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INCLUSIVE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN ARMENIA AND PERSPECTIVES FOR ITS DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

This article examines to what extent Armenia has advanced in inclusive education and the remaining institutional, social, cultural, and attitudinal barriers hindering the smooth implementation of universal inclusive education. It examines why it is important to include children with disabilities in mainstream classes and favorable attitudes toward inclusive education among teachers, administrators, and children.

Inclusive education is the process of integrating individuals with disabilities into regular classrooms, and it helps reflect the commitment to equal educational opportunities as outlined in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006). Inclusive education assumes that diverse and unique students are learning side by side within the same school and classroom context. It treasures each student's unique contribution to the learning process (Open Society Foundation, 2019). However, the definition somehow conceals the complexity of inclusive education, which requires appropriate strategies, inputs, and benchmarking.

The Inclusive Education system was officially embraced in 2003 and has more than 20 years of history. In the meantime, many barriers hinder its implementation, such as a lack of professional development for teachers, reasonable accommodations, assistive technologies, difficulty creating relationships between classmates, inadequate parent participation, and necessary operational procedures aligned to its practice.

Keywords: *inclusive education, reasonable accommodations, universal design for learning, children with special educational needs, autism spectrum disorder, assistive technologies.*

INTRODUCTION

The term “Inclusive Education” considers an understanding of inclusion as an approach to education for all children. At the core of inclusive education is the human right to education. Various

international documents specify the principles of inclusion for guiding the states towards their efforts to introduce a rights-based approach to education. According to UNICEF, an education system is inclusive if it “includes all students and welcomes and supports them to learn. No one should be excluded. Every child has a right to inclusive education, including children with disabilities” (United Nations, 2006; UNICEF, 2012). This statement is very much in line with the UNCRPD General Comment No. 4 regarding inclusive education as “a fundamental human right for all learners” and “a principle that values the well-being of all students, respects their inherent dignity and autonomy, and acknowledges individuals’ requirements and their ability to be effectively included in and contribute to society”. UNESCO views inclusion as “a dynamic approach of responding positively to pupil diversity and of seeing individual differences not as problems, but as opportunities for enriching learning (UNESCO, 2020). It is essential to consider inclusion as a continuous process of systemic reform that envisages changes in teaching and the curriculum, school buildings, classrooms, play areas, transport, policies and strategies in education with a vision to provide all students of the relevant age range with an equitable and participatory learning experience and the environment that best corresponds to their requirements and preferences. Therefore, the move towards inclusion is not simply a technical or organizational change but also a movement with a clear philosophy.

Is inclusive education, which integrates children with disabilities into regular classrooms, the best approach, or does it create challenges for teachers and children? In this article, we will discuss the challenges and benefits of inclusive education and provide answers to whether this idea is necessary for children's holistic development.

PERSPECTIVES FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT

In Armenia, historically, children with disabilities and special educational needs were often excluded from mainstream education. Negative attitudes towards disability, combined with feelings of shame, led large numbers of children to be sent to special boarding schools, particularly in rural areas. Since the 1990s, Armenia has adopted several important documents, both international and national, that contributed to the expansion of inclusive education policies and practices in the country. Armenia ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1992, the inclusive Education Concept Paper was adopted in 2005, and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) was ratified in 2010, thus confirming the country’s political will to ensure the rights of persons with disabilities to family life, leisure, and sports. After ratifying the CRPD, the social sector regulatory framework was adjusted to the convention's requirements (United Nations, 2006; United Nations, 1992).

Inclusive education was implemented by one school in Yerevan, the capital of Armenia, in 1999. Inclusive Education was implemented not in all schools of the Republic of Armenia, but only in those where directors and teachers found it essential to provide equal opportunities for the development of all children and applied to the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports for the right to implement inclusive education. In early 2014, the Government approved the Action Plan and Methodology for Piloting the Holistic Approach to Disability Assessment based on the WHO International Classifications of Functioning, Disability and Health Framework (Government of the Republic of Armenia, 2014). Under this plan, later in 2014, the government adopted the amendments to the Law on Mainstream Education, providing a legal and financial obligation for all children with disabilities to be accepted in mainstream schools by 2025 (National Assembly of the Republic of Armenia, 2009). With the introduction of the Law, two levels of pedagogical-psychological assessment/support to children with special educational needs were introduced: the first level should be provided by schools/kindergartens, the second by regional pedagogical-psychological support centers, and the appeal process by the Republican Pedagogical Psychological Center.

The Government of Armenia also approved the Action Plan and Timetable for introducing the Universal Inclusive Education system by 1 August 2025 (Government of the Republic of Armenia, 2016). According to the Plan, all special schools should gradually transform into regional pedagogical-psychological support centers, providing regular professional support to schools and preschools of their catchment area to assess the special educational needs of children and arrange individual specialist support according to the individual education plan and/or individual development plan of children. In 2021, the Law on “Rights of Persons with Disabilities” and the 2023-2027 Program for Social Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities were adopted (Government of the Republic of Armenia, 2023; National Assembly of the Republic of Armenia, 2021).

While numerous pieces of legislation are in place that promote deinstitutionalization programs and accelerate the progress of inclusive education practices in Armenia, there are still barriers at the societal and educational levels in ensuring that children feel included and successfully educated alongside their peers. Because of Armenia’s Soviet history, there are residual approaches and stereotypes about the teaching process, and teacher-centered education is still the norm. Thus, in recent years, the Armenian government has prioritized education for teachers to ensure equity and quality in access and learning.

STATE OF THE ART

Many buildings in Armenia are historic, making Universal Design challenging. However, many buildings are retrofitted to improve physical accessibility, and some accessibility approaches, such as

creating ramps, installing handrails, etc., have been very effective.

The role of several educational theories like social constructivism, humanistic approach, and universal learning design (UDL) contribute to addressing challenges in inclusive learning. **Social Constructivism** shows how collaborative work can be used in classrooms to reduce peer rejection (Vygotsky, 1978). The humanistic approach stresses the comprehensive growth of all individuals while addressing the needs of learners with disabilities. Social constructivism and inclusive education share the same idea due to their emphasis on social interaction, collaboration, and recognizing diverse perspectives. This approach is particularly beneficial in implementing inclusive education. It may be used as the basis for addressing different obstacles in the inclusion where students of all abilities can succeed.

Universal Design for Learning focuses on promoting an accessible learning environment and eliminating physical barriers to foster successful growth for all students. The proactive approach acknowledges individuals' unique needs, abilities, and learning preferences to establish a conducive environment that fosters successful growth for all. The Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework aims to create inclusive and equitable learning environments by providing multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression (CAST, 2018). Universal Design is a way for teachers to support all students' learning, even if those students learn differently. For example, in Armenia, professionals are taking steps to reframe the understanding of disability. Strategies like examining human differences through students' literature (Avagyan, Baghdasaryan & Sargsyan, 2016) and developing new norms in teacher development improve understanding and acceptance of human diversity. For example, the purpose of assessments for children with disabilities is shifting from a perspective and focus on a child's problems to a perspective that a child has resources and potential within inclusive classrooms.

A large-scale study conducted by UNICEF in Armenia in 2012 among children with registered disability status found that a 3rd of younger children did not attend kindergarten, and a 5th of school-age children did not attend school. One out of every eight children with disabilities lived in orphanages or residential care institutions, rarely leaving them and having little access to mainstream education. Only a quarter of children with disabilities receive the services described in Individual Rehabilitation Plans or receive the assistive devices they require (UNICEF, 2012).

According to the data for 2024, the number of children with Special Educational Needs in Armenian mainstream schools is around 8800, and around 500 children live in 7 special schools (MESCS, 2024). While the Deinstitutionalization reform targets children with disabilities (with the introduction of specialized foster care and expansion of alternative community-based services), there are

three specialized orphanages in Armenia with around 1000 children, the vast majority (more than 80%) of whom are children with disabilities. With the amendments to the Law on Mainstream Education, most special schools are planned to be transformed into Special School-Resource Centers. The change started with the Special School for Children with Hearing Impairments, where the pilot program on successfully reintegrating 15 children with hearing impairments into mainstream education and preventing institutionalization was realized.

Armenian experience in inclusive education and disability inclusion is considered one of the most advanced in Europe and Central Asia. Most of Armenia's initiatives in this field have been documented in regional and global reports and publications as the basis for learning for other countries. In the meantime, there are still many barriers that hinder children with disabilities and/or special educational needs from being fully included in mainstream education.

Challenges and barriers in full implementation of inclusive education

Inclusive Education in Armenia today faces several obstacles to the integration of children with special educational needs in mainstream classes, which include inadequate teacher preparation, rigid curriculum structures, limited support services, inadequate infrastructure, and gaps in knowledge among parents and educators regarding laws, regulations, and resources about inclusion. Other significant challenges are listed below:

Lack of teachers' training in inclusive education

One of the key issues today is the lack of preparedness of mainstream education teachers and the continuous resistance of some teachers to teach children with disabilities and create an inclusive setting in the classroom (Jardinez & Natividad, 2024). Lack of teaching methodologies, assistive technologies, and support services that would effectively include children with disabilities in class activities often leads to either poor quality inclusion or even exclusion. When Armenia committed to inclusion, it shifted its focus from a service-based to a rights-based model. This means that students with special educational needs will still receive the services, but greater focus will be placed on their right to participate in education in their school.

Lack of adapted learning materials

Most school buildings and sanitation facilities are not adapted to the needs of children with disabilities and special educational needs. Physical obstacles can impact the learning of children with special educational needs (Jardinez & Natividad, 2024). These barriers include non-inclusive sports programs, inadequately constructed classrooms, inaccessible facilities (stairs without ramps), and a lack of adaptive equipment (such as braille educational materials, translators for sign language, and screen readers).

Social integration and peer relationships

It is important to acknowledge that confident children with special needs may encounter instances of peer rejection within inclusive educational settings, which could have negative implications for their social conduct and self-perception (Chen, Huang, Liu & Wang, 2022). Rejection may have negative consequences, especially on the individual's self-esteem, which may result in decreased self-confidence and perhaps limit their social growth, making it harder for them to build solid connections with their classmates. Some students with impairments may also face bullying because of their condition. This phenomenon may induce feelings of loneliness and isolation among students with disability and may lead to increased stress and anxiety. Also, research performed by Coelho (2019) has indicated that the idea of inclusion may not always be suited for specific conditions, especially for those diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The complex social and sensory requirements may pose difficulties within inclusive environments, potentially hindering social growth and overall welfare. ASD individuals may struggle with social interactions and communication, impacting their ability to engage effectively in academic and social settings.

Legal and policy barriers

Inadequate operational procedures or enforcement mechanisms related to inclusive education can impede progress. One of the factors contributing to challenges in inclusive education is limited comprehension of regulations and personalized assistance in this area. Educators and administrators in Armenia struggle to navigate the complexities of legal frameworks, the complex environment of inclusive policies, and the art of individualized support for children with various needs. On 11 August 11, 2022, the Government of Armenia approved the Order (No. 1265) on "Reasonable Accommodations", which will enable children with disabilities to be provided with necessary high, low technological means, assistive devices, and support services (sign language interpreters, assistants, etc.) to ensure smooth and equitable integration of children with disabilities along with their peers in mainstream education (Government of the Republic of Armenia, 2022). In the meantime, consultations conducted with school principals from 20 schools in different regions of Armenia revealed that none of them have so far operationalized this order due to a lack of knowledge, guidance and enforcement mechanisms for its implementation, as well as a low amount envisaged for a child with special educational needs to benefit from this entitlement.

Parents' involvement

Engaging parents and caregivers as partners in inclusive education is essential for their children's success and smooth social inclusion in the learning process. However, there are many barriers to parental involvement in the education of children with special educational needs, including low level of parental

education, teachers' and school administrations' negative attitude towards parental participation in education, parental economic constraints, societal perceptions and stigmatization, parental stress and depression, lack of support, parental perceptions of teachers-school staff, mismatched expectations (between parents and teachers), the number of siblings in the family, severity of disability, and absence of policy guidelines/framework that would guide parental involvement in education (Oranga, Obuba & Boinnet, 2022). Understanding the role of families as advocates and partners with the educational team is a significant shift for both families and professionals because families hold a wealth of information and know the child in far more intimate ways than professionals. Concrete efforts towards training parents on inclusive education and supporting them to become “experts” to support their children's learning journey will bring positive changes towards inclusion.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, inclusive education provides equal opportunities for children with disabilities to learn and receive quality education in a regular classroom. The introduction of Universal Inclusive Education is a significant achievement. However, therapeutic, pedagogical, and psychological support is not always adequately available. There are many issues and challenges to be solved regarding the development of social and academic skills of children with disabilities, including teacher education and training, limited parental support, social and physical environment adjustments in schools, and parents' expectations, attitudes, and beliefs. There are still also issues with the quality of education and support services children with disabilities receive. Inclusive education reforms continue to focus only on preschool, primary, and secondary education levels, with limited efforts at vocational training, tertiary education, lifelong learning, extracurricular, and social activities. Overcoming these barriers requires careful planning, which involves advancements in administrative support, policy development, and teacher preparation, as well as the incorporation of various educational theories into practice. Social constructivism claims the necessity for social interaction, collaboration, and recognition of various perspectives in establishing an inclusive and supportive educational setting. Incorporating humanistic concepts into inclusive education emphasizes the significance of promoting uniqueness, holistic growth, and a nurturing environment. In addition, the application of Universal Design for Learning serves as the basis for making educational learning accessible and responsive to the special needs of children. By acknowledging the worth of every child and placing importance on inclusion, these ideas help create a learning atmosphere that cultivates empathy, kindness, and equality for all children, regardless of their capabilities or impairments. As a result, children with disabilities can get significant advantages from inclusive education. It enables them to receive an educational experience inside a conventional

classroom setting and fosters a learning atmosphere that promotes diversity, empathy, and acceptance, contributing to students' overall development. The focus on building a community that values diversity acknowledges each individual's needs, and actively promotes understanding and connection draws attention to the significant influence inclusive education has on children's overall development. Finally, in order to implement promising practices of inclusive education in schools and the community, a commitment to the principle of inclusion from policymakers, minorities, schools, NGOs, parents, and others involved is necessary.

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