
IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF EARLY EDUCATION SERVICES IN GEORGIA (DIAGNOSTIC SELF-ASSESSMENT PROCESS OF PRIVATE KINDERGARTENS AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT NEEDS OF TEACHING STAFF)

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Abstract

Improving the quality of early childhood education services in Georgia is hampered by many challenges. The most important challenge in this direction is the educational staff, who must be well trained, supported in the direction of professional development and highly qualified to be able to introduce child-centered approaches and methodologies that would effectively support child development and well-being, as well as implement the necessary changes for quality improvement. To support professional development, practical training and retraining, pre-school education programs should be available for early childhood educators (at the current stage, a total of 5 educational institutions across Georgia have been accredited on these trainings/ accreditation is in progress).

External quality assurance is also an important process in improving the quality of early education services in Georgia. It is worth noting that in this direction in 2023, the process of supporting the diagnostic self-assessment of kindergartens started in Georgia, the study of which is an important innovation.

Therefore, using secondary data analysis, as well as quantitative and qualitative research methods, the process of diagnostic self-assessment of private kindergartens aimed at improving the quality of early education services in Georgia is studied and challenges are identified; The existing needs for the professional development of the teaching staff were identified as well.

Keywords: *Early and preschool education, external quality*

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Introduction

Preschool education is the most important stage in a child's development and contributes to the readiness for school and later life. In order to improve the quality of early education services, it is necessary to create a supportive environment and conditions in which parents, family, educational institutions, the state and society will jointly participate.

International organizations such as the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and others pay special attention to analyzing early education policies in different countries and looking for research-based ways to improve systems. In this regard, it is worth noting the standards established by the member countries of the Economic Cooperation and Development Organization, the fulfillment of which is considered as an indicator of the status of the quality and availability of preschool education by the countries.

It should be noted that the national rate of children's participation in the preschool education system (69.5%) in Georgia is much lower than in Europe (95%). This percentage is even lower among ethnic minority groups, children with disabilities, socially vulnerable and rural families. In addition, the large number of children in classes, the scarcity of educational or entertainment resources, the low qualifications of educators have a negative impact on the quality of preschool education (Unicef).

In 2016, the law of Georgia "**On Early and Preschool Education and Education**" was developed to solve this problem, which included important innovations to improve the quality of preschool education and access to it throughout Georgia. One of the main innovations of this law is the development of mandatory national standards and the introduction of a standards-based authorization system for all private and public preschool education institutions. In 2023, a temporary rule was approved, "On the authorization of early childhood education and/or preschool and education institutions, as well as the suspension and termination of the institution's authorization", which establishes the authorization standards, the conditions for their fulfillment and the procedures for monitoring, as well as defines the institution's every year by mandatorily carrying out self-assessment processes. According to the mentioned rule, the objectives of the institution's self-assessment are to assess the compliance of the institution's conditions with the authorization standards and to promote the institution's continuous development through the use of evidence-based decision-making mechanisms (Article 3).

In Georgia, interesting steps were taken in relation to early childhood educators and state standards, and in October 2017, the following state standards related to preschool education were approved: the state standard of early and preschool education; professional standard of early childhood educators; According to the professional standard of the early childhood educators, the following requirement has been defined for the education of an educator-teacher to be employed in early and preschool education and education institutions from September 1, 2024: the teacher must either have a bachelor's academic degree in the field of preschool education and education, or at least a bachelor's degree or an academic degree equivalent to it in the direction of education, humanitarian sciences, psychology, art and have passed the training of teachers organized

by the municipality on the basis of training-modules for the professional development of teachers developed by the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia (Article 4);

The adoption of the **Law of Georgia on Early and Preschool Education and the Development of National Standards** for Early and Preschool Education were very important milestones in terms of improving the quality and accessibility of preschool education services in Georgia. Thus, based on the above, **the purpose of the article** is to study the diagnostic self-assessment process of kindergartens aimed at improving the quality of early education services in Georgia and the professional development needs of educational staff.

Based on the goal, the following research questions were identified:

- Studying the results of diagnostic self-assessment of private kindergartens and identifying challenges;
- Identifying existing problems for the professional development of educational staff and researching the need to develop undergraduate educational programs.

Based on the research objective and issues, a content analysis of the diagnostic self-assessment of 94 private kindergartens was carried out, at the same time a quantitative study was conducted, the target group of which was nurseries and associations of nurseries.

Research part – diagnostic self-assessment of private kindergartens

In order to promote the process of self-assessment of kindergartens, the LEPL the National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement in 2023 carried out a diagnostic self-assessment of kindergartens, in which 58 specialists were involved. For 2047 kindergartens registered in the self-assessment process (including 310 – private kindergartens, 1737 – public kindergartens), the implementation of diagnostic self-assessment was the legal basis for the implementation of activities (EQE). In addition, the 7th goal of the 2023 action plan of LEPL the National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement is noteworthy, which concerns the existence of effective external mechanisms for early and preschool education and education quality assurance, and considers the implementation of the following activities for the research topic of the article: piloting the institution's self-assessment electronic platform, implementing the institution's self-assessment process and developing a methodology for analyzing the results of the self-assessment; The budget of the sub-programme for the support of kindergarten diagnostic self-assessment for the mentioned activities is 621,000 GEL (EQE).

According to the form and implementation rule of self-evaluation of early education and/or preschool education institutions, the process of self-evaluation of preschool education institutions includes the involvement of the following parties: a) administration of the institution; b) educational staff; c) technical staff; d) parents/legal representatives; e) a representative of the relevant structural unit of the municipality's town hall and representatives of kindergarten associations (in the case of a public institution). The parties involved in the self-assessment fill out a self-assessment questionnaire, which includes the following information: a) description of the institution's compliance with the authorization standards/components/criteria; b) Evidence confirming compliance; c) other information, for the purposes of implementing a systematic assessment of the quality of early and preschool education and education system (Article 4).

Based on the above, it is interesting to analyze the process of diagnostic self-assessment of private kindergartens, which has not yet been implemented and is a **novelty of the article**. The article provides a content analysis of self-assessment of 94 private kindergartens, covering all regions of Georgia, namely: a general overview of the results of self-assessment, the main findings of work with private kindergartens in relation to authorization standards, and a summary of work with private kindergartens.

From the analysis of self-assessments of private kindergartens, the following positive context and problems can be seen:

- **Positive context:** 1) Private kindergartens positively assess the need for kindergarten reform and express gratitude for support; 2) have a high willingness to ensure the implementation of authorization standards; 3) are not inclined to conveyor approaches and try to make a successful positioning with their own individual offers;

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- **Identified challenges:** 1) the problem of understanding the content of the authorization standards and, even more, of determining the mechanisms of its implementation; 2) lack of experience working on documents; 3) low culture of business communication; 4) shortage of personnel with appropriate competence and experience; 5) little experience of cooperation with interested parties; 6) financial instability.

The analysis of self-assessments of private kindergartens in relation to the authorization standards reveals that there are significant challenges in terms of compatibility with all four authorization standards. The experience of planning, implementing and evaluating processes in accordance with pre-developed procedures is very scarce or almost non-existent; The results of the self-assessment provide the basis for saying that in private kindergartens, only a few of the four standards meet the requirements of the requirements.

More specifically, in relation to the **first standard** (mission and strategic development), the data analysis shows that the majority of private kindergartens do not have a written and shared mission, vision and values. In addition, there is no document on the methodology for developing the mission, vision and values. The challenge for kindergartens is to develop strategic and action plans, since they do not have experience in developing strategic documents. Accordingly, neither the methodology of their development is defined in written form, nor the similar practice.

The **second standard** of authorization examines curriculum planning, implementation, and its evaluation and development. The analysis of self-assessments of private kindergartens according to the second standard showed that they do not have the practice of having curriculum planning and development methodology in written form, they carry out the educational process using existing curricula and/or with the methodology developed by themselves; In the direction of curriculum evaluation and development, the majority of private kindergartens implement only certain elements of this component in practice, although it does not have a written form and does not take place regularly.

The **third standard** of authorization (family and community involvement) examines the planning, implementation and evaluation of cooperation. The analysis of self-assessments shows that in kindergartens there is a practice of cooperation with the child's parents/legal representatives, although cooperation with the community is a challenge. In addition, kindergartens do not have a predetermined methodology for cooperation with parents. Regarding the implementation and evaluation of cooperation, there is a practice of communicating with the child's parents/legal representatives and informing them about various issues related to the child's development, although similar communication with the community is not carried out. There is also no evaluation of the existing cooperation by kindergartens and care for development based on it.

Regarding the analysis of self-assessments in connection with the **4th standard** (support of upbringing and educational process), the following challenges were identified: the staff in private kindergartens needs both qualitative and quantitative growth. In kindergartens, there is no practice of having staff development support mechanisms and there is no internal quality assurance system, regulations/evidence related to process management. In addition, the regulations/evidences governing the legal relationship with staff and children are not perfect. Financial planning and management policies/documents are in some cases not implemented or not developed at all, and the infrastructure requires significant interventions.

Thus, the results of the presented research showed that the process of supporting diagnostic self-assessment of kindergartens was necessary, since private kindergartens did not have the experience of conducting similar processes, and the analysis of self-assessment showed very important challenges. In the wake of the implementation of authorization standards, it is important for the Center to continue providing active support based on the identified needs (eg trainings on document development, informational meetings to properly organize the infrastructure, etc.). Strengthening of external quality assessment processes (authorization of kindergartens, self-assessment, monitoring) will significantly contribute to the improvement of the quality of early education services in Georgia.

Research part – professional development needs of educational staff

According to the data of 2023, there are 2027 pre-school and education institutions (EQE) in Georgia, and both the number of public pre-school and education institutions and the number of employees in them are

increasing (see diagram 1). Unfortunately, there is still no open data on how many early childhood educators work in preschools and education institutions, what is their compliance with the standard, although the above-mentioned diagnostic self-assessment process in kindergartens will make complete statistical information available to professional circles in the near future. In addition to the above, the authorization process may include the need to replace some of the pre-service teachers employed until September 1, 2024 with new staff, as the qualifications of some of them may not meet the requirements of the professional standard of pre-service teachers. In addition, authorization is granted to the preschool and education institution for a period of 4 years. Accordingly, those institutions where after the next 4 years teachers of retirement age may voluntarily leave the workplace, it will be necessary to fill the deficit, which will be provided by preschool educational bachelor programs.

Some of the findings and statistics from a study conducted by UNICEF in 2018 are interesting. The authors of the study (Ian Peters, Hester Hulpia) emphasize the abundance of children in the group in preschool and educational institutions, which has a significant negative impact on the quality of the educational process. Thus, in order to improve the quality and working conditions for staff, to reduce the number of children in each group in the city, there is a need for more groups and early childhood educators. According to the same study, pre-school institutions are facing a significant problem, since most of the staff do not have qualifications, or have such qualifications that are not related to early education and upbringing of children. According to the data obtained from 57 municipalities, 44% of early childhood educators do not have qualifications. In addition, 50% of principals do not have education related to early childhood education and training. The study showed that 13 municipalities do not have any early childhood educators with a bachelor's degree in early childhood care and education. A problem for many municipalities is the lack of specialized support staff (specialized teachers, psychologists, etc.) with relevant qualifications. In the recommendation part of the same study, it is directly indicated that new programs should be created in the field of preschool education at the level of higher education and the professional standard of the educator should be the basis of the reform of university education and further professional development.

Thus, it is very interesting at the current stage what the situation is in terms of the needs of creating higher education programs of preschool education, whether there is a shortage of qualified educational personnel in preschool education institutions. In order to study the mentioned issues, a quantitative survey was conducted and an online questionnaire was sent to 370 institutions, of which 303 were private kindergartens, and 67 were associations of municipal kindergartens that manage pre-school and education institutions in their municipality. 35 associations of kindergartens, which manage a total of 734 preschools, took part in the survey. Accordingly, the results of the survey reflect **information about 1036 kindergartens**. All types of institutions of all regions and settlements took part in the survey.

In total, 1253 groups operate in kindergartens participating in the survey, in which 31369 children receive preschool education services. Unlike private kindergartens, municipal kindergartens maintain a waiting list. If for any reason an already enrolled child does not go to kindergarten, a child is replaced from the existing waiting list.

Associations of kindergartens, when asked whether there is unmet demand (whether there are more applicants for enrollment in their kindergartens than the kindergarten can accept), gave a positive answer (55.6%). At the same time, it turns out that there are approximately 230 children on the waiting list in the surveyed municipal kindergartens, although we may assume that the unmet demand is much higher, because part of the kindergartens avoided the mentioned question and the reason may be the lack of data for them.

The results of the research showed that there is a shortage of all types of qualified personnel in preschool institutions. However, special teachers (58.8%), speech therapists (56%), child psychologists (39.7%) and early childhood educators (37.7%) were named most often. In addition, to the question of how many staff the institutions need to add, it was found out that there is a shortage of approximately 381 early childhood educators, 161 teachers, 133 special educators, 120 speech therapists, etc. in the municipal kindergartens/private kindergartens of the surveyed institutions. Obviously, these data cannot be extrapolated to the whole of Georgia, and it is not possible to estimate the number of personnel shortages at the moment, but the shortage of personnel in the field of preschool education is visible.

In addition to the shortage of staff, it was interesting to find out how qualified the employees of preschool and education institutions are according to the interviewees. As can be seen in [diagram 2](#), most of the respondents give an average assessment to the qualifications of the staff. Very negative and very positive evaluations are significantly less. It was found that only 27% of early childhood educator working in the surveyed institutions have a bachelor's degree or an equivalent academic degree in the field of preschool education and education.

The respondents evaluated on a 5-point scale how difficult it is in their opinion to find a qualified staff for the position of early childhood educator at the level of the country, region, municipality. In all three cases, the respondents believe that it is very difficult to find such a staff, although they perceive the greatest difficulty in finding a qualified staff at the municipality level – 1.94 (in the country as a whole 2.11, in the region 2.1).

The results of the research show that the forecast of the respondents for the next 3 years is as follows: 61.5% believe that it will be necessary to add an early childhood educator, and 21.2% believe that it may be necessary to replace the existing staff with a new one. The majority of associations of kindergartens state that in the next 3 years, the construction of a new kindergarten or the rehabilitation/expansion of the existing one is planned in their municipality. According to the responses of the association of kindergartens, 91 kindergartens should be built (subject to capital rehabilitation) in their municipality during the next 3 years. According to available information, the new kindergartens will be designed for 255 groups in total, which means that access to preschool education will increase and institutions will need to hire new staff. According to the existing state standards, from September 1, 2024, preschool institutions will not be able to employ a person who does not have a formal education of a preschool education specialist as an early childhood educator.

The results regarding the distribution of early childhood educators by age groups are interesting. As a whole, a quarter of educators working in the surveyed institutions are over 56 years old, which means that at least some of them will reach retirement age in the next few years and the institutions will have to find new staff.

The overwhelming majority of respondents (93.2%) agree that there is a need to have a higher education program that will train early childhood education and education specialists.

In conclusion, it can be said that the process of diagnostic self-assessment of pre-school and educational institutions showed serious challenges in connection with all standards of authorization. The content analysis of self-assessments of private kindergartens revealed that it was very important to strengthen external quality mechanisms and support kindergartens for improving the quality of early education services in Georgia. Both secondary data analysis and survey results show that pre-school and early childhood education institutions need significant support for professional development. At the same time, there is a shortage of qualified personnel, and the authorization process, as well as the development of the private sector and, accordingly, the growing competition in the field give grounds for saying that the demand for qualified early childhood educators will increase. Therefore, it is necessary to develop higher education programs that ensure the training of educators in accordance with national and international standards, in the wake of the implementation of the mentioned higher education programs, to strengthen the role of universities and increase their contribution to support the reform of early and preschool education, to implement practical trainings, connections and promotion of exchange programs, cooperation on joint research projects with European universities that provide high quality education.

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