

Yerevan- on June 13, 2018 the American University of Armenia (AUA) has organized a round table discussion on “Assistance to Inclusive Education Initiatives in the Republic of Armenia” aiming to support inclusive education initiatives in Armenia within the framework of the Armenia’s comprehensive strategy for 2014-2025. The results of the discussion and the SWOT analysis is presented below.

## **Roundtable Discussion on Inclusive Education in Armenia (K-16) American University of Armenia, June 13, 2018 Meeting Notes**

### **Attending:**

Abelyan Karine, Alaverdyan Armen, Adamyan Haykuhi, Balasanyan Anzhela, Debra Carlson Wood, Gevorgyan Victoria, Grigoryan Meline, Hakobyan Anna, Harutyunyan Tamara, Hakhverdyan Hasmik, Karaseferyan Emma, Khachatryan Sona, Khosrovyan Anahit, Makaryan Gayane, Melikyan Sasoun, Melikyan Tatevik, Mikhaylova Mariam, Nazaretyan Hripsime, Ordyan Anahit, Parazyan Marina, Petrosyan Alisa, Petrosyan Syuzanna, Poghosyan Alvard, Safaryan Anna, Sardaryan Yelena, Stepanyan Anna, Vardanyan Narine, Vardanyan Siranush, Yardumyan Narine, Yesayan Vika, Zarukeyan Sima, Qushkyan Margarit, Tokhyan Tatevik, Dilanyan Haykanush, Aghajanyan Narine, Hovhannisyan Mariam.

### **Agenda:**

- Welcoming remarks by: Dr. Armen Der-Kiureghian, President of AUA;  
Dr. Randall Rhodes, Provost of AUA;  
Dr. Arman Tatoyan, RA Human Rights Defender;  
Mr. Sasoun Melikyan, Head of Higher Education Division, MoES;  
Ms. Anna Hakobyan, Head of Division of Disabled People Affairs, Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs;
- Introductions of attendees;
- SWOT Analyses on the current strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats/obstacles concerning the following topics within inclusive education:
  - o **Students with Hearing, Visual and Mobility Impairment**
  - o **Psychological, Developmental and Mental Health Issues**
  - o **Building Human Capacity: Administrators, Teachers and Interdisciplinary Teams**
  - o **Cultural Issues: Community and Family Education;** and
- Reporting out the results of the SWOT and concluding remarks.

Issues identified during the welcoming remarks and introductions included: the cultural-societal issue of stereotypes, teacher trainings, community outreach/education, inequities of opportunities and trainings between Yerevan and the marzes, universal design and definitions, nomenclature/terminology, and the legal protections for people’s fundamental rights.

### **SWOT Analyses:**

Participants were invited to engage in four separate conversations each dedicated to one of the four aspects identified above and each lasting for 30 minutes. Below are the recurring points made across sessions with corresponding action items:

## **Inclusion of Students with Hearing, Visual, and Mobility Impairment**

### **Strengths**

- Legislation requires environmental adaptations (e.g. vocal traffic lights, ramps and other facilities' adaptations, etc.);
- A few schools have acquired assistive technologies;
- Initiatives have been implemented (e.g. art therapy, OT, personal guides, "SOURCE");
- Awareness of inclusion agenda is improving with increased parent-teacher cooperation;
- Availability of Assessment Centers and Rehabilitation Centers;
- Free training of specialists in higher educational institutions;
- Free education of students with I and II-degree disability; and
- Hearing screenings for newborns and medical/surgical procedures allow for earlier interventions.

### **Weaknesses**

- Many of the above cited "strengths" are not universally available in schools in Yerevan and the marzes (e.g. availability of technologies, best practices in pedagogy, academic and professional tracks for children, physical equipment, qualified support staff, screenings of children to detect potential issues, etc.), therefore there is an absence of reasonable accommodation;
- Inconsistent use of terminology (e.g. children are weak/sick/disabled, etc.), can potentially lead to a misapplication of ethical norms;
- Lack of a unified, national database with the names of children identified under I and II-degree disability;
- Mandates outlined in the legislation are mostly unfunded, and resources needed to fund the hiring of support teams within schools are insufficient;
- Without true inclusion, these children will continue to be isolated, segregated; and
- Lack of differentiated approaches to learning and adaptation of alternative learning materials and media.

### **Opportunities**

- Legislative framework exists – needs to be fully implemented;
- State finances exist – need to be properly apportioned to schools (Yerevan and marzes);
- Implementation of consistent curriculum, learning objectives and modalities of instruction via universal design;
- High level of motivation and experience within the current Armenian structures and institutions;
- Cooperation with international organizations, local civil society networks, experts, and donor support (global and diaspora);
- Programming in arts and sports in schools and across schools including opportunities to connect with Paralympic and Special Olympic structures;
- IEPs identifying modalities of instruction, student learning outcomes appropriate to children’s needs;
- Sharing of best practices between schools; and
- Service multiplication, resulting in a competitive field and high quality services.

### **Threats**

- Lack of societal/cultural recognition and support for the issue of Inclusion (e.g. persistence of negative terminology affecting child and family, etc.);
- School facilities not being retrofitted to meet needs;
- Lack of appropriate resource allocation;
- Absence of translation centers to develop learning materials for the visually and hearing impaired;
- Insufficient number of properly trained professional staff; and
- Limited government (and/or international) grants to address funding gaps.

### **Action Items**

- Conduct an inventory of current K-16 facilities to assess their compliance with legislative mandates, specifically in regard to their accessibility for those with physical disabilities.
- Identify current best practices in respect to the use of assistive technologies for children with hearing and visual impairment (e.g. teaching best practices, learning resources).
- Identify the profile of professional staff needed to work with children/students (e.g. their educational degree(s), professional training, internships/field experiences, etc.).
- Recommend to the MoES the identification of an individual specifically charged with identifying grants and other resources needed to address human and fiscal shortages.

## **Psychological, Developmental, Mental Health Issues**

### **Strengths**

- Children/students are currently mainstreamed in schools and live with families;
- Legal frameworks exist protecting students;
- Presence of specialists' training programs;
- Positive trend in overcoming stereotypes in the community; collaborative networks exist;
- Utilization of IEPs and children's/students' needs assessment;
- Interdisciplinary teams and Resource Centers often include psychologists to provide support;
- Teachers' assistants and teachers are trained and willing to provide support to children/students; and
- Collaborations among institutions, school and organizations.

### **Weaknesses**

- Insufficient and inconsistent number of specialists, trainers and trainings for teachers across Armenia;
- Inability to provide services outlined in IEPs; lack of adequate assessment of child's needs and follow through on student learning outcomes;
- Universal inclusive design is unrealistic;
- Culture of assessment is not currently instituted system-wide;
- Decrease in number of student support positions as a result of new disability categorizations and child/student assessment methods;
- Lack of human and fiscal resources on national, and most importantly, regional levels;
- Lack or insufficient number, and inconsistent effectiveness, of Pedagogical-Psychological Centers and Resource Centers;
- Healthy learning atmosphere is disrupted for non-disabled students in classroom;
- Students with severe disabilities are not manageable in mainstreamed setting;
- Lack of consistent terminology; and
- Those with intellectual disabilities face harsher stereotypes than those within the category of the "medical model".

### **Opportunities**

- New assessment methods may achieve greater effectiveness across system;
- Potential to increase number of trainings for teachers, specialists and outreach to parents/community;
- Opportunities exist for greater collaboration between schools, NGOs and Pedagogical-Psychological Centers;
- Opportunities exist to identify additional resources, human and fiscal;
- Conferences, forums, and similar events on various issues/disabilities can be scheduled on various topics (e.g. ADHD, AUTISM);
- Need to convene working group to make the IEP more functional;
- Additional alternative services can provide a greater variety of modalities of instruction (e.g. art therapy, sand therapy, tale therapy, cultural and sport activities);
- Design incentives encouraging specialists to work within marzes; and
- ICT development in Armenia.

### **Threats**

- Lack of adequate financial support for initiatives within and without the schools;
- Lack of human resource allocation (e.g. student/teacher ratio);
- Only one public HEI trains teachers and specialists;
- Low SES of families impact a variety of issues including transportation to schools/Resource Centers; lack of access to rehabilitation centers;
- Pervasive stereotypes towards children with disabilities exist among all stakeholders;
- Teachers are inadequately prepared to work with children/students;
- Uneven distribution of available resources across marzes;
- Barriers on the legal field impede inclusive educations' effective implementation; and
- Social inclusion does not equate to inclusive education.

### **Action Items**

- Broaden the discussion of “disability” beyond the medical model to include developmental, psychological and mental health issues.
- Ensure that trainings and educational degree programs for teachers and specialists sufficiently address this broader scope of “disability”.
- Research and implement best practices in alternative modalities of instruction to engage children/students with autism and ADHD.
- Reassess IEPs and assessments to ensure that children’s/students’ needs are being properly defined and addressed.

## **Building Human Capacity: Administrators, Teachers and Interdisciplinary Teams**

### **Strengths**

- The National Institute of Education designed teaching modules and is charged with delivering 20-hour trainings for teachers (completed in 3 marzes – Tavush, Syunik, Lori); trainings available to teachers once every 5 years;
- International organizations, as well as NGOs, provide experts and implement trainings and other initiatives;
- The State Pedagogical University has a Special Education Department and curriculum that includes two required courses on inclusive education in the bachelor's and two in the master's; tuition waivers are available for students pursuing special education as their specialization; the Institute of Physical Education also has an allied program in Adaptive Physical Education;
- HEIs in the marzes have established departments to prepare specialists in the fields of special education and/or social work;
- Parental and, in general, public awareness is progressing, better in Yerevan than marzes;
- Pedagogical-Psychological Centers and Resource Centers provide professional services (and social workers and social educators) and support the effectiveness of interdisciplinary teams in schools to support children/students; and
- Gaps in the present system are acknowledged by the MoES.

### **Weaknesses**

- Fiscal and human resources are insufficient to meet the legislative mandate and child/student need; this includes few to no trainings for the interdisciplinary teams, specialists, teachers and principals in rural areas;
- Trainings provided by the National Institute for Education are insufficient – only limited hours and not regular; teachers remain unclear as to the conceptualization of inclusive education, the allied pedagogies, classroom management, IEP implementation, and assessment criteria, as well as the assessment of the trainings themselves;
- Higher Education programs for teacher education are more focused on theoretical than applied knowledge; the current practicum is insufficient in length and depth of experience;
- Lack of cohesiveness and collaborations between various universities and their programs;
- Members of interdisciplinary teams and other specialists are not licensed and held to consistent professional standards; this is also true of the teaching assistants; and
- Lack of cohesion between stakeholders.

### **Opportunities**

- Collaborations possible between NGOs, donors, and universities for the exchange of best practices, expertise and the identification of funding opportunities;

- STEM/AUMAT LABs and assistive technologies and smart devices can be acquired;
- The creation of an assessment system for trainers, trainees, and trainings would raise expectations and outcomes;
- Teachers would be incentivized to complete trainings and adopt new modalities of instruction through their accrual of additional benefits/salary;
- Universities can offer courses in inclusive education; and
- The infusion of “inclusion” across curricula and discourse on education in Armenia would publically endorse the initiative (e.g. championing success stories and current best practices).

### **Threats**

- Concept of inclusive education is not understood within and without schools;
- Parental expectations in respect to the schools meeting their children’s needs are not being met;
- Competing national interests affect funding for schools and teachers’ and support staff’s salaries;
- Armenia does not currently have a sufficient number of qualified specialists to meet the need created by legislative mandate;
- Current structure/system for trainings is perceived as neither efficient nor effective;
- Lack of qualified specialists in the rural areas limit hope of progress; and
- Cultural stereotypes hinder teacher attitude and performance.

### **Action Items**

- Assess and make recommendations on the design, effectiveness and efficiency of the trainings designed by the National Institute of Education.
- Assess the design of the current degree programs at the State Pedagogical University to ensure alignment with the professional needs in the schools (K-12).
- Review and make recommendations on the job descriptions and salaries of teachers, teaching assistants and interdisciplinary team members to ensure that they match the level of knowledge and skills required.
- Devise a strategy to ensure that new teachers and specialists are incentivized to work in the marzes.

## **Cultural Issues: Community and Family Education**

### **Strengths**

- The availability of institutions such as medical facilities, parental training centers and schools; specialists such as nurses and social workers cooperate with families and provide professional guidance; and
- Improving public support and attitudes toward individuals with mental and physical disabilities; growing awareness and acceptance of an inclusive culture – within schools and across society in general.

### **Weaknesses**

- Children with special needs are socially isolated; the cultural environment is mostly unaccommodating to their needs due to the persisting stigma;
- Lack of parent-teacher cooperation;
- Inconsistent use of terminology by the professionals in the field and teachers (e.g. children are weak/sick/disabled, etc.);
- Lack of expertise in designing adaptive educational processes to accommodate multiple learners (e.g. absence of learning materials based on best practices in methodology);
- Insufficient number of specialists in HEIs;
- Low level of awareness of legal rights;
- Gender-based discrimination hurts girls more than boys; and
- Limitations on these children/students participating in cultural and sport events.

### **Opportunities**

- Training of medical workers, social workers, psychologists and other allied professionals;
- Public promotion to raise awareness about inclusion via mass media, social media, etc.;
- Best practices in other countries can be researched through Erasmus+ and other grant opportunities;
- Find opportunities to optimize current financial resources and secure new funds;
- Establish a platform for discussions between ministries in order to ensure the effective implementation of programs;
- Ensure the integration of social services;
- Creation of a unified database of children/students needing support;
- Alternative inclusive platforms in communities can further promote inclusion (e.g. entertainment, educational centers outside of school).
- Establish and empower parent support groups; and



- Design a platform for awareness via internet.

### **Threats**

- Few K-16 buildings are welcoming to people with disabilities in respect to their facilities and assistive technologies;
- Insufficient number of trained professionals and specialists in the field;
- A lack of a national strategic plan;
- Absence of inclusive policy in higher education institutions;
- Lack of credible funnel from elementary to secondary to higher education for students with the potential to succeed academically;
- False diagnoses by specialists compromise the design of appropriate IEPs; and
- Low social responsibility of parents for children with disabilities.

### **Action Items**

- Devise a strategic plan and tactics for the improvement of public awareness of the benefits of inclusion via public forums, media campaigns, internet sites, etc.
- Use databases to identify and advocate for children/students who are not currently attending school and improve their integration into society.
- Find effective means to integrate parents into discussions at Research Centers and schools in order to address their concerns.
- Identify additional extra-curricular venues for the social integration of children/students with disabilities (e.g. community sports, art events, etc.).

### **Reporting Out and Concluding Remarks:**

There was a quick overview of the inputs received during the four SWOT sessions. Afterwards, Randall Rhodes highlighted two recurring issues: terminology/nomenclature and the need to clarify whether the principal objectives of inclusion focus on the social dimension of mainstreaming students or on the educational outcomes of the “disabled” students. In regard to the first, if there is no consensus on the verbiage to be used in defining “disabilities” (remaining sensitive to prejudice-laden language), then it will be even more difficult to “frame” the issue and devise strategies to engage the public in a positive and effective manner. And in regard to the second, the objective of mainstreaming needs to be clarified as the objectives and impact of social integration are very different from those objectives focused on the educational benefits and student learning outcomes of the “disabled” students, and the impact of mainstreaming on the learning of all students in the classroom.

Participants agreed that there needs to be an ongoing conversation with a sharing of best practices and the recommendation of action items to the allied ministries to ensure that children/students are accorded the quality of educational opportunities they deserve. Similar roundtable discussions will be scheduled in the future and will be hosted by participating units/organizations/schools.