / Please refer to the advantages for children with disabilities.

The vast majority of those interviewed in the qualitative study believe that children with SENs should not be isolated, but on the contrary integrated into society, on the one hand to understand the world in which they live, to adapt to everyday realities, and on the other hand to get used to their presence and their specific needs. The experts interviewed highlighted the fact that teachers and society are much more tolerant of the inclusion of children with SEN in schools. In their opinion, a lot of efforts have been made to accept children with SEN and the focus is already on the quality of inclusion. Both

policy makers, psycho-pedagogical service providers, but also some parents of children with SEN, as well as representatives of civil society emphasized that it is still important to ensure the quality of education for children with SEN, not only their access to educational institutions.

Box 2. Attitudes towards the inclusion of children with SEN

"The Minister of Education in February received a complaint about the situation of a hearing-impaired child who after the 9th grade was accepted to the vocational school No. 11 for hearing-impaired children. This child has spent 9 years in the school and the child does not know any language: no writing, no signing, no communication, absolutely nothing." (IDI, NGO representative)

"No one will refuse the child in school, no principal will refuse. The question is the quality of inclusion. Maybe in Chisinau are that more proud high schools are going to say: "I have no support teacher, go where they have one". But here there is choice in Chisinau. But in the village, there is a school. No one will refuse him but what kind of inclusion, what quality of his life in school - this is another question." (4IDI, expert)

"The teachers have understood that this process is already not as they perceived it at the beginning, as a project, but they have understood that it is already a reality. And we are trying not to approach education and inclusive education separately today. Inclusive education has to be part of education." (5IDI, expert)

The interviewed specialists emphasized that the existence of psycho-pedagogical services in the territory and in schools, of the normative framework and methodological guidelines, as well as the training of specialists in the field with the support of donors are the main achievements in the field of inclusion of children with SEN. These aspects have contributed over time to changing the perceptions of teachers towards the inclusion of children with SEN, and inclusive education is part of the education system - *"nobody questions anymore whether these children should be included in school or not"*.

However, in different contexts, a good number of the participants in the study, especially teachers, were in favour of selective integration of children with SEN in mainstream education. In their opinion, a disability assessment should be carried out to determine whether the child can be included in a mainstream educational environment. The greatest reluctance for inclusion was with regard to children with severe mental disabilities and/or those with aggressive behaviour who may endanger the safety of other pupils and whose behaviour is difficult to manage.

Box 3. Advocates for the selective inclusion of children with SEN

"Children with less severe diagnoses could be mainstreamed, allowing them to socialize with other children, such as children with locomotor needs, those with less severe diagnoses. However, children with autism should not be mainstreamed. I worked with an autistic child in first grade, and although he sometimes adapted and did activities with the other children, there were days when he became violent and refused to participate. After a while, this child moved abroad with his family." (F, teacher, 22 years of experience, urban, 1FGD)

"We have to be humane and accept them, but when it comes to my student, for example, who suffers from a severe mental disability and exhibits violent behaviour, and children are hit, the parents of the other students come and ask why my child has to suffer from this behaviour of the sick child. I believe that these severely disabled children should be isolated to some extent in a special school, where there are adequately trained specialists who know how to handle such situations. Sometimes police or security intervention is necessary because we, the teachers are also exposed to violence." (F, teacher, 12 years of experience, urban, 1FGD)

"However, we are not sufficiently prepared for such students, who may display violent behaviour. We cannot give them a chance and protect other pupils from their violent behaviour. I believe that those who are very violent should be sent to special schools, where they should be guided by more trained specialists, and then reintegrated into society. Of course, they will come back, but at an older

age, better trained, more mature and better behaved, which would be good for everybody." (F, teacher, 33 years of experience, rural, 1FGD)

"I agree with the ladies. So, with regard to children with disabilities, it would be ideal to consider the level of severity of the disability. Children with severe disabilities, such as mental disorders or those involved in legal problems, should receive special attention and should not be integrated into mainstream schools." (F, teacher, 22 years of experience, urban, 1FGD)

"However, I stop at the idea of children with learning disabilities being assessed, with other decisions being made with them. It is unacceptable for a class of 25 children to suffer for 9 years because of a pupil who cannot cope. In the rest, everyone is included, except those with severe mental disabilities." (F, biology and chemistry teacher, 14 years of experience, urban, 2FGD)

"It all depends on the situation, there are children who have very aggressive behaviour that disrupts the tranquillity of the class and sometimes it is very difficult for us to stabilize the situation. But there are children who are calmer, they understand, they don't cause discomfort to others. If there are 2-3 children with SEN in a class, you don't manage to give them all support and help and to a certain extent the other better children lose out on the time given to children with special needs." (F, Romanian language and literature teacher, 14 years of experience, rural, 2FGD)

"Where there are serious cases I am sceptical about integrating into a classroom of children. I am talking about children who show violence. The services that should be given to them should be in another environment but not in a regular school, I think that in this way we are punishing others in the desire to do inclusion with all the tools we have, we are punishing those who come to study." (IDI, school principal, urban)

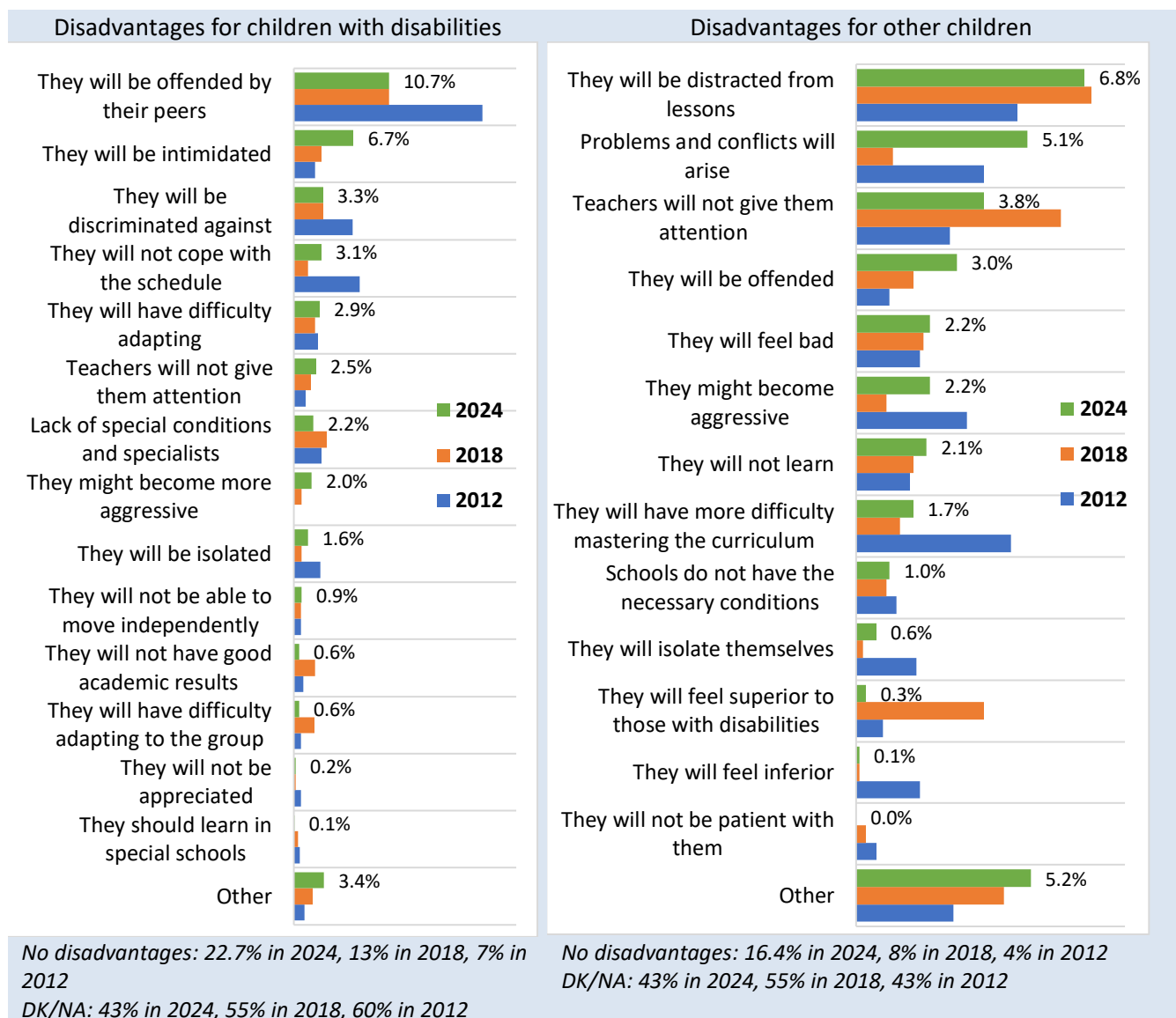
b) Disadvantages

The share of caregivers claiming that there are no disadvantages of inclusion of children with disabilities for other children is increasing and constitutes in the current survey about 23% (7% in 2012 and 13% in 2018), while 43% could not cite any disadvantages, also considerably decreasing compared to previous surveys (Figure 14).

The most frequently cited problems are that children will be distracted from lessons (6.8%, 7% in 2018, 5% in 2012), conflicts will arise (5.1%, considerably more than the share in 2018), teachers will not pay attention (3.8%, 6% in 2018, 3% in 2012), other options totalled less than 4%.

As disadvantages for *children with disabilities*, the main concern is the attitude of other children, 11% (same 11% in 2018 and 21% in 2012) of caregivers say that children with disabilities will be offended, offended by peers, 6.7% that they will be bullied by peers (much higher than previous surveys. Likewise increasing the share of those who think that disadvantages are missing, and decreasing the share of those who could not give a rating.

Figure 14. Disadvantages of including children with disabilities in pre-university education institutions according to caregivers

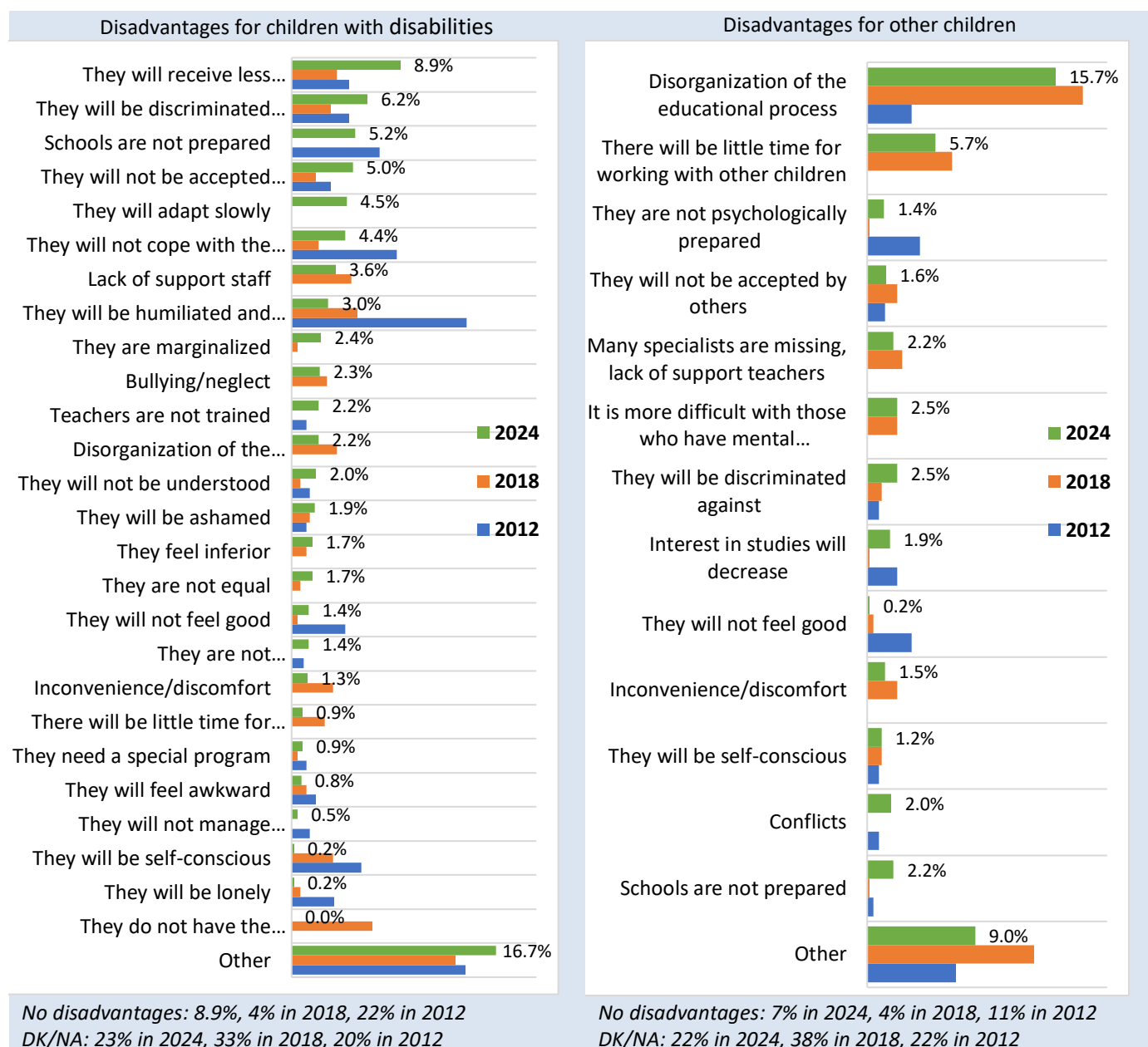


Formulating questions in the questionnaire: What do you think are the disadvantages of including children with disabilities in mainstream schools? Please refer to the disadvantages for other children. / Please refer to the disadvantages for children with disabilities.

Teachers are concerned that the inclusion of children with disabilities will disorganize the educational process (9% responses), other children will receive less attention because there will be less time left for working with other children (5.7%, 7% in 2018, in 2012 this issue was not mentioned) (Figure 15).

A multitude of disadvantages were highlighted by the respondents, some of which garnered less than 1% responses, but which point to factors that need to be specifically addressed.

Figure 15. Disadvantages of including children with disabilities in pre-university education in the opinion of teachers (disadvantages mentioned by more than 1% of teachers)



Formulating questions in the questionnaire: What do you think are the disadvantages of including children with disabilities in mainstream schools? Please refer to the disadvantages for other children. / Please refer to the disadvantages for children with disabilities.

The interviewed experts revealed that there are certain categories of students with SEN, such as children with hearing impairments, visually impaired children, and those with severe disabilities for whom the education system is less prepared, both in terms of equipment and teacher training to work with these students to ensure access to quality education.

"The education system is not sufficiently prepared to receive or... to be of sufficient quality for all children with special educational needs. Especially for children with sensory disabilities, children with hearing impairments, children with visual impairments and children with severe disabilities. So, the system does not have enough services. It doesn't have enough trained professionals to qualitatively cope with the needs of these children, because if let's talk about the fact that children with disabilities, for example, hearing, come to school, but maybe it's not the most adequate education and services in the system to cope with their needs." (6IDI, expert)

In the opinion of some teachers, but also of some parents of children with SEN for certain categories of children (with reference to those with intellectual disabilities, but also children with severe hearing or visual impairments) **special schools were more appropriate as they were equipped with assistive materials and specialized staff.** Thus, according to the respondents, the children had specialized support and benefited from the development of skills to enable them to be more independent.

"Being examined by a committee, it has to be specified and decided: can this child fit in and learn in a regular school, or does he need to attend some classes at a special school like it used to be in the old days?! Yes, maybe he studies, but they taught him painting and he came out a great artist. Those schools were good, even if we have new trends now. There, he was more prepared for life, he acquired certain knowledge, and here... I don't think so. I'm teaching him history, but it's even more likely that he won't need history in life. First of all, he needs some practical skills, not theoretical." (F, history teacher, manager, 30 years of experience, rural, 2FGD)

Another issue that was raised in the focus group discussions with students, but also mentioned by some parents, is that children with SEN are advantaged in relation to other children. This is another indicator of the lack of communication and preparation of all actors involved in the inclusion of these children in school.

"When I'm around him (child with SEN), I don't feel very comfortable because he has an air of superiority. This feeling comes from the fact that he has very good grades at all classes, even if he didn't write the test on his own, he is usually given teaching aids... During lessons, the given pupil is distracted, does not pay attention, does not listen to the teacher, does what he wants and, in some situations, disturbs other classmates. Therefore, he can make noises, laugh, stay on the phone and show his classmate what he found interesting or if he won the game." (F, 6th grade, rural, 5FGD)

Some teachers, but also some parents have emphasized that in different contexts they have heard dissatisfaction from teachers and parents about the inclusion of children with SEN in mainstream classes. These manifestations stem from lack of knowledge and communication gaps. In their view, the message should be promoted in society that anything can happen to anyone and neither the child with an SEN nor their parents are to blame, and that community members can make things easier for these families through acceptance and tolerance.

"I have heard complaints that why should she learn in this class, that she alone needs special care, that she should go to a special school, that she should not be integrated into normal society, but to anyone it can happen, as a parent you don't choose this." (F, 40, rural, 2 children, 3FGD)

Parents of children with disabilities are primarily concerned about their child's comfort and health. Sometimes parents prefer to keep their child at home, as they believe that the home environment will provide better conditions adapted to the child's disability, parents are aware of the child's needs and believe that they can protect the child from accidents. However, in some cases, due to the small number of children in the educational institution, managers insist on placing the child in kindergarten or school, assuring the parents that the child will be provided with the necessary care and supervision.

"I didn't want to enrol my little girl to the kindergarten, God forbid someone would push her and she would fall down, it was after the operation and the husband was afraid that if she fell down, she might be bald for life, and we spent a lot of money on that operation. But the director of the kindergarten came home and asked me to enrol her, because there are not enough children in the kindergarten, and they assured me that they would take care of her." (F, 45, mother of a 3rd grade child, rural, 7FGD)

A few parents mentioned that the human factor is very important, the situation of their children with SEN has changed, improved significantly after either another preschool teacher/teacher came, or they changed the educational institution.

"In the first year of kindergarten, the child was still not getting much attention, they kept saying that she was aggressive, after that the teacher changed and it was very good, that is, the child was included with everyone." (F, 37, 2 children, 4FGD)

IV. Barriers to the inclusion of children with SEN

There is a general awareness of the need for inclusion of children with SEN in mainstream educational institutions, but at the same time several challenges, barriers that make it difficult to integrate some children with SEN in pre-school and school institutions have been listed. The main barriers are listed below:

➤ Violent manifestations of children with SEN and how to manage them

Both parents and teachers have reported situations of **aggression and violence that they do not know how to manage in order to create a safe and inclusive environment for all children**. Although they are aware that children with SEN need to be included in society, to attend mainstream schools, at the same time they are concerned about the safety of both children with SEN and other children.

"I currently have a pupil with special educational needs who is sometimes very nice and pretty, but other times he becomes extremely violent. You have no idea how much trouble he causes me during lessons: he slams things, throws things, kicks the door and the bench. I'm the head teacher and I go to class every day, and his behaviour is different from what he does in French class. For example, in French class he throws his book at the teacher and insults her." (F, teacher, 33 years of experience, rural, 1FGD)

The violent behaviours of some children with SEN in relation to other students and especially the lack of specialized intervention causes some parents who are pro-inclusion of children with SEN to be more reserved or even doubtful about this aspect.

Box 4. Poor management of problem behaviour of a child with SEN

"In my daughter's class there are two children with problems, a girl and a boy. The girl is very communicable, friendly. Her classmates treat her very well. The boy, however, as he grew up, became aggressive. Even my little girl was grabbed by the throat in the corridor. I, for one, am not against her learning with other children in the classroom. If they were pushed aside, when they grow up and enter society, they would feel rejected. It's good that they are together, but who have big health problems and become aggressive over time, then, I don't know. I advised my daughter to approach the boy's mother, who works in the school cafeteria, and tell her what happened (the student was grabbed by the throat). She then reproached the girl that she made him do that, that he was not like that. I understand that it is painful for her to have such a child, but I don't know what should be done to solve this problem... Now the daughter is telling me that boy is not coming to school for three weeks now. It's not just my daughter who has been grabbed by the throat. Our school has three floors, but what if he grabs someone and throws them down the stairs?! It's a big problem. There are children who need more attention or a teacher with them. I'm not against them learning together, but I'm concerned about the safety of others. There's a support teacher in the school, but she can't be with him all the time, because there are ten of them in the school... One day, when he boarded the school transportation, the boy's mother approached my daughter and told her that because of her she would keep Ion²² at home. From what I understand, the mother can't do anything to him either, as he is a child with health problems." (F, 47, 3 children, rural, 3FGD)

Some students also reported situations in which their peers with SEN can be aggressive towards other children, either they are provoked by them or there are some spontaneous behaviours, so some children with SEN can physically and verbally assault others, including throwing objects.

²² first name changed

"But now he (the colleague with SEN) is very bad, and he doesn't want you to talk to him at all, he swears a lot, he talks nonsense, I'm a little bit overweight, and he calls me 'shaorma'... Other classmates talk to him, he is a gypsy, and his father gives him a lot of money and many classmates befriend him for that and they go and smoke." (M, 8th grade, urban, 6FGD)

It is believed that pupils with mental health problems should have a guardian so that their behaviour can be understood and managed by someone who knows them and is trained to do so. Respondents highlighted several situations in which children with SEN who have a guardian are more easily adapted in the classroom. Thus, whereas in previous studies children with intellectual disabilities were totally rejected for inclusion in mainstream schools, there is now a tendency for them to be monitored by adults.

"In more challenging cases, it's necessary for the child to be accompanied by someone who can keep them engaged, help, and encourage them. For example, my child's classmate has different states. Sometimes he can attend the whole lesson, and other times he starts screaming right at the beginning of the lesson. It all depends on his state. The lady who accompanies him takes him out of the class and tries to calm him down. If she succeeds, they come back in and continue the lesson." (F, 29, urban, 2 children, 3FGD)

"In another class, there's a girl with Down syndrome whom I know from the kindergarten my daughter attended. She's positive, but she can't stay focused for more than two hours, even with her simplified program. As far as I know, her schedule is adapted to her capacity. She stays for the first two lessons, and then someone comes to take her home. But there's also a speech therapist, a psychologist, and a support teacher working with her." (F, 37, urban, 5 children, 3FGD)

"It also depends a lot on the severity of the health issue. If a child has problems with their hands or legs, that's one thing, but when a child has serious mental health problems, it's a different issue. I believe they should be part of society; I don't agree they should be sent to another school. However, they do need someone by their side, whether it's an educator or someone from their family." (F, 47, rural, 3 children, 3FGD)

➤ **Disruption of classes**

According to some students and teachers, there are children with SEN who deliberately adopt certain behaviours to disrupt classes and draw the attention of teachers and classmates. The options for disciplining these students are limited and/or difficult for teachers and school administrators to identify and manage. Moreover, some children with SEN are fully aware of these limitations.

"In our class, there are three students with SEN, and two of them are normal (referring to their behaviour), but one of them, no matter what he does, disrupts the lesson and defends himself by saying, 'I have SEN, I have documents,' and that's just..." (F, 8th grade, rural, 6FGD)

Some school managers have mentioned feeling caught between a rock and a hard place. On one hand, there are state policies promoting the integration of children with SEN and the expectations of their parents. On the other hand, there are teachers and other parents who demand a safe environment and quality education for their children. In some cases, the lack of cooperation between parents and teachers leads to radical solutions that may not align with the child's best interests or the principles of inclusion. However, these measures are seen as ways to defuse tense situations.

"This year, I suspended a 5th-grade child for five days because he was disruptive nonstop. No teacher could hold a class; he wouldn't listen or acknowledge anyone. I called his parents, and when I decided to issue the order, they asked, 'But what are we supposed to do with him for five days?' I replied, 'What do you think we do with him every single day?' It's both the inability and unwillingness of parents to cope: 'I send him to school to get rid of him.' Meanwhile, other children suffer, and

their parents come to my office asking if something can be done because their children aren't learning. Lessons are being wasted." (IDI, school manager, urban)

The behaviour of some children with SEN requires increased attention from teachers, which sometimes means a few minutes and other times half the lesson. This impacts the quality of education and the right of other children to learn.

"In every class, there are children with SEN who disrupt lessons daily. As a result, the other children find their right to quality education infringed. Perhaps there aren't many such children, but they violate the majority's right to education every single day. For example, in our school, there is a boy who, from first grade to ninth grade, has been verbally and physically aggressive toward his classmates, using all kinds of sharp, rigid, or heavy objects." (F, history teacher, manager, 30 years of experience, rural, 2FGD)

➤ **Need for more attention from teachers**

The presence of one or several children with SEN in a class, especially in a class with more than 30 students, is perceived by some respondents as reducing the quality of lessons and overburdening the teacher. On one hand, the teacher must focus on the child/children with SEN, while on the other hand, they must teach the curriculum and manage a large group of students. Consequently, parents believe that other children in the class suffer, as their potential is not fully developed.

Box 5. Need for more attention from teachers

"Classes are large; in lower grades, I have as many as 34 students in a single class. Having even one child with special needs makes it difficult to meet everyone's requirements. Either you focus on the child with special needs, and the other 33 are left without attention, so to speak." (IDI, school principal, urban)

"Even managing a class of 38 students without special needs is a huge challenge. When we also have to address the needs of three children with special needs, the situation becomes overwhelming. In our institution, we have resources like psychological and speech therapy support, but the sheer number of cases exceeds our capacity." (F, teacher, 12 years of experience, urban, 1FGD)

"I can't leave the children with SEN to work alone during lessons, so most of my attention is directed toward them. As a result, I neglect the other students who have exceptional abilities. Something needs to be done about this because the students with high potential are often left to work on their own while I focus on helping the SEN students make progress. The problem is that in my class, I have 23 students, 8 of whom are exceptional at math—some even surpass my knowledge. I often wonder why I dedicate so much time to the SEN students, not wanting to leave them behind, but in doing so, I hold back those who need special attention to advance further." (F, teacher, 34 years of experience, rural, 1FGD)

"In my son's class, there is a boy with learning difficulties. He doesn't have a specific syndrome, but he struggles with learning. In such cases, the teacher finds it harder. Sometimes, she has to pause the lesson and spend extra time explaining to him. During these moments, the other children, who already understand the material, become bored and distracted, which affects discipline." (F, 37, urban, 5 children, 3FGD)

According to some educators and teachers, typical children, in their attempt to draw attention, adopt certain behaviours from children with SEN, with some even imitating them, which makes the teacher's work even more challenging.

"That saying is very true, and I don't want to compare students to a rotten apple, but one rotten apple spoils the bunch. This is what happens in classrooms: SEN students often tend to be the centre of attention, and we give them a lot of our focus. The other children see this and also try to get the same heightened attention from us as the SEN students do. This happens to us often, so it's a real

issue: those who adopt inappropriate behaviours watch the SEN child and try to imitate them, copying the mischief of the SEN child." (F, teacher, 34 years of experience, rural, 1FGD)

➤ **Attitudes of teachers and school managers**

Students, parents, and some teachers have pointed out that there are educators who completely ignore children with SEN. In some cases, teachers themselves promote the exclusion of these children from groups, believing that their inclusion comes at the expense of other students and that the effort teachers put in is *"not worth it, as they don't learn much anyway"*.

"My sister has a daughter with similar issues, and I know how hard it is for parents. My niece is quiet, sits in the back row, and studies according to a special curriculum. But in her case, it's the teachers who insult her. If she's one minute late for class, the teacher greets her with comments like, 'Oh, here comes our princess. She doesn't study and shows up whenever she pleases.' Discussions were held with the principal and the teachers, but they were told to move her to another school if they didn't like it." (F, 44, Chisinau, 2 children, 3FGD)

Teachers often lack the necessary training to address the specific needs of children with SEN, which can lead to frustration and, in some cases, segregation within the school.

"I have a classmate with some deficiencies, and because he didn't understand certain things, the teacher started yelling at him because he hadn't completed her assigned tasks. Teachers don't always have the patience to explain things to these students." (M, 6th grade, rural, 5FGD)

"There's a class in our school with kids who aren't like everyone else. They don't study all day, just one or two lessons with the other kids, and they mostly just talk with the psychologist, who explains things to them. Personally, I think it would be more comfortable if all these kids were in one class because they're bullied, and they feel very uncomfortable being in a class with other students... Teachers don't really like it when they join the lessons." (F, 7th grade, urban, 7FGD)

In some cases, parents request home schooling for their children, and little effort is made to include the child in the educational institution.

"A child receiving home education has locomotor problems; cognitively, he's fine, just has mobility issues. This child doesn't come to school at all; the parents don't allow it. I can't tell you why; I don't know the reason. Every year at the start of the school year, they request home education. Teachers go to his home and teach him there." (IDI, school principal, urban)

➤ **Attitudes of preschool teachers and managers of pre-school institutions**

At the same time, parents of children with SEN mentioned that they practically did not encounter difficulties in enrolling their children in school. However, a significant number faced challenges in enrolling their children in preschool institutions. Many parents reported being denied enrolment because their children exhibited more specific behaviours (lacking the abilities of children their age) and/or required special attention. Some parents sought support from local public authorities (LPA) and/or the education department to advocate for their child's acceptance into preschool.

Challenges persisted for some parents even after their children were admitted to preschool institutions. Their children were often neglected, and the parents remained under constant pressure, feeling that their children were not safe and/or were continuously criticized for being aggressive, not participating in educational activities, etc.

The interviewed experts, including policymakers and representatives of civil society, emphasized that the inclusion of children with SEN in preschool institutions requires greater attention and resource allocation. The challenges of including children with SEN in preschools are due to several factors:

- During the deinstitutionalization reform, the focus was primarily on school institutions, with less attention given to early education institutions;

- The management and funding of institutions through LPAs.

"Deinstitutionalization involved many school-age children, so everyone focused on how to support schools in the process of educational inclusion. Meanwhile, we were thinking that as admissions to residential schools were restricted, more preschool-age children would appear." (SIDI, expert)

"The lack of support teachers in early education institutions is a major issue. In our district, we don't have a single support teacher in kindergartens. This is because kindergartens are funded by local councils, not by the education department as they were previously, and they are not self-funded like schools. Local public authorities don't provide such positions because they lack the financial resources. Another barrier in kindergartens is that the institution itself doesn't refer children for evaluation by the PAS." (7IDI, expert)

Preschool educators and managers acknowledge that integrating children with SEN into preschool institutions is very challenging, particularly because these children require increased attention and care. Often, the educator or caregiver must stay constantly by the child's side, and if there are multiple children with SEN in a group, the situation becomes even more complicated. Some educators refuse to work with children with SEN due to concerns for their safety and/or the safety of other children. A significant issue is also the lack of support teachers in preschool institutions.

"You have no idea how much the other children suffer; even we, the educators, suffer. You start an activity, and suddenly it stops because the child doesn't want to listen. She gets up, goes to the toys, starts rattling a toy, and all the other children turn their heads there and do whatever they want. There should be a support teacher. Those from Stefan Voda suggested maybe the mother could stay until noon and then take the child home, or the caregiver could help, but the caregiver is busy feeding the children, cleaning up, and washing dishes." (IDI, preschool manager, rural)

➤ Teacher burnout

Teachers feel constant pressure in managing their tasks, and when there are many students in a class, along with children with SEN, physical and emotional exhaustion intensifies. Some older teachers struggle to control their emotions, resulting in health problems caused by stress, while some younger teachers choose to leave the system altogether.

"Those with more experience can handle situations better, but young professionals only work for a short period before leaving. It's emotionally and psychologically challenging to cope." (F, teacher, 12 years of experience, urban, 1FGD)

*"I find it very difficult to assess this child's abilities. For example, we've reached the end of the year, and I cannot evaluate his progress because he refuses to cooperate. His mother tells me that he reads at home, but at school, he refuses to talk to me, even though I try to approach him with patience and understanding, as if he were my own child. He also refuses to write, which makes it impossible to assess his reading and writing skills. I need to present an evaluation to the Pedagogical Council to determine his level, but I cannot do so because he categorically refuses to collaborate. I've tried discussing it with the principal, but he refuses to go to the resource center, even though he has scheduled sessions there. Many times, he leaves class, and I have to search for him on the school grounds. I leave my class in quiet and go look for him. The students listen to me, but some don't, and when I return, the class is noisy. **There are days when I feel very exhausted and don't know what else to do. Sometimes I feel like crying and quitting teaching altogether...** It's very hard; I don't think he should be in the same class with the other students. I can't conduct normal lessons—it's outrageous. There were times when he ran away into the village. His mother didn't answer her phone, his father was at work, and I had to call the police to look for him. I searched around the school and kindergarten—it's very hard with him. Once, he had a seizure; he was convulsing heavily, and I didn't know what to do. After that, I had a nervous breakdown and fell ill. We have a medical assistant in the institution, but by the time I went to the second floor and came back, he had already recovered. His mother didn't tell me he has epilepsy, and I didn't know until he had that seizure. She*

told me he is hard to manage, that he is sometimes violent and doesn't integrate with the other children. I didn't know he had epileptic seizures. When he collapsed in first grade, I didn't know what to do..." (F, teacher, 33 years of experience, rural, 1FGD)

In various contexts, students emphasized the necessity and role of the psychologist in improving relationships among students and supporting the well-being of teachers. This support is crucial not only for addressing challenges in working with students with SEN but also for managing interactions with other children.

"Teachers in some cases would also need a psychologist because, as I've mentioned before, we students have very different personalities, and teachers also have their own character, and sometimes they can't handle our whims. For example, we have classmates who, for all five years (the entire middle school cycle), haven't gone to the board because they don't want to, and of course, the teacher is somehow upset by this... Even to feel at ease, teachers need a psychologist." (F, 8th grade, rural, 6FGD)

"Older teachers also need a psychologist. They get angry quickly, yell, and then can't teach properly afterward. There are kids who know they get upset and purposely do something so that we don't have lessons afterward, because they just give us a lecture instead." (M, 6th grade, rural, 5FGD)

➤ **Stereotypes and prejudices**

Stereotypes and prejudices in society often represent significant barriers to providing specialized services to children with SEN. There is a perception that those who benefit from Resource Centre services or support teachers are "stupid" or "retarded." As a result, parents are often reluctant, and later, as students grow older, they too hesitate to attend these centres for fear of being labelled or stigmatized.

"In our case, it's not just the schools and teachers who are unprepared, but society as a whole. Up until 7th grade, the situation is manageable, and children aren't differentiated, but starting in 8th grade, stereotypes emerge. People think that if a child attends specialised sessions in a resource room, they're unhealthy or other similar things. Because of this, many children refuse to attend these additional sessions for fear of being teased by others. When a support teacher attends lessons, the child feels awkward and embarrassed, believing and sensing they're seen as part of the 'stupid' category. This makes it hard for us to work with parents as well. Many times, they refuse to consent to having special commissions assess their child and classify them as having SEN. Parents fear that if their child attends certain sessions, people will mock them for being 'unhealthy.'" (F, history teacher, 30 years of experience, rural, 2FGD)

"In the case of the boy who threw chairs at his classmates and teachers, his parents denied that he had any condition, calling the teachers 'abnormal.' It took a lot of effort to place him in a class with SEN children, but we managed. If the parents had listened to us from the beginning, the child could have undergone treatment and perhaps been able to study like other children. Unfortunately, the child was sent for treatment only after graduating from middle school, and he's now under medical care. In such cases, I've concluded that the hardest part isn't working with the children but collaborating with the parents." (F, biology and chemistry teacher, 14 years of experience, urban, 2FGD)

➤ **Minimal or no progress from pupils with SEN**

When teachers see results in children with SEN, they feel motivated to continue working with them. However, the lack of progress, despite their efforts, is demoralising and often perceived as a waste of time and effort—*"I feel like I'm tormenting both myself and the child"*.

"When you work hard and see results, it's rewarding, but when you put in all your effort and see no progress, then it really feels like a pointless waste of time." (F, Romanian language and literature teacher, 14 years of experience, rural, 2FGD)

➤ **Insufficient financial resources**

Experts, particularly decision-makers, providers of psycho-pedagogical services, and representatives of civil society, highlighted the insufficient allocation of financial resources for inclusive education. This limitation hampers the ability to address other challenges within the system. Specialists acknowledge that 2% of the budget for primary and lower secondary education is allocated to inclusive education, but these resources barely cover salary needs, leaving little to no funds for teaching materials or equipment.

However, for preschool and vocational education, almost no resources are directed at all. While certain actions, provisions, and requirements are regulated, they lack financial backing, making them difficult to implement.

"There is no foundational fund for inclusive education. If primary and secondary education institutions are managed at the district level and the district receives the financial allocation for these institutions, then funding for early education institutions goes to each local council. How could we manage this situation? Perhaps, hypothetically speaking, we could take 2% from the total allocation and deposit it somewhere? We've also thought of another idea: having a national inclusive education fund, where money could come from, let's say, the state budget. If the SAP identifies that a child in a specific kindergarten needs a service today—because tomorrow will be too late—then the SAP could access 20,000 lei from this fund to buy, for example, a wheelchair or a working screen for children with visual impairments." (5IDI, expert)

"From the 2% you mentioned, funding is allocated for equipping resource centers and paying the salaries of support teachers. I was saying that, currently, less funding is available for resource centers because the majority of the funds go toward salaries. As far as I know, resource centers—well, schools that can afford it—allocate some funds. It's not about specialised equipment, but more about consumables that these centers need to have." (6IDI, expert)

Specialists highlighted that assistive equipment is expensive, and most educational institutions cannot afford these costs. They suggested the establishment of an Inclusive education fund to enable timely intervention with equipment, teaching materials, and targeted human resources tailored to the needs of children with SEN.

"We need more flexible funding for inclusive education. The current approach is insufficient and inadequate to meet the needs of children. With the funds allocated today, we cannot purchase or provide schools with assistive technology." (6IDI, expert)

The lack of financial resources is a significant barrier to implementing mobile teams, an idea that has existed for years but has not been realised due to the absence of funding, particularly for specialist salaries, as donors typically do not provide financing for such costs. Mobile teams could address multiple issues, such as the shortage of qualified specialists and the provision of psycho-pedagogical services in small localities or institutions where there are only a few children with SEN.

However, some experts are sceptical about the effectiveness of mobile teams due to the shortage of personnel. They pointed out that there is already a lack of specialists, such as speech therapists, even in the private sector.

"They want mobile teams; perhaps someone will donate transport, but where will they find trained human resources? They don't exist. Parents ask us to recommend a private speech therapist, but

there isn't a single one in the district. It's a small district, and we don't have such specialists." (7IDI, expert)

During the focus group discussions, most of the challenges faced by children with SEN in educational institutions were highlighted. However, positive cases were also mentioned where children with SEN have a special attachment to their educator/teacher/support teacher and/or a good relationship with their peers. As a result, they enjoy going to school but, at the same time, both they and their parents worry about their future after completing their studies.

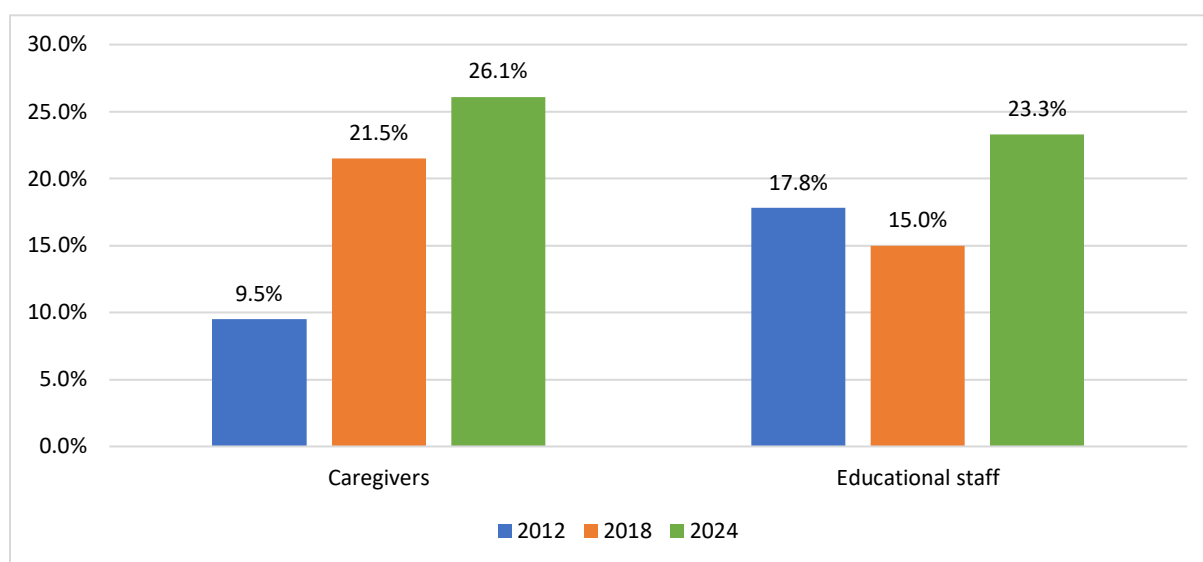
"We're afraid to say goodbye to school. He enjoys going to school so much. He knows all the teachers, the children, the parents—I think he knows the surnames of half the kids in the school. And now we're saying goodbye to school. We're afraid of what comes next. I think this fear is always there when you take the next step. But it's really hard for us to part with school." (F, 52, 2 children, Chisinau, 4FGD)

V. Assessing the preparedness of educational institutions for the inclusion of children with disabilities

Teachers' concerns about the readiness (as defined by the respondents) of mainstream schools to include children with disabilities, especially when discussing the disadvantages of inclusion, are reflected in their responses to a question directly addressing this topic. Only 23% of teachers included in the study (compared to 15% in 2018 and 18% in 2012) believe that mainstream schools are prepared for the integration of children with disabilities (Figure 16).

Caregivers interviewed are slightly more optimistic, with approximately 1/4 expressing confidence that mainstream educational institutions are ready to manage the inclusion of children with disabilities (compared to one in 10 in 2012 and one in five in 2018).

Figure 16. How prepared mainstream schools are for the integration of children with disabilities (% of answers Yes, schools are prepared)



Formulating the questions in the questionnaire: *Do you think mainstream schools are ready to integrate children with disabilities?*

Teachers who also serve as form tutors, men, and those from schools with Romanian as the language of instruction give more modest assessments of the readiness of schools.

Among caregivers, on the contrary, the proportion of those who believe that mainstream schools are prepared for the integration of these children has tripled compared to previous studies (26.1% compared to 22% in 2018 and 9.5% in 2012).

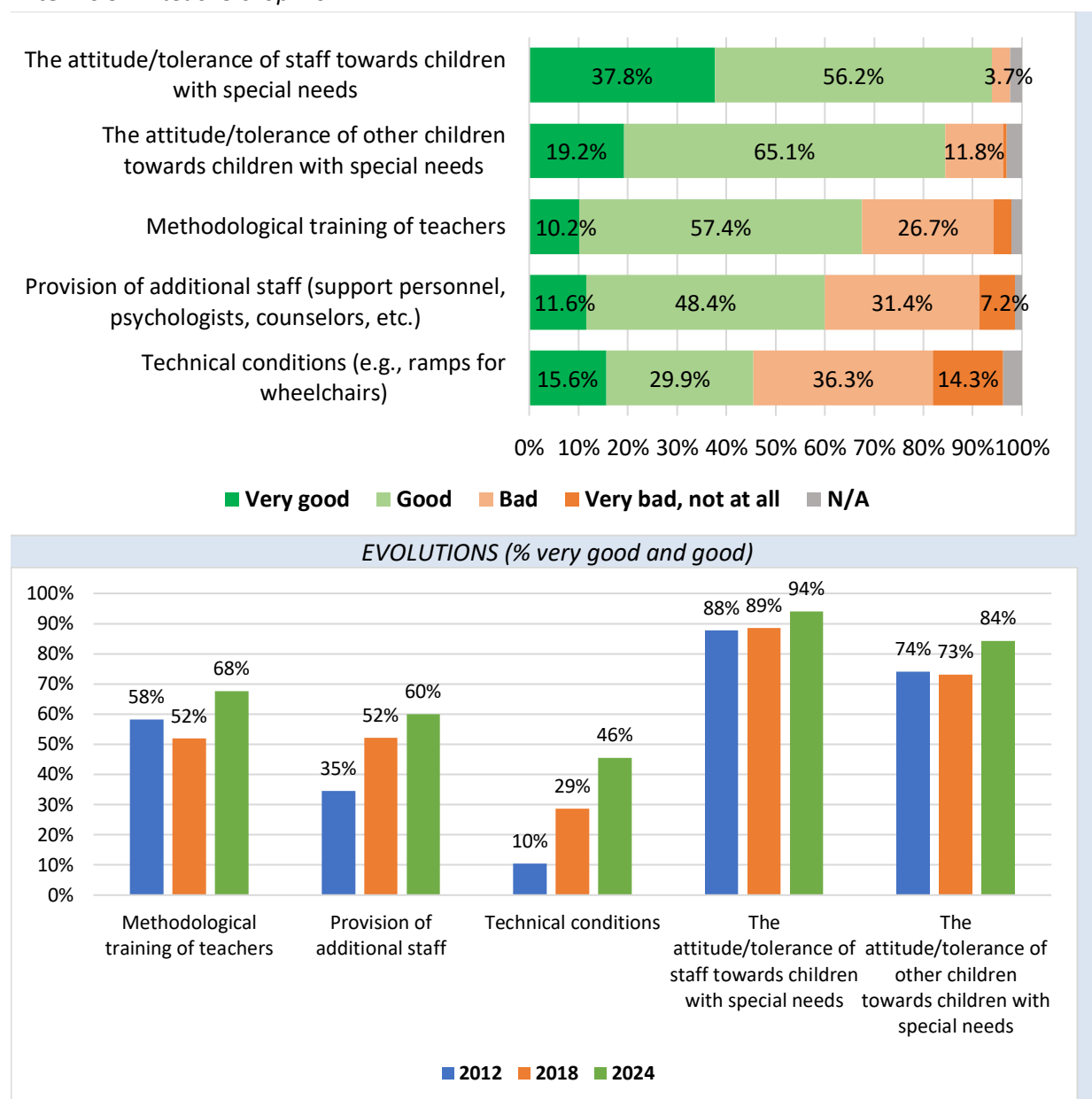
A certain inconsistency in perceptions can be observed when comparing the disadvantages mentioned earlier and the evaluations of key aspects of inclusion in schools. On the one hand, the main disadvantages cited by teachers were related to intolerant attitudes of students towards children with SEN. On the other hand, the tolerance of staff and other children is considered one of the areas where schools are best prepared to handle the inclusion of children with disabilities.

Outstanding issues are primarily technical. For instance, mainstream schools often lack necessary infrastructure, such as wheelchair ramps, and are not equipped with the required additional personnel. Additionally, the methodological preparedness of teachers leaves much to be desired.

Only about 45% of respondents rated technical conditions as very good or good, while 60% positively evaluated the provision of additional personnel, and 68% positively assessed the methodological preparedness of teachers.

It is worth noting that across all indicators, there is a growing trend in positive evaluations. For example, positive ratings for technical conditions increased from 10% in 2012 to 46% in the present study, and for the provision of additional personnel from 35% to 60%, among others (Figure 17).

Figure 17. The preparedness of mainstream schools for the integration of children with disabilities in terms of...: teachers' opinion

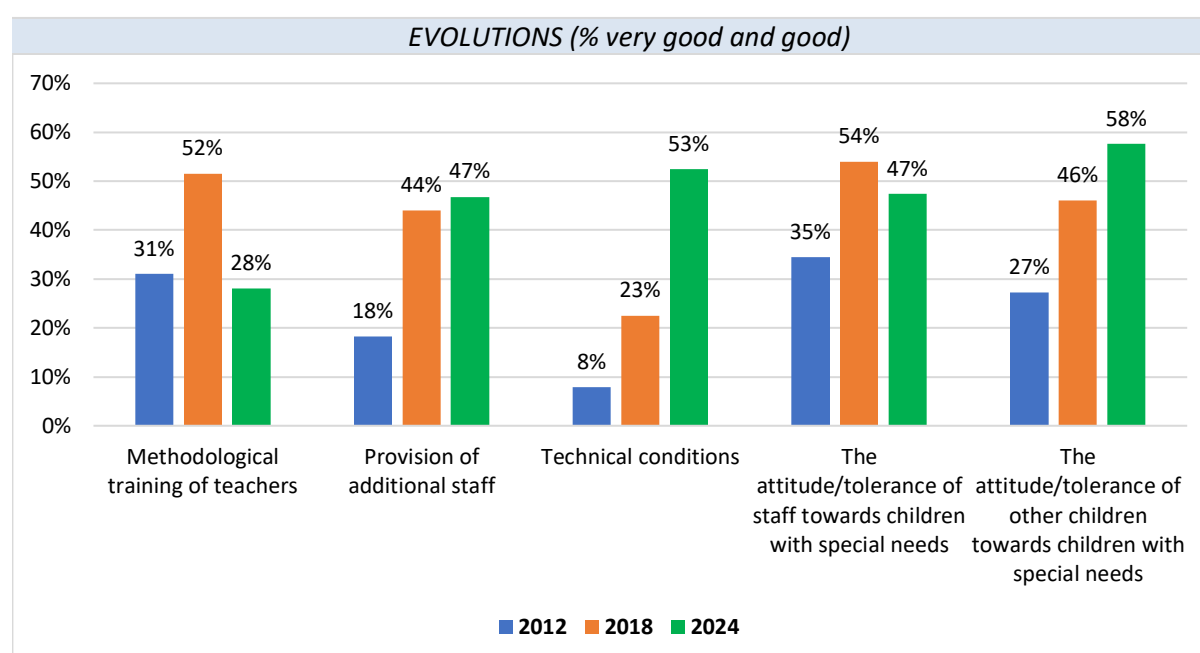
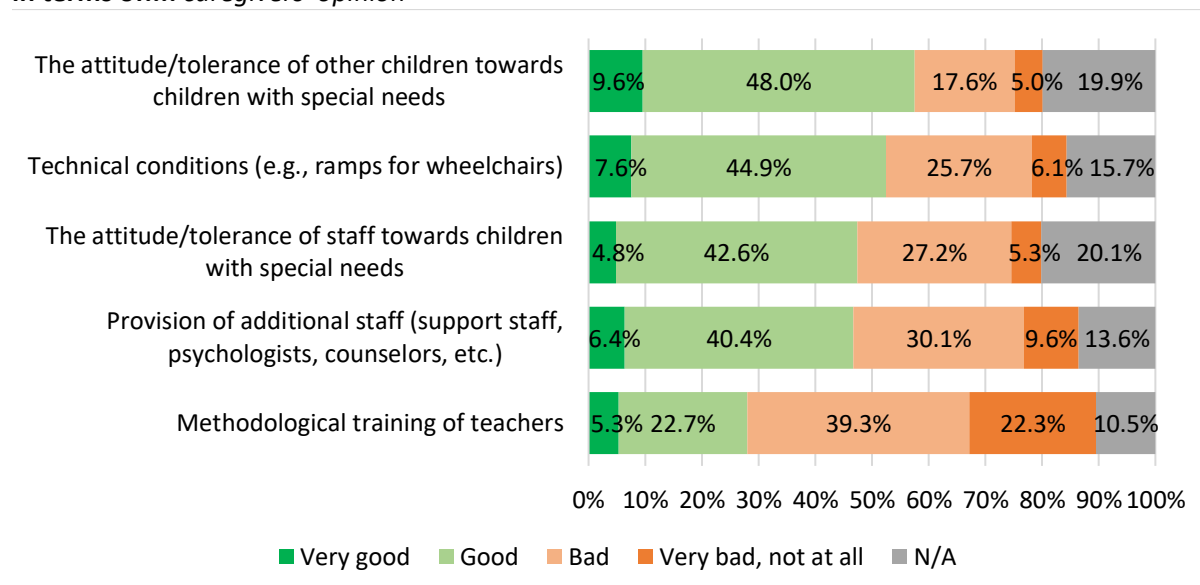


The wording of the question in the questionnaire: *how prepared for the integration of children with disabilities are mainstream schools in terms of...*

The ranking of problems reported by caregivers is roughly the same, with more pronounced increases in positive evaluations regarding technical conditions and the availability of additional personnel. However, compared to 2018, there are some regressions, with significantly fewer respondents positively assessing the methodological preparedness of teachers and the attitude/tolerance of school staff toward children with SEN.

Additionally, except for technical conditions, caregivers appear to be more reserved than teachers in evaluating other aspects (Figure 18).

Figure 18. The preparedness of mainstream schools for the integration of children with disabilities in terms of...: caregivers' opinion

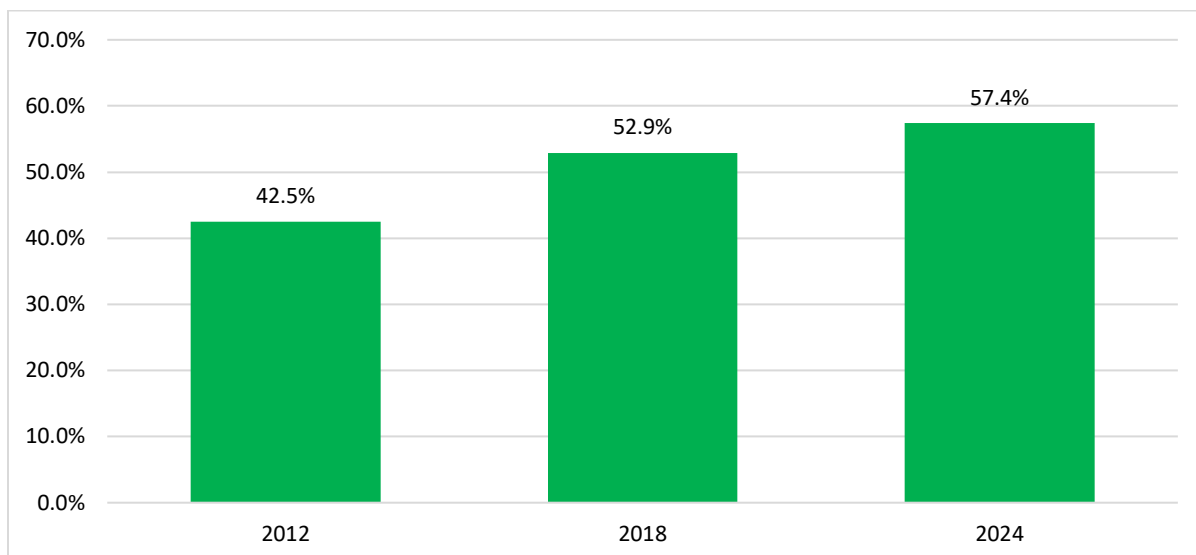


The wording of the question in the questionnaire: how prepared for the integration of children with disabilities are mainstream schools in terms of...

There remains a significant gap in the training of teachers, with only slightly more than half (52.9% in 2018 and 43% in 2012) having participated in specific training for integrating children with disabilities into schools. This indicator sheds light on the differences in perceptions and attitudes among various categories of teachers toward the inclusion of children with SEN, as it highlights the fragmented participation of teachers in such training programs.

As in the 2012 study, Russian-speaking teachers are less frequently included in training programs. Only 45.8% of Russian-speaking teachers (28.6% in 2018 and 10.7% in 2012) benefited from specialised training, compared to 60.1% of Romanian-speaking teachers (58.6% in 2018 and 49.7% in 2012). Male teachers are also much less frequently involved in these programs (35.3% compared to 58.7% for female teachers). However, over time, these disparities are narrowing (Figure 19).

Figure 19. Percentage of teachers who have participated in training on the integration of children with disabilities in school and assessment of their level of preparation

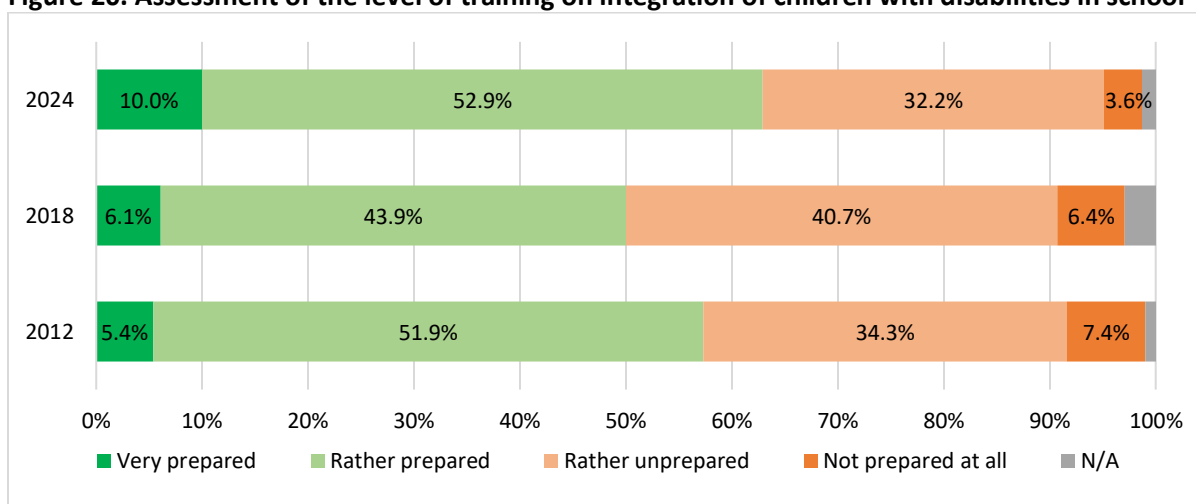


Formulating the question in the questionnaire: *Have you followed any special training for the integration of children with disabilities in school?*

In evaluating their own level of preparedness, a considerable proportion of the interviewed teachers consider themselves unprepared (32.2% - somewhat unprepared, 3.6% - not prepared at all). However, in 2024, this proportion is decreasing compared to 2012 (42%) and 2018 (47%) (Figure 20).

In 2009, approximately 73% of teachers and 67% of educators in mainstream institutions stated that they lacked information on psycho-pedagogical learning strategies for different categories of children with disabilities²³.

Figure 20. Assessment of the level of training on integration of children with disabilities in school



As a teacher, how prepared do you think you are for the integration of children with disabilities in school?

²³ <https://www.unicef.org/moldova/educatia-de-baza.ro.pdf>, p. 29

VI. Specialized resources and needs in inclusive education

6.1 Specialized resources

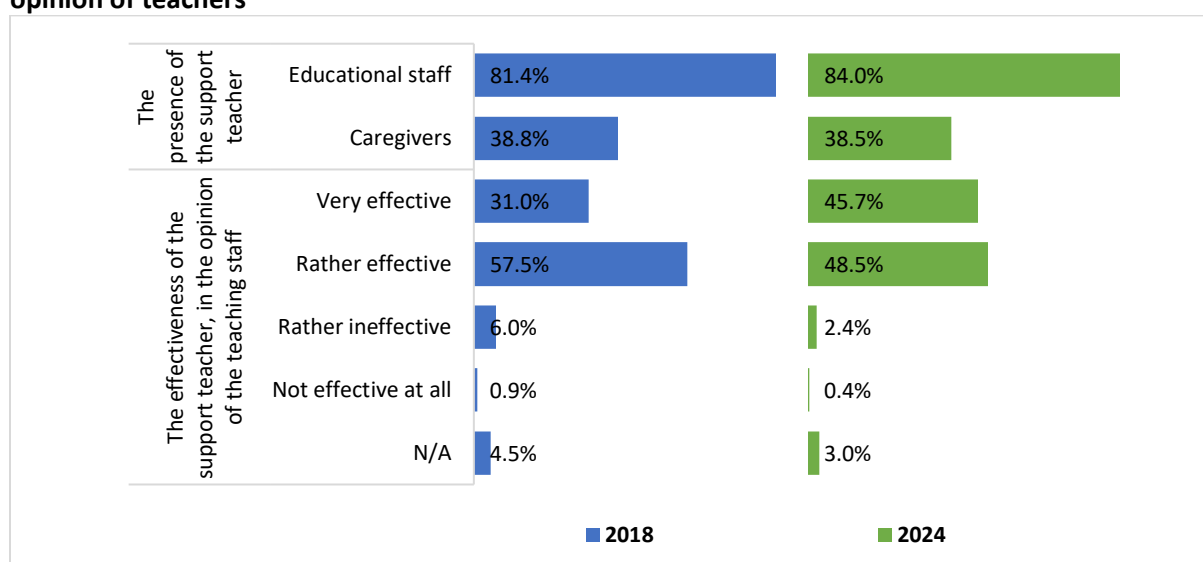
Support teacher

The majority of teachers, 84% of study respondents, indicated that the schools where they work have support teachers. It appears that rural schools are better staffed with such personnel, as the indicator shows a significant advantage in villages (93% compared to 71% in cities).

The effectiveness of support teachers is highly appreciated, with 45.7% being rated as "very effective" and 48.5% as "effective." Among these, 31% stated that support teachers are very effective, while 58% found them to be rather effective.

Among caregivers, only 38.5% reported the presence of support teachers. Notably, the discrepancy in favour of rural institutions is also evident in this group (41.0% in rural areas compared to only 34.5% in urban areas).

Figure 21. Existence and effectiveness of the support teacher for children with disabilities in the opinion of teachers



Formulating the question in the questionnaire: *To the best of your knowledge does your school have support teachers for children with disabilities?*

Most parents of children with SEN expressed satisfaction with the work and professionalism of support teachers. However, some parents pointed out that, in their cases, the work of the support teacher is more formal, with the position often filled by a teacher with fewer hours or a preschool educator. This trend of assigning the role of support teacher to a teacher with reduced teaching hours was also confirmed by some teachers.

"In our school, there are two support teachers: one from the primary grades and another who teaches Russian. The same practice applies here: if someone has fewer hours, they are also given this role. These individuals attended training and are somewhat prepared... At the moment, even though training sessions were organised, we are still not sufficiently prepared. These individualised programs were not even properly explained. Representatives from PAS came to guide us, but we still face many difficulties and uncertainties. When we encounter challenges, we turn to the head of studies, who handles these issues, and then she contacts the district office." (F, Romanian language and literature teacher, 14 years of experience, rural, 2FGD)

In some localities, the support teacher combines this role with other responsibilities and works with children with SEN after lessons or on their days off. In other institutions, for various reasons, no support teacher has been hired, and their responsibilities have been delegated to regular teachers.

"The support teacher has her own class and doesn't have time to work with them. She comes two days a week to work with Sergiu. If his teacher (the support teacher) isn't there, he gets upset, and our teachers tell us not to react to him or pay him attention. He doesn't disrupt lessons, but if he's too tired or someone annoys him, and his teacher is there, she can calm him down or send him home." (M, 7th grade, rural, 7FGD)

"Last year, there were eight children, and four were identified during the year, totalling 12 by the end of the year. The main issue was that we couldn't provide them with a support teacher, and the responsibility fell to the classroom teachers. These children were in the primary grades." (IDI, school principal, urban)

Interviewed specialists acknowledged this challenge and, where possible, attempt to mitigate it. They stressed that it is essential for support teachers not to combine this role with other functions but to be fully dedicated to their responsibilities. In some districts, the education department has insisted that support teachers must be hired specifically for this position and that the role cannot be shared among multiple staff members.

"A support teacher should be a standalone role, with a clear student-to-teacher ratio. It shouldn't be a chemistry teacher with six hours and then the rest of their time spent as a support teacher. In such cases, they are no longer truly a support teacher. Our idea is that these positions should be standalone roles within educational institutions, with no other teaching hours assigned." (5IDI, expert)

"In our district, everyone works on a full salary; there are no fractional support teacher roles. 'I don't have enough hours; give me 0.25 as a support teacher'—our district education economist doesn't allow this. The education department has informed school managers that splitting the support teacher role is not permitted, and here, everyone is employed on a full salary." (8IDI, expert)

Resource Centre

Teachers' opinions on the involvement and effectiveness of Resource Centres and, by extension, support teachers, are divided. Some interviewed teachers highlighted that these centers provide significant methodological and practical support in working with children with SEN. On the other hand, other teachers pointed out that the specific training of support teachers (for particular types of disabilities) is insufficient.

Support teachers should receive specialised training and mentorship tailored to the type of disability and the specific needs of the children they work with.

"When the transition was made to these Resource Centers, where children are supported by a support teacher, it was not considered that the support teacher works with different children with various diagnoses, including children with intellectual disabilities, locomotor impairments, and hyperactivity. In such a situation, it's impossible to meet the needs of all these children through your work alone." (F, history teacher, manager, 30 years of experience, 2FGD)

"In the last five years, some training sessions have been organised, with specialists from the district psycho-pedagogical services coming to teach us how to create individualised educational plans, modify curricula, and design other activities. I believe that given the workload we have, this training is insufficient. My opinion is that to teach such students, there need to be system-prepared individuals with the relevant knowledge, certified with a diploma. The support teacher in our institution was a mathematics teacher who took a three-week course to gain an idea of how to work with such children. She has a good heart, and the children feel attached to her, but even so, there are situations where she confides in us that she feels overwhelmed, not knowing how to proceed with certain children whose situations spiral out of control." (F, history teacher, manager, 30 years of experience, rural, 2FGD)

In schools where there is an inclusive approach, resource centres are an environment where all children in the school can turn to. In this way, any pupil who has certain learning difficulties can go to the centre to address them.

"At our school, on Wednesdays after the 7th lesson, students who don't understand the material can come, and the teacher explains the lesson again for any subject. This way, every student has access to the teachers' help." (F, 7th grade, Balti, 5FGD)

"At our school, other students can also come to the Resource Center. During lessons or breaks, the teacher there welcomes any student. This way, the teacher can talk with the student, and the student, in turn, can share whatever is on their mind. After the discussion, the student may feel relieved and better..." (F, 7th grade, rural, 5FGD)

In some institutions, however, children who attend the Resource Centre are labelled as "stupid" or "retarded." As a result, some children with SEN refuse to go to these centres as they progress to higher grades. Similarly, some parents do not give their consent for their children to be categorised as having SEN. Both teachers and some students highlighted that, although certain students would benefit from the services offered to those with SEN, they do not attend the Resource Centre or work with the support teacher.

"We actually have students in our class who cannot read, and they're not included or registered as part of the group of children with SEN. I don't know why they don't attend, but there are several who cannot read—well, three students, to be exact—but only one of them is registered at the centre for children with special needs. For example, when asked to read, he reads in syllables, barely connecting a few words together, but he doesn't go to the centre..." (F, 9th grade, urban, 6FGD)

The interviewed specialists highlighted that, although some Resource Centres have been equipped with teaching materials and assistive devices through donor support, many institutions still face a lack of equipment to support children with auditory and visual impairments. In addition to the financial resource shortages for equipping institutions, discussed in the barriers chapter, experts pointed to several other challenges related to providing assistive technology in schools, such as:

- The level of preparedness and competence of school managers and support teachers (ST) to "understand what assistive technology a particular child might need".
- Access to such technology, as "you need to look to an international market to procure it".

It is also crucial that the acquired equipment is utilised effectively. For this, teachers, parents, and beneficiary students must be trained and prepared. Equally important is ensuring the proper maintenance of these devices.

Other specialized resources

Respondents value the support provided by individuals from the District Psycho-Pedagogical Assistance Service, those working in NGOs, representatives of religious denominations, and other community actors. However, it was noted that this support would be more effective if it were consistent, and if there were more frequent and intensive communication between representatives of these institutions and teaching and managerial staff.

"The ladies from the PAS came at the beginning of the year and told us that we need to write reports and set simpler objectives. We had seminars with them, and they told us that if a child is 5–7 years old, we should adapt the evaluation sheet to 3–5 years to show that they are progressing and not just mark everything in red but include some yellow as well. We did evaluations for them and then showed them online how we are working with the children. When they come, they take the children and observe their progress, but I don't know what they write in their documents." (IDI, preschool institution director)

Both in focus group discussions with parents and students, several examples were highlighted where collaboration between educational institutions and representatives of civil society or religious groups to support children from vulnerable families and/or those facing learning difficulties led to significant progress for these students. However, most of these initiatives lacked continuity, being implemented primarily during a single academic year, likely as part of specific projects.

Students particularly appreciated activities that, in addition to educational aspects, included meals and recreational activities.

"At our school, in the sixth grade, I and a friend with SEN used to go to a Baptist organisation where we did our homework for two and a half hours. After that, for an hour and a half, we either watched a movie or played games, and even in those games, there were lessons to learn. This was mainly for people with SEN, but I come from a large family, so I also went there. They also gave us food, and he really enjoyed going there. Now that organisation doesn't exist anymore, but he used to go every day; he only came to school so he could go there. If he didn't come to school, they wouldn't let him attend. There were very kind women there, really wonderful; I liked them a lot because they were very good at helping us learn. You could learn so well with them." (M, 8th grade, urban, 6FGD)

6.2 Needs in inclusive education

Respondents were asked to express their views on the needs in inclusive education. Several aspects were identified that, in the participants' perception, require improvement:

Raising awareness and informing the community. Parents of children with SEN highlighted the need for ongoing awareness campaigns and information for parents and typical children. Many do not understand the challenges and barriers faced by children with SEN. In this context, it was suggested that short sensitisation videos could be useful. While these might not have an immediate impact, over time, society could become more empathetic toward the special educational needs of children with SEN.

"They need to focus, for the most part, on educational videos that show the problems of children with SEN, as they really are, so that other students at school can understand, in one way or another, how difficult it is for them, what challenges they face, and how different these children are from them. They need to understand not to provoke them... their attitude should change in the future. If these children with SEN are pushed aside during their school years, then, of course, we will not have inclusion in society. These children will continue to be marginalised, and that's logical." (M, 41, 3 children, 4FGD)

In all focus group discussions with students, they mentioned that there should be more communication with other students about the specific needs of children with SEN. Special attention should be given to working with children who display aggressive behaviour towards their peers.

In the opinion of the interviewed students, school psychologists would be the most suitable professionals to lead such activities.

"I think that to improve the relationship with these children in class, there needs to be a discussion with the students who behave poorly... generally, with the typical students, so that they realise this student needs more support, more help. I believe psychologists are the most suitable for these educational discussions. We have two psychologists in our school, but unfortunately, they don't communicate with us on these topics. We did have a discussion on this subject in our Russian culture and traditions class. The teacher talked to us about it—it was Autism Awareness Day, and we were told a little about this condition. There were also a few people who have children with autism." (F, 6th grade, urban, 7FGD)

Early intervention. Early assessment of children with SEN and providing them with specialised support is extremely important. There are situations where precious time is lost, making it difficult to recover

later, due to beliefs that "the child is developing at their own pace," because educators are unwilling to take on additional work, or because parents refuse to accept that their child has a developmental delay or a specific health issue.

"In Soldanesti district, in 2023, there wasn't a single child with SEN referred to the Psycho-Pedagogical Assistance Service, which is impossible. It's likely that no children were referred. Parents are less likely to refer children at this age because teachers are better informed and, according to standards, they should know what a child should be able to do at a certain age. They should assume that the child has special educational needs. But the teacher thinks that if they refer the child to the Psycho-Pedagogical Assistance Service, they will have to create individualised educational plans and take on a lot of additional work. So, they decide to leave it for someone else to address when the child goes to school." (5IDI, expert)

More communication and preparation for all parties involved (students, teachers, parents). When a child with SEN is to be integrated into a group, whether in kindergarten or school, specific training and guidance tailored to the needs of the child, or children being included in the group are essential.

"There needs to be more involvement from the psychologist because even these specialists don't work much with such children. At least, that's the situation in our school. Generally, this child comes to school, and everyone ignores him—that's all he does at school. Maybe there's a need for specialised professionals who could teach him and help him. Teachers don't manage, and some don't even want to. I'm saying this from my sister's experience. Teachers told her they wouldn't work with her child and advised her to find another school. At four other schools she approached, she was also refused." (F, 44, Chisinau, 2 children, 3FGD)

At the same time, the study found some reluctance among educators, teachers, and even school managers to engage in discussions with the parents of other children about the inclusion of children with SEN. Some believe that this initiative should come from the parents of children with SEN, while others feel it is better to communicate solely with the parents of the child with SEN when specific challenges arise.

"Parents don't know the details; we don't tell anyone. Maybe the children go home and say that so-and-so did this or that, but no one has complained. Whatever we have to discuss, we talk to the parents of the children with SEN and tell them in private. We call them in and explain what happened." (IDI, preschool institution manager, rural)

Thorough assessment of children and teacher training. In all focus group discussions, it was emphasised that proper assessment of children with SEN is essential. Although expressed differently, the common conclusion was that what is often provided to children with SEN in mainstream institutions does not align with their needs and abilities.

It was noted that continuous training should be offered to teachers to address the diversity of needs among students with SEN. This training should include guidance on developing modified and adapted curricula.

"It is very difficult for me because I don't know how to interact with children who have autism. I have attended courses and had guidance from experts from Chisinau, but we are still not pedagogically prepared to know how to work with these children and how to help them. We are not sufficiently trained pedagogically to work with these children, who may have various conditions such as autism, Down syndrome, or epileptic seizures—sometimes even combined—and I assure you that by the end of the day, we are completely exhausted." (F, teacher, 12 years of experience, urban, 1FGD)

"I would suggest that in the initial phase of integrating children with SEN into regular classes, they should be assessed to determine if they pose any danger to others, whether they are aggressive,

and how serious their condition is. This would allow the teacher to have an overall understanding and figure out how to act, what special program to create, and how to establish contact with them." (F, history teacher, 30 years of experience, 2FGD)

Individualisation of the curriculum and timetable. The interviewed students suggested that for some students with SEN, a much more flexible approach should be adopted concerning the duration of lessons and the schedule to be followed.

"For them, it's very difficult to sit for 45 minutes on a chair and listen to what the teacher is saying. I think they need different learning methods that involve more engagement, dynamism, and variety." (F, 6th grade, Chisinau, 5FGD)

"Probably, it would be good if lessons were more interactive for children with SEN because they don't have the patience to sit for 45 minutes on a chair without engaging in a more dynamic activity." (M, 7th grade, urban, 5FGD)

"Usually, we are required to keep children with developmental delays in lessons from start to finish. What can they learn in chemistry, for example, if they don't even know what 1+1 equals? It would be better if specialists in the field provided recommendations regarding the subjects that might interest the child and that they could handle. We shouldn't focus on vague theoretical knowledge or standard school subjects, but rather on activities that would truly benefit them—educational and collaborative activities. It's very hard to teach them mathematics or history when they don't know the basics." (F, biology and chemistry teacher, 14 years of experience, urban, 2FGD)

In the opinion of some parents and teachers, children with SEN who have learning difficulties should participate alongside their classmates in "easier" subjects or "practical skills" lessons. However, for subjects like mathematics and Romanian, they should work separately in the resource centre.

"Personally, I think it would be beneficial to separate mathematics and Romanian language lessons from socialisation activities, leaving the latter to take place in art, technology, and music classrooms. This is where we could integrate children with autism spectrum disorders." (F, teacher, 12 years of experience, urban, 1FGD)

"I think it would be better for them to study with a specialist separately, and then spend a few hours a week working in class with the other children. My daughter is in a class of 30 students, and it's very difficult. One child with problems making noise is enough to create chaos. Then you're trying to calm everyone down. The quality of education suffers. At a parent meeting, some parents announced that they intend to move their children to another class, both because there are too many students and because of the issues caused by this boy." (F, 47, 3 children, rural, 3FGD)

The interviewed experts noted that opportunities for partial or even occasional inclusion exist. Based on a doctor's recommendation and the evaluation by PAS specialists, students with SEN can be fully, partially, or occasionally integrated into educational institutions.

However, there are certain gaps in determining the appropriate form of inclusion, stemming both from a lack of knowledge and from the fact that some parents insist on full inclusion for their child. This is often so they can work or attend to other aspects of daily life, knowing that their child with SEN is under supervision for half the day.

"The parent wants to drop the child off at 8:00 and pick them up at 14:00. In such cases, it's the parents who refuse alternative forms of inclusion. Unfortunately, out of the three options, only the standard one is used. The parent understands that the child has SEN but doesn't want the partial or occasional form. They want to leave the child for half the day. As a result, the institution is forced to somehow keep the child there, and the child ends up having various crises. I was even called and asked what the specialist should do because the parent insists, saying they have no one to leave the

child with at home. I always suggest they write in their report what they observe as specialists, not what the parent demands." (5IDI, expert)

Some parents of children with SEN pointed out that, in some cases, to reduce their workload, teachers set objectives that are too simple for students with SEN. As a result, these students do not put in the effort to progress, improve their knowledge, or develop their skills.

The issue of improving the quality of education for students with SEN is currently considered a priority by the interviewed specialists. Both psycho-pedagogical service providers and representatives of civil society emphasised that efforts must be directed toward this goal to ensure that students with SEN have access to services, assistive technologies, and an environment that enables them to make progress.

"They have socialisation at school. They communicate, which is positive. Children get used to each other, and that's also a positive thing. They see that there are different kinds of children... But when it comes to knowledge, personally, as a mother, I understand that they could have taught him much more, even though I do his homework with him every day. He's 19 years old (9th grade), and if they show me a book for 3-4-year-olds, that's not acceptable to me and isn't a good indicator... We went to Chişinău for an assessment. They gave us a six-month program... a set of exercises, what he should master, and what we need to do to achieve that. The same should happen at school—there should be clear objectives for the child to achieve... It's easier to convince parents that this is good for the child, that he can't do more, than to actually work with him." (F, 52, 2 children, Chisinau, 4FGD)

Financial motivation for teachers. According to some respondents, it would be beneficial for teachers who work with children with SEN to receive additional remuneration. This would reward their efforts and increase their motivation to work with this category of students.

"It is very difficult to work with such a child, which may be why some teachers refuse. As an idea, perhaps these teachers should be motivated. For example, the teacher who has such children in their class and works with them outside of class hours should receive additional remuneration. There are people naturally gifted with empathy and kindness who want to help, but there are others with less empathy—it would be good to have a small incentive." (F, 37, urban, 5 children, 3FGD)

The interviewed specialists noted that teachers receive only insignificant remuneration for tasks such as developing a modified curriculum, individualised educational plans, and examination tests. Some civil society representatives and decision-makers emphasised that teachers should be fairly compensated and trained to work with all children, regardless of their status or learning abilities.

In their view, providing additional payment per child with SEN is not a viable solution.

"I wouldn't say that there is no remuneration today. In Law 270, through the Government Decision that enforces this law, a specific allowance is indicated for teachers working with children with special educational needs. So, to say that teachers are not allocated anything is incorrect because this is documented in the law. Monthly, teachers are paid, whether for creating individualised educational plans or even for preparing those exam tests." (5IDI, expert)

Provision of specialised teaching materials and assistive equipment. Teachers highlighted the need for structured educational programs, specialised teaching materials, and adapted evaluation tests/concepts for various categories of children with SEN.

The interviewed experts emphasised the importance of equipping schools with assistive technologies and equipment. Without these resources, and with only requirements for a modified curriculum and individualised programs, it is challenging for teachers to determine the best approach for a particular student.

Improvisation during the application of evaluation methods and the development of tests also causes frustration for teachers, who would prefer to have models or templates to guide them.

"If there are so many specialists, they should provide us with suitable programs instead of leaving us to create personalised programs for each child. It would be incredibly helpful to have support for teachers regarding the content these children should learn. Rather than placing the responsibility on us to decide what tasks to assign across various subjects, it would be beneficial to receive support in the form of well-structured programs." (F, teacher, 34 years of experience, rural, 1FGD)

"We are not provided with materials or teaching aids to guide us. Often, we have to find charts and drawings ourselves to somehow engage the child. As a Romanian language and literature teacher working with a child who cannot read or write, we are left with learning through play, colouring, and making associations. If the ministry were to deliver a pre-designed curriculum at various levels, it would make our work much easier. We also face significant challenges when preparing tests for exams. For a student who can read and write, creating a test is easier, but for those who lack these basic skills, what can I do? What can I include in a 12-item test? Have them colour or draw arrows?!" (F, Romanian language and literature teacher, 14 years of experience, rural, 2FGD)

"Providing children with the necessary tools: if a child has vision problems, they need a magnifying glass or a monitor with magnification; if a child has hearing disabilities, they need a functional hearing aid; if a child uses a wheelchair, there should be ramps to get them from home to school—this is what should be in place, but there is still much work to be done to ensure all these needs are met." (IDI, NGO representative)

Some parents also mentioned that they order specialised books adapted to their children's needs or purchase notebooks designed for younger children, as recommended by teachers.

Hiring and training specialists in line with the needs of children with SEN. Both parents and teachers emphasised the necessity of including *"psycho-pedagogues and speech therapists in the school staff for these resource centres"*. Support teachers should also be well-trained and prepared to provide the necessary assistance for the children they support. Additionally, children with specific special needs should benefit from therapies provided by mobile teams.

The lack of specialists (psycho-pedagogues, speech therapists, medical assistants) is a significant barrier to the inclusion of children with SEN.

"Regardless of the number of children, the school needs at least one psycho-pedagogue working throughout the day. A psycho-pedagogue is someone with specific skills and certification in this field, prepared to work with children with various diagnoses. They could engage with the children in practical activities such as gluing, cutting, making moulds, or crafting something. There should be at least one psycho-pedagogue for every five children with SEN. If we are aiming to align ourselves with European standards, then we need to implement certain models from Europe." (F, physics teacher, 22 years of experience, urban, 2FGD)

"If a health problem arises, I don't have specialists who can handle it, nor is the support teacher prepared in this regard. We face situations where we don't know how to respond when it's a health issue, not an educational one." (IDI, school principal, urban)

Students highlighted the psychologist's role in fostering relationships between children and providing support to those facing challenges. In this context, three main situations regarding school psychologists were identified:

- **The school psychologist provides support to students**, organises various activities, and acts as a resource person for students.
- **The presence of the psychologist is formal**; students do not seek their help, and there is no connection between the psychologist and the students.

"We also have a psychologist at our school, but no one visits her. She's a bit older and doesn't really understand this generation, being somewhat strict. Because of this, no one goes to share their feelings with someone they don't feel connected to. Last year, I was called to her office to take a psychological and IQ test, and she started yelling at me, which made me decide not to go back to her. I asked her a question, and she told me I wasn't allowed to ask questions." (F, 7th grade, Chisinau, 5FGD)

- **There is no psychologist in the school:** *"Unfortunately, our school does not have a psychologist, and this is a significant shortcoming of our gymnasium".*

All interviewed specialists highlighted that the biggest challenge in developing psycho-pedagogical services is the lack of qualified specialists and the overburdening of those currently in the system.

"We have psycho-pedagogical assistance services where, at one point, we didn't even have a psychologist, let alone a psycho-pedagogue. There are districts where not a single primary or secondary education institution has a psychologist. Therefore, our intention is to create mobile teams within the psycho-pedagogical assistance services." (5IDI, expert)

"PASs are very active in almost all districts, very engaged, and very responsible about their duties. The problem is they lack specialists. They don't have speech therapists, psycho-pedagogues, or psychologists to provide support and assistance. If they don't have specialists, how can they do their job?" (IDI, NGO representative)

Several experts pointed out that due to overburdening, some specialists who have received training and professional development choose to leave the field of psycho-pedagogical assistance services. Given the already acute shortage of staff, this represents a significant loss.

"A very good speech therapist from one district became a kindergarten director, and another speech therapist from a different district took on psychology classes in a high school. It's easier in high school, but at the PPSA, you have to work for the entire district—evaluating children, writing reports, giving recommendations—all for what people say is a very modest salary for the work they do." (IDI, NGO representative)

Support for parents of children with SEN. Many parents expressed that they often feel alone and helpless in the educational process. When they realise that their child is also being ignored by teachers, some parents take it upon themselves to research how they can help their child progress based on their individual abilities.

In this context, a few parents suggested that it would be helpful to have a platform or online group where parents of children with SEN could receive guidance, advice, and even references to various useful resources.

"We manage on our own, lifting our spirits by ourselves to somehow keep moving forward. I would agree that there should be something, even for parents, like a group where someone could also guide us on what and how to do things. Yes, we learn what we can, we learn from experience, but some form of support for us would also be welcome... We work with them at home too. What is offered at school, the teacher can't provide everything because there are 30 other students in the class. We can't blame one person for managing 30 students with different behaviours." (F, 29, 1 child, urban, 4FGD)

Some parents of children with SEN mentioned that they need psycho-emotional support but cannot afford private sessions with a psychologist, especially as their children require rehabilitation and therapies that impose significant financial burdens on the family. Additionally, it was emphasised that experiences of discrimination and bullying are often more challenging for parents to cope with emotionally than for the children themselves: *"It's harder for us sometimes. They may not understand what's happening to them or forget quickly, but for us as parents, it's more painful."*

Promoting positive experiences. In the public sphere, problematic cases are often the most visible and discussed, including among parents. It was suggested that success stories should be promoted more frequently. On one hand, this would encourage the social inclusion of children with SEN, and on the other, it would offer hope to families and children with SEN, motivating them to face challenges with determination.

"We had a boy with very poor eyesight, whether he wore glasses or not, but with a well-developed memory, thanks to the extensive work done with him by the Romanian language teacher. He memorised entire texts just by listening to what the teacher read. Later, when more advanced phones became available, he would record poems and texts read by the teacher, then go home, listen to them, and memorise them. He graduated ninth grade with excellent results and now owns a flock of sheep and plans to open a small farm. In another case, there was a girl, also from the SEN category, who became a chef. There are more positive experiences than negative ones, but when there's an unpleasant case, it tends to overshadow the other beautiful stories." (F, history teacher, manager, 30 years of experience, 2 FGD)

VII. The role of parents/caregivers in children's inclusion

The qualitative component of the study revealed that in most cases, mothers are the most involved in the upbringing and education of children, especially school matters are often the total responsibility of the mother, whether the father is abroad at work, or is busy with other activities - *"I take care of the girl, the husband is permanently in the field"* or in general he is not present in the child's life - *"it is totally me, because the father is missing, he is not present in our family"*. This topic was not a topic proposed for discussion to the focus group participants, it arose spontaneously, with some fathers participating in the focus group discussions remarking that *"more the wife gets involved"*. Including the couples who mentioned that both are involved in their children's schooling, the primary role falls on the mother.

"We both participate because neither of us has ever been abroad. If I were to speak as a percentage, I, as a mother, am involved 70% and my husband 30%, because the father of the children is busier at work, as he has several jobs. Being at home, I am more involved in school and extracurricular activities." (F, 37, urban, 5 children, 3FGD)

Parents of children with SEN, identify different solutions to protect, support their children, including some of them are employed in educational institutions (where appropriate as technical staff) to be closer to their children.

"I got a job as a school worker, to put it in one word - a maid. I went and proposed to the headmistress and went in there and I work next to her. In case she mourns something, I'm next to her. Well, kids are like kids, they have their communication, they have their advice, but she's more special. She comes to me at recess, communicates with me. The children reject her because she's not like them. She has words that she says with difficulty. They still laugh, but what can we do... her classmates take away the crayons she uses to draw. They still laugh, they still play, and she comes and mourns... I go and talk to them..." (F, 40 years old, 3 children, rural, 4FGD)

The teachers emphasized that the interest and involvement of parents in the progress of children with SEN is very important. Thus, if there is a cooperation of parents with teachers and the child with SEN has more trust in teachers and parents contribute to the learning process and the results become visible over time.

"Regrettably, we have no support from the parents, who are somewhat indifferent to what she does, how she feels and whether she is at school. They somehow wash their hands that she is taken to school and there are people responsible for her, shifting all the responsibility onto the teachers. It's not enough that these children have difficulties in assimilating the material, they also come from socially vulnerable families." (F, history teacher, 30 years of experience, rural, 2 FGD)

Several teachers revealed that some parents hide and/or refuse to accept the fact that their children have certain developmental delays, health problems, being worried that their children will not be accepted as they are and/or will face discrimination. Some parents perceive the fact that they have a child with SEN as a disgrace and a possible labelling and blaming of their family.

"I would like to point out that in our rural community, parents are reluctant to acknowledge any difficulties their children may have. As the lady mentioned, in the medical certificate of children attending kindergarten, there is never any mention of any problems, as this is considered a source of shame for parents. However, when it comes to the start of school, the situation changes, but at kindergarten level, parents avoid admitting these issues." (F, teacher, 28 years of experience, rural, 1FGD)

"Many parents hide their children's diagnosis, afraid that they will be excluded in the classroom, that they will be discriminated against. When they come for testing or to talk to the headmistress, they say nothing. After two weeks, the teacher in class 0, realizes after 2-3 weeks of activity that the child has a little mental retardation or a little attention deficit. After these realizations, the parents

communicate that yes, my child has some deficiencies, but I was afraid of what people will say and how other children will look at him. (F, art, technological education and painting teacher, 12 years of experience, Chisinau, 2FGD)

Some teachers felt that parents should be equally responsible with teachers for their children's progress. In this respect it was suggested that parents of children with SEN should also be trained on how to work with their child at home, but also how to support the teaching process when accompanying their children to school.

"In our school, parents, while recognizing the problem and agreeing to let us work with their children who have autism, they stay mostly on the phones in the school corridors, while we teachers are overwhelmed with tasks and don't know how to manage the situation and how to socially integrate these children into school activities. We feel that we are not getting the help we need, although our school is properly equipped to cope with special needs, including for physically challenged students, we have various games and platforms, yet our resources are insufficient for the increasing demands. Personally, I believe that parents should be more involved... The child's success depends on the joint effort of both us and the parents. Of course, the demands are high, and our resources are limited. I believe there should be a joint effort to meet this challenge. I encourage parents to understand that it is necessary to actively contribute to their child's progress. This way, we will be able to support and guide them more effectively." (F, teacher, 12 years of experience, urban, 1FGD)

Several interviewed professionals emphasized that parental education is necessary and only through real dialogue and parental involvement, children with SEN will make significant progress. It was mentioned that over the years there have been attempts to boost parental education, including through a Country Program, but due to lack of financial coverage this has been abandoned.

"We need to focus on parenting education, but unfortunately, as you probably know, such a program has been developed at the country level, but it has already expired and has not been implemented. The plan for the implementation of the program was also made, but due to the lack of financial sources, it was not implemented, and it was not approved, because here, too, very large resources are required. As long as we don't have a parental education policy, we will only mimic these school-family partnerships." (SIDI, expert)

"We don't have enough, enough parental education and parental support in this area. This too is a very big problem, because a lot of what we have to do for children with educational needs depends on the parents' decision. For example, certain assessments or support that we have to give. Assessments are the service. Not all parents today is ready to accept children's problems, to certify children's situations. It is very difficult for these children to provide support in the inclusion process." (6IDI, expert)

In different contexts, teachers, school managers have emphasized that parents must realize that the main responsibility for the child's life and integrity lies with the parent and not to pass this responsibility on to the educational institutions. According to some experts, the idea that the family is the school's partner has been wrongly conveyed - *"Parents need to understand that the school is the family's partner. The family is responsible for the child and the school is one of the partners, but not the other way around."*

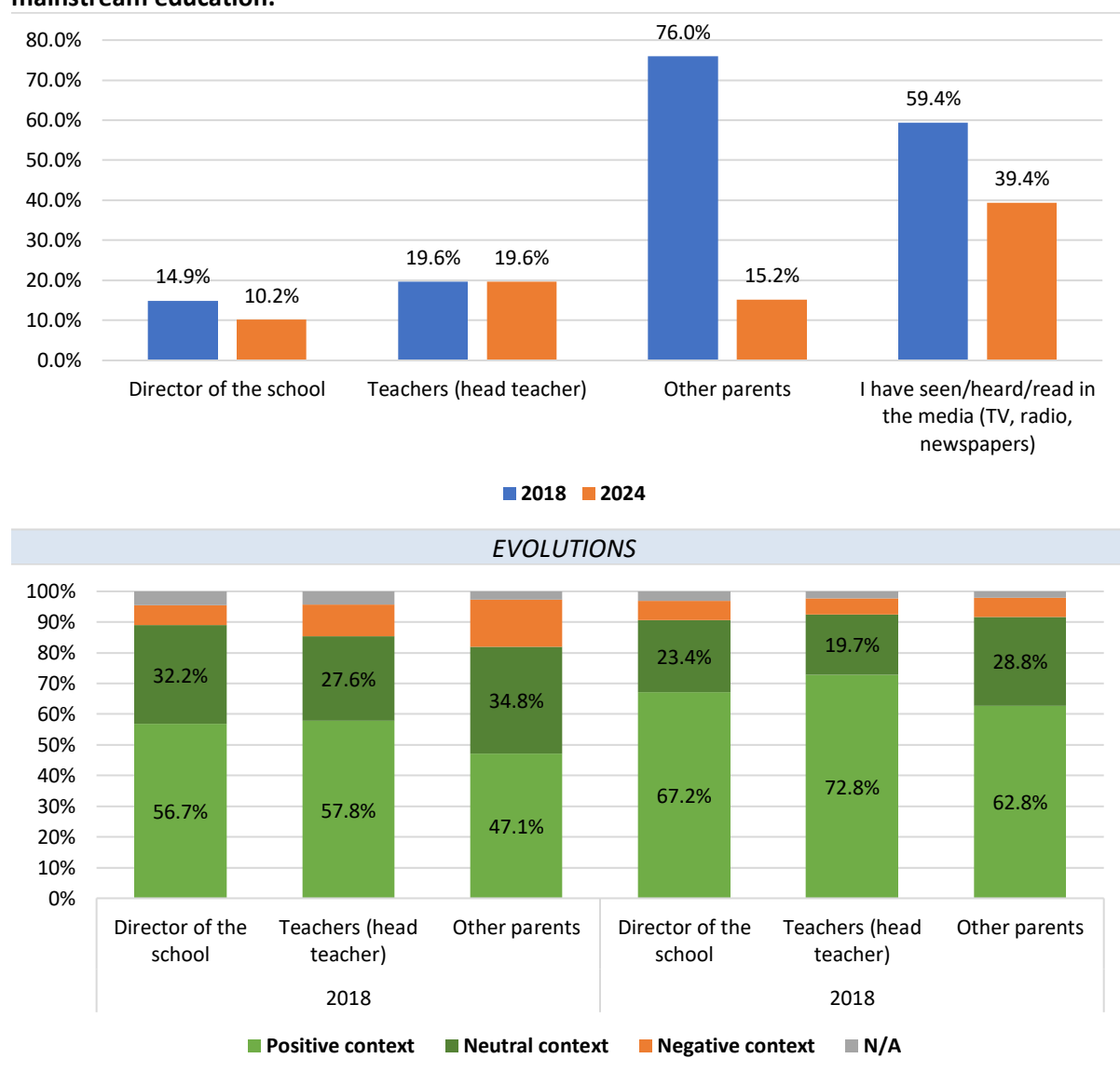
In the quantitative survey, caregivers were asked about sources of information about the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream education. One in ten caregivers spoke with the school principal, and almost 20% - with teachers (headmaster). Discussions with other parents had 15,2% respondents, they heard in the media about inclusion about 39,4% caregivers.

In all cases, the discussions were predominantly positive on the topic of inclusion (Figure 22).

At the same time, the topic seems to be less intensively discussed in society, as the share of respondents who have touched on this topic in discussions with other parents has decreased

considerably (from 76% in 2018 to 15.2% in 2024), as well as the share of those who have heard the topic of inclusion discussed in the media.

Figure 22. Sources of information for caregivers on the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream education.



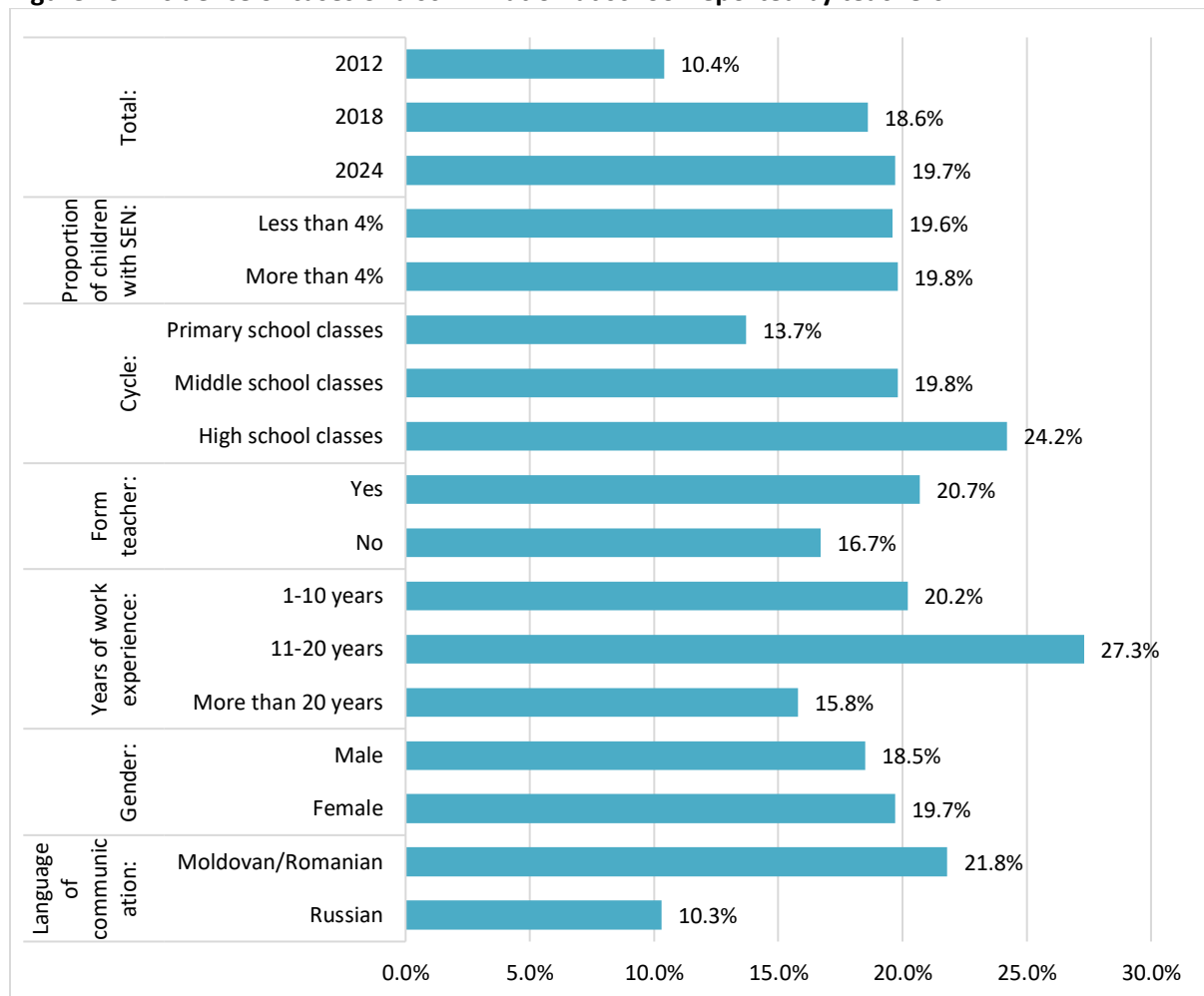
Formulating the question in the questionnaire: Have you discussed the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream schools with anyone?

VIII. Discrimination against students with SEN

The survey data suggest that discrimination (in any form) exists in mainstream educational institutions in the Republic of Moldova and disability is among the main causes of such treatment. Almost 1/5 teachers reported the existence of discrimination cases in the institutions in which they work, approximately at the same level as in 2018 (18.6%), but with a considerable increase compared to 2012.

Based on teachers' assessments, the incidence of discrimination increases with advancement through the school cycles. Teachers with between 11 and 20 years of seniority and teachers in schools with Romanian-language teaching are more likely to report such cases.

Figure 23. Incidence of cases of discrimination at school reported by teachers

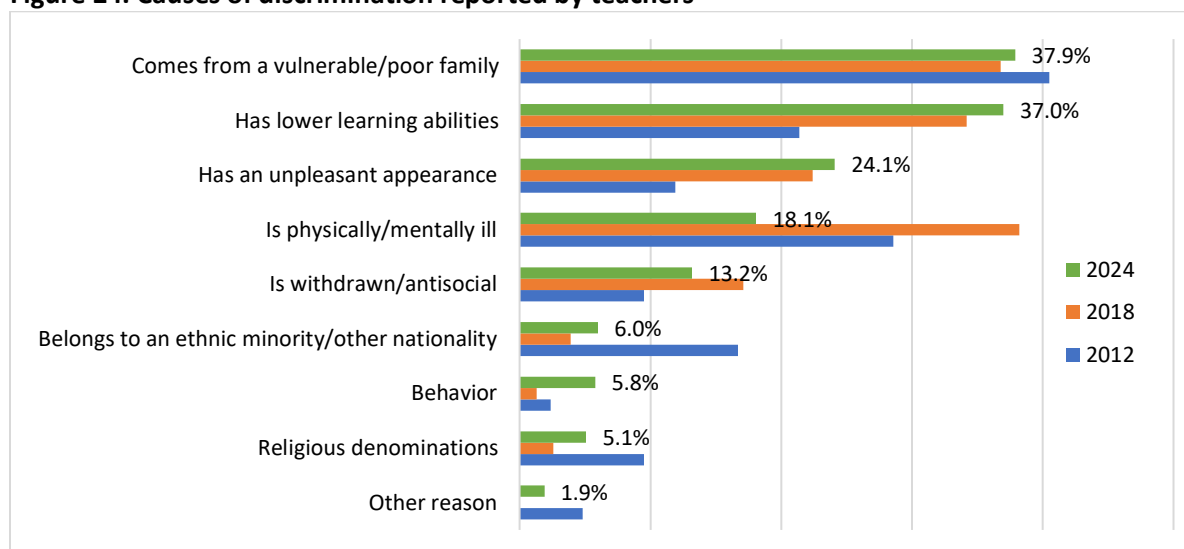


In the opinion of teachers there is an increased level (compared to other categories) of incidence of discrimination cases, especially in secondary school (about 25% in 2018 and 2024, 14% in 2012).

The causes of discrimination in schools are multiple and disability was mentioned as a reason for discrimination by 18.1% of teachers, ranking fourth in terms of weight, with a considerable decrease compared to the previous study (38% in 2018).

The social vulnerability of the victim of discrimination's family (almost 38%, 37% in 2018, 41% in 2012) and low learning abilities (37%, up from previous surveys (34% in 2018 and 21% in 2012)) are mentioned in the top positions. Other causes include ethnic or religious affiliation, unpleasant external appearance (Figure 23).

Figure 24. Causes of discrimination reported by teachers



Formulating the question in the questionnaire: Have there been cases of discrimination (of any kind) in the school where you work?

In the opinion of some respondents, from different focus group discussions, the society as a whole is not prepared for the integration of children with SEN in school and consequently, they suffer the most - "these children are subject to many stressors, they are ignored, they are mocked, they are not accepted, even some teachers do not want to deal with them". Often in school groups, these children are rejected, teased, and given nicknames - "many children don't want to talk to them, because they are not like all the other normal children".

Box 6. Bullying of children with SEN

"I think such children should not be in regular classes, because it's stressful for the child with special educational needs, first of all, because the children don't accept him. He behaves like a three-year-old, he challenges other classmates. I asked the son about the children's attitude towards this boy. He said he's not aggressive, but he's always challenging them to play. In sixth grade, they don't like to play with him on their own. He can get close and draw with his pen in notebooks or on backpacks. The teacher tells them not to pay attention to him, but it seems to me that he's looking for attention. That's why I say it's a stressful situation for this child that everyone ignores him. There was even a chat with the boy's mother, there was a request to transfer him to another school, but we don't have a special one, so things have remained the same... At first the children didn't realize that their peer was different and reacted badly to his challenges. Assemblies were organized and explained to the pupils, but not all of them understood. Some made fun of him (physically bullied him, soiled his clothes, challenged him) and the mother complained in the chat room. I asked my son if she ever offended him and he said no, she just ignored him. But I think even being ignored is still a stressor for him. The students don't suffer because of him, but they mock him. Overall, it's a class that lacks discipline. We are new to this school. For two years the class has practically not had a stable head teacher, hence the consequences." (F, 44, Chisinau, 2 children, 3FGD)

Several parents of children with SEN have reported situations in which their children have been/are victims of verbal and/or physical aggression from other peers. In some situations, after the intervention of teachers, school managers, this harassment was reduced, in other situations, however, the intervention of the police did not yield any results.

"There's a boy in her daughter's class who's always teasing her, making fun of her. Maybe he has family problems, I don't know, but he's always pushing her, always twisting her around, always doing something to her. And, Mrs. Headmistress, even the police went to their class to talk to them about this, but this child is in such a situation that you can't even talk to him. So that he understands that it's not possible, that she can't hear, you can't annoy her, there are so many children who don't understand that it's not possible to bother her... No change. This boy, he pulls her by the hair, takes her things, makes jokes at her expense. She comes home all the time and tells me that she's been annoying me again." (F, 32, 2 children, rural, 4FGD)

IX. Other issues

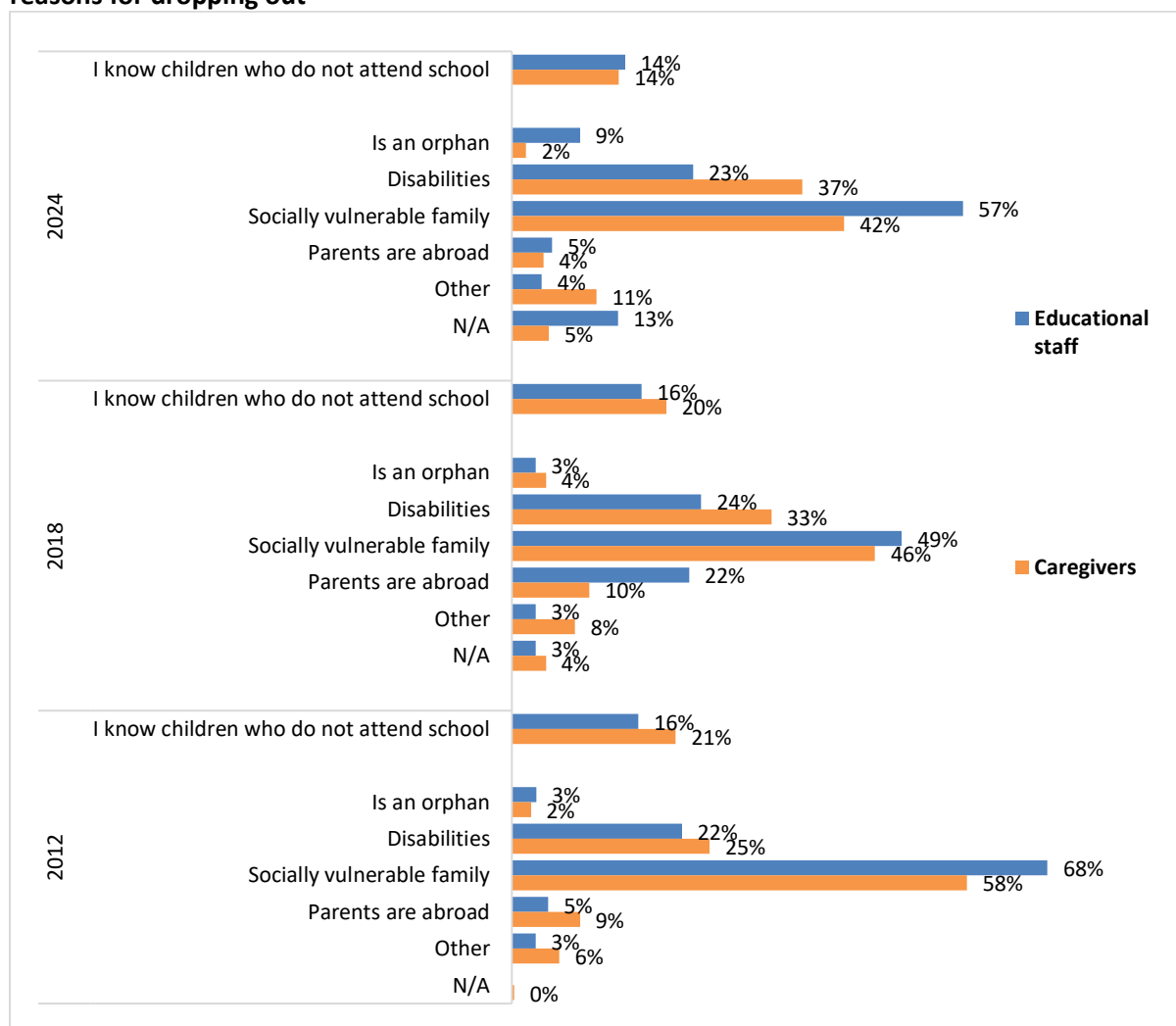
This is followed by a presentation of the data for a number of additionally measured aspects related to the topic of analysis.

Dropping out

Based on the data collected, it is estimated that 0.3% of households have children aged 7-15 not in school. The study shows that poverty and the special needs of children with disabilities are the determinants responsible for 80-90 percent of the reduction in school enrolment rates.

Around 14% of the caregivers and teachers included in the study reported cases when children of primary or secondary school age do not attend school. In the 2018 and 2012 surveys the same was reported by 20%-21% of caregivers and 16% of teachers surveyed. The reasons given by respondents are predominantly poverty and the child being disabled. Over time, the third factor - labour migration (Figure 24) - has decreased in intensity.

Figure 25. Percentage of respondents who are aware of cases of non-attendance at school and reasons for dropping out



Formulating the questions in the questionnaire: Do you know any school-age children who do not attend school?

Violence

The phenomenon of violence in educational institutions in the Republic of Moldova is a reality, both as a perception and as a concrete experience. Talking about the perceptions of teachers and caretakers, physical violence among students is present (also in the current study with about 80% affirmative answers among teachers and almost 65% among caretakers), but also verbal violence applied by students against teachers (about 75% among teachers and more than 50% among

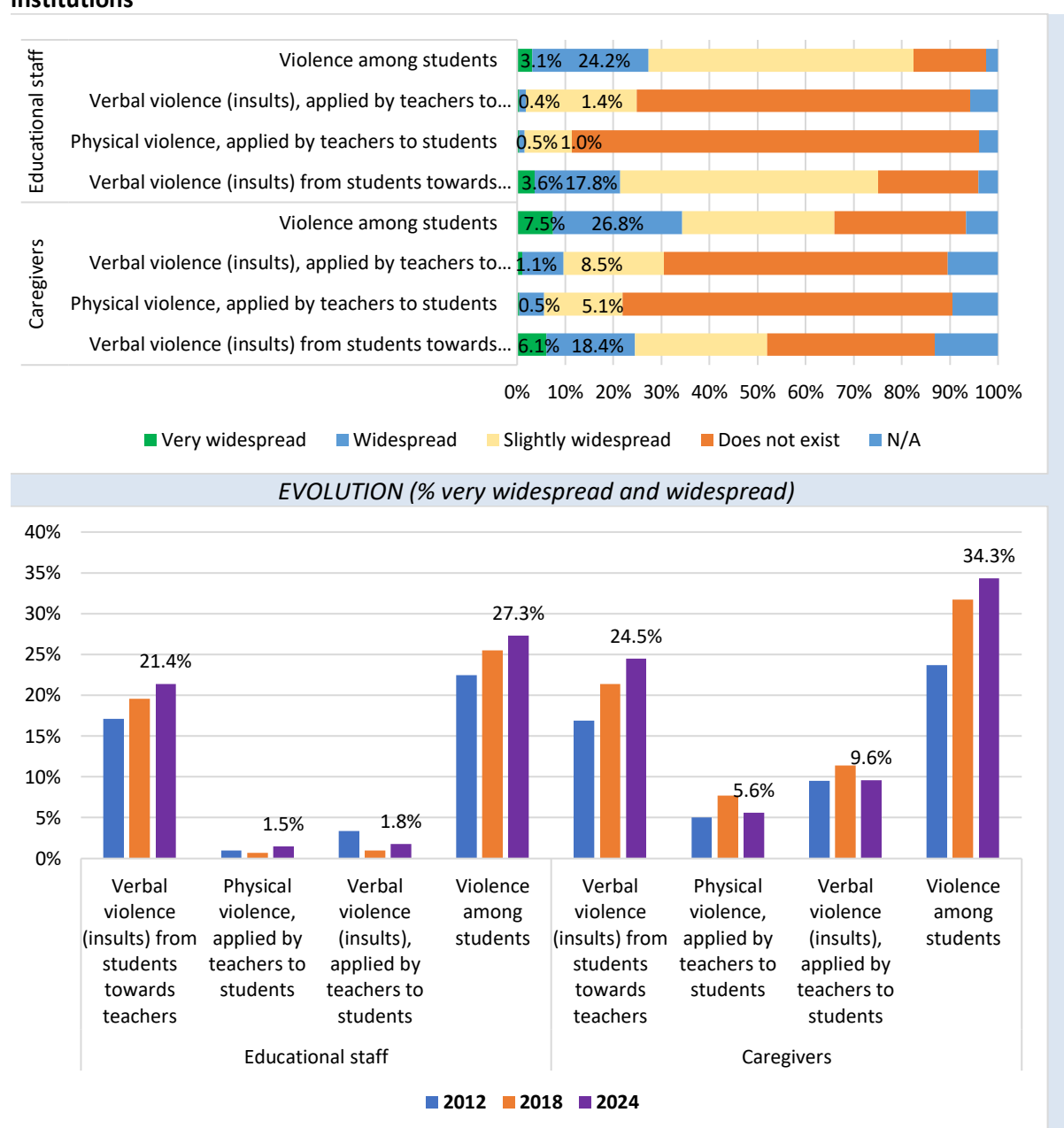
caretakers). Moreover, about 27% of teachers and 34% of caretakers admitted that the phenomenon is present intensively (widespread) (Figure 25).

At the same time, although with a lower but still worrying level of incidence, violence against students by teachers is also present, as confirmed by the teachers included in the study. They are of the opinion that physical violence against pupils by teachers is present in schools by more than 10% of teachers and more than 20% of caretakers, of which 1.5% of teachers and 5.6% of caretakers admitted to some degree of intensity ("very widespread" and "widespread").

The incidence of verbal violence by teachers towards students is even higher, about 25% of teachers estimate that the phenomenon is present, including about 2% admit that it is intensely present. In the case of caretakers, these proportions are about 30% and 10% of the teachers' teachers say it is intensely present.

At the same time, the incidence of violent treatment between students and verbal violence towards teachers by students is increasing.

Figure 26. Caregivers' and teachers' assessment of the prevalence of violence in educational institutions



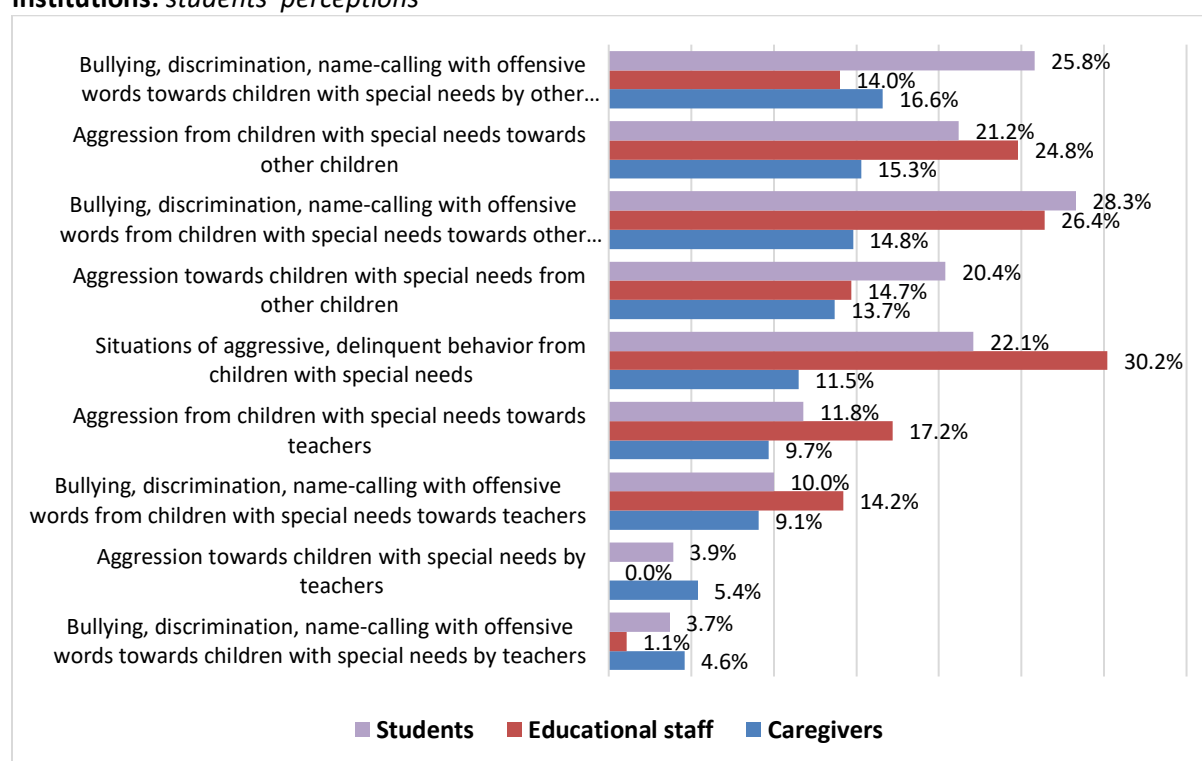
Formulating questions in the questionnaire: How widespread is it in educational institutions in your community (village/town)? (categories are listed in the figure)

About 1/5 of the teachers mentioned that they have encountered in the schools where they work various situations of aggression, bullying and discrimination in relation to children with disabilities, such as *Aggressive behaviour from children with special needs* 30.2% affirmative answers, *Aggression of children with special needs towards other children* and *Bullying, discrimination, name calling by children with disabilities towards other children* with 25% and 26% respectively (Figure 26). Cases of aggression, intimidation, and discrimination from children with disabilities towards teachers are reported with about 17% of the answers, but also such cases from other children towards children with special needs, about 15% of the answers were affirmative.

Approximately the same trends are observed in the case of caregivers with reference to cases of aggression, bullying and discrimination observed by pupils, but the weights of affirmative answers in this context are slightly lower. In the case of caregivers, however, lower incidences of all forms are observed (Figure 27).

Pupils' views on bullying, intimidation, and discrimination in relation to children with disabilities are scattered. Considerable proportions of pupils testify both about mistreatment of children with special needs and by children with disabilities (Figure 28).

Figure 27. The extent to which bullying, intimidation and discrimination are present in educational institutions: students' perceptions



Formulating the question in the questionnaire: *To the best of your knowledge, (have you heard/seen), the following cases have happened in your school... (the statements are listed in the figure)*

Toilets in schools are a place where some children, not only those with SEN, feel vulnerable, especially boys, as there are students who can verbally and physically abuse younger students or who are perceived as weaker, as is the case with children with SEN.

The qualitative study reveals that boys are also more frequently bullied by their peers, use more uncensored language, apply violence. Although some students mentioned that boys are friendlier in their classes, while girls form small groups that do not accept other girls except according to certain criteria: academic achievement, dress, etc.

"In our class, the boys are a bit mean. They use vulgar words excessively, they treat certain classmates badly..." (F, 7th grade, rural, 5FGD)

"In our class, there are a lot of smart girls, so they form groups of three, but not more. So, if you don't study well, it's very hard to be part of their group. They group themselves by levels, 7th and 10th." (M, 6th grade, rural, 5FGD)

CONCLUSIONS and RECOMMENDATIONS

Attitudes towards inclusion of children with disabilities

- **Public attitudes towards the inclusion of children with special educational needs in mainstream education remain predominantly exclusivist**, with a good proportion of caregivers and teachers still opting for the care of children with disabilities in families or residential institutions. In 2024, 45% of caregivers believe that children with disabilities should be cared for in the family, while 8% opt for residential institutions.
 - **Recommendation:** Continue awareness-raising and information campaigns, emphasizing the benefits of inclusive education for all children and for society in general.
- **There continues to be evidence of improvements in caregiver attitudes towards inclusion.** Compared to previous surveys, in 2024 there were slight improvements in caregivers' attitudes towards inclusion of children with SEN. This year, already 40% of caregivers opted for inclusion of children in mainstream education, up from 23% in 2018.
 - **Recommendation:** Implement support programs for caregivers to provide them with information and resources to better understand and support the inclusion process.
- **There are still large gaps in teachers' openness to the integration of children with disabilities.** In 2024, 60% of teachers say they are open to the educational inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream institutions, up from 41% in 2018. At the same time, 17% of teachers believe that these children should be cared for in the family, while 15% opt for residential institutions.
 - **Recommendation:** Continue teacher training and professional development efforts focused on inclusive education and diversity management in the classroom.
- **Pupils' views on the inclusion of children with disabilities remain dispersed**, but there is a continued increase in tolerance on this issue as well. In 2024, only 16% of students expressed strong disagreement with the inclusion of children with disabilities, down from 19% in 2018 and 36% in 2012.
- **In general, highly selective approaches persist, also towards different SEN.** The dispersion in the weights of maximum acceptance (98% for over-talented young people) and 17% for young people who use drugs, alcohol is significant.
 - **Recommendation:** Introduce educational programs focusing on empathy and diversity to reduce prejudice among students.
- **The difference in attitudes towards children with physical and intellectual disabilities continues to persist.** The 2024 survey confirms the persistence of the attitudinal gap, with a greater openness to the inclusion of children with physical disabilities and a pronounced reluctance towards those with intellectual disabilities.
 - **Recommendation:** Development of policies and infrastructure to support the adaptation of school premises and the educational process for all types of disabilities, as well as the training of teachers to effectively manage behaviours associated with intellectual disabilities.
- **The confusion between behavioural problems and intellectual disabilities.** In 2024, the confusion between behavioural problems and intellectual disabilities remains present among parents, teachers, and specialists. This confusion affects how children are integrated and supported in the education system.
 - **Recommendation:** Create education and training programs that clarify the differences between behavioural problems and intellectual disabilities and promote case-appropriate approaches.
- **The data of the study suggest that discrimination (in various forms) exists in mainstream educational institutions in the Republic of Moldova, and disability is among the main causes of**

such treatment. The incidence of discrimination increases with progress through the school cycles.

The pros and cons of inclusion

- **There are many perceived benefits of inclusive education for all pupils**, both for children with disabilities and their peers. Thus, between 55% and 65% of caregivers and over 80% of teachers mentioned certain benefits, believing that inclusion helps children with disabilities to socialize, learn essential skills and integrate more easily into society.
 - **Recommendation:** Expand educational programs (including extra-curricular) that promote inclusion and positive interaction among all students, regardless of ability.
- **However, there are still concerns about the lower quality of education in the context of inclusion.** Yet the disadvantages most often cited by parents and teachers concern the possible decline in the quality of education in inclusive classrooms. They feel that the time dedicated to each pupil is reduced because teachers have to give more time to the child with an SEN and classes are often disrupted.
 - **Recommendation:** Develop in-service training programs for teachers to provide them with the necessary tools to effectively manage diverse classrooms and maintain a high standard of quality education. Continue/strengthen programs to inform school communities about the right to education for all children and the benefits of inclusion.
- **The safety of children, both those with disabilities and their peers, remains a major concern.** Many parents expressed concerns about the adaptation of school infrastructure and potential discrimination. Concerns that their children might pick up inappropriate behaviours from peers with disabilities are also mentioned.
 - **Recommendation:** Invest in the adaptation of school infrastructure and in programs to prevent discrimination and provide psychological support for all students to ensure a safe and inclusive educational environment.
- **The 2024 survey highlights that many respondents, including teachers and parents, often confuse behavioural problems with mental disabilities.** This confusion leads to an inappropriate approach and difficulties in managing classroom situations.

Preparedness of educational institutions for the inclusion of children with SEN

- **There is still a shortage in the range of resources available to teachers to provide assistance and support tailored to the needs of children with different types of SEN**, as, despite improvements since previous studies, significant proportions of teachers acknowledged that they do not always have the resources to cope with different types of disabilities and behaviours.
 - **Recommendation:** Implementation of training programs for teachers, professionals, and parents, focused on understanding and managing different types of disabilities and behaviours. Create platforms with digital resources for inclusive education to support teachers, parents, and children.
- **Teachers' perception of personal preparation remains still reserved**, as 36% of teachers consider themselves unprepared (32% rather unprepared, 4% not prepared at all), at a level comparable to 2018 (41%). However, 57% of teachers mentioned that they have attended training on the integration of children with disabilities, which is a slight increase from 53% in 2018.
 - **Recommendation:** Extend in-service training programs by including compulsory modules on inclusive education and effective practice modules to increase teachers' perceived preparedness for inclusive education.

- **Perceptions of tolerance towards children with SEN show a positive trend.** In 2024, perceptions of staff and student tolerance of peers with disabilities were more positive than in previous surveys. Thus, 94% of teachers consider school staff to be tolerant, compared to 89% in 2018.
 - **Recommendation:** Continue awareness-raising efforts to promote a tolerant school environment.
- **The infrastructure of educational institutions remains a major challenge.** Although ramps have been built in several schools, in 2024 only 53% of parents and 46% of teachers believe that the technical conditions created in schools are sufficient. Accessibility issues, such as moving between floors and adapting sanitary blocks, continue to be reported as the main obstacles.
 - **Recommendation:** Develop and implement capital investment programs to adapt school infrastructure to ensure full accessibility for all children, regardless of disability.
- **The education system in the Republic of Moldova continues to place considerable emphasis on academic content.** Some of the teachers participating in the study recognized that it is difficult for them to focus on individual progress and relational aspects of students with disabilities due to the pressure to cover the school subject.
 - **Recommendation:** Revise the school curriculum to include specific personal and social development objectives alongside traditional academic objectives and train teachers to adapt to this approach.
- Many teachers expressed **dissatisfaction with increased responsibilities without adequate remuneration.** Many teachers feel that in the context of inclusive education they have been given new tasks for which they are not adequately paid.
 - **Recommendation:** Rethink the teacher remuneration system, including consideration of allowances or other forms of reward for teachers who are actively involved in inclusive education.

Specialized resources in inclusive education

- **Most institutions have support teaching (ST) staff,** with 85% of teachers confirming their presence in their institution. ST activity is rated relatively positively by teachers.
- However, **misperceptions and dissatisfaction with ST are still present,** including suspicions about the real purposes of ST and their role in the classroom. The perception persists that STs work exclusively with children with disabilities, leading to their isolation from the rest of the pupils.
 - **Recommendation:** Organize information and promotion activities at the institutional level, in order to valorise the determining role of the ST in ensuring the inclusion of children with SEN and in the implementation of state policies in the field of inclusive education. Promote a working model in which STs are integrated into group activities, so as not to isolate children with disabilities from the rest of the pupils. Launch information campaigns targeted at teachers, parents, and pupils to clarify the role and functions of STs and reduce misperceptions.
 - **Recommendation:** Organize information and dialogue sessions between STs and teachers to clarify common goals and to improve collaboration in the best interests of students with disabilities.
- **The work of the Psycho-pedagogical Assistance Services (PAS) is perceived positively,** but there is dissatisfaction with the insufficient involvement in the teaching of non-core subjects.
 - **Recommendation:** Extend the involvement of PAS in all school subjects, not just core subjects, to provide more comprehensive and balanced support to teachers.
- **The PAS recommendations are sometimes considered too general and not adapted to the particular circumstances of students with disabilities.**

- **Recommendation:** Develop guidelines, methodologies, supports, tools, etc. that are applicable in specific contexts so that teachers can effectively implement the PAS recommendations. Customization of PAS recommendations.
- **Personal assistance is often provided by family members of the child with disabilities, which generates mixed reactions from teachers.**
 - **Recommendation:** Professional training for personal assistants. Implement training programs for personal assistants so that they can effectively support the child without disrupting the educational process.
 - **Recommendation:** Create and implement information/training programs for family members, including those employed as personal assistants, to ensure effective collaboration with teachers and real inclusion of children.
- **The continuity of the educational path of pupils with disabilities is insufficiently guaranteed, which jeopardizes their long-term integration into society.**
 - **Recommendation:** Develop a national transition plan to ensure the educational continuity of students with disabilities throughout their schooling, from kindergarten to vocational education, including higher education.
- **General weaknesses in the education system, such as teacher turnover and ageing, inadequate salaries, and insufficient equipment, continue to affect the implementation of inclusive education.**
 - **Recommendation:** Improve working conditions. Implement policies aimed at stabilizing and rejuvenating teaching staff, as well as increasing the pay and endowment of educational institutions to better support inclusion.

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List of documents analysed in the study

Legislation

- Education Code of the Republic of Moldova
- "Education 2030" Development Strategy
- Program for the Development of Inclusive Education in the Republic of Moldova for 2024-2027
- Program for the Development of Inclusive Education in the Republic of Moldova for 2011-2020
- Action Plan for 2015-2017 for the implementation of the Program for the Development of Inclusive Education in the Republic of Moldova for 2011-2020
- Action Plan for 2018 - 2020 for the implementation of the Program for the Development of Inclusive Education in the Republic of Moldova for 2011 - 2020 (Draft)
- Law No. 60 on social inclusion of persons with disabilities of 30.03.2012
- Child Protection Strategy 2014-2020
- National Strategy and Plan for the Reform of the Residential Childcare System for 2007-2012
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ANNEXES

Annex 1. Profile of survey respondents

Table 1. Sample structure among teachers

| | | Number | % |
|-----------------------------|--------------------|--------|------|
| | Total | 408 | 100% |
| Share of children with SEN: | Less than 4% | 203 | 50% |
| | More than 4% | 205 | 50% |
| Cycle: | Primary classes | 74 | 18% |
| | Secondary classes | 204 | 50% |
| | Secondary classes | 130 | 32% |
| Head teacher: | Yes | 264 | 65% |
| | No | 144 | 35% |
| Length of service: | 10 years and less | 75 | 19% |
| | 11-20 years | 99 | 25% |
| | more than 20 years | 228 | 57% |
| Sex of respondent: | Male | 49 | 12% |
| | Female | 359 | 88% |
| Language of communication: | Romanian | 331 | 81% |
| | Russian | 77 | 19% |
| Residential environment: | Urban | 169 | 41% |
| | Rural | 239 | 59% |

Table 2. Sample structure among students

| | | Number | % |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------|--------|------|
| | Total | 611 | 100% |
| Share of children with SEN: | Less than 4% | 325 | 53% |
| | More than 4% | 286 | 47% |
| Sex of respondent: | Male | 255 | 42% |
| | Female | 356 | 58% |
| Language of communication: | Romanian | 469 | 77% |
| | Russian | 142 | 23% |
| Residential environment: | Urban | 284 | 47% |
| | Rural | 327 | 54% |
| Year, class: | 6 th grade | 149 | 24% |
| | 7 th grade | 143 | 23% |
| | 8 th grade | 154 | 25% |
| | 9 th grade | 165 | 27% |

Table 3. Sample structure among caregivers

| | | Number | % |
|---|------------------------------|--------|------|
| | Total | 1298 | 100% |
| Number of children under 18 in the household: | A child | 500 | 39% |
| | Two children | 574 | 44% |
| | Three children and more | 224 | 17% |
| Children under 7 in the household: | No children under 7 | 711 | 55% |
| | There are children under 7 | 588 | 45% |
| 7-15 years old in the household: | No children aged 7-15 | 246 | 19% |
| | They are children aged 7-15 | 1053 | 81% |
| Children aged 16-18 in the household: | No children aged 16-18 | 1103 | 85% |
| | They are children aged 16-18 | 196 | 15% |
| Age of the children's mother: | 18-30 years | 331 | 26% |
| | 31-40 years | 689 | 54% |
| | 40+ years | 257 | 20% |
| Age of the children's father: | 18-30 years | 162 | 14% |

| | | Number | % |
|------------------------------|--|--------|-----|
| | 31-40 years | 595 | 50% |
| | 40+ years | 438 | 37% |
| Children's mother's studies: | incomplete secondary education ²⁴ | 283 | 22% |
| | Secondary education | 229 | 18% |
| | professional education | 246 | 19% |
| | higher education (incl. college) | 517 | 41% |
| Children's father's studies: | incomplete secondary education | 248 | 21% |
| | Secondary education | 214 | 18% |
| | professional education | 325 | 28% |
| | higher education (incl. college) | 393 | 33% |
| Sex of respondent: | male | 256 | 20% |
| | female | 1043 | 80% |
| Residential environment: | urban | 503 | 39% |
| | rural | 796 | 61% |
| Language of communication: | Romanian | 1087 | 84% |
| | Russian | 212 | 16% |
| Socio-economic status: | low | 412 | 32% |
| | medium | 402 | 31% |
| | high | 485 | 37% |

²⁴ Secondary education or less, including primary school or no education

Table 1. Degree of access to the (pre-university) education system of different categories of children: by categories of caregivers

| | | Average value of the summary synthetic coefficient ²⁵ max. 7, min (-7) |
|--|----------------------------------|--|
| Total: | | 4.4 |
| Number of children under 18: | A child | 4.0 |
| | Two children | 4.7 |
| | Three children and more | 4.9 |
| Children under 7 in the household: | No children under 7 | 4.5 |
| | There are children under 7 | 4.4 |
| Children aged 7-15 years in the household: | No children aged 7-15 | 4.0 |
| | They are children aged 7-15 | 4.6 |
| Children aged 16-18 in the household: | No children aged 16-18 | 4.4 |
| | They are children aged 16-18 | 4.5 |
| Age of the children's mother: | 18-30 years | 4.4 |
| | 31-40 years | 4.6 |
| | 40+ years | 4.1 |
| Age of the children's father: | 18-30 years | 4.1 |
| | 31-40 years | 4.5 |
| | 40+ years | 4.4 |
| Children's mother's studies: | incomplete secondary education | 4.9 |
| | Secondary education | 4.7 |
| | professional education | 4.7 |
| | higher education (incl. college) | 3.7 |
| The children's father's studies: | incomplete secondary education | 4.8 |
| | Secondary education | 4.6 |
| | professional education | 4.8 |
| | higher education (incl. college) | 3.5 |
| Sex of respondent: | male | 4.5 |
| | female | 4.4 |
| Residential environment: | urban | 3.7 |
| | rural | 4.9 |
| Language of communication: | Romanian | 4.6 |
| | Russian | 3.9 |
| Socio-economic status: | low | 4.8 |
| | medium | 4.6 |
| | high | 3.9 |

²⁵ It represents the sum of the responses to the 7 categories compared (see diagram 1), where the answers that sure (have free access) are assigned the value 1, more yes than no are assigned the value 0.5, more no than yes the value (-0.5) and no, sure the value (-1). The coefficient can range between 7 and (-7). An average value of 7 would mean that all respondents rated in all categories that children 'definitely have free access', and (-7) would mean that all respondents rated in all categories that children 'definitely do not have free access'.

Table 2. Placement options for children with developmental problems: *by categories of caregivers*

| | | Caring for him in the family | Placement in an institution (boarding school, children's home) | Enrolment in the local kindergarten/school | Other | DK/NA |
|---------------------------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------------|--|--|-------|-------|
| Total 2012 | | 54,9% | 22,6% | 17,2% | ,4% | 4,8% |
| Total 2018 | | 61,7% | 9,5% | 23,1% | 1,2% | 4,4% |
| Total 2024 | | 45,0% | 7,5% | 40,1% | 0,0% | 7,4% |
| Number of children under 18: | A child | 50,3% | 5,7% | 38,3% | 0,0% | 5,7% |
| | Two children | 41,3% | 9,1% | 40,9% | 0,0% | 8,7% |
| | Three children and more | 45,4% | 6,8% | 40,7% | 0,0% | 7,1% |
| Children under 6 in the household: | No children under 6 | 48,0% | 6,8% | 38,0% | 0,0% | 7,2% |
| | There are children under 6 | 42,8% | 8,0% | 41,6% | 0,0% | 7,6% |
| 7-15 years old in the household: | No children aged 7-15 | 44,4% | 6,7% | 41,3% | 0,0% | 7,6% |
| | They are children aged 7-15 | 45,1% | 7,7% | 39,8% | 0,0% | 7,4% |
| Children aged 16-18 in the household: | No children aged 16-18 | 44,9% | 7,7% | 40,0% | 0,0% | 7,4% |
| | They are children aged 16-18 | 45,7% | 5,7% | 40,7% | 0,0% | 7,9% |
| Age of the children's mother: | 18-30 years | 46,5% | 4,6% | 41,5% | 0,0% | 7,5% |
| | 31-40 years | 46,0% | 8,1% | 39,2% | 0,0% | 6,7% |
| | 40+ years | 41,5% | 8,5% | 41,2% | 0,0% | 8,8% |
| Age of the children's father: | 18-30 years | 44,0% | 3,4% | 44,0% | 0,0% | 8,6% |
| | 31-40 years | 45,8% | 7,7% | 38,4% | 0,0% | 8,0% |
| | 40+ years | 42,7% | 9,1% | 41,3% | 0,0% | 7,0% |
| Children's mother's studies: | incomplete secondary education | 44,8% | 4,9% | 43,8% | 0,0% | 6,5% |
| | Secondary education | 51,7% | 6,3% | 36,7% | 0,0% | 5,3% |
| | professional education | 50,0% | 6,1% | 37,9% | 0,0% | 6,1% |
| | higher education (incl. college) | 40,0% | 10,0% | 40,6% | 0,0% | 9,4% |
| The children's father's studies: | incomplete secondary education | 46,3% | 4,4% | 42,9% | 0,0% | 6,3% |
| | Secondary education | 49,7% | 10,3% | 33,3% | 0,0% | 6,7% |
| | professional education | 45,7% | 7,9% | 39,7% | 0,0% | 6,6% |
| | higher education (incl. college) | 38,8% | 8,6% | 42,8% | 0,0% | 9,8% |
| Sex of respondent: | male | 50,5% | 8,6% | 29,7% | 0,0% | 11,3% |
| | female | 43,8% | 7,3% | 42,3% | 0,0% | 6,6% |
| Residential environment: | urban | 41,8% | 9,0% | 40,5% | 0,0% | 8,8% |
| | rural | 46,9% | 6,6% | 39,8% | 0,0% | 6,6% |
| Language of communication: | Romanian | 43,0% | 7,1% | 42,0% | 0,0% | 7,9% |
| | Russian | 52,6% | 9,0% | 32,7% | 0,0% | 5,6% |
| Socio-economic status: | low | 52,3% | 5,3% | 37,2% | 0,0% | 5,3% |
| | medium | 40,7% | 9,1% | 43,7% | 0,0% | 6,6% |
| | high | 42,0% | 8,2% | 39,5% | 0,0% | 10,2% |

Table 3. Placement options for children with developmental problems: *by categories of teachers*

| | | Caring for him in the family | Placement in an institution (boarding school, children's home) | Enrolment in the local educational institution | Other | I don't know |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------------|--|--|-------|--------------|
| Total 2013 | | 31,4% | 13,3% | 46,7% | 4,0% | 4,7% |
| Total 2018 | | 24,0% | 24,3% | 40,7% | 1,7% | 9,3% |
| Total 2024 | | 17,0% | 14,9% | 59,9% | 2,7% | 5,6% |
| Share of children with SEN: | Less than 4% | 18,0% | 14,2% | 58,8% | 0,3% | 6,3% |
| | More than 4% | 15,2% | 16,1% | 61,8% | 0,0% | 4,3% |
| Cycle: | Primary classes | 23,5% | 14,5% | 55,0% | 0,0% | 5,7% |
| | Lower secondary classes | 13,1% | 15,5% | 61,7% | 0,4% | 5,6% |
| | Upper secondary classes | 18,2% | 14,1% | 60,9% | 0,0% | 5,6% |
| Head teacher: | Yes | 17,3% | 15,0% | 60,2% | 0,0% | 5,3% |
| | No | 16,1% | 14,5% | 59,0% | 0,7% | 6,4% |
| Length of service: | 1-10 years | 13,8% | 14,9% | 60,8% | 0,0% | 5,7% |
| | 11-20 years | 14,0% | 13,8% | 68,4% | 0,0% | 2,3% |
| | more than 20 years | 19,5% | 15,4% | 56,4% | 0,3% | 6,4% |
| Gender: | Male | 13,5% | 31,1% | 55,4% | 0,0% | 0,0% |
| | Female | 17,2% | 13,9% | 60,2% | 0,2% | 5,9% |
| Language of communication: | Romanian | 12,8% | 15,7% | 63,1% | 0,2% | 5,2% |
| | Russian | 35,0% | 11,3% | 46,5% | 0,0% | 7,2% |
| Residential environment: | Urban | 22,9% | 13,4% | 55,4% | 0,4% | 6,5% |
| | Rural | 12,6% | 15,9% | 63,2% | 0,0% | 4,9% |

Table 4.²⁶ Indices of general appreciation on the inclusion of children with disabilities in pre-university education institutions: by categories of caregivers

| | | Children with developmental disabilities (in general) | Children with physical disabilities | Children with mental disabilities | Summary index |
|--|----------------------------------|---|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------|
| Total: | | ,41 | ,49 | -,38 | ,17 |
| Number of children under 18: | A child | ,42 | ,51 | -,37 | ,19 |
| | Two children | ,40 | ,50 | -,38 | ,17 |
| | Three children and more | ,40 | ,45 | -,39 | ,15 |
| Children under 7 in the household: | No children under 7 | ,39 | ,49 | -,42 | ,15 |
| | There are children under 7 | ,42 | ,49 | -,35 | ,18 |
| Children aged 7-15 years old in the household: | No children aged 7-15 | ,47 | ,51 | -,26 | ,24 |
| | There are children aged 7-15 | ,39 | ,49 | -,41 | ,15 |
| Children aged 16-18 in the household: | No children aged 16-18 | ,41 | ,49 | -,37 | ,17 |
| | There are children aged 16-18 | ,40 | ,48 | -,45 | ,15 |
| Age of the children's mother: | 18-30 years | ,47 | ,55 | -,33 | ,22 |
| | 31-40 years | ,40 | ,47 | -,37 | ,17 |
| | 40+ years | ,36 | ,49 | -,46 | ,12 |
| Age of the children's father: | 18-30 years | ,52 | ,57 | -,27 | ,27 |
| | 31-40 years | ,41 | ,50 | -,38 | ,17 |
| | 40+ years | ,37 | ,46 | -,39 | ,15 |
| Children's mother's studies: | incomplete secondary education | ,40 | ,44 | -,40 | ,14 |
| | secondary education | ,41 | ,47 | -,43 | ,15 |
| | professional education | ,43 | ,47 | -,40 | ,16 |
| | higher education (incl. college) | ,41 | ,54 | -,34 | ,20 |
| Children's father's studies: | incomplete secondary education | ,40 | ,40 | -,40 | ,13 |
| | secondary education | ,33 | ,41 | -,51 | ,08 |
| | professional education | ,47 | ,56 | -,34 | ,23 |
| | higher education (incl. college) | ,43 | ,58 | -,28 | ,24 |
| Sex of respondent: | male | ,39 | ,45 | -,38 | ,16 |
| | female | ,41 | ,50 | -,38 | ,17 |
| Residential environment: | urban | ,41 | ,52 | -,35 | ,19 |
| | rural | ,41 | ,47 | -,40 | ,16 |
| Language of communication: | Romanian | ,43 | ,49 | -,36 | ,18 |
| | Russian | ,31 | ,49 | -,45 | ,12 |
| Socio-economic status: | Low | ,42 | ,43 | -,36 | ,16 |
| | medium | ,43 | ,54 | -,39 | ,20 |
| | high | ,37 | ,50 | -,39 | ,15 |

²⁶ It represents the average of the answers, where the answers completely agree (that children with disabilities should be educated together with other children) are given a value of 1, rather agree are given a value of 0.5, neither ... nor ... are given a value of 0, rather disagree are given a value of (-0.5) and strongly disagree are given a value of (-1). The coefficient can range between 1 and (-1). The mean value equal to 1 would mean that all respondents for all types of impairments completely agree that children with impairments should be educated together with other children, and the value (-1) would mean that all respondents for all types of impairments strongly disagree.

Table 5. Indices² of general appreciation of the inclusion of children with disabilities in pre-university education institutions: by categories of teachers

| | | Children with developmental disabilities (in general) | Children with physical disabilities | Children with mental disabilities | Summary index |
|-----------------------------|--------------------|---|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------|
| Total | | ,40 | ,54 | -,35 | ,20 |
| Share of children with SEN: | Less than 4% | ,34 | ,54 | -,39 | ,16 |
| | More than 4% | ,50 | ,54 | -,27 | ,26 |
| Cycle: | Primary classes | ,25 | ,42 | -,39 | ,10 |
| | Secondary classes | ,47 | ,57 | -,35 | ,23 |
| | Secondary classes | ,41 | ,58 | -,31 | ,22 |
| Head teacher: | Yes | ,39 | ,54 | -,36 | ,19 |
| | No | ,44 | ,53 | -,31 | ,21 |
| Work experience: | under 10 years | ,48 | ,47 | -,23 | ,24 |
| | 11-20 years | ,48 | ,63 | -,33 | ,26 |
| | more than 20 years | ,34 | ,53 | -,39 | ,16 |
| Gender: | Male | ,34 | ,59 | -,56 | ,10 |
| | Female | ,40 | ,54 | -,34 | ,20 |
| Language of communication: | Romanian | ,44 | ,56 | -,43 | ,19 |
| | Russian | ,24 | ,44 | ,00 | ,22 |
| Residential environment: | Urban | ,35 | ,57 | -,28 | ,21 |
| | Rural | ,44 | ,52 | -,40 | ,19 |

Table 6. Indices²⁷ of acceptance of children with disabilities in their own children's class: by categories of caregivers

| | | Media |
|---------------------------------------|----------------------------------|-------|
| Total: | | 0,34 |
| Number of children under 18: | A child | 0,34 |
| | Two children | 0,35 |
| | Three children and more | 0,31 |
| Children under 7 in the household: | No children under 7 | 0,31 |
| | There are children under 7 | 0,35 |
| 7-15 years old in the household: | No children aged 7-15 | 0,37 |
| | There are children aged 7-15 | 0,33 |
| Children aged 16-18 in the household: | No children aged 16-18 | 0,35 |
| | There are children aged 16-18 | 0,26 |
| Age of children's mother | 18-30 years | 0,34 |
| | 31-40 years | 0,34 |
| | 40+ years | 0,31 |
| Age of children's father | 18-30 years | 0,40 |
| | 31-40 years | 0,34 |
| | 40+ years | 0,33 |
| Children's mother's studies: | incomplete secondary education | 0,25 |
| | secondary education | 0,29 |
| | professional education | 0,30 |
| | higher education (incl. college) | 0,43 |
| Children's father's studies: | incomplete secondary education | 0,23 |
| | Secondary education | 0,22 |
| | professional education | 0,41 |
| | higher education (incl. college) | 0,48 |
| Sex of respondent: | male | 0,29 |
| | female | 0,35 |
| Residential environment: | urban | 0,41 |
| | rural | 0,30 |
| Language of communication: | Romanian | 0,34 |
| | Russian | 0,34 |
| Socio-economic status: | low | 0,27 |
| | medium | 0,37 |

²⁷ It represents the mean of the responses, where "yes, definitely" (would accept that children with disabilities be educated in the class where the respondent's children are educated) is assigned a value of 1, "probably yes" is assigned a value of 0.5, "probably no" a value (-0.5) and "definitely no" a value (-1). The coefficient can range between 1 and (-1). The mean value of 1 would mean that all respondents agree that children with all types of disabilities (plus children in residential care) should be educated together with other children, while (-1) would mean that all respondents do not agree.

Table 7. ²⁸ index of appreciation of the inclusion of children with disabilities in the class in which they study: *by categories of pupils*

| | | Media |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------|-------|
| Total | | ,65 |
| Share of children with SEN: | Less than 4% | ,64 |
| | More than 4% | ,67 |
| Gender: | Male | ,60 |
| | Female | ,68 |
| Language of communication: | Romanian | ,64 |
| | Russian | ,71 |
| Residential environment: | Urban | ,69 |
| | Rural | ,62 |
| Year, class: | 6 th grade | ,68 |
| | 7 th grade | ,64 |
| | 8 th grade | ,64 |
| | 9 th grade | ,65 |

²⁸ Represents the mean of the responses, where 'think it would be good for all children' (after including children with disabilities in the class where the respondent is studying) is assigned a value of 1, 'think it would be bad for these children' or 'think it would be bad for healthy children' is assigned a value of -0.5, 'think it would be bad for all children' is assigned a value of (-1). The coefficient can range between 1 and (-1). The mean value of (1) would mean that all respondents see only advantages of including children with disabilities of all types plus children in residential institutions, and (-1) would mean that all respondents see only disadvantages.

Annex 3. Qualitative research design

Tabelul 1. Focus group design

| No FG | Category of respondents | Total respondents | Date |
|--------------|---|--------------------------|--------------|
| 1FG | Preschool teachers and teachers (grades 1-4) | 8 respondents | May 18, 2024 |
| 2FG | Secondary school teachers | 9 respondents | May 18, 2024 |
| 3FG | Parents | 9 respondents | May 19, 2024 |
| 4FG | Parents who have children with SEN in schools | 8 respondents | May 19, 2024 |
| 5FG | Pupils, 6-7 grades | 8 respondents | May 24, 2024 |
| 6FG | Pupils, 8-9 grades | 9 respondents | May 25, 2024 |
| 7FG | Russian-speaking pupils, 6-9 grades | 8 respondents | May 25, 2024 |
| | | 59 respondents | |

Annex 5. Informed Consent

Good morning / noon / evening. My name is _____ (NAME, FIRST NAME). I invite you to participate in the sociological survey conducted by the Centre for Sociological Research and Marketing "CBS-Research". We are studying the opinion of pupils/teachers/parents on various issues related to the inclusion of children in school.

I would like to point out that there are no right or wrong answers to the questions in the questionnaire. We just want to find out what people like you really think. Thank you in advance for participating in the survey. Your participation in this survey and your answers to the questions remain anonymous. The survey results will be statistically analysed and presented in integrated form, without reference to the survey participants themselves. It is quite simple to answer the questions. It requires you to read the question and the response options carefully and then select the response option(s) that most closely match your opinion.

Do you agree to participate in our research?

- Yes ☐ apply signature then proceed to questions
- No ☐ thanks!