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Approximation of Inclusive Education in Armenia to International Standards and Practices

Policy Brief

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There are 5 major policy related concerns that need to be addressed in order to consider the implementation of inclusive education in Armenia a successful reform: legislative framework; information flow and communication; quality of inclusive education; teacher education and capacity building; funding schemes.

First issue is that inclusive education is poorly defined in policies and legal framework, and it is primarily perceived in terms of disability and special needs. This was observed during the analysis of legislation and policies related to inclusive education.

"Inclusive education is perceived in terms of disability and special needs."

Draft laws on amending the Law on Education and the Law on Mainstream education which has been pending in the National Assembly since 2012, has finally passed: these laws will considerably enhance the reform agenda. Still, legal framework needs consolidation in any case, especially after Law amendments, all the by-laws, Governmental Decrees, policies and regulations articulated to inclusive education implementation have to be redeveloped.

"Communication is the key for developing a holistic approach of education provisions."

The second policy concern relates to the lack of holistic approach in the education system, which is conditioned by the lack of formal and practical mechanisms for information flow and exchange of experience among professionals. This matter was indirectly raised in 95% of our in-depth interviews with school principles, members of multidisciplinary teams and subject teachers.

Reform ownership is not transmitted from reforms initiators and implementers to schoolteachers, and lack of empowerment brings up disapproval and apathy towards the reform. Improper communication is not only confusing for the teachers, but also for the learners and their parents: constantly changing practices, without proper explanation and reasoning creates an environment of mistrust towards the system, reduce of motivation and empowerment, while students and their parents are supposed to be seen as allies for putting the reform forward.

The third and rather salient policy concern is related to education quality vs. enrolment rates: increase of enrolment is prioritized over improvement of the quality of education. A number of experts we interviewed attached importance to the increase in the number

"Quality vs. Inclusion?"

of learners attending mainstream education schools. This tendency is also observed in the internationally funded projects, including those with UN. While absolutely seconding all the arguments that bringing a child into school is of utmost importance, we however, note that quality is reciprocal to inclusion.

The forth policy issue is about capacity building and enhancement in all the spheres and levels of education system related to inclusive education. This policy concern is closely linked to the previous concern, as quality hinges on the capacity of the system in general and education providers in particular. This matter has been addressed by evaluating

current mechanisms of capacity development and analysis of the local potential for enhancing the quality of teacher education.

Current reform narrative is that by August 2025 all mainstream education schools should provide inclusive education. This implies moving towards full inclusion and this shift protects the education rights of children. However, access to education is not the only crisis – poor quality is holding back learning even for those who make it to school. In Armenia inclusion is priorities over quality.

Quality of education can be improved by addressing the following five dimensions of teaching and learning processes:

1. Characteristics of learners: Learners have differences and their achievements cannot be assessed with ignoring those differences. Thus understanding learners is a key, since it requires flexible and needs based approach and support.

2. Discourse: Society and education influence each other and so do state education policies. The context is also influenced by international projects, civil society activities, international developments, etc. Therefore, the context should be considered and properly addressed.

3. Resources: Effectiveness of schools depends on teachers, textbooks, materials, as well as funding. Thus, human and material resources become determinants for quality of teaching and learning processes. Administration of resources is also important, as their availability is yet not a sufficient condition for quality.

4. Teaching and learning: The most important key for quality lies in teaching and learning activities. This includes curricula, classroom strategies, learners' motivation, teaching methodologies, and other things.

5. Learning outcomes: Achievement of learner is usually assessed against declared objectives. There can also be other proxies for assessment, for example, labor market success.

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> *"If we fail to educate, train and prepare quality professionals, we will fail the goal of the reform entirely."*

4 specific policy challenges that need to be addressed Regarding teacher capacity development and education:

1. Inclusive education is mostly considered to be a problem for subject teachers and inclusive teaching is not considered as a natural way of working.
2. In-service teacher education is not in place, as there is no collaborative teaching, proper channels for communication and exchange of experience.
3. Training packages provided by the National Institute of Education should be redeveloped and modernized.

4. Pedagogical training at institutional settings should become a state priority, as they feed schools in terms of personnel, including multidisciplinary team members.

Reformation of special schools into pedagogical-psychological support centres, which will also be responsible for needs assessment, has the risk that assessors might not be experienced for working with ICF – the assessment tool: ICF is a rather comprehensive and complicated tool, and working with that took requires specific trainings.

Finally, the fifth policy concern is related to the funding schemes of inclusive education. Funding of inclusive education is conditioned by a number of extra-budgetary factors, among which is the method of need assessment and choice of the funding model, level of corruption in the chain of the funding flow, and availability of the funds.

Based on the framework of the anticipated legal amendments, Resource-based model of financing could be the best choice for funding. Considering that the functional needs of a child will be identified, it is reasonable to have needs-based funding. This model implied decentralization of funds, which could, in addition, ensure the integrity of the system

"Resource-based model of financing could be the best choice for funding"

Based on the research findings the following recommendations have been developed:

Recommendation 1: Civil society of Armenia could advocate that Armenia ratify the Optional Protocol of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Recommendation 2: In line or immediately after the adoption of the drafts of the Law on Mainstream Education and the Law on Education, all the articulated laws and by-laws should be amended.

Recommendation 3: Discussions should be organized to understand and identify the best possible mechanisms for ensuring information flow and transparency.

Recommendation 4: Based on state educational standards, develop flexible learning outcomes and adopted methods for assessing learning outcomes of individual curricula of SEN children.

Recommendation 5: Improvement of teaching methods should become a strategic priority: mechanisms should be developed for promoting collaborative teaching.

Recommendations 6: Develop training packages based on teacher needs assessment and build up 3-tier e training scheme.
> In 1st phase teachers get generic exposure to inclusive education, its main underlying concepts, roles and responsibilities, implementation practices and alike. This training should be the same for all – subject teachers and support team. Second is specific methodological trainings for subject teachers and support team members in accordance with their qualifications. For example, a teacher of mathematics should learn the exact tools, which s/he needs for addressing the exact needs of children in a classroom. Special psychologist, who supposedly should already have

the relevant background qualification, should receive training on the latest international developments in the field. And finally, the 3rd tier of trainings should include very mobile and flexible topics related to specific educational needs. These trainings should be short and precise one-day workshops, which could be organized at schools by training organizations.

Recommendation 7: Pedagogical institutions need to be prioritized and subsidized. State should consider subsidizing pedagogical institutions for the following purposes and reasons:

1. Graduates of all qualifications should be properly trained professionals to enter an inclusive classroom without an additional training. For this reason curricula should be reviewed and inclusive education related courses should be developed and added. Course development requires funding and this is the room where state funding will be extremely important. Still, this expense will be cost effective as, in the long run, state will save on additional trainings.

2. Considering that the faculty of special education is supposed to fill the shortage of human resources for support teams and teacher assistants, the faculty should become attractive for applicants. Attractiveness can be raised by waiving the tuition fee and probably even providing merit-based scholarship. This can be possible only with state subsidies, and given the priority of the reform, it would be rational for the budget to define that priority as well.

Recommendation 8: International organizations should consider allocating resources for supporting the state in providing trainings.

Recommendation 9: Funding may be a decisive factor in achieving inclusion. Considering that special schools will be closed, additional resources would be available for funding the inclusive education. Based on various studies it is clear that decentralized financing (Resource-based) model is likely to be more cost-effective and provide fewer opportunities for undesirable forms of hindering integrity.

"Poor quality of inclusive education will have adverse effects on inclusion"

Implementation of inclusive education is already an achievement. Still, very crucial policy concerns are not yet addressed. The Government, international organizations, local NGOs and INGOs, as well as experts and professionals related to the implementation of inclusive education have failed so far to create a genuine discourse which would promote inclusiveness and would value diversity. Besides this framework, quality of inclusion has received less attention: in the long run poor quality of inclusive education will have adverse effects on inclusion. Therefore, current reform should address quality from strategic perspective.