AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF ARMENIA

DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

Inclusive Education in Armenia: Implementation Challenges

A MASTER ESSAY SUBMITTED TO

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE PROGRAM OF

POLITICAL SCIENCE AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

FOR PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF MASTERS OF ARTS

BY

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SPRING 2014

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May 2014

Acknowledgements

I would like to take this opportunity to express my thanks and gratitude my master's essay supervisor Dr. Yevgenya Paturyan for the tremendous contributions and valuable advice Her support all along the whole project encouraged and inspired me in completing it.

I would like to express my thankfulness to the community of the School of Political Science and International Affairs for the high level knowledge, skills and experience they gave and shared with us. I'm grateful for the time and contribution they devoted to us in our way to the field of Political Science.

I wish to thank also to the entire staff of the school where I carried out the research for my thesis project, to the principal and teachers who met me with warmth and hospitality. Special thanks to all students.

And special thanks to my lovely family for their support and patience towards my education to lovely kids for their understanding and strength they gave throughout these years.

Content

List of Abbreviations

DIG Disablement Income Group

DPI Disabled People International

EFA Education for All

ICIDH International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities and Handicaps

RA Republic of Armenia

UNESCO United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

UPIAS Union of Physically Impaired against Segregation

UNICEF United Nations Children's Fund

WHO World Health Organization

Abstract

In the thesis essay the topic of inclusive education is discussed. It gives short understanding of the development of the notion of inclusive education and through what stages it passed. The paper highlights the fundamental principles laid in the basis of the transformation of educational system from segregated into integrated one.

Passing through legal background of the inclusive education in Armenia the paper provides primary data to delve into the implementation process. The discussion of some official reports will serve a tool to look at the issue from different aspects and points of view.

For this Masters Essay qualitative methodology has been used. Primary data collection is acquired by means of classroom observations and teachers' interviews as data collection tools. It is proved that in the observed school teachers mainly do not have any education, experience and qualification of teaching students with disabilities. When facing challenges they rely on their own experience and skills.

Introduction

The words 'inclusion' and 'inclusive education' became one of the most debated topics in the field of education for last decades. The inclusion of students with disabilities into mainstream schools still is being contested in public education sphere. There is rising recognition of benefits of full inclusion for all students in spite of still intense opposing arguments for the maintenance of segregated special education settings (Fitch, 2003).

Previously the public education system was organized via normal and special education systems, which were parallel and developed next to each other. At the same time there was very little chance for a change from one system to another. Inclusive education is both structural and social new way to answer to educational challenges. It is a combination of usual and special educational systems into one where all children may get quality education. Inclusive education is not only a change in system but also change of viewpoint: it is based on humanitarian values, which implies that schools should be able to meet the needs of children in spite of socio-cultural, educational or skill differences of students. Inclusive education implies that the need of education of each child must be met without any preferences but not in favor of one group at the expense of another.

In other words the mission of inclusive school must be treating the students with disabilities as fully integrated members of their community, realizing that the differences should not play a decisive role and every child should be accepted and welcomed in every school. Inclusive school must adopt "child-centered" way of thinking and stay away from "differentiation".

Therefore defining inclusive education in a broader sense we can state that it is a way leading to an inclusive society. Accepting the rights of all children for education, including children with disabilities, inclusive schools make input in their personal development, prepare them to use their skills and abilities for their future life. And this will lead them to become fully integrated members of society.

In this Master Essay I present the inclusive education in Armenia. After giving some background information the definitions will be provided to understand the main aim of inclusive education and inclusion. Then the Essay will elaborate the legal framework on the basis of which inclusive education in Armenia is implemented.

The qualitative methodology of data collection of the Essay will enable to describe the situation that exists in schools and highlight both the success and challenges of the program.

The Right to Education and Inclusive Education

Education had always its importance throughout human evolution. With the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 ("The Universal Declaration of Human Rights," 1948) the education was put on the agenda as a basic human right. The right received a legally binding obligation with the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990("Convention on the Rights of the Child," 1990)[1]. And the right to education is a cornerstone of the notion for inclusive education.

In the article "An Education for All: An Unfinished Revolution" the authors express their belief in possibility of educating all children (Bloom & Cohen, 2002). A step forward that was a World Conference on *Education for All* launched by United Nations where all the represented countries assured that "children and adults would benefit from educational opportunities designed to meet their basic learning needs"(Bloom & Cohen, 2002, p. 86). Here the authors bring the following four basics factors to provide Education for All: humanitarian, sociological, political and economic.

Saying humanitarian the authors mean enabling humans to develop their skills and give meaning to their lives through education. Equal opportunities would prevent inequalities and marginalization of poor. Under the sociological aspect the authors put the emphasis on 'social and cultural capital' linking them to the role of education in gaining of 'social justice, human rights and social and religious tolerance'. To show the political justification for education the authors describe democracy as an impossible notion in an illiterate society, as well as emphasize the role of education on the international level, as a contributor to global peace and stability. The

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[1] Armenia ratified it on 23 June 1993.

last justification is economic factor where authors mention the role of human capital in the economic wealth of the country. People's productivity is connected with their educational level and promotes a technological development. Thus according to the notions highlighted by the authors the universal education should lean on all its four benefits mentioned above (Bloom & Cohen, 2002).

EFA (Education for All) aims to ensure every child in receiving basic quality education. Since 1948 UNESCO has been carrying policy with the development of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It is worth to mention that the recent decades past has seen a noticeable expansion in endeavoring a Child Rights centered worldwide education. In 1990, both the Convention of the Rights of the Child, and the World Declaration on Education For All have been adopted by 191 nation states, that puts emphasis on access to education to all children around the world (Hunt, 2009).

The World Declaration on Education for All has a global scope tackling the educational access and participation challenges, and introduces the concept of Inclusive Education as a way leading to universal education. It states that each country have to provide resources and give solutions to access and equity. In addition, in 1994 the World Congress on Special Educational Needs Education held in Spain produced the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action, which was adopted by more than 90 governments and 25 international organizations (Paula Frederica Hunt, 2009).

Defining 'inclusion' and 'inclusive'

The terms 'inclusive' and 'inclusion' began to be used in educational contexts. These terms are about the degree of integration of students with special educational needs into mainstream schools. Inclusive school means an environment where all the students are welcomed equally, treated as equal members despite of their physical or mental disability. In the core of inclusive education is the idea that it is beneficial not only for those who are marginalized but also for all school community. As inclusive education is an opportunity for all to learn feeling responsible and taking care about others at the same time revealing mutual respect towards each other. The insurance of both educational and social support is under the emphasis in inclusive schools. The way leading to these goals is through involvement of all members like parents, teachers and students (Susan Stainback & William Stainback, 1994).

One way of interpretation of inclusive education was provided by Mel Ainscow who framed it as 'a process of increasing the participation of pupils in, and reducing their exclusion from, the cultures, curricula and communities of their local schools, not forgetting, of course, that education involves many processes that occur outside of schools' Mel Ainscow 1999 in (Dyson & Millward, 2000, p. 31). Later Ainscow in his article "Developing Inclusive Education Systems: What are the levers for Change?" brings four key elements in defining inclusion. Those are:

- *"Inclusion is a process.*
- *Inclusion is concerned with the identification and removal of barriers.*
- *Inclusion is about presence, participation and achievement of all students.*

- *Inclusion involves a particular emphasis on those groups of learners who may be at risk of marginalization, exclusion or underachievement".*

(Mel Ainscow, 2005, p. 15)

Inclusion is about choice and participation but not about segregation. The supporters of exclusion are for "educating the best, taking care of the rest" (Stainback & Stainback, 1994, p. xv). Advocates of segregation accept the 'underclass' in society and they find no meaning in funding to educate all. Henceforth the paths of exclusion and inclusion come across. They contradict each other because inclusion, in contrast to exclusion, envisions including of each child in regular classrooms and educate all children despite any differences. The way to inclusive society passes through the schools. Inclusive schools are a step towards integration. Integration implies where previously 'labeled' children are welcomed in society (Stainback & Stainback, 1994).

Defining "disability" and its Medical and Social Models

The term 'disabled student' is much contested in the literature concerning to its definition. It is important to understand and define who should be considered as a disabled person. During last decades the social model of disability was put forth in contrast to the medical model of disability. It brought a change in approaches towards disability and changed it to the rights issue. In the context of different attempts in conceptualizing illness, impairment and disability the World Health Organization (WHO) adopted the International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities and Handicaps (ICIDH) (Mike Oliver, 1996). It later became a basis for different studies.

"In the context of health experience, a disability is any restriction or lack (resulting from an impairment) of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being."

WHO in (Oliver, 1996, p. 2)

The definition above also has met some criticism and rejection. Particularly it was criticized by the disabled people's organizations which questioned it. The Disabled People International (DPI) gave its own definition which states:

"Disability is a loss or limitation of opportunities to take part in the normal life of the community on an equal level with others due to physical and social barriers"

DPI, 1982 in (Oliver, 1996, p. 3)

In this definition it is obvious that it discards the body factor and describes disability as a matter of social organization and barriers. As it is described in the criticism of a medical sociologist who states:

"Sometimes, in seeking to reject reductionism of the medical model and its institutional contexts, proponents of independent living have tended to discuss disablement as if it had nothing to do with the physical body."

Williams, 1991, p. 521 in (Oliver, 1996, p. 4)

There was a notion during last decades when many social scientists and disability campaigners built the understanding of disability on social context. They refer to disability as 'disadvantage, social exclusion and oppression'(Shakespeare, 2006). One of disability campaigning unions is the Union of Physically Impaired against Segregation (UPIAS) which has been formed in 1970s. Before Disablement Income Group (DIG), founded in 1966, was acting for improved benefits for people with disabilities. Yet UPIAS which carried more reformist characteristics put forth new ways of resolving social barriers of disabled people. The main aim of UPIAS was creating opportunities for people with impairments for a full participation in society and an independent life instead of isolation. In their policy statement they underlined the barriers and referred to disabled as oppressed:

"We find ourselves isolated and excluded by such things as flights of steps, inadequate public and personal transport, unsuitable housing, rigid work routines in factories and offices, and a lack of up-to-date aids and equipment."

UPIAS Aims paragraph 1 in (Shakespeare, 2006, p. 11)

However, the first time we come across the social model of disability published is in the reported discussions between UPIAS and Disability Alliance in *Fundamental Principles of Disability* in 1975. The social model of disability defined by UPIAS has been developed further by other unions and organizations offering different explanations and definitions (Shakespeare, 2006).

As a contrast to social model there is a medical model of disability the symbol of which for many disability campaigners is the definition offered by the International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities and Handicaps. They refer to impairments as 'any loss or abnormality of psychological, physiological or anatomical structure or function'(Shakespeare, 2006).

The matter in the discourse of the two models is that it is hard to assume that only one model would explain disability with its all complexity. The social model should be evolving taking into account disabled people and medical sociologists' viewpoint on disability (Mike Oliver, 1996).

The discourse among the two dimensions has conceptual component in it. As Mike Oliver suggests it is about the determination of issues needed for 'medical interventions' or 'policy developments'. The polarization of two approaches brings to either 'medicalisation' or the 'colonisation' of disability or people with disability, where the change in civil rights legislation by political actions would be more adequate (Oliver, 1996).

Legal Context of Inclusive Education in Armenia

Armenia inherited its education system from the period of the Soviet Union. Systematic protection of children's rights in the country has started with the ratification of "United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child"[2]. In 1996 the "Law on Child's Rights" was adopted, later in 1999 "Law on Education" and in 2005 "Law on Education of Persons with Special Educational Needs" followed (The Ministry of Education and Science of RA, 2014).

The Law on Education was the beginning for educational reforms in regards to the special educational infrastructure of the country. The Law states that the education of the children with special needs can be organized both in special schools as well as in mainstream schools by the choice of parents. The reforms are based on two main principles: access and quality of education, which entails equal conditions and opportunities to quality education for the children with special needs. The key assumptions leading the strategy are the following: the children with special educational needs have equal rights in the choice of public educational institution and it is preferable to organize the child's education without exclusion from family and society (The Ministry of Education and Science of RA, 2014).

In the "Law on Education of Persons with Special Educational Needs" the term 'inclusive education' is formulated as the provision of education for children with special education needs in mainstream public schools with peers through insuring certain conditions. One of the important aims of reforms is reducing the number of students in special schools. Student-centered pedagogy is at the core of inclusive education policy (The Ministry of Education and Science of RA, 2014).

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[2]In 1959, the UN General Assembly adopted the Declaration of the Rights of the Child. It's an international consensus over the fundamental principles of the children's rights ("Declaration of the Rights of the Child, | Humanium for Children's Rights," 1959).

This entails that there are three types of schools in the country: special schools, mainstream school and mainstream schools that provide inclusive education. Currently there are 25 special schools and 117 mainstream schools providing inclusive education. Those schools providing inclusive education receive additional financial resources from the state budget. They are equipped with parents' room and resource room for organizing personal lessons for inclusive students. These schools have a social worker and a special education teacher. The implementation of inclusive education in Armenia is being supported by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), World Vision, "Bridge of Hope" NGO (non-governmental organization) and other international organizations (The Ministry of Education and Science of RA, 2014).

From 117 schools providing inclusive education 55 schools are in Yerevan and the rest are in the marzes; only 16 out of them are high schools. The implementation and provision of inclusive education is being regulated by "The Procedure of Implementation of Inclusive Education" signed by the Minister of Education and Science in 2010 ("The Procedure on Implementation of Inclusive Education," 2010). It consists of 17 points which refer to different aspects of the implementation.

Relevance of Study

The Education Development State program of the Republic of Armenia for 2011-2015 envisages completing the implementation of inclusive education in Armenia. Hence the program is being implemented in Armenia currently and has not been completed yet. This is the actual reason to make research in this field by collecting and representing in-depth information about the policies and policy implementation in the field of creating and maintaining schools for inclusive education. In this research some successful and challenging points during the policy implementation will be highlighted, however, besides the highlights on policy implementation procedure and results, an advice on how to improve the situation is also elaborated.

The transformation goes not only via structural changes in the education system but also through the changes in attitudes of teachers and society as a whole, through the changes in values, cultural and traditional characteristics of thinking. That is the reason that the main aim of the research is defined to study both inclusive and non-inclusive students and teachers as major carriers of values and attitudes. The study gave an opportunity to have a closer view on their real experience.

Methodology

For completing the research both primary and secondary data has been collected. A qualitative approach has been used. The analysis is mainly based on primary data. Data collection instruments were classroom observations, in-depth interviews with teachers and focus group discussions with students observed.

Classroom observations served as a key source of data on students' behavior, attitude, involvement and engagement as well as a mean to find out teachers' behavior and attitude towards inclusive and non-inclusive students. The teacher interviews consisted of open-ended questions. Interview questions were designed to help to answer research questions.

For classroom observations pre-observations were carried out within two days. Observations were held for one week uninterrupted period in two different classrooms. In addition classroom observations were followed by semi-structured focus group discussions with inclusive and non-inclusive students who had been observed.

The aim of this choice of method is to achieve the deepest possible understanding of students and teachers within their usual social context. The participant observations helped to observe both verbal and non-verbal indicators of behavior observed.

Context of the study: The primary data collection for this research has been carried out in an inclusive school in one of Yerevan districts. Two different classes were chosen for observation. One was 4th grade and the other 7th. The classes were chosen by the difference in ratio percentage of inclusive students and non-inclusive students. The 4th grade consisted of 23 students, 7 inclusive students out of them. In the 7th grade there are 4 inclusive students out of 30 total students. Overall 11 inclusive students and 42 non-inclusive students were observed. 15

teachers were observed during their usual class time and 10 teachers and 1 social worker of the school have been interviewed.

Limitations: As any project this research also has its limitations. First limitation is the size of the sample which included only one school in one of the districts of the capital. The next limitation is time dedicated to its realization. This is a cross-sectional study. Another important limitation is recourses. Unfortunately it is difficult to get the agreement from school administrations to conduct a data collection and research in schools for a thesis project.

Research questions and Hypothesis

One of the greatest challenges to the successful implementation of inclusive education is the role of teachers, their education, preferences and attitudes. The 48th International Conference on Education, *Inclusive Education: The Way of the Future* ("UNESCO International Bureau of Education 48th session," 2008) highlights teacher education as playing main role leading towards achieving the demands of inclusive education. In the final report six points are presented in recommendation to teacher education and development.

Thus taking into account the role of teachers in the successful implementation of inclusive education the following research questions would be answered to prove the hypotheses set up for this research.

RQ: What are the main objective factors that highlight the differences between inclusive and non-inclusive students in the school?

RQ: What are the main subjective factors that highlight the differences between inclusive and non-inclusive students in the school?

RQ: What are the barriers that prevent inclusive students from full integration?

H1: Teachers mainly do not have any education, experience and qualification of teaching students with disabilities.

H2: Teachers do not have a clear view on the use of expressions and terminology.

H3: Teachers do not express willingness to receive further education on how to teach children with disabilities in inclusive settings classrooms.

H4: Non-inclusive students have difficulties in interaction with their inclusive peers.

Results

First of all I want to give brief description of the classrooms that I have chosen for my observations. As I have already mentioned they were two: 4th and 7th grades. In the 4th grade the total number of students was 23. Seven students out of them were studying in the scope of inclusive education and were considered as inclusive students. Having the aim of keeping the names of the students anonymous I will change their names and use them in further discussion. One of seven inclusive students (Student 7 below) was getting home study by the choice of his parents and therefore I did not have an opportunity to observe him/her. The other six inclusive students were supposed to attend school as all non-inclusive students. Below I present the students with diagnosis of Medical Psychological Pedagogical Assessment Centre they received.

1. Student 1: Specific disorder of learning abilities

2. Student 2: Psychological Problems

3. Student 3: Psychological and specific disorder of learning abilities

4. Student 4: Emotional disorder

5. Student 5: Psychological problems and specific disorder of learning abilities

6. Student 6: Emotional disorder

7. Student 7: Mild mental retardation

Although Student 2 was supposed to attend school as all other students during my observation period I did not have any opportunity to observe him/her. The student was absent throughout the whole observation period.

In the 7th grade there were 30 students studying in total. Inclusive students were four out of 30. Below I present the students with diagnosis of Medical Psychological Pedagogical Assessment Centre they received:

1. Student 8: Mild mental retardation

2. Student 9: Motor system disorder

3. Student 10: Emotional disorder

4. Student 11: Specific disorder of learning abilities

In this classroom I did not have an opportunity to observe Student 11because of consistent absences of the student. The rest of the students have been observed. Different lessons were chosen for observation among which language classes, mathematics, history classes, hand working and others.

During the observations I looked for general patterns, commonalities or obvious differences which would further help me in answering the research questions and accepting or rejecting the hypotheses. For the purpose of highlighting all those issues mentioned above I have grouped several subjective patterns as below:

- attitude of the teachers defined by their speech and behavioral occurrences

- interaction among inclusive and non-inclusive students defined by mutual assistance, relations and differentiation

- sitting arrangements in the classrooms

I have defined objective factors as follows:

- the process of providing food for inclusive students

- violations in the implementation of inclusive education in contrast to the order defined in "The Procedure of Implementation of Inclusive Education" adopted by the Ministry of Education

One of the main targets of my research was teachers' attitude towards inclusive and non-inclusive students, as compared with each other. I tried to define it through the speech and behavioral occurrences during usual learning process in school. Teachers' speech and proper use of terminology was my utmost interest as personal identity is being formulated also during daily dialogues. Frank Fitch states in his article:

"Identity is both ideological and yet rooted in the day-to-day dynamic process of language, within the speech act. Since personal identity is always constructed in conversation (dialogue), identity is understood to change from conversation to conversation, from speech act to speech act."

(Fitch, 2003, p. 247)

One of the common features of teachers' speech that has been observed is labeling the students as "inclusive" or using "inclusive" term for comparison with other students. The cases which I came across during my studies were connected with the teachers who in some instances failed to settle down the class. When they had difficulties in calming the class they angrily would ask *"Are you "inclusive"?* From the answer of that question the teacher decided how to act. Another case when the label "inclusive" was used as an offensive word was as follows: during the lesson the students were noisy and when the teacher detected the student who was mainly making noise, the teacher asked:

"Are you from inclusive department?" She got a negative answer and then she said, *"You should be there. That's exactly your place."*

This kind of expressions were observed by different teachers also when any of the students behaved noisy or had not completed tasks: they were first asked if they are "inclusive" or not.

A different pattern of labeling inclusive students was while making comparison among students. When a teacher wants to show a dissatisfaction of non-inclusive student she compares them with the inclusive students meaning as weak. An example of situation observed describes the pattern deeper. When during a lesson a non-inclusive and an inclusive student were talking consistently the teacher noticed and said to the non-inclusive student:

"What are you doing? To who's level did you fall down?" and she was pointing to the inclusive student.

A different situation was when a non-inclusive student was complaining about the difficulty of the task the teacher answered surprisingly:

"Student 10 has learnt and you say that it is difficult?"

A comparison of the same feature was a situation when Student 10 answered the lesson meanwhile several non-inclusive students have not learnt their lessons. After the answer of Student 10 the teacher asked her to leave a classroom for something. When the student left the classroom the teacher referred to the class, saying:

"She is an inclusive student but could tell the lesson better than you all three". And the topic was just closed as the Student 10 came back.

While in the case of the peers there were only few cases of comparison between being inclusive or non-inclusive. When someone from a class did not know the answer of the questions a non-inclusive student said, *"Even Student 1 knows!"* The patterns of comparing inclusive and non-inclusive students among the peers were rare. In contrast to negative comparisons it was interesting to notice positive remarks from teachers when peers tried to help inclusive children. When a non-inclusive student whispered to help Student 6 the teacher noticed and said:

"Now you will answer and everyone will listen carefully, is there anyone who doubts that you can?" and encouraged the inclusive student to answer the lesson.

When we compare the two classrooms observed, it can be noted that the negative features of labeling occur more often in 4th grade compared with more positive features of speech in 7th grade.

In the case of behavioral occurrences they usually have been observed when the teacher had difficulty to settle down the class or a student. In several cases when the teachers could handle the situation by giving an inclusive student a certain task to complete, that could be writing or copying out a text. In other cases the easiest way to handle the situation for the teacher was just to send the inclusive student to the department where they get help of special teachers in doing their home tasks. As it is stated in the point 13 of the Procedure of Implementation of Inclusive Education ("The Procedure on Implementation of Inclusive Education," 2010) inclusive students should attend at least 80% of classes in mainstream schools. The curriculum for each inclusive student is being designed individually in the beginning of each year.

"The learning process of the child with special educational needs necessarily involves a not less than 80% participation of his classroom curriculum designed for educational classes".[3]

(translated from "The Procedure on Implementation of Inclusive Education," 2010, point 13)

When facing the challenges with inclusive students, the teachers sometimes use this opportunity to "get rid of" a difficulty rather than to overcome it like in the following situation.

"Student 1, your time is already over. Go to the inclusive room". And she insisted the student had to leave the classroom.

The reaction of the student was interesting when he did not want to leave saying, *"They will not let me sit there".* Anyway the teacher insisted and the student left the classroom and spent ten minutes in inclusive department after which he came back.

When we compare both speech and behavioral cases of negative or positive occurrences the overall picture is that negative expressions happen more often in the 4th grade in contrast to the 7th grade. Aiming to explain this phenomenon we look at the differences that may be among these two classrooms. When we compare the diagnosis of the students of both classrooms they do not differ much. In both classrooms there are students with more or less the same level of difficulties and needs. What is the most obvious difference is the quantity of inclusive students in each classroom. Here we again will refer to "The Procedure of Implementation of Inclusive

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[3] 13. Կրթության առանձնահատուկ պայմանների կարիք ունեցող երեխայի ուսուցման գործընթացը պարտադիր ներառում է երեխայի կողմից նրա դասարանի դասացուցակով նախատեսված ուսումնական պարապմունքների ոչ պակաս քան 80%-ի մասնակցությունը:("The Procedure on Implementation of Inclusive Education," 2010)

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Education" signed by the Minister of Education and Science to regulate the implementation of inclusive education where the point five states:

"In the same grade contingent of a secondary educational institution providing inclusive education may be included 2-3 children with special educational needs simultaneously by the complexity of their educational needs; moreover they can be children both of the same and of different variety of special educational needs".[4]

(Translated from "The Procedure on Implementation of Inclusive Education," 2010, point 5)

Here we see that the actual number of inclusive students does not correspond to the limit set by the law. In the case of 7th grade there are four inclusive students out of 30 students in one classroom which is by one student more than there should be. And there are seven inclusive students out of 23 students in 4th grade. Even if we consider that one student is a home study still six inclusive students are far more than the number defined by the law. The picture gets worse if we look at the ratio of inclusive and non-inclusive students. In the case of 7th grade inclusive students comprise approximately13% of the classroom while in the case of 4th grade inclusive students comprise approximately30% of the classroom. These are real violations of the implementation of the inclusive education defined by the law.

Another target of my observations were students themselves both inclusive and non-inclusive. I saw the interaction of students as one subjective factor leading to differentiating or

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[4] 5. Ներառական կրթություն իրականացնող հանրակրթական ուսումնական հաստատության միևնույն դասարանի համակազմում միաժամանակ կարող են ընդգրկվել կրթության առանձնահատուկ պայմանների կարիք ունեցող 2-3 երեխա՝ ըստ կրթական կարիքների բարդության, ընդ որում՝ դրանք կարող են լինել թե՛ միևնույն, թե՛ տարբեր կրթության առանձնահատուկ պայմանների կարիք ունեցող երեխաներ:("The Procedure on Implementation of Inclusive Education," 2010)

integration of disabled children among others in mainstream schools. For this aim the main patterns that I looked for were mutual help among inclusive and non-inclusive children, their relations both during the class time and breaks while playing, and patterns of differentiation among themselves. During the whole observation period the general occurrences that were highlighted was mutual help towards each other. In both classrooms children showed readiness to help each other both in oral tasks and written tests. The interesting pattern was when very often inclusive students help their non-inclusive peers during their classes. During the class a non-inclusive student was not ready for the lesson meanwhile Student 3 was ready and could answer. When the teacher noticed that Student 3 is trying to help his peer to learn, the teacher encouraged him for his action. As a result Student 3 could help his peer to answer the lesson. In another situation there was a math test writing class and a non-inclusive student who was sitting near Student 5 was helping him to write while he had not even finished his own test.

During this research I had a chance to conduct focus group discussions with the students of two classrooms observed. I used this tool to find out the attitude of students towards each other. It was important for me to understand if they differentiate themselves by their disabilities or feel isolated in one kind of group or other. During the discussions the main emphasis was put on the characteristics by which they describe each other and how well they know their peers.

I asked the students to describe their peers each time choosing either inclusive student or non-inclusive to detect the differences in their speech and use of words. When asking questions to describe their peers the students used characteristics like: 'clever boy', 'naughty boy', 'he always helps', 'kind girl' and when concerning to appearance they used: 'tall', 'beautiful', 'fat' and other wordings. Only once I heard an answer where the student referred to the disability of

his peer. When the question was how well they know their classmate and I showed Student 3 I got an answer from one student:

"I know him very well, I even know about his heart disease", with this he wanted to show that he knows his peers well.

The overall picture from observations and focus group discussion is that the children are more flexible in formation of their attitudes. They treat each other as equal and there is constant mutual help among them. When children learn in one classroom, in one school, when they play together they learn to live together. To support this assumption I got an interesting answer from teacher interviews. When asked about the challenges the teachers face one of them said:

"It is hard for us to accept inclusive education because we have grown up in a different society where we had not seen disabled people around us because they were isolated in special schools or even in their homes. For this generation who is learning together with disabled children in one classroom that will become a normal phenomenon to live together" Teacher.

To come to the last pattern of subjective factors I detected during my observations was sitting arrangements of students in the classrooms. During the pre-observation period I noticed that inclusive children are grouped in one row mainly. It became interesting if the children choose their seats themselves or the teachers set them. I found out that usually the teachers decide the seat of the children. In the case of 7th grade only one inclusive student (Student 10) was always sitting in the last table which gave a feeling of her segregation from full integration and interrelation with the rest of the students. While in the case of 4th grade all four inclusive students were sitting in one row one after another or side by side. Those inclusive students who were sitting among other students usually were freer in their relations with the rest of the class.

Being among others fostered more integrated relations. While being grouped in one row would create a picture of differentiated group in the classroom. I considered it as a subjective factor as key role of sitting arrangement is mainly teachers' choice and decision.

An interesting process was the food provision to inclusive students. Currently in Armenia both secondary and high schools do not provide food for students. There is now a project of starting to provide food for elementary students which is just in its initial period of realization (The Ministry of Education and Science of RA, 2014). But inclusive students are being provided with food every day. During the second break the students come to the inclusive department's room to take their food. This process causes contradictory reactions from both inclusive and non-inclusive students. In the case of inclusive students it sometimes becomes a reason of being differentiated. Sometimes the students forget to take their food and the teachers of inclusive department have to interrupt the following class to distribute the food among the students.

In the case of 4th grade it looked normal and the children were taking their food. What was interesting to observe in higher grade is that I noticed that the students usually do not go to take their food. I wondered if they also got food and told the teacher that I have noticed that the students of 7th grade do not receive food and was given the following answer:

"Actually they also receive food. But in higher classes the inclusive students feel ashamed to go and take their food. They do not want their peers to see that".

I have also noticed that at the same time the Student 10 was used to go to cafeteria and even had a debt for food there while she had opportunity to take food free of charge. When I asked the teacher about this she answered:

"Yes, I know. On one hand they are ashamed to take food and on the other they want to show their peers that they also can afford to buy food for themselves".

The other side of the issue is non-inclusive students. In lower grades they are interested why their peers get food and they do not. They start asking questions such as 'why do you get food?', 'what is inclusive?', 'why are you inclusive?' Actually among all students there are the ones from poor families who do not get anything. One of the teachers said while talking about the challenges they face:

"Before the school provided the food in a certain room where the inclusive children could go and eat. There were cases that non-inclusive students went and stole the food from the room".

During observations I noticed several times when inclusive students share their candies with their peers. On one hand one of the main principles of inclusive education is equality among all children on the other hand only one group of students in one school is privileged to get food. Therefore I find the issue of food providing contradictory until it would be possible to provide food for all the students.

The last objective factor that leaves its influence on the success of the program is the correspondence of its implementation to the law adopted. As we have already seen there are many deviations from the procedure set by the Ministry of Education and Science. The deviations exist both in terms of the quantity of the inclusive students in one classroom. They create more challenges for teachers and as a result most part of the burden falls on their shoulders as they are those key persons who play the main role in the success of the transition.

Main Challenges Discovered

With the help of teacher's interviews I tried to find out what are the main factors that lead to difficulties in teaching students with special needs. Here also I draw out general patterns which were mentioned by the teachers. The main challenges stated by them are:

- Absence of education regarding teaching students with special needs

- Teachers get no support and no trainings

- Stereotypes of parents

- Stereotypes in the society

- Existence of only one Assessment Centre

All teachers interviewed do not have any education in teaching students with special needs. They mentioned that currently the students of Pedagogical University study courses in teaching in inclusive classrooms. But those who have studied before that lack any education in the field. Therefore when talking about the way they teach in inclusive classrooms they rely on their own experience and skills. One of the teachers said:

"If we were provided with trainings or courses in teaching students with special needs that would be easier for us to overcome the barriers. May be we would change our approaches".

In the school where I carried out my research only social worker mentioned the trainings and conferences that she took part in. As a result she was the one who had the most positive attitude towards inclusive education. Nevertheless majority of the teachers expresses interest in future development of their professional skills with the help of trainings or courses which they believe would make their job easier. One of the interviewed teachers expressed unwillingness to take part in such trainings insisting on her point of view of inclusive education:

"What is this? How can a disabled child study with others? That's impossible. It affects the quality of overall classroom. If they want to integrate disabled children let them make a separate classroom where only special teachers will teach. And the children would have opportunity to play with their peers during the breaks".

When talking about the success stories in their practice the teachers mentioned that usually they gain any success only due to with their personal and professional skills.

"We had a student who was very uncontrollable. He was beating other peers. It was difficult to control him. We could gain some results only after three years. Now he is much better than before".

From this perspective because of the lack of professional knowledge the teachers build their methods based on own beliefs and assumptions. One teacher describing how they design an individual curriculum for inclusive student mentioned that they do it according to their own assumption to decide what a certain student should be able to learn and complete during a certain period.

Teachers value the role of parents in their work. The success depends on parents' cooperation. Even during observations I often came across expressions like 'you have such an attentive mother'. And the social worker brought several stories when they have more difficulties to gain success because of parents' indifferent attitude towards their children. Once when the social worker asked a parent not to be absent so often because it reflects on the results we may gain, the parent answered:

"She should be thankful even that I get up so early because of her and bring her to school".

Another difficulty in their work is parents' stereotypes. When social worker detects a student with difficulties and offers parents to take the child to the Assessment Centre and include

him/her in the inclusive program the parents usually resist. They are usually afraid of getting known among their neighbors that their child is an 'inclusive student'. The existence of only one Medical Psychological Pedagogical Assessment Centre is also preventing to get objective diagnosis.

"Sometimes we send the same child several times for the assessment because usually they do not correspond to reality. It happens when the child has mental disorder but he gets the diagnosis of psychological disorder".

Sometimes the parents prepare the child to pretend in order not to get the diagnosis of mental disorder to hide the disease from their neighborhood and relatives. The teachers face the challenges of stereotypes of not only inclusive students' parents' but also the parents of non-inclusive students. When an inclusive student is being allocated in a classroom where there was no inclusive student before they face the resistance of the parents of non-inclusive students. Sometimes they even frighten the school staff of complain to the principal. The school puts efforts in explaining and coming to common agreement.

Document Review

In this part of the study I will present and analyze three different reports where the issue of inclusive education in Armenia is referred to. This will help to look at situation from different points. Further they will support the findings from primary data collection.

In the country report (April 17[th,] 2014) for International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Armenia presents the situation of education of children with disabilities to answer the question about the steps taken to ensure availability of formal education for children with disabilities   ("Replies of Armenia to the list of issues," 2014).

In the report the answer of Armenia is mainly positive. The changes are presented in article 190 where the country states about the closure of half of the existed special schools by which 2000 students with disabilities are already involved in inclusive schools. In the scope of its coherent policy of expanding inclusive education five more special school are supposed to be closed during upcoming years.

By adopting the law "On Making Amendments to the Law of the Republic of Armenia On General Education" the country envisages transition to global inclusive education during which existing special schools are supposed to be restructured into 'pedagogical and psychological resource censers' to serve for inclusive education. An ongoing pilot project of transforming the Special School for Children into a Resource Centre will serve as a model for transformation of other special schools("Replies of Armenia to the list of issues," 2014). In the last article concerning the education of students with special needs the country presents the changes in the assessment of the children. The important development in this sphere is:

"New criteria and new toolkit was developed for the assessment of the educational needs of children, according to which transition is made from the medical model of special needs assessment to the social model, contributing to the activity and participation of children".

("Replies of Armenia to the list of issues," 2014, article 192)

In contrast to this report in his annual report of 2012 (*On the Activities of the RA Human Rights Defender and the Violations of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms in the Country During 2012*, 2013) Human Rights Defender of Armenia[5] Karen Andreasyan presenting the situation in the educational sphere along with variety of issues also addressed the issue of implementation of inclusive education in Armenia which referred more to the problems and challenges of the program. In the list of drawbacks and problems in the sphere of education one of the points refers to the implementation of inclusive education. Particularly he mentions the low number of inclusive schools and the obvious drawbacks during implementation. As a result only 8% of children with disabilities in Armenia could attend mainstream schools. The three-tier system of support for the children with special educational needs is not implemented yet in spite of the adoption of the law on amendments which envisages the transformation in the scope of inclusive education (*On the Activities of the RA Human Rights Defender and the Violations of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms in the Country During 2012*, 2013).

In another report of the Human Rights Defender of Armenia presented to the Pre-Sessional Working Group of the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Article

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[5] According to Article 1 of the Law of the Republic of Armenia "On Human Right Defender", Human Right Defender is an independent and unaltered official, who is charged with protecting human rights and freedoms that have been violated by state and local self-government bodies and officials thereof, based on the fundamental principles of lawfulness, social cohabitation, and social justice ("Law of RA on the Human Rights Defender - Information Center," n.d.).

13 also refers to the drawbacks of the inclusive education in Armenia. In the article besides above mentioned issues there is a reference to the physical facilitations of the schools providing inclusive education. It particularly states:

"Though inclusive education is implemented in many schools, not all of them are adequately adjusted for the needs of students with reduced mobility, visual and hearing impairments. For example, a rampant would be built in front f the school, which is cannot be used by a person on wheelchair on his/her own, the restrooms are not adjusted and there are no elevators to help them to move within the building".

(Human Rights Defender of Armenia, 2013, article 13)

The above discussed reports help to look at the program from differing points. On the one hand the government realizing reforms on the other hand there are still drawbacks during its implementation.

Discussion

When we put the information above together the overall picture of inclusive education in Armenia becomes more thorough. As we saw in the discussion of legislative framework for the program the country goes through the transition from dual system of education to the notion of Inclusive Education. The existing laws and procedures are not perfect, but they provide enough bases for successful transformation. They show the willingness of the country to accomplish the transformation towards inclusive education properly to provide education which is available and accessible for all children. Besides the government there are many non-governmental agencies that support the program and carry out different projects throughout the country.

However the main obstacles that we observed both in the primary data analysis and document analysis are rooted both in the legal and implementation levels of the program.

The schools do not follow the procedures set by the Ministry of Education in the implementation of the requirements for the program. Main challenges occur within the schools providing inclusive education. Both physical and professional capacity of the schools is not satisfactory. Schools make transition to inclusive schools with only minimal changes in building facilities and equipment to transform into an inclusive school, which does not make the school fully available for children with different disabilities and needs.

The process of transition also goes very slowly and with many violations. Teachers are not trained, and it becomes more difficult to teach in classrooms with 25-30 students where two or more students are those with special educational needs. Buildings are not adapted fully to satisfy the needs of children with disabilities and to provide safe environment. To provide barrier-free environment and accessible education for all students more improved infrastructure and equipments are needed.

To come back to the hypotheses stated for this research project the results show:

1. The first hypothesis which stated that teachers mainly do not have any education, experience and qualification of teaching students with disabilities is supported for the one school observed.

2. My second hypothesis stating that teachers do not have a clear view on the use of expressions and terminology seems to be true also.

3. As for the third hypothesis which says that teachers do not express willingness to receive further education on how to teach children with disabilities in inclusive settings classrooms, this hypothesis is rejected for the one school observed.

4. And the last hypothesis which says that non-inclusive students have difficulties in interaction with their inclusive peers also is rejected.

Conclusion

In spite of the efforts made by the country towards transition to inclusive education the transformation in Armenia goes painfully slowly. The timeline and scope of the transformation accomplished does not correspond to the timeline set by the law "On Making Amendments to the Law of the Republic of Armenia On General Education". The vision of full transition to inclusive education till 2015 is impossible as currently the number of inclusive schools is very low.

Because of the many NGOs involved in different programs of inclusive education it seems that there is no one leading vision of the government which will guide all the reforms in one direction and make them more consistent and permanent.

There is a sense that the transformation goes from up to bottom. The legal background exists, the country takes steps to transformation but the implementation is not being realized properly. Meanwhile the notion of transformation from bottom to top is absent. The schools are hardly ready for the transformation. The negative attitude towards inclusive education exists in the society. Henceforth the program faces challenges while being implemented

The developments within each school should lead to sustainable transition if process of change is consistent. The developments of the factors from the bottom may hinder or stimulate the success of the inclusive education. The lack of consciousness of inclusive education as quality education for all children rather than just an opportunity for children with special needs prevents the society and parents of non-inclusive students from supporting the transition. Because of that there is misperception among the parents towards inclusive education as beneficial for only disabled children.

The transition goes partially and it slows down the process of changing secondary schools into inclusive schools. Inconsistent and temporary reforms and interventions do not lead to systematic sustainable development of the program in the country. With consistent, systemic reforms which comprise all levels of governance, all parts of participants will make a potential to go through effective and sustainable process of transition. Relevant legislation alone would not help, regulations and funding are also important factors influencing inclusive education.

To conclude we can state that inclusion is not just systemic changes it is wider and encompasses changes in values, society, attitudes and philosophy of life. Inclusion is a way of living together in contrast to segregation. Instead of avoiding the challenges should be met.

Recommendations:

- The schools as well as the teaching staff should be prepared to changes before accepting inclusive students
- With the help of successful models of schools of transition to inclusive education foster attitudinal change in society
- Implement awareness-raising activities among the parents of not only children with disabilities but also parents of usual students
- Consistent follow-up in implementation process to prevent violation of the law and procedures adopted by the government

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Appendix

Appendix 1

Teacher interview questions

1. This school became an 'inclusive' school. How do you understand that? What does that mean for you? What has been changed? Describe the transformation.

2. Do you have students with special needs in your classes? If yes, how long do you teach them? Tell me a little about him/her.

3. Can you talk a little bit about your experience in teaching students who have special needs?

4. Have you faced negative responses to inclusion? From whom?

5. Do you feel prepared (have you had education) in teaching students who have special needs? (university-level; professional development workshops, trainings, etc.)

6. Would you describe what kind of support you receive to assist you in working with a student with disabilities?

7. What do you consider as your successes with a student? How do you assess you work?

8. Tell about the challenges you faced? How do you meet those challenges?

9. How do you share your experience among the teachers of your school and from other schools?

10. Tell about the ways you usually work with student's parents? Have you ever faced challenges while working with Student's parents? Please, tell about that. How do you usually meet challenges?

If there is anything that you would like to add or say that I have not asked please feel free to share.