Children with Special Needs

Transition to Inclusive Education in Armenia

By Hannah Page

unite for children
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Armenia recognized the importance of inclusive education before most nations in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS); however, many children with special needs remain out of school. Many Armenian children with disabilities are educated apart from their peers and placed in inferior educational settings that greatly reduce their chances of becoming productive members of society and serve to increase their isolation. Children with mild disabilities are rarely mainstreamed into normal classrooms; many spend their entire childhood in full-time residential homes and experience lasting negative consequences into adulthood. This comes at a time when many nations worldwide have already adopted and implemented comprehensive education policies of inclusion. Without immediate attention to fundamental educational disadvantages facing children with disabilities, Armenia’s special-needs children will continue to have unequal access to education.

This paper will explore both social and economic reasons behind the exclusion of children with special needs from the Armenian education system and society. First, inclusive education will be defined in the specific context of Armenia. Second, major barriers of poverty, insufficient funding, institutionalization, discrimination, and ill-equipped teachers will be examined. The impact and the consequences of poverty on children with disabilities will be addressed throughout the paper due to its substantial role in the denial of access to appropriate learning environments for children with special needs. This will be followed by an evaluation of existing policies in Armenia, then best practices of successful models of inclusive education in similar countries will be analysed to gauge their success. Finally, policy recommendations will be presented for promoting inclusive education that takes into account political and governance realities in Armenia.

1. DEFINING ‘INCLUSION’ IN ARmenIA

‘Inclusive education’ and ‘disability’ are defined according to their diverse contexts and situations. In the particular context of Armenia, and for the purposes of this paper, ‘inclusive education’ will be defined as the placement of children in the least restrictive environment possible with the ultimate aim of healthy, social and academic coexistence, allowing children with special needs to spend time with their peers and to regain a sense of normalcy. While inclusive education should not receive automatic acceptance without a thorough critique, Armenia has historically provided socially and academically inferior education to children with special needs. This definition also applies to children from vulnerable social groups in Armenia that are excluded from mainstream education for reasons other than disability; however, due to the limited scope of this paper, the focus will be on children with special needs.
2. BACKGROUND

Armenia’s slow progress in reforming education for special-needs children is likely rooted in the poor economic situation of the country and national attitudes towards disability. Armenia’s independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 brought with it a wrenching transition to a free market economy, a new democratic government, and the devastating Nagorno-Karabakh war fought with neighbouring Azerbaijan that lasted until 1994. The massive damage to the country’s infrastructure caused by a devastating earthquake in 1988 compounded transitional costs.

Between 1990 and 1993, Armenia’s GDP shrunk to less than half of its previous size, forcing more than half of its population to emigrate in search of better work opportunities abroad; this is still evident in the massive diaspora populating other regions of the world. The unprecedented contraction in GDP was the worst economic decline in the CIS and forced much of the population into poverty (UNICEF 2005). Armenia’s education system was severely affected; the government lacked the resources to provide quality education, and funding for initiating inclusive education did not exist.

In addition to economic instability, national attitudes and opinions concerning disability have also kept many Armenians from advocating for inclusion (UNICEF 2005). While not specific to Armenia, stigmatization plays an important role in understanding the difficulties in implementing inclusive policies in Armenia. Stigmatization and discrimination can perpetuate exclusive policies and can contribute to the difficulties in the implementation of inclusive policies.

3. IMPORTANCE OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

There are clear benefits of inclusive education. From a human-rights perspective, inclusive education guarantees children with disabilities their right to education and helps achieve equality. When children are excluded from education, they are denied a basic human right, as expressed in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. These principles are reflected in the Education For All (EFA) goals, the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Salamanca Framework.

Inclusive education has also grown to be an essential component in democratic education systems; it has been embodied in the EFA goals since their inception in 1990, and in all major international educational standards. According to UNESCO, which is the Secretariat overseeing the EFA goals, “inclusive education is a developmental approach to the learning needs of all children, youth and adults, especially those who are vulnerable to marginalization and exclusion” (2008). In 1994, these goals were solidified in the Salamanca Framework, with its inclusion of the phrase ‘all children must work together’, implying that children should not be singled out or kept from full inclusion. In 2000, in Dakar, Senegal, the goals of inclusion were codified again at the World Education Forum. The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), one of the most active advocates for inclusive education worldwide, agrees with prevailing literature on the importance of inclusive education, evident in the weight given to addressing concerns of inclusion in their international work and reports.

Mainstreaming children with special needs has a positive impact on both social and academic learning for children with and without special needs (Farrell 2000). Socially, inclusion has the potential to facilitate relationships that prove to be mutually beneficial and integral, which also allows the development of awareness of equality and diversity. Academically, inclusive classrooms with specialized teachers are often equipped with multiple pedagogical strategies, such as the use of small groups and more hands-on learning. Research shows that these methodologies improve
learning for all children in the classroom. From a mental-health perspective, practitioners find exclusive practices are both discriminatory and detrimental for cognitive development (UNESCO 2007).

Economically, maintaining an inclusive classroom is more cost effective than an Armenian residential institution (Ainscow and Haile-Giorgis 1998). Many scholars also emphasize the economic benefits of inclusive education, finding that the eventual economic output by Armenians with special needs is much greater when educated in inclusive settings because of the self-sufficiency skills stressed in inclusive classrooms. Ninety per cent of children with disabilities in developing countries do not attend school (CRRC 2007). Not attending school decreases the likelihood of these individuals becoming economically productive members of society. This leaves many adults who have not learned basic skills for self-sufficiency to remain institutionalized for the remainder of their lives because of a lack of employment opportunities for them, and a lack of societal understanding and acceptance of individuals with disabilities.

Armenian law takes a rights-based approach to inclusive education. In 1998, the Armenian Law of the Rights on the Child clearly specified goals for mainstreaming children with special needs. Article 26 of the law states:

The state and its relevant structures guarantee free specialized, medical, psychological care, an opportunity to get basic and special education tailored to abilities, employment and social rehabilitation for children with disabilities and children with physical and mental developmental deficiencies. These children can, if they wish to, study in mainstream schools. The state and its relevant structures create for them special children’s homes, take actions directed at decreasing the number of the disabled children, organise production and acquisition of necessary technical apparatus and equipment for the active functioning of the disabled (Magloutchiants 2002).

This discussion assumes the appropriate implementation of inclusive practices. Inclusive practices that lack sufficient support can provide inadequate educational opportunities for children. After independence, Armenians formed a presidential representative democratic republic with more democratic governance and transparency. However, the government consistently performs poorly on measurements of freedom and political rights (Freedom House 2009). This can centrally affect how the Armenian government controls the school system, including how it implements school reforms and of new policies.

4. SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM: OBSTACLES AND CHALLENGES TO REDUCING EXCLUSION

According to official statistics, there are between 8,000 and 9,000 children documented with disabilities in Armenia; however, the true number is likely much higher due to the severe lack of data, the limited definition of disability and the associated shame that prevents parents from registering their children¹. These children, often neglected, are kept isolated from society and from the greater population. In 2007, the Caucasus Research Resource Centers found that of the disabled children in two Armenian districts (or marzs), Malatia-Sebastia and Shengavit, only 10 to 15 per cent were receiving an education; the situation is more dire in rural schools, when compared to urban schools

¹ As of 1995, this definition was officially changed to include a wider range of disabilities. However, the definition continues to be disputed in some areas of Armenia (Magloutchiants 2002).
in Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States

in Yerevan, the capital. Not only are there few inclusive opportunities, but UNICEF has also reported that only 1,000 children are being educated in mainstream classrooms, where their learning needs were often not being met (UNICEF 2005). Furthermore, during the same UNICEF study, researchers found 130 children in government institutions for learning disabilities who exhibited no signs of disability. This finding alerted researchers and policymakers to the possibility that such institutions were serving more as general caretaking institutions, rather than specialized institutions for those with disabilities.

4.1 Poverty

In 2005, 44 per cent of the Armenian population lived below the poverty line (UNICEF 2005). Among this group, nearly 13 per cent lived in extreme poverty, struggling to afford basic food staples. Parents of children with special needs suffer additional financial burdens, especially in single-parent households, which is a major factor in deciding whether to send children to institutions. These institutions are often special boarding schools located in Yerevan. Because children only stay in the schools during the week, parents must pay for travel to and from the school, which adds additional costs to already financially strained families. The state does not offer substantial financial support and opportunities to reduce the costs to the families of children with special needs. Sending a child to school, with or without a disability, is already a significant expense for families living in poverty. In addition to providing for the special resources that a child with special needs may require, many Armenian schools also require families to purchase school supplies, books, and materials.

4.2 Insufficient funding

In addition to many of Armenia’s citizens living in poverty, the national expenditure on education is extremely low. As a transition country without excess funding, the amount of budgeting dedicated to education has been inadequate to support quality education. Initiating inclusive education reforms is costly because of all the components and training that must be developed (Ainscow and Haile-Giorgis 1998). The percentage of the total GDP of government spending in Armenia fell from 2.2 per cent in 1999, to 1.9 per cent in 2002. By 1998, educational spending had increased to 2.5 per cent. While this increase is commendable, it is far below the OECD average of 4.7 per cent (UNDP-NHDR 2006). Inadequate spending on education not only hurts children with disabilities, but decreases the quality of education for all children. As a result, enrolment rates continue to be below average and the quality of education is lower because of a failure to invest in schools, especially in teacher training, technology, and other necessary educational resources (UNICEF 2005). With reduced funding, these institutions often discontinue social and medical rehabilitation programmes, if they had been implemented at all (Magloutchians 2002).

This downward spiral of reduced services and lower enrolment is evident in the current state of schools in Armenia and the inability to provide adequate supply-side factors. These factors include the provision of heat or adequate water sanitation. In addition, schools cannot provide sufficient books, cannot hire specialized teachers, build resource rooms, construct ramps, or provide other educational resources (UNICEF 2005).

4.3 Institutionalization

Sending children with or without disabilities to poor-quality institutions and special schools deprives them of quality education throughout Armenia, as well as in other former Soviet republics. As a result of the massive shift away from a controlled economy to a market-based economy, the difficulties of
Institutions increased in the ensuing financial instability. Families continued to rely on the social services sector as they had previously, thus enrolment in institutions for the disabled, including children, continued to rise. This held true for state-maintained orphanages as well (UNICEF 2005). In 2001, 5 per cent of children with disabilities lived in orphanages, up from 3.9 per cent in 1989 (Magloutchiants 2002). The same UNICEF study found that nearly 70 per cent of children in orphanages had intact families, whom they would periodically visit. This suggests that these orphanages were used more as a social service, rather than a child protective institution for orphaned children; or as the First Deputy Minister of Social Security, Ashot Yesayan, calls them, “the primary ‘social safety-net’ for their children” (UNICEF 2005).

Remnants of the Soviet system of state provision of social services continue; former Soviet institutions are now overcrowded and do not provide the quality that they did under Soviet rule (Ainscow and Haile-Giorgis 1998). Currently children classified as having disabilities are often only diagnosed with mental retardation and vision impairments, while speech and hearing impairment diagnoses are neglected. Researchers believe that only 4,000 of the 10,000 children currently living in institutions actually have disabilities (Magloutchiants 2002). Parents often believe that institutions can provide better care for their child, even when the child does not have a disability. Given the discrimination surrounding disability, parents are also ashamed to acknowledge disability in their own children. Children are often seen as an additional financial burden on household income, and institutionalization provides a solution. Institutionalization was perceived as one escape from poverty because of the elimination of costs incurred in raising and caring for a child with a disability (UNICEF 2005).

Accountability for the over-reliance on institutionalization rests not only with parents, but with all stakeholders involved in the institutionalization process. When parents do receive a diagnosis from professionals, they must send their child to the placement determined by the state to be the most appropriate, which are most often residential institutions. These factors indicate a need for systemic change, including how children are diagnosed throughout Armenia and how institutionalization is preferred over inclusive education. This bias was evident in the opposition to deinstitutionalization in Armenia; a nationwide effort to integrate children from special schools in more inclusive settings faced great resistance from both the students and staff at the special schools (Abrahamyan 2006). Opponents resisted because they felt that the special schools provided more appropriate care and support that the children required, and that removing them in any form would be detrimental to their social and academic development.

4.4 Societal stigma

In addition to sending children to institutions and orphanages for financial reasons, parents also institutionalize children because of the societal stigma they face if they keep their children. Discrimination against special-needs children exists around the world; however, communism exacerbated the stigma associated with disabilities in Armenia and other post-Soviet countries. Under communist rule, an individual’s value was often based on his or her productivity and capacity to work. When disability (or other factors) prevented this, people that did not fit into the mould were often shunned from society and sent to institutions, where their rights were often forfeited. Parents, especially mothers, faced incredible degrees of stigmatization if they had a special-needs child. In communist China, there continue to be unprecedented rates of mothers committing infanticide of their disabled newborns (Johnson 1996).

Due to the social stigma and fear of humiliation, families are reluctant to register their disabled children with the state, to enrol them in school and to seek specialized care. Traditionally, Armenian
families take care of children with special needs within the home, focusing on care and support and often neglecting education (Magloutchiants 2002). Yet families who do attempt to provide quality education within the home often lack the necessary resources and training required to teach. In 2007, the CRRC collected nationwide data on the conditions of children with disabilities living at home; the study found that these children were often neglected and did not receive any kind of education. Children living at home often suffer additional stigmatization by being confined to the home and excluded from their communities. Ironically, as those living with poverty increased after the economic crisis in 1989, families began registering their children in order to collect disability payments, resulting in a doubling of registered children by 2001 (see Table 1).

4.5 Ill-equipped teachers and facilities

There are very few teacher-training programmes in Armenia that address the needs of children with disabilities. In cases where children have been mainstreamed, they are often placed in classrooms with teachers who are not trained to teach children with special needs (UNICEF 2005). Teachers without specialized training are unaware of specific strategies and tools developed specifically for dealing with the challenges of teaching an inclusive classroom and can be detrimental to children with disabilities.

There are similar challenges with the lack of appropriate and specialized school buildings for inclusion. While a lack of funding is often the cause of this, the importance of facilities must be emphasized. For example, in one inclusive classroom in Yerevan, a child was mainstreamed into a classroom with no wheelchair accommodations. Because of this, the child’s mother had to come to the school four times a day to help move him and take him to the bathroom (UNICEF 2005). While the student was an active participant in his inclusive class, the school had not yet provided the facilities to ensure a successful transition for this student. This example illustrates the lack of structures in place for the transition to more inclusive education. This gap in policy and on-the-ground implementation is a challenge to achieving inclusive education in Armenia.

5. RESEARCH AND BEST PRACTICES

Inclusive practices have been implemented worldwide since the 1980s, with the United States providing much of the impetus for change. The Armenian Ministry of Education and Science can draw on the best practices and research of other nations as they develop and implement effective
policies for their own nation. This section will help inform the final recommendations.

5.1 Poverty

In order to reduce demand-side poverty factors, the government must eliminate costs associated with attending school, such as school supplies and transportation to school, especially for children with special needs. In other nations, projects and programmes have been developed to reduce this financial burden for families. In India, for example, children often receive both breakfast and lunch in schools, so that families are more likely to send their children to school (Afridi 2009). Similar initiatives could alleviate this pressure for Armenian families.

In Armenia, parents are often reluctant to bring children on the limited public transportation options because of the expense and the embarrassment. To address this issue, Armenia partnered with VivaCell and developed a pilot project that provided a van service to transport children from school to home (UNICEF 2008b). This free service allows parents to send their children to school without paying the costs for public transportation.

5.2 Lack of funding

Overall expenditure on education must increase and should include special provisions for special-needs students. In neighbouring Georgia, the state has successfully implemented a national per-pupil funding scheme, where ‘money follows the student’ (Machabeli and Bregvadze 2008). These programmes help to ensure that funding goes directly to students, rather than being passed through many different levels of school bureaucracy. Armenia also has a per-pupil funding scheme that provides additional funding for children with special needs. This additional funding could provide an incentive for schools to introduce inclusive programmes in order to receive additional funding (Machabeli and Bregvadze 2008). In addition, public-private partnerships can provide support, such as the successful transportation partnership with VivaCell and UNICEF. These partnerships would be especially helpful with technology firms that could provide assistance with equipping inclusive schools with appropriate technology that can both assist children with special needs and enhance the learning experiences of all children.

5.3 Institutionalization

Because nations have begun massive deinstitutionalization efforts worldwide, there is a great deal of literature and research surrounding this issue. In the often-cited example of Romanian institutions, the potential harms of institutionalization and successes of both foster care and adoption were applauded. In 1996, UNICEF published a report about the detrimental impact institutionalization has had on children in Romania, which ignited another wave of literature condemning the practice of institutionalization. This report found that children suffered serious cognitive delays in institutions, resulting in lower IQ scores, while children with similar backgrounds who were moved to foster care did not experience any negative cognitive effect.

Other countries have had similar experiences that show the importance of children developing within a familial environment. In Denmark, for example, businesses and vocational programmes offer children with disabilities certain internships to prepare them for specific jobs (Brodsky 1990). This research provides strong evidence for deinstitutionalization. However, it is essential that structures provide alternatives for times when the economy cannot support this kind of initiative.
5.4 Ill-equipped teachers and facilities

In the U.S., specialized teacher-training programmes for inclusive teachers have been developed. First, in many areas, teachers must be certified and must often complete a specialized graduate degree in order to teach in an inclusive classroom. When a graduate degree is required, it is often rewarded with a higher salary. This model increases the likelihood that specialized teachers are in the classroom with children with special needs.

Facilities should also incorporate features of universal design of inclusive classrooms that incorporate inclusive ideals in all aspects of classroom design and pedagogy. Research shows that building classrooms from a meaningful incorporation of these principles can enhance learning in the classroom (Maguire et al. 2003). These elements include:

1. Equitable use: The design is useful and relevant to a wide group of users.
2. Flexibility in use: The design accommodates a wide range of individual preferences and abilities.
3. Simple and intuitive use: The design is easy to understand regardless of the knowledge, experience, language skills or concentration level of the user.
4. Perceptive information: The design communicates information effectively to the user regardless of the ambient condition or the sensory abilities of the user.
5. Tolerance for error: The design minimizes the hazards and adverse consequences of unintended actions of the user.
6. Low physical effort: The design can be used easily, efficiently and comfortably with a minimum of fatigue.
7. Size and space for approach and use: The size and space for approach, reach, manipulation and use should be appropriate regardless of the body size, posture or mobility of the user.
8. Community of learners: The creation of an optimally inclusive environment, which treats all individuals as equals.
9. Instructional climate: The delivery of instruction is not discriminatory towards any learners, yet is also tailored to each individual student (Maguire et al. 2003).

5.5 Social stigma

As discussed previously, stigmatization of individuals exists globally. However, in some areas, policies and programmes have minimized this kind of stigmatization. An innovative programme in the Semy region of Kazakhstan provides a useful model for an effective programme to include children with special needs in society. The government partnered with UNICEF and the Special Olympics for the 2008 Beijing Olympics to run a programme that provides opportunities for children with special needs to participate in sports and fitness training. In addition, the programme includes workshops for children to build their advocacy skills for their rights, so that they can continue their own advocacy in society (UNICEF 2008a).

6. EXISTING POLICIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite international conventions on the rights of special-needs children, Armenia has historically lacked legislation ensuring the right to education for disabled children, which made it legally difficult to protect them from educational exclusion and discrimination. In 1992, Armenia signed on to the
UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which advocates for the protection of fundamental human rights of the child. Article 23 of the CRC declares that states must ensure that “the disabled child has effective access to and receives education” (UNICEF 2005). The following year, Armenia marked two milestones: the enactment of a constitutional right for all Armenian citizens to a free education, and the successful abolition of school fees (UNICEF 2005).

Regarding the incorporation of an inclusive curriculum, the Armenian Law of Education (1999) supports teaching the value of the individual, along with other civic and community responsibilities, which is a considerable shift from the curriculum developed under Soviet rule (UNICEF 2005). This shift in ideologies allows for a more open-minded and accepting approach towards people with disabilities. In 2005, the government officially abandoned outdated terminology referring to children with special needs – terms such as ‘defectology’, ‘orphans’, ‘children deprived of parental care’, and ‘children with extraordinary ability’ (Yesayan 2008). In March 2007, Congress acknowledged this with the signing of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and developed a law requiring the state to take care of graduates from institutions (UNICEF 2005).

While long-term studies are required to gauge the successes of these interventions, there are some clear signs of progress, according to several evaluations. Most notably, the World Bank Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (see below), which evaluates progress towards governmental goals, including inclusive education. On a three-year rotation beginning in 2002, Armenia, along with the IMF and the World Bank, will prepare a comprehensive report on the status of its goals toward reducing poverty.

**7. INCLUSIVE EDUCATION GOALS FROM THE 2008 ARMENIAN POVERTY REDUCTION STRATEGY PAPER**

The 2008 Armenian Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) provides a comprehensive approach regarding how Armenia plans to improve inclusive education in the next decades. Education in Armenia will likely become more inclusive as the government continues to strive for this goal. The PRSP goals are primarily developed by Armenian experts, along with broad consultation services by both the staff of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Some of the relevant policy goals from this report will be noted in order to inform the policy recommendations. The goals pertaining to inclusive education include:

- Doubling financial benefits from 2012 to 2021 to help overcome difficulties for families with children with special needs
- Prioritizing needs of children under 18 with disabilities
- Reforming and renovating existing institutions to comply with international standards
- Prioritizing inclusive education in areas that have higher rates of poverty and vulnerable populations
- Reducing enrolment in child institutions, while also providing social benefits, such as maternal leave, day care and childcare services
- Revising Armenian definition of disability to meet EU standards and the standards of the Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
- Developing social enterprises that train and hire persons with disabilities (World Bank-IMF 2008)
The combined efforts of the government, other agencies and legislation are effectively working towards creating more inclusive education in Armenia, evident in the growing number of children in inclusive programmes (see Table 2). As of 2006, five general schools provided inclusive education, with plans to extend this to at least 17 schools in 2007 (UNDP-NHDR 2006). These schools have parent rooms, resource centers, and specially trained teachers trained in inclusive pedagogy (UNDP-NHDR 2006). With the additional evaluation and regulatory efforts of outside agencies, this progress should continue. While these areas of visible improvements are commendable, they are by no means comprehensive and there remains more to be done. As previously described, the government continues to increase its financial support for inclusive education.

The government is also working with NGOs and UNICEF to pilot new projects, which should continue to receive support. There are day-care centres and community-resource centres designed especially for working with children with special needs. The WB-IMF report confirms these findings and commends the government on recent initiatives to improve not only inclusive education, but to work towards eradicating extreme poverty, which often contributes to children’s exclusion from high-quality inclusive schools.

7.1 Funding

Governmental funding is crucial to improving inclusion. Increases in government spending indicate more involvement and dedication to improving education in the country. The government has set up a system of paying disability for families with children with special needs (WB-IMF 2008). However, when these percentages are compared to Taiwan and Korea, economies with flourishing education systems, which each spend over 15 per cent of their GDP on education, it is apparent that Armenia must continue increasing the percentage. The World Bank has also provided funding for some educational projects. Additionally, the government would spend less money developing inclusive classrooms in the long run than maintaining residential institutions.

7.2 Deinstitutionalization

In addition to increased funding, the government has also created a three-pronged approach to eliminating institutional education facilities: gradual reintegration, foster care and preventing future institutionalization (UNICEF 2005). By implementing tangible steps towards appropriate deinstitutionalization, the likelihood of a gradual transition for children and adults living in residential institutions is increased. NGOs are also deeply involved in this process and have set up community centres and services to help youngsters reintegrate into society. Included in this plan is an attempt to create more family-like conditions in orphanages during the transition, and developing a special training programme for medical professionals working in orphanages (Magloutchiants 2002).

UNICEF is also a driving force in the shift toward more inclusive education. It has supported focused initiatives from 2000 to 2004 to reduce the population of children in institutions, advocates for their slow reintegration back into society, and educates people to understand the dangers of not allowing this process to happen gradually. For example, UNICEF supports children initially staying in

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic Year</th>
<th>Number of Pupils</th>
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<tr>
<td>2001-2002</td>
<td>10 (only one school)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2002-2003</td>
<td>68</td>
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<tr>
<td>2003-2004</td>
<td>81</td>
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<td>2004-2005</td>
<td>138</td>
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<td>2005-2006</td>
<td>165</td>
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<td>2006-2007</td>
<td>257</td>
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Source: UNDP, NHDR, 2006
institutions during the day, but encourages children to come home in the evenings to acclimate back to life with their families (UNICEF 2005). Using this process, UNICEF has helped 250 children integrate from institutions into more inclusive education. Also, the organization helps parents escape poverty and informs them of the benefits of choosing to send their children to mainstream schools, rather than sending them to institutions.

Local and international non-governmental organizations such as Bridge of Hope, World Vision, and Mission East are also developing new and innovative techniques for advancing inclusive education in Armenia (UNICEF 2005). All NGOs working on issues related to children with disabilities have collaborated to promote the social reintegration of these children. As of 2005, centres and services provided by these NGOs had helped 300 children with disabilities. These organizations are also responsible for running four major community centres that care for 400 children in the north-eastern region of Tavoush. Tavoush suffered severely from the conflict with Azerbaijan and has no services or institutions for children with disabilities.

7.3 Public awareness campaigns

The government has also initiated public awareness campaigns to combat prevailing stigmas around children with disabilities. These campaigns describe the dangers of institutionalization and the benefits of alternate approaches, such as foster care and adoption. For example, one of the campaigns involved the government distributing pamphlets describing the merits of inclusive education (UNICEF 2005). Bridge of Hope is one of the largest NGOs promoting inclusive education; it runs five schools in Yerevan, and offers community-based services around the country. It also has a magazine, Sunflower, which primarily publishes student content that helps raise awareness in a positive manner around issues of disability (UNICEF 2005). This magazine is distributed nationwide in schools and is often brought into lessons for children both with and without disabilities.

7.4 Teacher training

Teacher-training programmes in Armenia are beginning to incorporate courses and content related to inclusive education and children with disabilities. In 1998, the Armenian Ministry of Education and Science started the Centre for Educational Reforms, which trains teachers in new pedagogical methods and conducts educational research. The centre provides workshops and in-service professional development opportunities to improve teachers’ knowledge of how to teach children with special needs, and better understand the philosophies behind inclusive education. Also, the World Bank has funded a ten-year assistance project to promote education reform in Armenia, including developing an inclusive curriculum and providing resources for special education (World Bank 2004). The first phase of the plan emphasizes the role of special education in improving the quality and access to education for all Armenian children. Other stakeholders are also getting involved, such as the International Research and Exchanges Board in Armenia (IREX), an international education NGO that sponsored Armenian in-service teacher training programmes that bring innovative teaching methods to students.

Despite these gains in policy development, the greatest obstacle remains that the policies are not implemented. Progress is very slow on the ground. The next section will discuss recommendations for overcoming the barriers discussed above.
8. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The policies of inclusive education are becoming gradually incorporated into Armenia’s philosophies and goals for a successful education system. This progress comes as a result of targeting the previously mentioned challenges and barriers. As Armenia’s economy grows, poverty continues to decrease, boosting overall development of education and allowing more progress towards goals of inclusion. With the decreases in poverty, there has also been a surge in political will to protect marginalized and vulnerable groups, such as children with disabilities. In addition, the government and other key stakeholders have publicly acknowledged the urgent need for inclusive education in several key pieces of legislation and policies. Progress towards inclusive education is also apparent in the move towards nationwide deinstitutionalization of both children and adults, and the beginning of a movement to reintegrate children and adults with disabilities back into society.

However, there continues to be a gap between policy decisions and on-the-ground implementation. In the exceptional cases, such as the previously mentioned school with no wheelchair access, there continue to be insufficient or inappropriate resources. The law specifically mandates that physical provisions be made for all children with disabilities, but it is not being enforced (CRRC 2007). This phenomenon is amplified in rural areas. Following are some of the successful programmes and initiatives that must be supported and continued.

Increase in education funding. Funding for education must continue to increase at the rate that the government forecasts. As presented earlier, this is already happening and the PRSP report predicts that this increase will continue: educational funding is expected to double from 2012 to 2021 (World Bank-IMF 2008). This funding, especially for quality teacher training and salaries and technology, must be carefully allocated to train educators and to bring tools into the classroom that are essential for successful mainstreaming of children. The government should increase funding for pilot programmes with NGOs, such as the Bridge of Hope project. However, funding alone will not bring about systemic change. Funding must also be coupled with incentives to encourage schools to enrol children with special needs.

Deinstitutionalization. All stakeholders must work collaboratively and understand long-term reintegration policies. This requires extensive communication between schools, institutions, parents, and the Ministry of Education. The government must ensure that appropriate training, resources, and materials are channelled into inclusion in a timely manner and that these classrooms are prepared before children with special needs are mainstreamed. Alternative entities can provide some of the structure in the interim, such as community-based centres that provide a higher quality education than institutions, but are not sufficient as a long-term solution.

Public awareness campaigns. The government and other stakeholders must continue to devise innovative and effective strategies to inform the Armenian population about the importance of inclusive education, especially in schools. Pilot projects, such as the Bridge of Hope magazine, Sunflower, should be continued and replicated. Inclusive ideas should also be incorporated into the curriculum in order to reduce discrimination and stigmatization.

Increasing public awareness surrounding children with special needs must coincide with the development of projects that shield children from societal stigmatization. As previously mentioned, the recent partnership of VivaCell and UNICEF, which have teamed up to provide three specialized minivans for children with special needs, should continue (UNICEF 2008b).

Teacher training and facilities. Teacher-training colleges must promote inclusive education as part
of the certification requirements for all teachers. In addition, the government should continue supporting innovative efforts, such as the one by IREX, which provide valuable partnerships with nations that have successfully implemented inclusive programmes. The government should use this data to develop ways of providing education for these children during the transition to integration.

Facilities must be equipped to allow for the successful transition towards mainstreaming students. This requires attention to infrastructural improvements that will benefit all students, such as heating and sanitation needs, to the provision of specialty services for children with special needs, such as assistive technology and wheelchair ramps. The same partnership mentioned between VivaCell and UNICEF has also furnished eight resource rooms in different inclusive schools (UNICEF 2008b).

In order to achieve the ambitious goals set forth in the PRSP, stakeholders must rigorously maintain current effective policies and develop new ones. Using the same framework for existing practices, this discussion demonstrates how a sustained focus on these areas can continue to increase inclusive practices with the end goal of including all Armenian children in education. Increased funding, deinstitutionalization, public awareness programmes and improved teacher training provide the most effective and promising tools for improving inclusive education, yet they must be planned and developed for the specific needs of Armenia and must be critiqued in light of political realities in Armenia.

9. CONCLUSION

This paper highlights how the crucial components of inclusive education policies are ultimately economic: the reduction of poverty, provision of disability payments to families, and giving adequate funding to teachers and schools. However, these economic factors must be combined with a comprehensive long-term plan to deinstitutionalize children, except in the most extreme cases and only in high-quality institutions. The government must also increase its dedication to dispelling societal stigmas around disabilities. At the same time, teachers must be trained and equipped with tools and skills for teaching inclusive classrooms. If the current trajectory of policy and legislation is successful and promotes collaboration with local groups and NGOs, Armenia will see the development of more inclusive classrooms in the future. Most importantly, as Armenia continues to develop more inclusive policies, policymakers and stakeholders must address the gap between policy development and implementation.

References

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