

Education transition for children with disabilities in Armenia

Research report

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Abbreviations

ALMP	active labour market programmes
BoH	Bridge of Hope
DPO	disabled people's organization
EENET	Enabling Education Network
EU	European Union
IEP	individual educational plan
MoES	Ministry of Education and Science
NIE	National Institute of Education
NGO	non-governmental organization
OSF	Open Society Foundations
SESA	State Employment Service Agency
SEN	special educational needs
UNCRPD	United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

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Executive summary

The research carried out by Bridge of Hope was a valuable opportunity to investigate in more depth some important stages in children's development – their transition through different education levels. This is a topic that is receiving attention in Armenia for the first time. Transition is important for all children, and is of particular importance for children with disabilities and special educational needs (SEN). Transition for youth (particularly those with disabilities and SEN) from schooling to professional/vocational education is also challenging in many ways, and is impacting their future livelihood opportunities. The lack of inclusive support for people with disabilities in accessing work and work-related training was clearly highlighted.

The research, carried out with a diverse range of education stakeholders through interviews and focus groups, highlighted clearly that the issue of transition should be brought onto the agenda of policy-makers and should be a particular focus of attention for implementers at all levels in the education system. The research also revealed that, although there are not yet any regulations regarding transition, many specialists and teachers are already finding very encouraging solutions to support learners when they move to new education settings. If shared, these ideas could support better service provision for children and youth with disabilities. Lack of information seems the primary obstacle for promoting best practice ideas on transition. The vital role of parents in developing individual education plans (IEPs) and plans for transition was recognised by some research participants, but parents currently are not routinely facilitated to engage in these processes.

Information about a child's development and performance, as well as about proven methods for working effectively with the child, is not being transferred between kindergartens and primary schools. The lack of regulation and requirement means this information transfer has never been viewed as important for ensuring consistency in a child's development and education. A key step iterated by the research participants is for all kindergartens to become inclusive, and to have some specialist staff who can co-ordinate special needs support and communicate this information, and information about the child's strengths, to parents and the child's primary school when they are ready to graduate.

Transfer of information from primary classes to basic school is done on an ad hoc basis, but again there are no special regulations or procedures to ensure this happens. It is expected that specialists can refer to the information documented in the IEPs if needed, but beyond this there are no specific plans for supporting the child's transition to different levels.

In Armenia, children transfer from one grade to another based on their academic performance or based on targets defined in their IEPs (if they are following a curriculum for children with SEN). Exams used during certain transition stages (especially at higher levels) are not routinely or effectively being adapted to support children with disabilities and SEN to access the next level of education. Transition of children with disabilities and SEN to high school or to a vocational education setting is particularly challenging, especially in remote areas. Many high schools/vocational institutions feel unable to offer options to children with disabilities

and SEN due to limited funding and a lack of specialists to advise/support the teachers and learners. This means children with disabilities and SEN in Armenia often end their education at the age of 15 or 16, without having the possibility of obtaining specific skills for entering the labour market and thus living independently.

Transition of information about IEPs, children's strengths and needs, etc, from school-to-school, should become mandatory practice for teaching staff and specialists. Greater efforts are needed to make high school, vocational education and higher/university education accessible to learners with disabilities and SEN, through improving existing/exam systems, improving the transfer of information about students and improving the general accessibility and support in these institutions. Programmes to support labour market engagement need to be adapted to ensure people with disabilities are able to participate and benefit. All of these issues and the right of people with disabilities to access life-long learning should be placed clearly on the advocacy agendas for disabled people's organisations and non-government organisations.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background to the research

Bridge of Hope (BoH) is a non-government organization (NGO) which seeks to protect the rights and dignity of children and youth with disabilities and their families, and strives to support their social inclusion. BoH promotes educational inclusion for children and youth with disabilities and other educational special needs, and supports the development of independent living skills among children with disabilities. BoH also advocates for changes in policies, practices, ideas and beliefs to uphold the rights of persons with disabilities.

In March 2015, BoH submitted a paper to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) Committee on key issues relating to inclusive education and education for persons with disabilities in Armenia. The submission was part of the Committee's process of reviewing Article 24 on education rights, and developing a General Comment to support better implementation of the Article.

BoH's submission highlighted the important progressive legislative steps that have been taken to embed inclusive education into mainstream education in Armenia, and the legal changes that are still needed to boost inclusion across other education sectors. The submission stressed the importance of working towards overall improvements in the quality of education and embedding inclusive education throughout all teachers training, as fundamental building blocks for a more inclusive system. In preparing this submission to the Committee, it became apparent that little is currently documented about educational transition for children with disabilities in Armenia. The discussions at the Committee's Day of General Discussion on Article 24 also highlighted that transition is a vital issue in achieving Article 24 that has so far received insufficient attention in terms of both policy and action.

The research presented in this report was therefore conducted with the aim of preparing information on educational transition for learners with disabilities, which could be submitted to subsequent stages of the UNCRPD Article 24 General Comment process. The research findings are also intended to support the development of advocacy messages and tools for BoH and other NGOs and disabled person's organisations (DPOs) to use within Armenia, to campaign for better transition support and/or policies for children with disabilities and special educational needs, in particular for children with intellectual difficulties.

This report presents the results of a one-off piece of research into policies and existing practices in relation to the educational transition of children with disabilities and special educational needs (SEN) and their opportunities for life-long education and employment. The report provides detailed analysis of findings from focus group discussions and face-to-face interviews with parents of children with disabilities, teachers and special educators from inclusive mainstream schools and kindergartens, as well as lecturers, experts and specialists from colleges, vocational education institutions and universities, field experts and policy-makers. The voices of

children and youth were heard through separate activities and group discussions. Special attention was paid to including children with intellectual difficulties.

1.2. Research methodology

The research took place in 10 schools that practise inclusive education. They were selected based on their willingness to participate in the survey and because they were considered active and experienced with inclusion, and are also partnering with Bridge of Hope (BoH) and Medical Psychological Pedagogical Assessment Center. There are very few kindergartens practising inclusive education, so all were invited to participate in the research. The selected vocational institutions and colleges were those that had participated in the European Union programme on inclusive education. Universities known to have students with disabilities were also selected. Finally, well-known experts on inclusive education were invited to participate.

The research methodology included:

- **focus group discussions** with teaching staff and specialists from schools and kindergartens that practise inclusive education; parents of children with disabilities of pre-school and school age; lecturers and specialists from universities, colleges and vocational education institutions; and students with disabilities who were studying or had graduated from the universities and colleges. The participants of the focus groups generally found the discussions to be friendly and they appreciated the opportunity for experience sharing about real practices, which they said is not always the case from trainings.
- **face-to-face interviews** with sector policy developers, policy implementers, experts and donor community representatives;
- **participatory activities** with children with disabilities of pre-school and school age. Several techniques suggested by EENET were used during this activity work, including showing photographs of different scenes and asking children to say what they saw in the photos.
- **desk research** around country legislation and international best practice.

In total 10 focus group discussions and 10 face-to-face interviews were conducted. The facilitators used a common methodological guide developed in advance, and questionnaires adjusted for each particular group or interviewee. Each focus group involved 8 to 10 participants. Overall, the research featured the views of 85 adults and 20 children.

A review of legislation looked at revisions of main sector laws (Law on Education, Law on Mainstream Education, Law on Pre-school Education, Law on Specialized and Vocational Education, Law on Postgraduate and Specialized Education, Law on State Program for Education Development between 2011-2015) and at Government resolutions, regulations and Ministers' orders that regulate transition from one level of education to another.

A rapid **review of international documentation** by EENET revealed the key transition challenges being faced globally, as well as practical ideas for addressing effective, inclusive educational transition. This is presented in Section 2 of this report, with short case studies in Annex 4.

2. Introduction to transition issues

Transition is the change or movement from one concept, position, stage, state or subject to another. In education, the term transition usually refers to three main events: when children move a) from home or pre-school provision to primary school, b) from primary school to secondary school, and c) from secondary school to tertiary education (e.g. vocational training, college, university). Children also experience a number of other important transitions during their education, such as moving, usually annually, from one class/grade to the next within the same school, or changing schools when their family moves to live in a different place.

All children face potentially disruptive or upsetting transition periods during their education, but for some children, such as those with disabilities and/or special educational needs, the changes can be more challenging and the children may need more support.

2.1. Challenges during transition

During an education transition period, children with disabilities move from familiar surroundings to unfamiliar ones. They may experience emotional, social, behavioural, developmental or academic challenges that can adversely affect their school life. The rapid literature review revealed various educational changes that children experience around the world, including:

- **Spending the day away from home for the first time:** For *all* children, the transition from home to their first education experience – whether in a pre-school setting such as a nursery school, kindergarten or other early childhood development (ECD) setting, or a primary school – is a very important time in their lives, when they and their parents experience a range of emotions. Children with disabilities are often, understandably, over-protected by their parents, making their first move out of home and into education even more disruptive or frightening.
- **School buildings and facilities:** The new education setting may be much larger and organized in a different way to what children are used to. They may experience difficulties getting to know the new 'rules and routines' and navigating their way around the new school environment, especially if they have mobility or visual impairments, or experience learning difficulties.
- **New neighbourhood:** The new school may be in a different area or community. Children may have to travel from home each day into an unfamiliar place. This may be both physically challenging and emotionally frightening, especially for children with disabilities who may not be used to moving around independently outside their home or immediate neighbourhood.
- **Class schedules:** Children may move from being taught in one room for most of the day (e.g. in pre-school or primary school) to changing classrooms several times a day for different lessons (e.g. in secondary school). This may create

further mobility challenges and also requires a new set of organizational and time-keeping skills.

- **Different teachers:** In pre-school and primary school, children usually have one teacher (sometimes with additional adult helpers, e.g. teaching assistants in class). However, when they move to secondary and tertiary education they often have various different subject teachers. Each teacher may have their own teaching styles, classroom rules and expectations for the children to get used to. This may be particularly challenging for children with intellectual impairments, or for other children with disabilities who may lack self-confidence.
- **Educational requirements:** Each new school/college will have different academic expectations that may challenge children. They may need to acquire new skills and learn at a different pace than in their previous school.
- **Peer groups:** When children move to a new school they meet lots of children they do not know. This can affect their behaviour, self-confidence, self-perceptions, sense of belonging, existing friendships and existing social groups. Making new friends can be particularly challenging for children with disabilities, especially if they lack self-confidence, or if the other children in the class/school are not aware of disability issues or are repeating prejudiced views they have heard from adults.
- **Self-reliance:** As children grow older and experience successive education transitions, they will be expected to become more self-reliant and take more responsibility with each class/school move. For instance, they will be expected to be organized, meet deadlines and plan ahead. There may be less support available from teachers, parents or other adults with each level of transition, even though some children with disabilities may still need significant amounts of physical or emotional support with every transition.
- **Family involvement:** Transition is a time of significant change, not only for a child but also for their family members. Family members may be concerned about the challenges ahead, anxious about the new adults and children their child will meet, yet excited and hopeful about their child's new learning experiences. In pre-school and primary school, parents may have regular, even daily contact with their child's teachers (though this is not the case everywhere). However, in secondary and tertiary education parental and guardian involvement in school activities and communication with the school about their children's performance, behaviour or needs may decrease – often because the schools/colleges do not have systems for parental engagement. Yet parents of children with disabilities may need to maintain higher levels of engagement with the school, throughout all education levels.
- **Personal pressures:** During transition children may feel anxious, insecure, scared, confused, frustrated, and even overwhelmed. As a consequence they may exhibit increased behavioural problems, absenteeism or lower academic performance. This is usually temporary until the children adjust to their new routines and become successfully included into their new school. However,

children with disabilities may experience these pressures for longer and need more support to overcome them.

2.2. Making a positive transition

The following strategies can help children with disabilities to transition successfully:

- **Transition staff:** All education settings can have designated staff – ‘liaison workers’ – who manage the transition of *all* children between learning phases. These staff should be available in the school that children are about to leave, and in the school they are going to join. Such staff will be in contact with their counterparts in the ‘old or ‘new’ school. They will share information vital to the successful transition and inclusion of children with disabilities into their new educational setting. Ideally, these staff will receive training to enable them to carry out these responsibilities. The work of these staff members ideally should not stop once children have moved schools – staff from the ‘old’ school need to be available to give support or advice to staff in the ‘new’ school, at least during the first term after the move.
- **Children’s specific needs:** Staff in the current education setting need to spend time identifying any emotional, social, behavioural, developmental or academic issues that the new school/college should be aware of. They should share individual education plans (IEPs), or other similar documents, with the liaison worker in the new school. They can help to ensure the new school is aware of the child’s preferred teaching and learning styles, abilities and learning needs, and requirements for equipment (e.g. assistive devices), access (transport to/from school and movement within school), teaching support (e.g. assistants in the classroom), dietary needs, and vital health needs relating to epilepsy, diabetes, or other medical conditions. They also need to share records of performance levels, absences/lateness, behaviour, friendships and socialisation, along with information on appropriate support that has been used, or could be used by the new school to address problems in these areas.
- **IEPs:** Staff responsible for a child’s IEP should ensure that any amendments have been agreed and added to the document prior to the child moving school. This should take place a few months before the move. For instance, in the UK, the IEP annual review needs to be completed before mid-February for children with disabilities who are moving to their new school in September (i.e. six months before the move). The report of the last IEP review meeting should also be shared with the new school to ensure that any additional needs of the child are known and understood.
- **Home and school visits:** Staff who are responsible for transition in the current and new school should be in contact months before any transition occurs. This collaboration between education settings helps create a sense of continuity and belonging for the children. Designated transition staff members from the new school (e.g. teacher(s) who will work with the incoming children with disabilities in the near future) should meet with the child and his/her family (parents or

guardians and extended family) before transition to discuss the child's needs. This could also include a home visit. The transition staff should liaise with and also, if possible, visit the current school.

- **Trial/transition days:** All children benefit from having a chance to visit their new school before the transition happens. Children with disabilities in particular need 'transition days', when they visit their new school **with friends** to orientate themselves with the new surroundings and the new staff. This also gives their new teachers and support staff a chance to meet them and identify any additional needs. Family members should also be invited to participate in these orientation days, to meet staff and learn more about the systems of the new school.
- **Staff training:** Relevant staff in the child's new school should ideally receive training to help them with any specific issues that have been identified during the transition preparation stage. This will help ensure that the move is as stress-free as possible, for both the child with disabilities and their new teacher(s).

2.2. Education transition around the world

The global drive for universal primary education has seen increasing numbers of children, including those with disabilities, attending primary education. However, in many countries, the majority of children with disabilities struggle to progress to, and subsequently succeed in, secondary and tertiary education. Often this is because they are not supported in their transition to these phases. They either do not move to the next phase at all, or they drop out after the move because their new teachers do not have the teaching skills, knowledge and understanding to include them in lessons.¹ In addition, while primary school provision has grown, the number of secondary schools has not always increased at the same pace. In some countries, all children are competing for too few secondary school places.² Added to this, secondary education is not free in many countries (while primary often is). Families of children with disabilities are often among the poorest in a community, unable to afford the costs of secondary education.

Some international organizations are beginning to recognize the need to support education transition. UNICEF identifies the importance of children's transition to school ("children's readiness for school; schools' readiness for children; and the readiness of families and communities to help children make the transition to school")³ and acknowledges girls' transition to secondary education.⁴ The transition of other excluded groups, such as children with disabilities, has not necessarily received so much of the organization's attention. The UK's Department for International Development is also highlighting transition by initiating research on the theme so as to build "a greater understanding of the trajectory and transitions of

¹ Global Campaign for Education, 2014, '*Send all my friends to school*', p.12. See www.sendmyfriend.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/GCE-UK-report-Send-ALL-My-Friends-to-School-2014.pdf accessed 08/07/15.

² Obande, H. (2004) 'Post-primary Education, Kenya'. See www.eenet.org.uk/resources/eenet_newsletter/news8/page6.php

³ See www.unicef.org/education/bege_61627.html accessed 08/07/15.

⁴ See www.unicef.org/education/bege_70640.html accessed 08/07/15.

students through the schooling cycle”,⁵ although they also only explicitly mention girls’ transition, not transition for children with disabilities.

International NGOs, such as Save the Children UK, are increasingly turning their attention towards transition: “support at transition periods – into primary school, into secondary school – is particularly important and can make a significant difference to subsequent attainment”.⁶ The Global Campaign for Education has also drawn attention to the fact that children with disabilities are “less likely than their non-disabled peers to remain in school and transition to the next grade”.⁷ Nevertheless, there remains a clear need for more research, policy change and direct action – from governments, school communities and the international community – to support the successful transition of children with disabilities through all levels of education.

⁵ DFID (2013), Education Position Paper, ‘*Improving learning, expanding opportunities*’, p. 21. See www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/225715/Education_Position_Paper_July_2013.pdf accessed 08/07/15.

⁶ Save the Children UK, 2009, ‘*Helping families support children’s success at school*’, p.20. See www.savethechildren.org.uk/sites/default/files/docs/Helping_Families_Review_of_Research_Evidence_%285%29_1.pdf accessed 08/07/15.

⁷ Global Campaign for Education, 2012, ‘*Equity and inclusion for all in education*’, p. 9. See www.savethechildren.org.uk/sites/default/files/docs/Equity_and_Inclusion_for_All_in_Education.pdf accessed 08/07/15.

3. Findings

The findings summarised here were elicited from the various focus group discussions, interviews and desk research. They offer a snapshot of opinions and experiences related to transition between grades/schools for children with disabilities and SEN.

Armenia's education levels

Grades 1–4 are primary education

Grades 5–9 are basic education

Grades 1–9 are also known as 'general basic education'.

Currently these 9 grades are compulsory. Students with SEN may move to vocational education after Grade 9.

Grades 10–12 are high school/senior secondary education.

A student who completes all 12 grades has completed 'full secondary education'.

From 2017, all 12 years of education will be mandatory.

After Grade 12, students may move to vocational or tertiary/higher education (e.g. university).

3.1. Policy and legislative context regarding transition between schools/grades

The legal regulation of transition from one level of education to another was discussed with the Mainstream Education Department of the Ministry of Education and Science (MoES) of Armenia. Key points revealed included:

3.1.1. Regulation regarding tests, exams, curricula

The Law on Mainstream Education regulates the requirements and conditions for enrolment in and transition between mainstream education levels, as well as graduation rules. Children are not expected to complete any tests for admission to primary school nor for primary level graduation.

Children with SEN and disabilities can study at mainstream schools regardless of the level of their learning difficulty. Mainstream education offers three types of curricula: 'general', 'special' and 'specialized'. Children with intellectual disabilities follow the special curricula, while gifted children use the specialized curricula. Children with SEN and disabilities undergo medical-psychological-pedagogical assessments. Each child receives a certificate which recommends the curriculum most appropriate for them. Parents decide whether their child should study at a mainstream or special school.

General knowledge tests are conducted through school testing assignments. These tests are used to measure the quality of education rather than the individual performance of students.

To complete basic education, students must pass exams (tests of their individual knowledge) and receive a graduation certificate showing their performance results. For children with SEN and disabilities the process may differ, especially if the child has an intellectual disability. The progress and performance of these children is assessed based on targets set within their IEPs. They receive the basic school graduation certificate but their marks refer to their IEP implementation. This regulation allows them to pass to the next level of education: high school or vocational education.

“One thing is regulations and legal provisions, the other is their practical application. If we say the legislation allows access of children with SEN to this level of education, it does not mean that we also protect that right: participation of children with SEN and disabilities in high schools and vocational education and in tertiary level alike, is very low and this is alarming and means that the necessary adjustments are not in place, the curricula is not adaptable and accessibility is not maintained. So legal regulations are half of the way: we still need to pass a longer path in this direction.” (MoES representative)

Regulations state that children with disabilities can enrol in vocational or tertiary education institutions even if they pass the previous level with lower marks. Moreover, their education is free of charge in both these levels of education. However, children with SEN can only enter vocational education if they choose faculties with less popular professions/specializations, where the number of applicants is small and they could enter with their graduation certificate, without passing exams.

From 2015, the high school curriculum for children with SEN became interdisciplinary. For instance, instead of separate subjects such as Biology, Physics and Chemistry the children now study Natural Sciences; instead of studying different history disciplines, they study Social Sciences, and so on. By graduation, it is often still unclear what skills and capacities these children have and what jobs they could do in the labour market. They only receive a graduation certificate which does not tell a potential employer about the child's skills and capacities.

‘Improving Education’, the new project funded by the World Bank, aims to address omissions from previous projects. For instance, the new project is expected to review the whole curriculum and the criteria of the state education system and disciplines, with the aim of compiling the requirements of the new Law on Mainstream Education and universal inclusive education principles.

3.1.2. Regulation regarding transition

Despite relatively good progress in fulfilling the education rights of children with disabilities and SEN at primary and basic education levels, there is less support for the transition of children from kindergarten to primary school, between school grades and from secondary education to vocational and/or tertiary education levels. This causes breaks in the chain of parental and state investment in children's education.

Although transferring information about a child from one school to the next is essential for successfully organizing his/her education, this has never been subject

to regulation. As such, it has never been practised, unless active parents of children with SEN demand information and then pass it to the next school's specialists.

Children with SEN and intellectual disabilities are often only studying at mainstream schools to give them an opportunity to communicate with peers and develop communication and interpersonal skills. There is often no continuity for their further education and preparation for the labour market.

“It is important for a child to find his/her place and role within community, so consistency and continuity in his/her education should be regulated. This is true not only for a child with disabilities or SEN but for all children and we are facing challenges in this regards” (school teacher).

A possible solution to transition challenges suggested by a MoES representative is to move away from disciplinary education to competency-based education, but this is still not on the policy agenda in Armenia.

The representative of the Education Programs Implementation Unit⁸ informed us that the new World Bank funded project will also address transition issues at all levels of education. The project is expected to conduct a nationwide needs assessment survey. This will collect information to inform revisions to the education curriculum and criteria and national framework of education qualifications.

3.1.3. Regulation regarding pre-school and transition to primary school

Pre-school education is not mandatory in Armenia and is not funded through the state budget. The MoES regulates education and care standards, staff requirements and teaching criteria at pre-school level, but there is no specific regulation regarding children with SEN.

“If we put regulations or requirements, we should also provide relevant funding, while kindergartens are under municipality funding and municipalities are free to establish their rules and regulations for kindergartens within the frame of Law on pre-school education” (MoES representative)

Several donor organizations and international NGOs (e.g. UNICEF, World Vision, USAID, Save the Children, Mission East, Step by Step, Open Society Foundations) have suggested different models for including children with SEN and disabilities in early childhood education. Unfortunately, the local authorities do not always continue funding these pilot projects, due to limited resources. Yet in the rare cases that kindergartens do accept children with SEN or disabilities, and manage to hire a special educator or psychologist, the children demonstrate greater achievements and better performance later at school. Unfortunately, information on methods used and the child's development progress is not given by the kindergarten to parents or to the next school, as there are no requirements to do this.

The draft strategy for the development of pre-school education between 2016 and 2024 foresees relevant activities and regulations for increasing both general

⁸ This Unit is funded by World Bank and reports to the Minister of Education and Science.

enrolment in pre-schools and enrolment rates for children with SEN and disabilities. The World Bank is the main donor supporting pre-school education in Armenia, through the construction of new pre-school groups within mainstream schools, teaching of personnel and developing regulations. However, no specific regulation is devoted to early years education and enrolment of children with SEN and disabilities, and many new settings constructed across Armenia still do not consider accessibility issues.

3.2. Information from stakeholders

3.2.1. The role of teachers and schools in supporting effective transition

School-level practice and teacher training were discussed with representatives from the National Institute of Education (NIE). Focus group discussions were also held with teachers from the mainstream schools that practise inclusive education and with specialists from the multi-disciplinary teams.



Focus group discussion with school teachers

Teacher training

The primary role of the NIE is arranging regular in-service training for teachers. These training modules currently do not cover inclusive education, and thus also do not look at supporting the transition of children with disabilities or SEN between levels of education. However, the lack of focus on inclusive education is expected to change following amendments to the Law on Mainstream Education and the Government's commitment to introduce inclusive education in all schools.

Inclusive education was part of the in-service training modules a couple of years ago. However, this topic was not included within new modules developed as part of the World Bank-funded project to improve in-service training.⁹ This example illustrates the inconsistency and miscommunication between different divisions within the MoES, NIE and donor agencies.

The amendments to the Law on Mainstream Education suggest introducing a new level of service in schools: teachers' assistants. These assistants will be the main support providers for children with SEN and disabilities. However, all teachers –

⁹ 'Education Quality and Relevance' programme

'master teachers' (class teachers) and subject teachers – will still be expected to have awareness of inclusive education and use inclusive communication methods. The Law and job descriptions for these teachers' assistants do not envisage a role for them in supporting transition between classes/grades, only supporting participation of learners in class.

Information sharing

The promotion of information sharing between teachers and special educators is vital for inclusive education and for smooth transition of children between classes/schools. Participants in the focus groups recognized the importance of information sharing and mentioned some of the mechanisms that already exist.

“If the school director is responsible and the team is taking responsibility to provide quality teaching and services, the communication is maintained. The responsibility should be there, within each person, and this [personal commitment/sense of responsibility] is not something that can be taught to teachers” (NIE expert).

The Law highlights the importance of having methodological units within the schools – for each grade and for key subjects. Methodological units collect best practices inside or outside the school and share these with all teachers in their particular subject (e.g. Maths, Biology, Russian, English, Armenian etc).

“If the school team is responsible then [methodological] units are functional, if not, nothing could promote better practice” (NIE specialist).

Promoting teachers was noted by research respondents as one way of encouraging teachers to take more responsibility for communication and sharing information.

Under the new Law, the IEP is an official document that should follow the assessed child to each new class. The information in the IEP should be built on each year and tracked by specialists and teachers (parents are not currently officially involved). The information can also be transferred to high school or college after the child graduates from the basic school. However, there seems to be little evidence that the IEP is being used in this way to support transition.

Funding the development and sharing of inclusive practice

NIE is responsible for training teachers but not for monitoring if or how teachers implement what they have learned, especially at kindergarten level. The local authorities generally do not request quality teacher training services from NIE and do not allocate funding for inclusive education development in kindergartens. Although local decision-makers and authorities accept that inclusive education is important for developing the education system, they do not allocate the necessary funding and resources for kindergartens.

A few years ago schools had inclusive education coordinators who were responsible for information sharing, teacher training and keeping control over the quality of inclusive education efforts. These positions have since been eliminated in favour of school's Deputy Director for education quality, who have instead been given the responsibility of maintaining communication between specialists, teachers and parents.

Connecting different education levels

In Tavush marz (province) there has been a pilot programme linking vocational education with mainstream education. This was implemented with BoH support and Mission East Armenia funding. The pilot has shown that the vocational education institutions now know how to admit and support children with SEN and disabilities. This is a model that could be replicated nationwide. Currently most mainstream schools do not give consideration to what happens to their student with SEN when they graduate, and do not link with vocational institutions (such tasks are seen as extra work needing extra funds).

3.2.2. Parents' views on transition-related issues

Parents who participated in the discussions shared their experiences of selecting kindergartens and schools for their children. Kindergartens closest to home or the local community were selected. The majority selected community schools or the schools that they or their husbands had attended (the majority of participating parents were women). Only one parent represented a kindergarten that practises inclusive education.

One father agreed to participate in the discussion, which was very unusual; mothers and sometimes grandmothers are the main caretakers of children in Armenia and fathers rarely agree to engage in such meetings.

Parents' participation in the transition of their children through education levels was discussed in relation to:

- Admission to kindergarten;
- Graduation and admission to primary school;
- Transition from primary to basic school;
- Graduation from basic school and transition to high school.



Focus group discussion with parents of kindergarten children

Overall views on inclusive education

The schools represented by the parents were practising inclusive education and providing specialized support to children. The parents of younger children were more satisfied with the services and attitudes, while parents of children from middle grades more often reported a lack of proper attention or communication. They all agreed that the support provided at school by multidisciplinary teams has a significant positive impact on their children's development, and they recognized the notable progress in inclusive education provision.

"My child started writing without any support at 5th grade! You know what that means to me. I believe the new teacher encouraged her to be independent, her attention and demands made my daughter believe in her capacities and take action" (mother of a 10-year-old girl with motor function problems).

During the discussion, parents unexpectedly revealed that they perceive inclusive education to be a project funded by a separate national NGO or international organization. They lacked information that the additional funding for their children is paid from the state budget. Parents of kindergarten children also thought that inclusive education is provided in separate classes only for children with SEN and disabilities. The discussions highlighted a need to address the lack of understanding around inclusive education provision in general, if there is to be more success in achieving smooth transition for children between different levels of inclusive provision.

Individual education plans

Kindergartens are not developing IEPs and parents had not heard about this approach. Only one parent mentioned that their kindergarten practises inclusive education. In that school, the special educator is working with the parent's child, and the parent is aware of an individual developmental plan which her child will take to the next school.

The majority of parents with children at school were aware of IEPs. They knew that teachers conduct observations in early September and then start developing the IEPs. However, none of the parents had participated in IEP development, they were just invited to read and sign it after it had already been developed. The parents could make changes to an IEP if they didn't agree with any task or assignment, but they were not aware of the IEP development process and of the cooperation among school teachers and the multidisciplinary team. Further, parents noted that they were not always informed about their child's achievements and progress, and they participated only minimally in IEP implementation and evaluation.

Relationships between parents and teachers / specialists

Parents reported that some schools maintain strong ties with parents, and specialists share details of activities and progress after the lessons. Parents said they wanted to know more about the everyday work that specialists are doing with their children. Some were happy with the additional homework the specialists were giving, and some complained about the lack of information on the progress of their child.

Education transition for children with disabilities in Armenia

“I understand what it means working with children, when the teacher was changed. The new one was giving daily assignments to me and I am happy with my informed participation in my child’s development” (mother of child with intellectual disability).

Parents were not familiar with the **information flow within the school**, (the sharing of information among special educators and regular teachers, and with parents), but believed that there should be such communication about the academic and communication progress of their children.

“I am very thankful to the teacher of Mathematics. She recognized that my son has advanced capacities and worked with me to keep his interest by giving additional assignments both at school and at home, directing me how to work on the assignments, and he has had very good achievements. So this is team work, I believe” (mother of an autistic boy).

Kindergarten enrolment process

The majority of parents of pre-school age children complained about the stressful process of admission to kindergarten for their children:

“They were pushing my child from my hands and did not pay attention on her cry. They said in 15 days she will get used to it and will not cry. I was requesting to start a gradual transition, preparing the child day-by-day to get used to the new teacher and peers and environment. But they said it is not permitted and you may bring infection. This way my child is facing so many stresses. I believe if there were a psychologist at the kindergarten, she would help to shape the situation” (parent).

Many parents agreed that all kindergartens should have at least a speech therapist and psychologist in the team to help children.

“It is hard to pay individual attention to each child when there are 30-40 kids in a group and there is only one educator and one nurse” (parent).

The father present at the discussion had a slightly different view:

“The child could easily adapt to the new environment if a triangle of parent-educator-child is working smoothly. No psychologist is needed” (parent).

Transferring information from kindergarten to school

Most parents thought that the brief profiles provided by kindergartens would not help the schools to understand their children. They felt that their children were growing and their behaviour was changing, so the profile the kindergarten submitted to the school may quickly become (or already be) out of date. The parents believed that school observations and communication with parents was the best way of collecting information on children.

Continuation of education

The major concern of parents was the continuation of education for their children, especially for those with intellectual disabilities. The majority did not know of any opportunities for their children to continue education after graduation. They suggested having access to a list of possible options for children with SEN.

“We all put a lot of effort into children’s development. They get encouraged by successes and get used to being in society. I am so afraid what will happen to him after we finish the basic school at age of 15. Where should we go, what should we do?” (mother of an 11-year-old boy with intellectual disability).

Transferring information from basic school to the next levels

Parents faced difficulties in responding to the question about the need to transfer information on the child from their basic school to the high school or vocational education setting. The benefit or value of such information was not clear to them, and they did not believe such practice was necessary. They felt that there should be opportunities for their children to continue with education and that the new setting should collect the information they need from parents and/or from the children.

Greater involvement of parents in the education process of their children might help them to recognize what types of information should be shared between the different levels of education or between schools.

Parents’ other concerns

Many parents were still concerned about negative attitudes among parents of children without disabilities. They found this particularly worrying during parents meetings when:

“They look at us so unfriendly as if my child is hampering the learning of their children”.

“They are using very rude words when talking about our children and it is translated into the attitudes of their children as well”.

However, such attitudes only seem to be an issue within schools that initiated inclusive education recently and which still need to conduct seminars with parents to change their perceptions. As one participant from the group discussion with specialists highlighted:

“The Government introduced inclusive education at a very rapid pace, but our society was not ready for that, and we need to spend hours and hours explaining to the other parents about the benefits of inclusive education and the rights of these children to education”.

One mother of a child with mobility issues expressed her concern regarding the heavy school bags:

“I was helping my son to carry the heavy school bag up to grade 5, but now he is feeling shame that his mother is carrying his bag. He did not want me to come to school, he said he can do it, but he cannot carry heavy things. So I make copies of all text-books and leave the original ones in the class and use copies at home. It will be good if the school could support two sets of textbooks for such children”.

3.2.3. Communication for transition

Various challenges and suggestions were raised during the research regarding the issue of effective communication between stakeholders, to support a smoother transition of children between levels of education.

Education transition for children with disabilities in Armenia

The representative from the Medical Psychological Pedagogical Assessment Center noted that practices observed during study tours in EU countries gave her and representatives from MoES and NIE a chance to see the benefits of strong and smooth cooperation and communication between teachers. Such cooperation and communication would improve transition processes.

“This is another precondition of success and quality of education. It was not just talking or discussing, they were communicating through lesson observations, sharing practical experiences, etc.”

Regarding transition support for children from kindergartens to school, parents suggested arranging excursions for children to the school to show them the school environment, how students are learning and responding during lessons, what the teachers look like, and what interesting things they can learn and see at school. They felt this would reduce children’s fear and give them confidence. In addition, the parents suggested allowing parents and children to get to know their future master/class teachers before the children enrol in the school.

It was also suggested that basic schools should have a list of high schools and colleges that admit students with SEN and disabilities, so that options can be shared and discussed with students and their parents.

An interesting model of communicating about transition was revealed during the focus group with university lecturers. Jointly with the high schools of Yerevan, the lecturers arranged a meeting with students and a tour of the university, explaining the structure and faculties. They also conducted a seminar on creative thinking to introduce potential students to the kind of learning approaches used in university.

The NIE is promoting communication through its training of in-service teachers on inclusive pedagogy and its mentoring visits to schools that have received training. Within its trainings, information communication is an important topic.¹⁰ Mentoring visits to schools last year focused on IEP implementation and information communication between specialists and teaching staff. The feedback received suggested that the trainings have had an impact, however:

“We also understand that we need to change the content and format of the IEP and make it a good tool for information communication. Unfortunately we are not even thinking of preparing transition plans” (NIE expert).

During an interview, an NIE expert explained that many teachers and special educators complain that it is hard to fill in the IEP. They must write the information manually and space is limited. NIE suggested filling it electronically. However, schools cannot do this as there is no statement in the regulations to say that IEPs can be created in soft (electronic) copy. NIE’s expert strongly felt that all information regarding a child’s academic progress, methods used and services received should be filled in electronically, maintained during the academic year and passed to next

¹⁰ Over the years the focus of NIE’s training has changed. An initial phase of inclusive education development focused on integrating children with SEN into mainstream schools. A second reform promoted inclusive education as the right of the child with disabilities to study within the same class as his/her peers. Now inclusive education is seen as education for all.

class teacher. The IEP is a strong document for communicating information during transition, but is not being used to its full potential.

3.2.4. Specialist support and role models

The issue of transition from kindergarten to school and between school levels was discussed with specialists from school multi-disciplinary teams: special educators, speech therapists and psychologists. The focus group gave specialists an opportunity to share and learn from each other's experiences, which was especially valuable for schools with a short history of inclusive education. A face-to-face interview was also conducted with a representative of the Medical Psychological Pedagogical Assessment Center.



Focus group discussion with specialists

Positive examples

The representative from the Medical Psychological Pedagogical Assessment Center highlighted the importance of developing inclusive education in kindergartens so as to identify and address development problems as early as possible, and help children have a more positive start to schooling:

“Intervention to child development should be started from early childhood. Today we are starting assessment of special educational needs only at school entrance, which means that we are losing time. ...If we start inclusive education at kindergarten and the specialists start working with children earlier, many issues like speech, communication, behaviour, motor functions, etc, will be solved or become less severe at school.”

The focus group discussion with specialists revealed several positive cases of **kindergarten specialists following up children with disabilities**, and arranging meetings with school personnel and special educators to share details about the child's development and to monitor his/her progress during the first grade. There were other examples of school specialist teams visiting kindergartens, once parents have presented their applications for admission and the school learns that a child has special educational needs. The specialists reportedly pay several visits to the kindergarten, observe the child in her/his usual environment and talk to kindergarten specialists. They also invite the parents and child to visit the school, thus preparing them for when they start in September. Another example given was of schools

visiting kindergartens that practise inclusive education to present the school's services to parents of children with SEN, and invite them to enrol at the school.



'First day at school' drawn by a kindergarten graduate

These examples represent a new culture in the education system of Armenia that has not been voiced or shared prior to this study. Such a culture of communication and sharing could be promoted by MoES decision-makers and also regulated and supported through legislation.

Transition between school grades and levels was also viewed by the specialists as needing particular attention: it is a challenge especially for children with behavioural problems. One educator explained how, at their school, the new class teacher visited a child with aggressive behaviour almost every day during the summer holidays. With the parents' support the teacher got the child used to her so that in September, when the child came to school, he was ready to accept the change in teaching staff.

The special educator from a school with two years of inclusive education experience also explained about the school director's assignment to spend the summer holidays working with a third grade child with very aggressive behaviour. Regular visits to the child's home were made by the special educators and social educators (who deal with social issues affecting students) so as to prepare him, with his parents, for the new academic year.

Working with parents

Parents are an invaluable source of information and can be advisers for children's support needs. However, participants noted that it is not always easy to communicate with parents. It can be difficult to help them understand that their child has special educational needs and requires an assessment, from which the staff can develop an IEP to be used as the basis for specialized support and for monitoring learning progress. Some educators therefore arrange open classes to demonstrate the work of special teachers, and some conduct regular meetings to share and discuss the challenges and successes of children. Sometimes the reason for resistance is the requirement of documentation: parents don't want problems

documented in the child's individual file for fear of future labelling when they move to new classes or schools. This may be a particular problem in higher classes, even though many children need more psychological support at this age, as they move into adolescence.

Fathers are less active in communicating with schools, and sometimes are more resistant to including children in inclusive education programmes. The special educators highlighted that they need to find ways to persuade parents by proving the benefits of specialized support for their child's development. There are also parents who accept the specialized support and augment the specialists' work by continuing with activities at home. Sometimes, however, parents' extra care hinders or slows the progress of the child. The teams of special educators are trying to address all these challenges carefully, with regular and intensive communication with parents and peers. The teams of special educators work carefully with parents, teachers and children to gradually improve performance and increase the child's participation.

More information needed

All special educators agreed that they need more information about each child at the start of the academic year, so as to build the child-focused strategy of SEN support. They felt that any written information from kindergartens on the child's development can be invaluable support to them. They felt that kindergartens can also transfer short profiles of the children, or the school can send a request for that information. Parents were also acknowledged as a source of information, although felt to be not always objective.

According to Government regulations on transitioning from one school to another, the 'old' school should provide the individual profiles of students together with their basic school completion certificate. However, it seems that this requirement is not followed and the high schools are not requesting the students' profiles. The representative from the Medical Psychological Pedagogical Assessment Center agreed that a school should provide a short profile of the child when he/she is transitioning to a higher level or to another school. However, she believed that new documents should not be introduced as this would increase the document burden on teachers, which would not be welcomed. She nevertheless noted that the lack of transition plans or communication sheets is huge gap in keeping consistency in a child's education.

The issue of inter-sectoral information sharing for inclusion and transition was raised by the representative from the Medical Psychological Pedagogical Assessment Center:

"The main problem in our country is the poor cooperation between the Government agencies that work with children – healthcare, education and social services. They are providing services to children and do not share the information. The same with the IEP, it is not shared when the child is transferring to another school or the school is not receiving information from other specialists who worked with child prior to their current school".

Research participants noted that a key obstacle the school specialists face at the start of the academic year is resistance and negative language from parents of children without SEN; they don't want a child with SEN or disabilities sitting next to

their child. By the end of the year this barrier to developing a class community has usually been broken down, but it causes challenges and delays at the start of the year. The specialists felt that public information and awareness needs to be expanded, and inclusive education needs to be explained more before the academic year starts. The schools could arrange meetings with all parents to explain the school's inclusive policy and values, and ask them to avoid using negative labels for any children.

Special educators also explained that they face resistance from older pedagogues. These staff often feel that they used to teach and work with students with learning difficulties before the school formally introduced inclusive education; they feel they were using inclusive methods but were not calling it inclusive pedagogy. Each year such resistance is decreasing. Regular joint seminars have contributed to general understanding of students' needs and of the work conducted by special educators.

"It is important to break the idea of 'my student' – 'your student'. We all are members of the school community and are doing the same work, we are helping regular teachers in their efforts to educate all children. Thanks to God the negative approach now is gradually disappearing and an inclusive approach to teachers' cooperation is becoming a usual practice".

Focus group participants commented that schools should have more printed posters and/or booklets on inclusive education practice, and guides to help them arrange transition for students. They commented that parents of children with SEN and disabilities who have already succeeded and are studying at universities or are working, could also help parents of newly enrolled students with disabilities and SEN by sharing the challenges and experiences they went through in order to achieve good results.

Assessment and transition

At the end of the academic year, students take tests which are crucial for determining their marks of academic progress. The tests on each subject and for every grade are received from the Knowledge Testing Center of MoES. Special educators explained their concerns about the lack of proper regulation of the arrangements for support to children with SEN and disabilities. Some felt that the teachers and the team of specialists should develop adapted tests based on IEP goals and measure the progress of each child according to his/her IEP goals. Others believed that the general tests should be adapted to the needs of students with SEN. Some thought that special educators should be present during the tests to support the children with SEN; not to help with writing the tests or answering the questions but helping them to concentrate their attention and or to understand the wording of a question. However, as this part is not regulated yet, some teachers view such support from specialists as an unfair intervention compared to students without SEN. Some teachers believe that children with SEN should not participate in testing or pass exams. This was considered unacceptable by teachers, who said that the huge amount of work conducted by educators and children should be subject to assessment.

Transition to and support in higher grades

Research participants noted that the work of specialists becomes more difficult in the higher classes, as children feel uncomfortable with being singled out for separate

work or observations by the specialists. More 'hidden' work needs to be done with students in graduation classes, so that they don't resist the help and miss out on support that they still need.

The special educators who participated in the focus group discussion were experienced at working with children from primary classes and lower levels of basic school. During the discussion they expressed their thoughts, but not actual experience, of how transition from basic school to high school for children with SEN and disabilities should be supported. Some believed that IEPs should be transferred to the high school, others disagreed, since IEPs do not provide information on the actual work done and some specialists or teachers may fill them in incorrectly. Some believed that a transition plan is needed. They did not necessarily understand what this would mean in practice, but felt that high schools should have detailed information on the students.

Many educators did not understand how inclusive education could be organized at high school level. They all agreed that there is huge gap in information, and that teachers and specialists from basic and high schools need to have round table discussions to communicate information about students with SEN and disabilities.

3.2.5. The child's voice regarding inclusion and transition



Participatory drawing activity with children during a focus group

Kindergarten children

Participatory drawing activities were carried out with groups of older children, with and without disabilities, who will soon graduate from kindergarten. The activities revealed that, regardless of their needs and difficulties, children's expectations from school were very similar: they wanted to make more friends, study well and obtain new skills. Only two out of ten children used dark (black) colours when drawing their future at school.

The majority explained their 'expectations of school' art work as follows: they are going to school and the day is bright, they meet friends and the surrounding is full of flowers. The boys drew female friends, the girls still drew just girls as friends. They were expecting that the teacher would be kind and love them, and that they will have

fun, and learn writing and reading. They explained that school is close to their home and grandmother's home, and their neighbourhood friends will visit them at schools. One child with mobility issues drew the school with three floors and said that he would be strong enough to walk there and use the stairs. One child represented his school bag with all his toys and things he likes.

The drawing activity suggested that, on the whole, the children felt positively about their upcoming transition from kindergarten to school.

School children

The school students who took part in the participatory activities were primarily students with mild intellectual and physical problems. All of them felt comfortable at school, enjoyed having many friends, and were not much concerned about bullying or did not face much name-calling.



Participatory activities with children during a focus group

They mostly said they enjoy playing together, breaks between lessons and out-of-school contact with peers. They were proud of having their friends, who always support them when they are in need, by helping to carry a bag, or supporting them when moving between floors (stairs).

“My friend helped me during the test writing and I got a good mark” (boy ages 10).

The children did not worry much about their academic achievements. Depending on the teacher, some were more interested in Mathematics, some liked History and Geography. Young children liked their master/class teacher.

One child with mobility issues was unhappy that he was not allowed to participate in the physical training classes and had to spend that time with the psychologist. In general, however, the children said they liked the special educators who work with them and they liked the individual lessons.

“I am playing there games which other children did not play, and later I am telling what I have done” (girl aged 9).

Older children (aged 11-12) expressed discomfort when they had to spend time separately with special educators. Group work was considered enjoyable.

Children who had transitioned from primary classes to basic school said that their special educators had practised the tests with them and they could pass the exams. They all felt that the special educators would always help them if they faced any difficulty during lessons.

During the photo elicitation activities (see 'Methodology'), the photo depicting both children with and without disabilities was described as: "happy children, they are having friendship". None of the participating children pointed to difference between the children in the photo. One photo of a child with disabilities sitting alone under a tree was considered to show a child who was "tired and having a rest". None of the children saw any negativity behind the child being alone.

The discussion among school children was very open and positive. This was especially encouraging since none of the invited children knew each other already, and they did not know the moderators and were unfamiliar with the school premises where the discussion was held.

3.3. A closer look at specific transition stages

3.3.1. Kindergarten to primary transition



Child's drawing of "How I see my first day at school"

Pre-school education is not mandatory in Armenia and thus is not funded through the state budget. Municipal authorities are in charge of funding and managing the functioning of kindergartens. MoES is the main government agency authorized to develop and monitor the pre-school education law, regulations, standards and criteria, as well as education programme. Children enter kindergarten at the age of 3 and graduate at the age of 6. There are very few nurseries that accept toddlers from the age of one.



Focus group discussion with kindergarten children

Kindergartens are free only in capital Yerevan. The monthly cost per child varies from 6 to 10 USD¹¹ for municipal kindergartens, and may be as expensive as 150 USD or more per month for private ones. Even 6 USD is not affordable for poor families, and enrolment rates are very low for remote areas. The total national enrolment varies from 27% to 35%, and only in Yerevan does it reach almost 50%. In Yerevan the municipal kindergartens are free of charge, therefore the average number of children per group is 35-40, compared to 28 per group as the national average. One educator and one nurse look after the children in one group.

The focus group discussion with educators from kindergartens that are and are not practising inclusive education revealed that preparation of children for school is their primary objective.

“It is important to teach children to sit and listen, otherwise they cannot get used to school’s routine and requirements.”

Some kindergartens have managed to obtain additional funding to hire a special educator and /or social educator who takes care of children with disabilities and SEN. However, this practice is not common yet and enrolment of children with disabilities and SEN is low. Inclusive kindergartens seem to maintain very strong ties with inclusive community schools and recommend to parents of children with disabilities and SEN which school to choose. However, transition issues, in particular special efforts and/or provisions for preparing information exchanges between kindergarten and school, are not routinely specifically addressed.¹²

¹¹ Poverty levels are high in Armenia. In 2013, 32% of the general population and almost 65% of families with 3 and more children were poor (according to a poverty threshold equivalent to about 96USD per month per adult).

¹² In 2009 the UNICEF Report on “Evaluation of Inclusive Education Policies and Programs in Armenia” stated that “In Pre-Schools, the greatest concern with regards to the implementation of Inclusive Education is the lack of transitional services to ensure that a child cared for in an Inclusive Pre-School is enrolled and educated in an Inclusive School upon entering 1st grade.”



Focus group discussion with kindergarten educators

Transition to a new school environment is stressful for every child and can be particularly stressful for children with special needs. If information about the child's activities and progress is not communicated properly, either through parents or directly with the schools' specialists, then the work already done may be ignored and the new school may start again from the beginning. This could make the transition more stressful for the child, and block his/her full participation.

Many of the kindergarten educators who participated in this study were concerned that mainstream school teachers might view 'their' children with SEN as incapable of studying.

Exchange of experiences between kindergartens is crucial for communicating best practice, and this exchange should include information about effectively supporting children's inclusive transition to school. The focus groups revealed that community inclusive kindergartens send invitations to community schools asking them to participate in the graduation matinee (morning performance). This is a good opportunity for school specialists to see the children who will soon join their school, in their natural environment. It is an opportunity to help the specialists start to plan for the preparations they need to make, especially if there are children with mobility issues.

Another primary class teacher explained how she collects information about the history, achievements and needs of children with SEN and/or disabilities from parents and other specialists who have worked with them before, to build up her strategy of communicating with the child.

"Like other good initiatives, this approach of communicating with the kindergarten's specialists is an individual invention. If the teacher is really devoted to her work and is interested in the progress of a child she will be working with, she keeps communication with kindergarten to collect necessary information."

Many school teachers believed that the inclusive kindergartens have done a lot of work preparing children for school. However, many children with SEN and disabilities do not attend kindergartens, so when their parents bring them to school their developmental delays can be very significant.

Education transition for children with disabilities in Armenia

“If Government is interested in quality of inclusive education at schools, they should think ahead and open at least one inclusive kindergarten in each district and support early development of children with SEN” (school teacher).

Schools that have all levels of education (12 years), including pre-school,¹³ have established some very encouraging practices. The primary school multi-disciplinary team maintains very strong ties and contacts with the pre-school educators and peers, regularly visit their meetings and matinees, conduct observations and document information on every child, especially those with SEN and disabilities. This helps to ensure consistency of work done in pre-school level and ease the child’s transition. Unfortunately, if the parents decide to move their child to a different school, this wealth of information is not passed to the parents and the other school usually doesn’t request that information.

“The schools did not know that they can request information and they did not know what to request!”

The Government¹⁴ provides a list of documents necessary for school admission. This does not request any information on the child’s developmental history either from kindergartens or from other specialists. Children with SEN and disabilities may present the SEN Assessment Certificate if they have passed the assessment before entering the school, if their parents take this initiative.

3.3.2. Primary to secondary

Information is transferred easily from primary classes to basic school. Teachers believed that every school develops its own approach following the best interests of children and pedagogues alike. The above-mentioned Government regulation suggests that each child who is certified as having SEN should have a personal file, where all information on his/her development and progress is collected, including the IEP. Some devoted head teachers write very carefully about their students, and the head teacher of the middle classes (grades 4 to 9) should get acquainted with this documentation and learn about the students. However, experience suggests that face-to-face communication and information transition between the heads of primary and basic schools is the most effective method of reducing the stress of transition, both for students and for teaching staff.

The participants of the focus group with school teachers provided interesting and encouraging examples from their practice of sharing information and experiences of working with different children. Many of them also value communication with parents and partnering with them and the child’s new head teacher during transition from primary to basic school. This cooperation is especially valuable and important for students with SEN and disabilities, and the inclusive schools are able to learn from their own experiences.

¹³ These schools are named Education Complex

¹⁴ GoA Resolution No 861_N of 22.07.2011 on Admission, transition and dismissal of students to and from education institutions of RA

“It is almost two years since our school had joined the inclusive education system. We did not have graduates yet from primary to middle classes, but our team has already agreed that we will hold a round table discussion with head teachers and subject teachers in late August to share our recommendations for working with different students with different SEN.”

Participants stressed that there should not be competition among the head teachers of primary classes and basic classes. Also, if students want to keep closer links with their first teacher that should be welcomed and used to help the new teacher find solutions for working with the child. They also noted that IEPs should be filled in more carefully, and be the only source for information transmission among teachers from different grades and disciplines. Many teachers did not know how to fill in the IEP correctly and the teaching and learning methods used were not always recorded. Some pointed out that targets defined in IEPs are sometimes for six months, without details of the smaller achievements needed for the child to reach these targets.

Teachers expressed concerns about the upper classes of the basic school: children are growing, their behaviour and interests are changing, parents pay less attention to their everyday progress at school, and it is becoming more difficult to communicate with them. It becomes more difficult to keep students in the inclusive education program¹⁵ and to continue the specialists' work with them, even though teachers believe they still need extra support to improve performance. The stigma of being labelled as having SEN in higher classes is the main obstacle in continuing to provide support services to students. Fathers of girl students are the main opponents of SEN assessments of their children, perhaps for fear that an assessment may affect the girl's marriage prospects.

Contact between the school and parents reduces in the upper classes; parents' meetings are the only way schools interact with parents at this level, and these meetings are not enough for developing a common approach for a child's development. Despite these challenges, many teachers did not agree that there is a need for developing a separate transition plan for the students moving between the school levels. They only felt such a plan would be useful for transferring student information from basic school to high school and/or vocational educational institution.

3.3.3. Basic to high school or vocational

Government regulation does not require the transfer of students' files from basic school to high school. Students have to pass the exams, receive their graduation certificate, choose a high school and curricula stream¹⁶ and apply. There are no admission exams for state-funded high schools nor for vocational educational institutions. Education of students with SEN and disabilities does not differ from their peers without SEN and disabilities. Twelve years education will become mandatory from 2017, which means that all children should enter either high school or vocational/specialized educational institutions after finishing basic school.

¹⁵ The students need to pass the SEN assessment at Medical Psychological Pedagogical Assessment Center and receive a certificate of SEN, which will give the school additional funding to provide specialist support to the student.

¹⁶ There are three streams in high school curricula: Natural Sciences, Humanitarian Sciences and Handicraft.

Education transition for children with disabilities in Armenia

Teachers in the focus group discussion were concerned about the regulation of graduation exams at basic school level. Children with SEN and disabilities who have a certificate of SEN, are not allowed to pass regular exams regardless of their academic achievements:

“I had a student with autistic syndrome who was the best, who understands the language structures and compositions. He could easily answer any grammar question, yet he was not allowed to pass the Armenian language test with his peers. He was asked to pass the easy test for special education curricula and even though he had no mistakes he was marked 5 (out of 10) which is not fair. He did not understand the meaning of that mark, as he was happy that he had passed the exam and received a gift from his parents, but I feel that something is wrong with this approach” (basic school teacher).

There are no special criteria for assessing academic achievements of students with SEN and disabilities, especially those with intellectual difficulties. Teachers believe that they should put high marks if the student demonstrates good progress and achievement towards his/her IEP targets and that they should “act based on our own moral sense”.

“If my student with SEN demonstrates good achievement, answers correctly or performs unexpectedly well I put 9 [out of 10]. The other children welcome that, sometimes they even applaud the small achievements of their peer with disabilities, as they understand what amount of efforts stands behind that achievement, and they will never dispute that mark. That inspired me to tears”.

The Government has regulations for arranging the exams of students with visual and hearing impairments, as well as testing students with intellectual disabilities. However, teachers in the focus group believed that the exams

“should be developed based on IEPs and by teachers, as the aim is to assess the child’s capacity and abilities rather showing incapability, and as teachers are part of the state, there should be trust towards their work”.

There were teachers in the group who believed children with physical and intellectual disabilities could not study at high school and could not graduate and continue their education at universities. These children, they felt, should learn crafts so as to earn money. But the majority did not share this view, and strongly advocated that all children can study if accessibility issues are solved.

Overall, high schools are not yet ready to accept children with disabilities. The teachers had few success stories of children who had graduated basic school and continued their education and started earning an income. They believed that close cooperation between parents and schools could support children with SEN and disabilities to live independently. They noted that good stories that do exist need to be aired through the media to encourage society to believe in these children and break the stereotypes.

Teachers felt that their schools should have a list of vocational education institutions that can provide education to children with SEN and disabilities, and that the schools should keep in contact with the children to support their transition. However, there

are no regulations yet to make this mandatory and there is huge gap in information on what possibilities the students may have after graduation from basic schools.

3.3.4. Post-school and life-long education

Post-school education and life-long learning related issues were discussed during the focus group discussions with lecturers from colleges, vocational educational institutions and universities.

Colleges and vocational institutions

Positive examples

“We had a brilliant girl student with mobility issues and the whole class was helping her to move - carrying her chair from one floor to another... The strong support of peers helped her to pass the exams and enter university. She is now studying and has good achievements... Attitudes are powerful; even if the schools are not accessible these children could succeed...” (high school teacher).

The focus group with colleges and vocational education institutions included representatives from state and non-state institutions, as well as national and regional level colleges. Some had experience of working with students with SEN and disabilities. A few were participating at the USAID-funded LIFE project implemented by Save the Children, and had improved the physical accessibility of their premises.

“This year we have two graduates with disabilities: one has completed the accounting course with excellence and the other will soon finish the culinary course. We have adapted premises within the LIFE project, although we have not yet adjusted the curriculum” (lecturer from vocational educational institution).

Participants felt some positive developments are underway to help students progress to higher or vocational education. For instance, many of the participants had been trained and could recognize the reasonable adjustments needed for different types of disability, and understood that students should not be viewed on the basis of their disabilities. However, still there is long way to go.

Challenges

Participants said that inclusive education was strongly supported at mainstream schools, yet no interventions or programmes have been designed to introduce inclusive education into vocational and/or higher education. There are now no legal barriers to students with disabilities studying at these institutions. The discriminatory rule in the social medical examination regulation¹⁷ was recently removed, so now all children can choose and enrol in education institutions if they apply and pass the exams.

Focus group participants discussed four major barriers hindering students with disabilities from transitioning into professional / vocational education:

¹⁷ The government resolution on Social and Medical Examination included an item that stated that SMEC could decide where and what course a person with disabilities could study, and could prevent them from enrolling in university.

Education transition for children with disabilities in Armenia

- physical accessibility
- teaching style and communication
- curriculum adjustment
- attitudinal barriers.

A common challenge is reportedly the negative attitudes of students towards their peers with disabilities and widespread bullying, despite efforts from pedagogues to build positive relationships.

Study options for students with disabilities

Reportedly, colleges and vocational institutions involved in the LIFE project have contacted DPOs and posted announcements that they are ready to accept students with disabilities and SEN.

The focus group participants shared experiences of how they started to admit students with disabilities. There was a debate on directing the students regarding which specialty to choose. Some participants were confident that students should choose for themselves, and the institution should just support their education, while others believed that more guidance regarding choice of courses is important and should be based on the student's capacities. Ultimately, the majority agreed that pedagogues in higher/vocational colleges should learn to identify students' strengths and access their knowledge and capacity.

“State academic criteria is the guidance and plan for educators not for the students. Educators are responsible for achieving its requirements, not the students, so educators should find solutions to help a diverse audience to learn and absorb the curriculum. If the educator did not reach his/her targets it is not the student's fault, but the educator's” (vocational education expert interview).

Without guidance from regulations, colleges and vocational institutions have tried to adapt to the different needs of students, with some success. The focus group participants mentioned that sometimes they work longer hours or give more detailed explanations to students with SEN and disabilities. Some reported that the college provides a wide range of options so students can try to find the most appropriate sector for them (woodwork, hair dressing, cooking, construction, etc.). They have videos showing the achievements of their students.

Information about the students

No assessment of needs is conducted and no communication is maintained with previous educators to learn more about the students with SEN. The IEP is not communicated to the new college/vocational institution, and only medical diagnoses (which do not give useful information for educators) are attached to students' files. If the enrolment of students with SEN and disabilities is done within an NGO project, then information and methods are suggested by the NGO team. SEN assessments conducted by Medical Pedagogical Psychological Assessment centre are not used by colleges.

Employment opportunities

Participants commented that after graduation, students with SEN and disabilities cannot find jobs, since employers are not willing to hire them.

“If private sector employers were clever enough they could understand the value of our students, they could turn the surroundings of their businesses to blossoming gardens if they hire our students with disabilities, who learn and do it perfectly” (college representative).

Suggestions from focus group participants

Focus group participants made some suggestions for improving the inclusion of students with SEN and disabilities:

- Provide opportunities for institutions to apply for specialized support, for instance to request a sign language interpreter or a specialist in braille;
- Increase the level of understanding of disability and communication with students with disabilities among educators through a series of trainings;
- Create clearly defined plans and curricula for each student with disabilities, and help them to find a job;
- Provide the institutions with adaptive devices and technologies;
- Develop government regulation to improve job opportunities for students with disabilities after they graduate from college.

“All my students, regardless of whether they are with or without disabilities, are working. You know why? Because from the first day of my contact with them I set up a target that you should be compatible in the labour market. This is your goal and this is the outcome of our joint efforts” (vocational education expert interview).

Universities

“I was surprised to learn that our student with blindness is doing manicures, and was doing it at the special school for blind students. This was a shock for me and I understand how much we had to learn from them” (lecturer).

“I am proud that I have an experience of working with students with disabilities. I had two students who were blind, but demonstrated very advanced learning capacities and performance. I also understand that they did not expect extra care from us; rather such care is harming them. What they are requesting is equal opportunities” (lecturer from Pedagogical University).

The focus group with university lecturers brought together 10 specialists from 5 Armenian universities. State Pedagogical University and Eurasia University were also partnering with the EU Tempus-funded Aspire programme, which is supporting inclusive education practices at higher education level.

Legal context

The legal framework provides free access to education for students with disabilities if they have passed the entry exams. The regulation also states that the university should provide reasonable conditions for students with disabilities.¹⁸

¹⁸ Government resolution on Rules of Admission to State and Non-State Higher Educational Institutions

Understanding students with disabilities

The lecturers agreed that for better transition into higher education, the admission commissions should be trained and supported to understand disability issues, and the types of support and conditions needed for different applicants. Communication with students with disabilities should be properly handled, as should the regular semester testing systems of universities.

Technology

The lack of advanced information technologies was considered alarming. Participants felt that if the Government is adopting inclusion then it is important also to introduce the supportive technologies. Knowledge of supportive devices was also reported to be very low, although everyone understood that such support could help students with disabilities to enrol and study more easily in higher education.

Accessibility

There are no physically accessible universities in Armenia, except the American University of Armenia. A recent accessibility survey among universities showed that Armenian universities are lacking inclusive policies, facilities and academic programmes for students with disabilities. This potentially creates the perception that there are certain professions that persons with disabilities cannot attain, although in general students understand the careers that are genuinely not feasible for them.

Support for students

The practice of having an Access Officer is being introduced by the Tempus-funded Aspire Project. Participants were concerned about whether the lecturers would manage to check students' texts in braille or be able to understand sign language after a one-off training. It seems that the purpose of the project was establishing access to the university rather than teaching lecturers.

One participant highlighted that universities need to include support teams, like schools do. Pedagogical University has the necessary specialists and could support other faculties if they need access to braille or sign language specialists, but they expressed concern over how to arrange such support correctly.

Study and career options and transition to employment

Focus group participants again raised the issue of what happens when students leave the university – transition to work is a challenge as the labour market is not ready to accept people with disabilities. Many highlighted, however, that universities should still be ready to accept these students.

Lecturers stated that they did not see children with SEN and disabilities in high schools so felt they are not transitioning to that level as a precursor to coming to university. They felt that parents are not aware that their children could study at university. One lecturer explained that their university invites students from high schools to come and find out what their study options are. Recently they had students from the special school for children with hearing impairments. One of their mothers subsequently asked the university to confirm that her deaf daughter would not be able to study at the university. She was surprised when staff told her that her daughter's impairment is not an obstacle; if the girl could pass the exams she could

study at the university. The mother “left with a happy smile and satisfaction”. Nevertheless, all participants agreed that prejudice and stereotypes remain widespread in society, so that people with disabilities are not viewed as Armenia’s future independent workers or specialists.

Career orientation and professional orientation at high schools can support students to understand professions and choose which university to attend. Students with disabilities should be supported to select courses and thus a profession they can work in following graduation. This needs to be matched with efforts to educate society to accept and support employees with disabilities.

Universities are inviting businesses to attend graduations and choose students for internships or employment. However, internships for students with disabilities are not properly arranged. Universities lack information on what support the students with disabilities need during these practicums. Some believed that the issue should be regulated by the Government while others felt that universities should not wait for state regulation but simply act and support their students.

Students’ views

The most lively discussion of this study was with students with disabilities or those who had graduated and were working/or searching for a job.



Focus group discussion with youth with disabilities

Challenges with studying

Participants explained that, at graduation from secondary education, students with SEN and disabilities face the following problems:

- Lack of information about which institutions have adapted conditions to support the enrolment of students with disabilities;
- Lack of clarity about admission regulations for students with SEN and disability. For instance, students with visual and hearing impairments should apply ahead to the Admission Commission and request special arrangements for the examination days (e.g. a support person to read the texts and or sign language interpretation);
- Inclusive schools should apply ahead to the Knowledge Testing Center and inform them about students with SEN who are going to apply and pass the

Unified exams. However, the majority of schools are not aware of that regulation;

- Timing of examinations: for example, students with cerebral palsy need extra time for moving and writing which is not considered yet;
- Place of examinations: usually exams are arranged on the second floors of universities which are almost never accessible for students with mobility impairments;
- Communication difficulties with the Admission Commission;
- Transport availability: only 10 buses in Yerevan were adjusted to the needs of people with disabilities recently. However, during heavy traffic these buses are so full that wheelchair user can't get on. Students with disabilities from outside Yerevan have to use two transportation means to get to the University or use a taxi, which is an additional burden on the family budget.

Data on the number of applicants to universities reflects these challenges: only three students with disabilities (visual and hearing) applied to Admission Commission this year, and last year there were none. The Minister of Education and Science was reportedly surprised by the small number of applicants with disabilities but said there had been no complaints about admission barriers.¹⁹

Study and career options

The youth focus group participants felt that options for professional orientation are limited, as a result of society's stereotypes such as "If you have mobility problems you cannot work as a journalist!" Some suggested having a specialist in schools who can support students with disabilities with professional orientation. Due to the challenges listed above, many students with disabilities prefer to apply for distance learning courses, but this can limit their options for professions, as not all faculties and institutions provide distance learning.

Support while studying

Solutions are often found once the student with disabilities is enrolled. Parents are the first supporters (reading documents for them, assisting with mobility, etc.). Peers also support students with their daily routines and lecturers make ad hoc adjustments. However, this depends on the setting. There are no regulations or procedures for education institutions to provide professional support to students with disabilities.

"I had the chance to study in two universities and faced totally different attitudes: at Pedagogical University I was always nicely directed to the place I did not know... at Yerevan State University I was told that I had to find my way alone" (blind student).

Students' suggestions for improved support

- Universities should have an access officer who liaises between the applicant/student with disabilities and teaching staff to arrange necessary adaptations.
- Seminars on disability issues should be arranged for all lecturers and staff members of educational institutions nationwide, to help them gain elementary

¹⁹ Interview with a DPO: <http://disabilityinfo.am/3194/>

knowledge of communication with persons with disabilities and adaptation solutions. This should be done regardless of whether the institutions currently had students with disabilities or not.

3.3.5. Professional orientation and employment

Methodological Center for Professional Orientation

In 2012 the Youth Center for Professional Orientation was transformed into the Methodological Center for Professional Orientation. Its primary goal is to provide methodological support and guidance on professional orientation, education and vocational training, and public awareness. The changes sought to increase the efficiency of services and provide the wider public with information on life-long learning.

The Center identifies a child's strengths and increases his/her skills in information searching and analysis – essential career skills. Its website provides a wide range of services, but it is not accessible to children with special needs.

The Center is working closely with schools.

“The schools with multidisciplinary teams and especially with social educators, maintain consistency in applying the knowledge obtained during our trainings and demonstrate very positive results sharing with students the career options” (Centre director).

An interview with the Center's director revealed that the extra care provided by some parents of children with disabilities creates a bigger barrier to their development and career options than other environmental factors.

“We trained a child with intellectual disability and recorded very unexpected results as he clearly understands the construction materials and construction techniques. But when we found a job for him, agreed with the employer, his mother did not allow him to go to work, saying that she cannot allow him to go out of the home alone and use public transport. She preferred her son to do nothing but stay with her at home!”

It is therefore important to work with parents of children with disabilities to address their fears.

The Center has participated in the USAID-funded Livelihood Improvement through Fostered Employment (LIFE) project run by Save the Children. It introduced several modules for the vocational sector, including modules adjusted for students with disabilities, with the aim of increasing their self-esteem, their communication skills, orientation in professions and occupations.

It appears that the Center is introducing Access Officers and education institutions career orientation specialists and career advisors to work with students with disabilities. These personnel will conduct the assessments and develop individual plans and communicate with teaching staff regarding the best teaching approach for each student.

The Centre is training the colleges every two years. They are also maintaining contact with employers and with Small and Medium Size Enterprises Development NGO. There are many interesting initiatives, all still in pilot stages and not yet announced publicly or regulated.

During the interview it became clear that the Centre staff also need additional training on disability issues, and on understanding disability and communication with people with disabilities.

State Employment Services Agency

Employment opportunities for youth and people with disabilities were discussed with the representative of the State Employment Services Agency (SESA) of Armenia. The Government plan for active labour market programmes (ALMP) for 2014 provided directions regarding the Government's support to persons with disabilities (such citizens are within the category "persons not compatible in labour market of Armenia"). The goal of the programme is to increase their labour market participation through training to increase knowledge and capacity. Only 5% of beneficiaries approached by the programme received jobs at the end.²⁰

"There are many problems that we had to solve, but many interesting and new initiatives are also underway. In close cooperation with the Medical Social Expertize Commission we have initiated and now have a program for reasonable adjustments at the work places for people with disabilities, which should be recommended in the individual rehabilitation plans. Another problem we are facing is the small number of people with disabilities who apply for active labour market programs. I cannot explain why, either the information is poorly shared with public, or people with disabilities are not interested in our programs, or their number is really small. We don't know how to enroll them in our programs" (SESA representative interview).

During the research it was revealed that youth and people with disabilities are complaining that there is no information or options for their rehabilitation or sources for earning an independent living. Organizations responsible for improving this situation complain that they cannot find their beneficiaries.

The main barriers or obstacles to successful implementation of ALMPs for people with disabilities appear to be:

- Physical inaccessibility of buildings and transportation;
- Perception of employers about people with disabilities;
- Motivation of persons with disabilities to work, and their self-esteem;
- Parents' fears that their children can work;
- Communication capacity of persons with disabilities;
- Lack of financial resources for hiring specialists – sign language interpreters, personal assistants and psychologist, for regional divisions of the employment service.

Almost all buildings are inaccessible, including the SESA offices. The 19 newly opened integrated social services centres are also not fully accessible. Premises of

²⁰ State Program for Employment Regulation for 2015, Annex to GoA resolution No 40 of September 2014

employers are usually inaccessible and the alterations usually cost more than the compensation the Government can provide within ALMPs.

The study revealed that it is very difficult to encourage employers to hire persons with disabilities. Perceptions, stereotypes and prejudices are very hard to break during one-off meetings, so widespread public awareness and success stories need to be shared. The motivation and self-esteem of persons with disabilities is another fundamental barrier, with origins in the education sector. Further, some people with disabilities are afraid to join ALMP in case they lose the family benefits compensation from the state. But positive examples exist:

“One beneficiary with blindness was so enthusiastic, she managed to find a job for her daughter and later with our support, could find a job for herself”

Parents of youth with disabilities are not always willing to leave their children alone at the workplace or on public transport, and reject any offer of help from the SESA.

“In order to find beneficiaries for our programs, we took the contact numbers of persons with disabilities from the database and called them, but very few agreed to come and accept the provided options”.

SESA is conducting round table discussions and/or seminars for employers to present successful cases and challenge stereotypes about people with disabilities. There has been notable progress. To improve their services the SESA representative believes they need psychologist at all regional offices, and access to sign language and Braille specialists and also personal assistants, if needed, for blind people.

The pilot programme implemented a few years ago with Norwegian Government support showed that having a psychologist in the team improved the quality of services with people with disabilities.

SESA does not have special programmes for youth or adolescents: they can only suggest 3-6 months craftsmanship trainings and offer a job opportunity. SESA has not documented whether its applicants attended inclusive schools or not, but they can collect this data if requested.

The SESA representative thought that labour rehabilitation centres could prepare and support people with disabilities to adapt to new work environments. A similar centre was opened in Gyumri (Armenia’s second largest city) but there is lack of clarity around what type of services it should provide, for whom and when. SESA’s representative felt that social workers could communicate with family members to support the education of children with disabilities, and DPOs should be active in this field of education and employment. Community authorities should also take the lead and support the inclusion of people with disabilities in community life.

Allocating quotas in professional education and workplaces was considered the best solution for inclusion of people with disabilities, especially for person with intellectual disabilities. Regular monitoring of provisions is also an important step to assuring the full inclusion.

Disabled people's organisations

During the interview with DPO representatives they recognised the significant progress and efforts towards the inclusion of people with disabilities in different aspects of society. However, they were concerned by the inconsistency of actions and poor coordination.

For example, the DPOs highlighted that child development centres in kindergartens, established by World Vision Armenia between 2005 and 2010,²¹ were not properly handled or continued by the Government. The DPOs mentioned that Yerevan Municipality ordered that children with disabilities should be given priority in kindergarten admission, but this is not happening, perhaps because parents are not aware of this regulation or feel their child won't be properly supported in a busy kindergarten that lacks specialist staff.

Transportation inaccessibility was raised. It causes daily troubles for children with disabilities, while taxi services are too expensive to use for getting to school every day. The DPOs also mentioned that the majority of people with severe hearing issues did not accurately comprehend what they read (which is inevitably a challenge to their education progression and employment).

“The share of students who successfully study at universities is higher among children with blindness compared to children with deafness, and this is because they [deaf children] cannot understand the texts and books. They do not understand the subtitles in TV programmes... [and] ...always request sign language translation. ...children with deafness who study at mainstream schools have a wider vocabulary and understand the meaning of texts and writing. So this is an important issue that we should pay attention to when talking about transition from one level to another” (mother of a child with disabilities).

DPOs value the role of parents in education transition. They said that if the parents maintain communication with teachers they can then share the methods used with the child's new teachers. They believe teachers could easily communicate the methods they use during meetings which would not take long. The sharing of information should become a mandatory requirement for all schools.

The DPO representatives highlighted that schools are not always teaching or supporting communication skills among children with disabilities, so the children cannot communicate their basic needs or do not have the confidence to talk with new people (again this would make school transition more challenging).

Neither of the DPO representatives could name an inclusive high school that supports education of children with disabilities and their easy transition to university education, other than Anania Shirakarzi and Mkhitar Sebastaci Education Complexes which have all 12 levels of education from kindergarten upwards. They felt that education for children with disabilities in high schools and colleges should

²¹ This was an early childhood development project funded by USAID and implemented in 6 Area Development Programmes of World Vision, demonstrating the importance of early childhood development for school readiness and further development of children with disabilities. It was agreed that by the end of the project the local authorities would take over the funding and keep operating Child Development Centers established within the kindergartens, but out of 15 centers only 4 are operating now.

focus on developing life skills to ease their transition into higher education and the labour market.

They raised the issue of examinations, especially the ones for entering university. The Knowledge Testing Center collects information from schools regarding applicants and follows up individually if there are students with disabilities who need adaptations for exams. However, students who are not applying directly from school currently do not get an opportunity to express their needs. The DPO representatives suggested a separate box on the forms that students submit to the Admission Commission where they can write about any special arrangements needed for examinations.

At university level, the main obstacle to participation by students with disabilities is accessibility and the use of ICT. The students must cover all ICT and daily support expenses themselves.

Regarding transition to work, the DPO representatives indicated that SESA has expressed a lack of interest in the issue of people with disabilities and why they are not engaging in the ALMP processes, and have not attempted to collect information on why these stakeholders are not engaging. The DPOs called for better planning of SESA's services. They also said that to improve the transition from secondary school to vocational education and/or university the process should be properly regulated, and schools should have information on the services and courses available to students with disabilities at each institution.

4. Conclusions and recommendations for Armenia

The focus group participants were open to discussions on the inclusion of children with disabilities and shared their thoughts and experiences. Both policy-makers and implementers, as well as the service recipients agreed that there has been significant progress around inclusion of children and youth in society, recognition of their rights and changed perceptions about disability. Progress has also been documented in all levels of education, and the discussions revealed numerous examples of good practice and achievements.

However, almost all participants also agreed that in order to sustain the achieved results there needs to be smooth transition of learners from one level of education to another. This is not yet properly addressed and regulated, so there is still a long way to go. The idea of 'constant inclusion' needs more attention and regulation.

The issue of smooth transition needs to be on the agenda of policy-makers and implementers at all levels of education. Despite the current lack of guidance or regulation many specialists and teachers have already developed effective solutions that could be shared, adapted and replicated to bring about better services for children and youth with disabilities and SEN before, during and after a period of education transition. Lack of information and miscommunication seems to be the primary obstacle for promoting good practice at the moment, so efforts are needed to document and share ideas and experiences more comprehensively around this issue.

The main recommendation summarised here are based on the results of this qualitative research. They are grouped by the levels of education.

Pre-school education

- Pre-school education is recognized as important for early development of all children, and especially those with SEN and disabilities. Almost all groups of respondents highlighted the urgency of establishing inclusive education in kindergartens. It was recommended that inclusive practice in pre-schools should be supported by the Government, or local authorities should be obliged to hire special educators and/or social educators to help with preparing children with SEN and disabilities for transition to school.
- Information on the methods used and the development progress of a child should be transferred to parents and/or directly to the next school when the child graduates from kindergarten. This should be regulated at least by a Minister's order.
- Kindergartens are not developing IEPs and parents have not heard of this practice. Yet kindergartens can develop individual development plans, recording the work done with children and later transferring that information to the school.
- Visits to school can be arranged for kindergarten children to show them the school environment, how students are learning and interacting in lessons, what the teachers look like and what interesting things they can learn and see at school. This would help to alleviate fears and build confidence. Parents and

children should also have opportunities to get to know the future master teachers (class teachers) before the children join the school.

- Inclusive kindergartens maintain strong ties with inclusive community schools and advise parents of children with disabilities and SEN about which school to choose. This good practice example should be widely shared to encourage more widespread development of such relationships between education institutions.
- The network of inclusive kindergartens needs to be expanded, so that more children are benefitting from inclusive education earlier, and society starts to see an inclusive culture in education right from the start.

Primary education

- Transferring information about a child is fundamental for successfully organizing his/her education at school. This should become mandatory under regulation, and practised widely.
- Good examples where primary school teaching staff share information on the school's services with parents of upper grade kindergarten children should be shared and replicated.
- Efforts should be directed to increase wider participation of parents in IEP development and implementation. In general parents are not participating in these processes. There should be requirements for the full participation of parents in IEP development and progress tracking.
- The success of inclusive education depends on cooperation between special educators, regular teachers and parents. Greater efforts are needed to expand on existing good examples of this, to ensure that it is happening routinely and especially during transition periods between/within schools.

Basic education

- IEPs need to be regularly reviewed and updated, and tracked by specialists, teachers and parents, so that it is a useful resource for new teachers and can also be transferred to the student's high school or college after basic school graduation.
- Basic schools should have a list of which high schools and colleges admit students with SEN and disabilities, so that they can discuss options with students and their parents.
- All information regarding a child's academic progress, the methods used and services received should be recorded and maintained electronically, to make the process of filling in and sharing the IEP much easier.
- More practical posters and booklets on inclusive education, and guides to support the transition of students, are needed in schools.
- Schools could link up parents of children with SEN and disabilities who have already graduated, enrolled in university or found a job, with parents of newly enrolled students with disabilities and SEN. This could help them with sharing experiences, challenges and solutions, as well as motivating and supporting the parents whose children have just enrolled.
- Steps need to be taken to ensure that the general graduation tests are adapted to the needs of students with SEN.

High school

- Since high schools generally are not ready to accept children with disabilities and SEN, there needs to be more focus on investigating and learning from international best practice around inclusion at this level, to inform and motivate change in Armenia.
- Efforts are needed, through practical training, to increase the level of understanding about disability, inclusive communication and pedagogy among high school teachers.
- Craftsmanship streams of curricula should be developed for high schools. The few existing examples and good practices should be studied and replicated nationally.

Professional/vocational education

- The schools should have a list of vocational education institutions that offer education to children with SEN and disabilities.
- Schools should maintain contact with their students and the vocational colleges so as to support students' transition.
- The colleges and vocational institutions could arrange excursions for students from basic schools so that they can visit the college/institution and find out about the professions and skills they might choose to study.
- Colleges/institutions should be able to apply for specialized support where necessary (e.g. sign language interpreter or braille specialist).
- All educators in colleges/institutions should participate in trainings to improve their understanding of and ability to support students with disabilities and SEN.
- Each student with a disability or SEN should have a clearly defined plan for achieving their desired curriculum results and for helping them find a job.
- Efforts need to be made to equip colleges and institutions with adaptive devices and technologies.
- More government efforts are needed to promote job opportunities for graduates with disabilities and SEN. Public awareness campaigns through the media, documenting positive case studies and role models, could be one way to support this.

University education

- Universities should routinely offer opportunities for students with disabilities (and other students) to tour the university, learn about the structure and faculties, and ask questions. Such methods need to become part of a supportive transition culture in Armenia.
- The Admission Commissions should receive training on disability issues so they better understand the types of support and accommodations needed by diverse applicants, and are able to communicate appropriately with all applicants/students. Such training also needs to be extended to all university lecturers and staff.
- The universities should have an access officer who liaises between the applicant/student with disabilities and teaching staff to arrange necessary adaptations and support services.

Life-long education

- Improved career orientation and professional orientation at high schools is needed to support students with making decisions about which profession and/or university they should choose. Students should be empowered to make their own decisions, with accurate and encouraging advice from staff about what professions might be most appropriate.
- Teaching at high school and colleges should be based on developing life skills that will help students with disabilities and SEN to transition more easily to higher education and the labour market.
- The Government's ALMPs should be based on the needs of people with disabilities in their communities.
- Extra-curricular activities and learning opportunities should be developed for children with SEN and disabilities, or existing service providers should be trained to provide accessible and adaptable services.

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Annexes

Annex 1: Guide questions for interviews and focus groups

The primary question this study intends to respond to is: How is transition from one level of education to another arranged for children with SEN and disabilities in Armenia's education system? What are the main preconditions and/or provisions for life-long education for people with disabilities?

The list of Key Informants included: Ministry of Education and Science (MoES); National Institute of Education (NIE), Medical-Psychological Pedagogical Assessment center (MPPAC), Career Orientation Center for Youth; State employment Service Agency (SESA); World Bank Education Program Unit; UNICEF and EU Tempus Program, as well as 2 DPOs.

Two focus groups were conducted with parents and teaching staff from 10 kindergartens; two with special educators and teaching staff from 10 mainstream schools; two with parents and students from mainstream schools. There were also focus groups with teaching staff from 10 vocational education institutions/colleges and 5 universities and with students with disabilities; and participatory activities were facilitated with children. All respondents were selected from Yerevan.

Focus groups were conducted by field experts and BoH staff using following guide questions:

Focus groups with parents and teaching staff from kindergartens

- Are there any specific requirements for preparing children for schooling? are there any specific requirement for the k/g to do before they send one of their children to primary school
- Are there any specific provisions for children with disabilities and special educational needs for school preparations?
- How the information in IEP if any is passed to school?
- How the teaching staff/specialists are communicating with parents of children with disabilities and special educational needs on special arrangements of children at school? What opportunities do the parents have to voice their concerns and ideas for their child's transition process? How are parents empowered to have a role in their child's education/transition at this early stage in the child's education career (parents who are empowered to have a role or interest in education at k/g stage will be better able to have a role in helping (or advocate for) their children transitioning at higher levels). Do parents feel that they are listened to (does the k/g or primary school take notice of parents' views or do teachers/specialists just have a top-down attitude of giving instructions to parents)?
- Are there any examples of cooperation between teaching staff of kindergarten and school specialists for particular child? What they see the best scenario? know if the k/g teachers are talking to the primary teachers as well (not just talking to the specialists). The primary teachers can really benefit from getting ideas and reassurance from the previous teacher

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- What are desired arrangements/assistance the teaching staff will expect to be provided with to prepare children for schooling and ease their transition?
- What possibility would the teaching staff/parents like to have to prepare children for schooling and ease their transition?
- How do parents feel about their children with disabilities transitioning from k/g to primary, what are their fears/concerns, hopes, ambitions, etc?
- What are the main fears/concerns of k/g teachers when they see 'their' children transitioning to primary?

A key focus of discussions was on children with intellectual disabilities, behavioral problems, autism, developmental delays. Also participants were asked how they see the possibility of educating and preparing for school children with blindness and deafness?

Focus groups with parents and teaching staff from mainstream schools

- Are there any specific requirements for admission of children with disabilities and special educational needs, except for the referral from the MPPAC? I mean any details on child's specific abilities, strengths from previous education institution? This refers also to a child who transfers from other school.
- How the school arranged transition of children with disabilities and special educational needs from one grade to higher one? How the communication among teachers is maintained, shared? What is the role of parents in transition (particularly focusing on the opportunities for parents to voice concerns and ideas or provide practical advice to the teachers)?
- Have they attempted to develop transition plans or they rely on IEPs? Does IEPs supportive for information exchange among different teachers? Is it preferable to have separate transition plan?
- How the school prepares children with disabilities and special educational needs to graduation? How their examination is arranged? How the children passed to High School, if any? Do they pass also the child's IEP? How they establish communication with High school staff, if they do?
- How the teaching staff/specialists are communicating with parents of children with disabilities and special educational needs on special arrangements of children at high school/College? Again also try to look at this question from the parents' perspective – not just what the teachers say to the parents but what opportunities/rights the parents are given to have a voice, share ideas, express concerns or expectations.
- Are there any examples of cooperation between teaching staff and school specialists for particular child? Especially at the higher classes? What they see as the best scenario? Why they could not follow the best practice?
- What are desired arrangements/assistance the teaching staff will expect to be provided with to prepare children for further education and ease their transition?
- What possibility would the teaching staff/parents (and children) like to have to prepare children for further career/education and ease their transition?

A key focus of discussions was on children with intellectual disabilities, behavioral problems, autism, developmental delays. Also participants were asked how they

see the possibility of educating and preparing for school children with blindness and deafness?

Focus groups with parents, students and teaching staff from vocational education institutions/colleges and universities

- Are there “Access officers”? I mean staff responsible for recording the special needs of children with disabilities and maintaining communication of the needs with teaching staff?
- Are there any specific requirements for admission of students with disabilities and SEN? How they conduct SEN assessment of students with disabilities?
- What arrangements /possibilities are available for students with disabilities, especially with blindness and deafness, with intellectual disabilities, behavioral problems, autistic, developmental delays to study at Colleges, institutes and universities?
- Do they communicate with school teachers on SEN of students with disabilities?
- What are the desired arrangements/assistance the teaching staff will expect to be provided with to prepare students for further education and ease their transition?
- What possibility would the teaching staff/parents like to have to prepare children for further career/education and ease their transition?
- how the children and parents feel (what scares or excites them), what they have experienced already (what was helpful or not helpful), what ideas they have for better transition processes?
- whether parents/teachers/children are aware that children with disabilities have a (legal and human) right to transition to the next grade/school? For high school
- whether there is any role for disabled role models or mentors in the transition process, or whether there are opportunities for disabled youth/adults to advise/help the school or the child/family during transition. Or what potential there is for trying to make this happen.

Separate lists of questions were developed for face to face interviews and for each FGD with background information and instructions.

Annex 2: Schedule of focus group discussions

	Target group	Moderators	Date and time	Place
1.	Kindergarten educators	Gayane Mardanyan Gohar Tadevosyan	June 08 14:00-16:00	Medical Psychological Pedagogical assessment center
2.	School teachers (primary/basic)	Lilit Asryan Narine Susliyan	June 08 14:00-16:00	
3.	Special educators of schools	Gayane Mardanyan Knarik Mirzoyan	June 09 14:00-16:00	
4.	School parents	Hasmik Khacheyan Armine Khananyan	June 11 14:00-16:00	
5.	School students	Lilit Asryan Narine Susliyan	June 11 14:00-16:00	
6.	Kindergarten parents	Hasmik Khacheyan Armine Khananyan	June 12 11:00-13:00	
7.	Kindergartens children	Gayane Mardanyan Knarik Mirzoyan	June 12 11:00-13:00	
8.	University Lecturers	Armine Avagyan Armine Khananyan	June 15 11:00-13:00	Pedagogical University
9.	Educators from Collages and VAT institutions	Marine Hakobyan Armine Khananyan	June 19 11:00-13:00	BoH office
10.	Students and Youth with disabilities	Rudolf Zabrodin Zaruhi Batoyan Gohar Tadevosyan	June 16 14:00-16:00	BoH office

Annex 3: Schedule of face-to-face interviews

		5.06. 2015	8.06. 2015	9.06. 2015	10.06. 2015	11.06. 2015	12.06. 2015
1.	MLSA		11 a.m				
2.	NIE					3.p.m	
3.	Assessment Center					11:00 AM	
4.	Professional Orientation Center				3 p.m.		
5.	Employment Agency		2.30 p.m				
6.	WB PIU	2.30 p.m					
7.	UNICEF			3 p.m.			
8.	VET						3.p.m
9.	TEMPUS						11:00 a.m
10.	Pedagogical University	11:00 AM					
11.	DPO				12.p.m		

Annex 4: Inclusive transition case studies

The following case studies offer snap shots of the situation and efforts to address education transition for children with disabilities around the world.

Macedonia

In Macedonia, the inclusion team of Dimo Hadzi Dimov Primary School, Skopje works to ensure that children with disabilities successfully transition into the school from home or from the nearby pre-school. They also support the children's transition from year group to year group, once in school. The school has "an effective hand-over process between lower and upper primary, so that any child who has particular needs continues to receive the same level and quality of support as they move up through the grades". However, the inclusion team is concerned about the transition of children with disabilities to secondary school because "not all the local secondary schools are inclusive and supportive". While some of their previous students with disabilities have succeeded in secondary education and even progressed to university and taken part in the Paralympics, "others have sadly dropped out of school at secondary level" because of the lack of support.²²

People's Democratic Republic of Laos

In 1993, Save the Children began its support of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR) government's inclusive education initiative. Prior to this there was no education provision for children with disabilities in the country. The project, which ran for 16 years until 2009, worked throughout the country with over 500 schools in 141 districts and 17 provinces, improving the inclusion of children with disabilities in education. In 2009, as a result of the project's work, more than 3,000 children with disabilities were included in school and "being educated alongside their peers".

The project collected case studies of children's inclusion in schooling. One such child was Lili, a young girl with cerebral palsy living in the north of the country. She had difficulty moving and speaking. She started attending pre-school when she was nearly three, and in 2009 she moved with her friends to the nearby local primary school. The pre-school principal ensured that the pre-school staff worked closely with the primary school teachers "to make sure Lili's transition is smooth. We are arranging for teachers to visit here and meet Lili, observe her in class, discuss with her mother and teacher how best to meet her needs. Working collaboratively and in partnership together, we can all make sure that children such as Lili can be as successful as anybody else in school".²³

Germany

In 2008, a UNICEF report criticised Germany's education system for discriminating against children with disabilities and those children from immigrant families and lower social classes. As a result, Bonn and Cologne began using the Index for

²² EENET, 2011, 'A team approach to inclusion, Macedonia', 2011, p.2. See www.eenet.org.uk/resources/resource_search_advanced.php?theme=0&date=0&author=0&publisher=0&type=0&country=mk,®ion=0 accessed 08/07/15.

²³ Save the Children Norway (2009) 'A Quality Education for All. A History of the Lao PDR Inclusive Education Project 1993 – 2009', p. 116. See www.eenet.org.uk/resources/docs/A_Quality_Education_For_All_LaoPDR.pdf accessed 09/07/15.

Inclusion²⁴ to improve early childhood and primary education and to ensure that “inclusive cultures, structures, and practices become effective across the different facilities”.²⁵

In 2009, four Bonn pre-school day care centres began to work with a neighbouring primary school using the Index for Inclusion “to ensure a participatory and inclusive transition from kindergarten to elementary school”.²⁶ Parents, pre-school childcare workers and primary school teachers were made aware of their responsibilities during the children’s transition between education establishments, and were encouraged to actively participate in the process. They shared their knowledge and understanding of each child’s individual needs to ensure that there was a smooth transition.

India

In India, many children who finish primary school do not transition to secondary school or successfully complete their secondary education. The Population Council (2014) noted that in the academic year 2005-06 only “42 percent of young men and 32 percent of young women aged 18-24 had completed Class 10, the final year of (lower) secondary school”.²⁷ It argued that communities’ lack of understanding of the values and importance of secondary schooling and the returns to education was “perhaps the most prominent” of several reasons why so few children transitioned to secondary education. The organisation thus highlighted the need for community awareness-raising and mobilisation, especially of parents, guardians and other family members, to ensure that all children successfully transition to, and complete their secondary schooling.²⁸

While the Population Council document focused on girls’ transition to secondary school, many of the challenges to their progress through the education system are also relevant to children with disabilities. For instance, parents often believe that continued education will not yield results for their children with disabilities and is not worth investing in. Thus there is a need for more awareness around the possible returns for families and countries if more children with disabilities complete a high quality secondary education.

Sri Lanka

In Sri Lanka, many children from poor, marginalised, low caste and minority ethnic communities are excluded from early childhood care and development (ECCD) services. In 2005, a Save the Children study discovered that children with disabilities “make up a significant proportion of those excluded. Their exclusion is due to social

²⁴ The Index for Inclusion in a variety of languages is available from: www.eenet.org.uk/resources/resource_search.php?theme=indx&date=0&author=0&publisher=0&type=0&country=0 accessed 10/07/15.

²⁵ Platte, A. (2010) ‘*Developing quality early childhood education: Using the Index for Inclusion in Germany*’. See www.eenet.org.uk/resources/eenet_newsletter/news14/page5.php accessed 10/07/15.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Population Council (2014) ‘*Supporting Girls in their Transition to Secondary Education: An exploratory study of the family, school and community environments of adolescent girls in Gujarat*’, p. 1. Santhya, K.G. et al (2014) *Supporting Girls in their Transition to Secondary Education: An exploratory study of the family, school and community environments of adolescent girls in Gujarat*. New Delhi: Population Council. See www.eenet.org.uk/resources/docs/2014PGY_GujaratEducationReport.pdf accessed 10/07/15.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 2.

stigma, a lack of early screening systems, and the perceived inability of ECCD teachers to accommodate children with disabilities in their programmes”.²⁹

Save the Children began a community programme to raise awareness of the right of all children to access ECCD and to encourage community members to actively participate in assisting excluded children, including children with disabilities, to make the transition from home to ECCD provision. Save the Children also created a teacher training programme which was designed to help ECCD teachers “to identify, enrol and include children with disabilities, seeing difference as a resource for learning and development rather than a problem”.³⁰ By 2009, over 5,000 ECCD teachers had been trained and over 300 children with disabilities have been included into ECCD provision.

Namibia

In 2007, Elizabeth, a girl with physical disabilities, sat her end of primary school exams. Unfortunately she failed by one point to achieve the pass mark required for transition to secondary school. However, it was discovered that the school's Examination Officer had not applied for Elisabeth's 'Special Considerations' (for children with disabilities), allowing 25% more time for her exams. The Regional Inclusive Education Advisor advocated on her behalf, with the Regional Director of Education, that this failure to give Elizabeth additional exam time contributed to her exam score. The Regional Director accepted this argument and Elizabeth was finally allowed to go to her new secondary school.

The transition to secondary school was successful “partly because of [Elizabeth's] positive attitude and partly because of the support plan [developed together with Elizabeth and her mother] involving people from many different organisations. It did feel like people were taking some responsibility and really wanted this to be as easy as possible for Elizabeth. ...the school, its principal, teachers, hostel and school workers were ... looking forward to welcoming Elisabeth into the school. More importantly they realised she would need support but without the undue fuss and attention that would isolate her from the other learners.”³¹

Elizabeth settled into secondary school and she became a member of the Namibian Learners Parliament, where she represented learners with disabilities.

²⁹ Krishnakumar, P. (2009) 'Early Childhood Care and Development for All in Sri Lanka' in *Enabling Education* No.13. See www.eenet.org.uk/resources/eenet_newsletter/news13/page7.php accessed 12/08/15.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Mills, D. (2008) 'Meaningful Understanding: Institutionalised practice on inclusive education in Kunene Region, Namibia. A case study.' See www.eenet.org.uk/resources/docs/Case_Study_Namibia.pdf accessed 12/08/15.



Education transition for children with disabilities in Armenia

Research report

In 2015 the Committee for the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities started developing a General Comment on Article 24 (Education). This will provide the States Parties with more detail on the fulfilment of the right to education for children and youth with disabilities.

The Early Childhood Program of Open Society Foundations invited Bridge of Hope to participate in a research initiative to document implementation of Article 24, by collecting information on inclusive education experiences, challenges and successes in Armenia. As part of this process, the issue of inclusive educational transition was revealed as an under-researched area, and a decision was taken to carry out further investigations.

This report documents information collected through 10 focus group discussions among teachers, parents and children/youth with disabilities and 10 interviews with education experts and policy-makers. The information focuses on policies and practices around transition from one level of education to another for children with disabilities and special educational needs. Recommendations are made for Armenia.

The report was prepared by Bridge of Hope with methodological and editing support from Enabling Education Network.

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