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Perceptions of General Education Teachers Working in Inclusive Schools in Armenia: A Preliminary Study

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Annotation. In Armenia, the inclusion of students with special needs in regular classrooms underscores the need for robust support for teachers, students, and communities. This article explores general education teachers' views on inclusion, emphasizing the need for extensive training and better resources to achieve effective inclusivity.

Introduction

There is extensive literature showing that children with special educational needs (SEN) can be included and educated in regular education settings (Nilholm & Alm, 2010; Ruijs & Peetsma, 2009; Leatherman, 2007). Within this framework, the general education teacher's role is to make inclusion work. Their positive attitudes towards inclusive education are a prerequisite for its successful implementation (Saloviita, 2020). Although the push for schools to educate children with SEN within the general education classroom is more recent, inclusion is not a new idea. The concept of inclusion is based on human rights for equal treatment and on the goal in education for all Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2006). The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities strengthened the ideology that SEN should not be segregated, if not it should be included in general classrooms (Perles, 2015; Egilson & Traustadottir,

2009; Goleman, 2006). Effectively implementing inclusive education is a multifaceted endeavor that necessitates not only the enactment of appropriate legislation but also the active participation of diverse stakeholders in decision-making processes. Furthermore, it is essential to dispel outdated stereotypes that have historically marginalized children with SEN in order to minimize educational and social exclusion (Pappas et al., 2018; Nilson & Townsend, 2010).

However, the preparation and the support for general education teachers working with such children in inclusive schools can be a challenge around the world (Loreman et al., 2013; Ballhys & Flager, 2011; Leatherman, 2007; Lopes et al., 2004). At the same time, the positive influence of self-efficacy on attitudes is assumed by Savolainen et al. (2022). Moreover, the important role of attitudes and self-efficacy as potential predictors of the way teachers engage in developing inclusive practices is highlighted. Although inclusion is a relatively new policy in Armenia, the teachers providing inclusive education tend to receive their inclusion-oriented training after they have entered the classroom.

Inclusion in Armenia

Armenia, with its 1600 years of educational history, has always prioritized education. Schools have traditionally played an important role in nurturing political and national identity since the institution bases have helped to preserve the national identity, language, and culture.

Although the UN Convention on Disability Rights was adopted in 2006 and ratified by Armenia in 2010, Armenia had already taken a proactive step towards inclusion by implementing inclusive education in 2005. This commitment was further supported by projects like "Toward Education for All", initiated by Armenian NGOs in 2003 with government backing.

The main goal of this project is to establish and promote inclusive education in Armenia for students with SEN, giving equal opportunity to education to all children.

Five schools in Yerevan, the capital, started implementing inclusive education with the project's assistance. In 2005, inclusive education was formally adopted as a national policy, and a portion of the education budget was allocated to its development. Based on Protocol decision N6 of the Government of Armenia[1] in 2016, in Syunik region and in 2017, in Lori and Tavush regions the following initiatives were carried out: regional pedagogical-psychological support center foundation (through special schools' transition to support centers); newly created regional pedagogical-psychological support center staff's training by National Institute of Education experts; children from special schools' allocation in inclusive schools; teacher assistant position in inclusive schools implemented (one teacher assistant per 100–150 children); the raised scale of funding for children with SEN in accordance with child needs implementation.

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[1] Republic of Armenia Government. (2016, February 18). On approving the action plan and schedule for the implementation of the universal inclusive education system (Protocol Decision N6).

Further on, the Resolution N1058-N of the Government of the Republic of Armenia[2] has regulated the frame of activities performed by these centers. Also, the services provided by republican and regional pedagogical-psychological support centers were expounded by Decree N 370 of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Armenia as of 13.04.2017. Already today, all regions are included in the process of universal inclusive education in the Republic of Armenia and very few special schools operating in the country. Actually, almost all the schools in Armenia deal with children with SEN, but a scarce number of general education teachers have participated in training or educational programs to master the methods of effective teaching of children with SEN (see the Assessment of Implementation of Inclusive Education in the Republic of Armenia, 2013). Presently, there is no structure or special program for teachers in Armenia to train them to work in inclusive classes with diverse children despite the pressing need. Still, it's fairer and more ethical for all children to have equal access to mainstream education (Thomas, 2003). At the same time, the existing research evidence regarding inclusion in schools derives from European countries and the USA (McWhirter et al., 2016; Pesonen, 2016; Tournaki & Samuels, 2016; Urton et al., 2014; Engelbrecht et al., 2015; Friend et al., 2011). The results of these researches are often quite different from the situation educators are currently facing in Armenia, as new experience instances are always initially based on the context of some familiar, reliable reality conception in which people must be able to attach personal meaning to experiences, regardless of how meaningful they might be to others (Fullan, 2015).

Schooling System in Armenia

In 2006, Armenia completed its transition from the Soviet-era system of 10-year schooling to the 12-year-long educational cycle. The current National Curriculum for General Education consists of compulsory primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary schools. The Law on General Education of the Republic of Armenia (2009) states that there should be no more than 35 pupils in one class, and no more than three children with SEN in the same class (Education in Armenia: A System in Transition, 2013; the Law of the Republic of Armenia on General Education, 2009). In Armenia, children with SEN are defined as those with autism spectrum disorder, including Asperger's syndrome, attention deficit (hyperactivity) disorder, and specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia, obsessive compulsive disorder, and communication difficulties. In addition, medical conditions, such as epilepsy, cerebral palsy, and mobility difficulties, might require special educational attention.

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[2] Republic of Armenia Government. (2016, October 13). Resolution on defining the model charters and list of republican and territorial pedagogical and psychological support centers (Resolution N1058-N).

As the specialized literature clearly indicates (Khochen & Radford, 2012), the development of inclusive education has varied in different countries. Therefore, the medical issues, defined as special needs in Armenia, may not require special education in many countries in Europe, if not requiring some physical arrangements of the learning environment. The classification of special needs in Armenia historically has used the medical model of disability more than the social model that has been more commonly used in Europe (Schwab et al., 2015; Page, 2014; Powell, 2010; Reindal, 2008). Armenia is gradually moving towards the social model. As an example of this, the Armenian government recently accepted the World Health Organization's International Classification of Function (2007) as the basis of disability determination and rehabilitation (RA Government protocol decision N1, 2014; World Health Organization, 2007).

According to the Armenian Government's statement, by the year 2025, all of the schools in Armenia will provide inclusive education (see the Armenian Government Strategical Report for 2022–2025, 2022). This means that school staff, teachers, parents, and children with and without SEN need to be trained to be prepared for this new educational reality. Already today, almost all schools in Armenia have shifted to the full model of Inclusive education (Harutyunyan, 2023).

Teacher Education in Armenia

Teacher education in Armenia is regulated by the Law of the Republic of Armenia on Higher, Postgraduate, and Professional Education (2004). Presently, teacher qualifications are taught by the secondary vocational and higher professional educational institutions. The qualification requirements for a primary school teacher are a Bachelor's degree. Principals and deputy principals at a secondary school, on the other hand, require a Master's degree in the field of Pedagogy. Consequently, teacher education in Armenia is provided through four different systems. A teacher can be trained in secondary vocational schools (for 2 years), educational institutions or universities (for 4 years (Bachelor-degree program) and for 2 years (Master-degree program)), the National Institute of Education of Armenia (the duration depends on the program), or by international organizations or non-governmental organizations through in-service teacher-training projects. During their training, potential teachers must participate in a teaching-practice (pedagogical internship) in schools (Education in Armenia, 2013).

According to the law, schools should have close ties with regional pedagogical-psychological support centers with a diverse team of professionals, such as speech and language therapists, special educators, teachers for students with hearing, visual, or dual sensory impairments, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, and psychologists, who provide services primarily in schools. They collaborate with teachers and parents to comprehensively evaluate students' academic and nonacademic abilities.

Due to the fact related to policy changes, children with SEN are increasingly being included in general classrooms. This shift can partly be attributed to the greater emphasis

that is now placed on collaborative practices among educational professionals (Mcleskey et al., 2012).

While a multidisciplinary team is responsible for developing individualized education plans for students with SEN, the availability of support staff like paraprofessionals is scarce.

This is the main reason, why many parents have to accompany their children to school and provide additional support during the school day. Some parents, who have the opportunity, hire a tutor to help their child with SEN in an inclusive environment.

This informal arrangement places a substantial burden on parents of SEN. In a study conducted by the Open Society Foundation in Armenia (2013), 63% of the 600 teachers who participated confirmed that they had received training in an inclusive education. Out of the 600 participants, 62% were trained only once since teaching in inclusive school. In addition, 50% of those teachers who were trained did not remember the name of the organization that conducted the training, and 43% of the trained teachers could not recall the topic of the training beyond remembering that it was about inclusive education (Assessment of Implementation of Inclusive Education in the Republic of Armenia, 2013).

As this survey showed, the current approach based only on one-time training and formal preparation of teachers in inclusive schools may not lead to the desired result. According to the study, the effectiveness of teacher training does not meet its goals. The problems are also compounded by the need for interdisciplinary teams experienced by students with SEN, which prevents them from receiving the support and education they need. Moreover, the growth trends of an inclusive society and its funding sources still need to be determined, thereby creating barriers to the successful implementation of inclusive education.

The aim of the study

This study aims to explore the attitudes of teachers of general education institutions in Armenia towards their inclusive education experience. The goal of the project is to answer the question: how do teachers understand and interpret inclusive education based on their interactions with students with special educational needs in inclusive schools in Armenia? A qualitative research approach was used to delve deeply into teachers' personal experiences and perceptions as it is most suitable for collecting and analyzing individual experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Research Design and Methodology

According to Bandura (2001) Social Cognitive Theory forms the foundation of this research, examining the interplay of personal factors (beliefs, attitudes), behaviors (teaching practices), and environmental influences (school culture, support systems) (Bard,

Google AI, 2023). It examines the causal relationship between teachers' perceptions of inclusion (self-efficacy, performance expectations) and behaviors such as collaboration and differentiated instruction and how factors such as resources, training, and administration shape them. This approach identifies the underlying causes of teachers' specific concerns, perceived challenges, and potential motivators for implementing inclusive practices, which are discussed in detail in the results and discussion sections.

Method

To understand the possible potential of teachers in inclusive schools operating in Armenia, five schools that started this educational approach in Yerevan in 2003 were selected for an exploratory study (Bernard, 2000).

Elementary school teachers with over five years of experience in inclusive education were selected from these five schools as participants. Principals identified these teachers, who were then informed about the study's purpose by the researcher through a consent form. Two volunteers from each school were ultimately chosen for the study. These teachers worked with students diagnosed with autism, cerebral palsy, hearing impairments, and behavioral and emotional challenges.

Participants

Ten participants from five inclusive schools were interviewed using open-ended questions. Table 1 shows the demographic information, and the duration of interviews, for each participant.

Table 1

Demographic Information of Participants and Duration of the Two Interviews.

Participant	Number of schools she works	Duration of Special Education training	Teaching experience (years)	Duration of the interview (minutes)
Teacher 1	1	1 day	7	40
Teacher 2	1	1 week	8	38
Teacher 3	2	Twice: 2 days; 3 days	10	35
Teacher 4	2	None	6	32
Teacher 5	3	1 day	7	42
Teacher 6	3	1 week	11	36
Teacher 7	4	2 days	9	35
Teacher 8	4	None	6	41
Teacher 9	5	Twice: 1 day; 2 days	7	37
Teacher 10	5	3 days	8	48

All the teachers were female with a mean age of 32 (ranging from 28 to 60). During their work period, the teachers received a range of special education/inclusion training to different extents: from no training to minimal training. The teachers had 22–34 students in their classrooms, with 2–5 identified with special needs (Table 2).

Table 2

Number of Children With Special Needs (According to Their Disability) in the Classes of Participant Teachers

Participant	Children with			
	Autism spectrum disorder	Cerebral Palsy	Hearing impairments	Behavioral and emotional problems
Teacher 1	1	1	x	1
Teacher 2	1	x	1	2
Teacher 3	x	2	x	2
Teacher 4	1	1	1	1
Teacher 5	1	1	x	x
Teacher 6	1	x	1	2
Teacher 7	2	1	1	1
Teacher 8	1	2	1	1
Teacher 9	1	2	x	2
Teacher 10	1	1	x	x

The mean number of pupils in the schools was 500. The members of the multidisciplinary team in these schools typically included a psychologist, and a speech therapist.

Since there are no institutional research ethics board in Armenia, an institutional review of the research question couldn't be conducted. Thus, the permission was gained from the principals and teachers via a written research proposal informing potential participants on the research aim, their rights, and the researcher's ethical obligations.

Procedure and Data Collection

Interviews were conducted by the first author of this study and were audio-recorded. The data was collected through in-depth face-to-face interviews with ten participants. An interview provided the opportunity for the participants to freely respond to the questions and to talk about their perceptions (Boyce & Neale, 2006). The questions were open-ended, focusing on how each teacher worked to include children with SEN in their classroom activities. All interviews were conducted in the Armenian language, and each

participant was interviewed once. All the teachers involved were interviewed after school hours in their classrooms – with only the teacher and the interviewer present. The mean duration of the interviews was 30 minutes, with a range of 32–48 minutes. The expert in the field of special and inclusive education, an associated professor of the Armenian State Pedagogical University was asked to read the transcribed data as an interrater of reliability to determine the three themes identified by the first author. The themes presented were quite close to the ones outlined by the authors.

Data Analysis

Content analysis was used to study the teachers' experiences (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Mayring, 2000; Morse & Field, 1995). The data analysis was based on the summative content analysis method, which helped to search, analyze, identify, and report the key categories within the data (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992). For this purpose, ATLAS.ti software was used to uncover and systematically analyze complex occurrences hidden in unstructured data (Lewins & Silver, 2007). The adopted procedure involved four steps. First, the audio-recorded data was transcribed into text. Then, the text was read and re-read. Based on the research question, meaning units were outlined. Next, the sub-categories were identified from the responses. Finally, emerging main categories were defined, refined, and named (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). All involved continuous interpretation of the interview transcripts in relation to the research questions.

Results

The analysis of the interview data revealed four distinct subcategories of concerns. These subcategories were then consolidated into two overarching themes: practical and ideological concerns, which effectively captured the most prevalent issues raised by the participants. This summary of the findings is presented in Table 3.

Table 3
Main Themes and Subcategories

Practical perspective	Knowledge demand, support
	Need for environmental changes
Ideological/Awareness perspective	Human rights
	Inclusive ideology

Key themes emerged from the study, reflecting both practical and ideological concerns.

The details of the findings are shown below. All teachers had expressed concern, and although they supported inclusion, they also felt unprepared to implement it successfully. They worked in schools serving children with special needs. Still, the transition to inclusive education was made by the government without prior preparation, leaving administrators and teachers feeling unprepared and uninvolved. The consequence of this dramatic change was that all participants felt a lack of influence in the decision-making process and a lack of adequate preparation to cope with such significant changes (Bard, Google AI, 2023).

The first major topic is: "Practical Perspective" – including the sub-categories "Knowledge Demand and Need for Environmental Change".

A key feeling among participants was a sense of inadequacy in meeting the varied needs of their students in inclusive settings, with all but one person seeking additional support from professional colleagues. Developing sufficient knowledge and skills was a common concern among all participants.

Many of the teachers were general education teachers with no prior special education/ training at the university level. Five teachers had only passed short-term (1–2 day-long) seminars with an average duration of 6–10 hours, which was not sufficient for preparing them to teach effectively in inclusive classrooms. The teachers stated that they would like to have deeper, ongoing training with broader perspectives to be able to get acquainted with the work of different professionals regarding inclusive education. *"There are more than 20 pupils in the classroom... In many cases, the teacher mostly concentrates on special needs children…and the others are ignored. They suffer, and this happens because we do not know how to organize this process. We are all alone without sufficient knowledge or information."* [T4]. Her concern was echoed repeatedly by the other teachers interviewed. All ten participants considered this issue to be the most essential change necessary for their success as teachers in an inclusive class.

The opportunity to work with others, to share with colleagues, and to ask specialists for assistance was vital for the eight teachers interviewed. For instance, they considered it helpful to have mentors always available there. Therefore, the need for help from other specialists was outlined as an important issue. *"We need specialists to support us for understanding the child's needs, parent's perceptions and preparation of parents for guidance in different areas of child's life...and to instruct us how to deal with children with autism, cerebral palsy, children with behavioral and emotional problems."* [T3]. Meanwhile, it is crucial to know that multidisciplinary team existed in all the selected schools, but those professionals were mostly engaged in the work with children and not the teachers. Teachers demanded consultations with available experts to support their work with children with different abilities. They wanted assistance, group work, and supportive guidance which they reported they did not receive. All the participants stated that they had begun

to understand children's needs only after working with them, and they reported that more understanding required more interaction time with the child. Accordingly, they complained of overloaded classes and often blamed themselves for what they perceived as a poor educational experience for the students with special needs. *"There are more than 20 pupils in the classroom... This is too much… Often teachers mostly concentrated on the special needs children…and the others are unseen. They suffer, and this affects the future of generations which is very harmful"* [T9].

Seven teachers mentioned, as a very negative point of their own experience, the presence of parents or hired (private) tutors during the classes to support their child in the inclusive setting. *"You have 22 students in your class and four of them are with special needs, and every day during your classes parents of all these four children are presented to take care of their children…this is terrible as for them, as well as for me…"* This informal policy placed an unreasonable burden on parents of children with SEN, as they can't have their own private life, can't go to work, and their basic daily routine is mostly connected only to the child with special needs.

The challenges of the physical environment were the initial problem in the implementation of inclusive education in Armenia. Accessibility in schools and in public places was, and continues to be, a challenge. All teachers interviewed highlighted the importance of environmental accessibility and further changes to the whole environment for a more inclusive society. The environment needs adjustments in order to implement the inclusive education approach most effectively. Teachers experienced serious difficulties in their current schools because of the special physical needs of their students. *"There are children using wheelchairs. They may have no learning problems and work very well… But always due to environmental conditions…they face serious difficulties. Our schools are not modified for wheelchair users."* [T2]. The school buildings didn't allow children to feel free or to be able to participate fully and independently in the school life. The same applied to the nearby communities as well as public spaces, and public transportation.

These restrictions violate children's rights to full and accurate inclusion in schools and their country.

The Second Theme: Ideological/Awareness Perspective

The third theme was broadest since it included beliefs, attitudes, and philosophical considerations. The values of inclusive education seemed to be very important for teachers who were teaching in inclusive classrooms. *"Alongside many challenges, we can see some positive outcomes, and I can prove to any teacher in our country that inclusive education has positive results already…If the child isn't in ordinary school…he/she is weak from a social perspective, he is isolated and has a very poor life experience…All the children gain more social experience, and that is more important than academic knowledge."* [T3].

Five teachers emphasized the importance of inclusion as a foundational principle of inclusive education.

They reported that daily interaction between students with and without disabilities created a supportive environment that promoted mutual understanding, empathy, and positivity among all students. It was also noted that inclusive classrooms bring diversity, which creates an enabling environment for students to naturally and comfortably accept differences.

Four participants stated that children with SEN were happy with the inclusive environment.

For the teachers and the parents, satisfaction was the most significant outcome. Fortunately, all the pupils in the class were believed to be benefiting from inclusive education. Despite the benefit, many problems did exist related to the attitudes of others outside of the classroom toward the children with SEN. *"Students (without special needs) in the class may recognize the children with special educational needs like they are. They are real friends. They try to help and support them… But many problems come from the attitude of parents, when they can ban this relationship…"* [T1]. Nevertheless, the attitudes of some people outside of the classroom can still affect interactions within the school.

It's worth mentioning that all the participants demonstrated a strong sense of purpose and motivation to ensure that all the children in their classrooms had equal opportunities. They firmly believed that every child has the fundamental right to both life and education. While these opportunities haven't always been accessible to all students in Armenia, teachers advocate for their universal availability within the school system and ultimately throughout Armenian society. In contrast to the very personal, inwardly reflective nature of the first theme, in the second one, the teachers turned their focus toward the Armenian society.

Six participants mentioned the importance of reviewing the terminology regarding the inclusion. Children with SEN very often refused to go to school because they were called "included" and this, all again, highlighted the role of the school and teachers. This may be considered a holistic view since it attempts to understand the meaning and the importance of recognizing children with SEN as full members of the Armenian society and not segregating them even within the inclusive society. *"Inclusion is not only about disabled children…It is about help, support, it is about everyone, so we should take care of the terminology, children should never get "nicknames". Schools need to be public and not inclusive… It has something to do with the public, it should not hurt any child."* [T7].

The teachers wanted to include, rather than segregate, in order to prevent isolation from the external world.

Discussion

The findings of this study shed light on the perspectives of 10 general education teachers who were working with students with diverse disabilities in inclusive classrooms. The

teachers' experiences echoed the typical challenges encountered by schools implementing inclusion for the first time, as documented by Khochen and Radford (2012).

The teachers' perceptions fell into two main themes and four subcategories within those themes. The first theme was identified as the Practical Perspective. The general education participants recognized that they were not sufficiently trained on how to implement inclusion successfully. Sufficient preparation was not offered during their teacher-training years or afterwards while the teacher was working in schools with diverse children. Another issue identified was the lack of regular consultation with other professionals and experts. This lack of support was also found in the research conducted by Friend et al. (2011) in North Carolina, USA. Training and support would be necessary to successfully teach within an inclusive classroom. Similar experiences are reported elsewhere – as shown in the research by Engelbrecht et al. (2015). It is recommended to develop a special training course for general education teachers and estimate the period during which every teacher should participate in this course and get credits and certificates. This kind of trainings should be led by the qualified bodies and should have life-long character to support each teacher in their daily work. At the same time, multidisciplinary team members from regional pedagogical-psychological support centers should actively collaborate and provide consultancy to all teachers and parents. This scheme should be included in the policy as effective consultation has to precisely assess situations and develop creative and successful ideas, it may also make compound strategies practical, reasonable, and personalized to the teachers applying them.

The second theme revealed can be called the Ideological/Awareness Perspective. The teachers involved in this study experienced that the public is responsible for creating an inclusive society first, and this new, hopefully more inclusive society, would lead to inclusive schooling. There is a contradiction between the concepts suggested by Thomas (2009), as he states that inclusive society begins with the schools and then the society gradually becomes more inclusive. Within this scope, teachers should accept the importance of school and their roles in this public framework. However, of course, they cannot do it alone. Teachers point to the human desire to belong, which can be fostered by meaningful activities in everyday social context (Savolainen et al., 2022; Pesonen, 2016; Perles, 2015; Goleman, 2006). The attitude toward children by calling them "included" sets a real burden over promoting the ideology/awareness and the process of inclusion smooth. Inclusion refers to justice and to the access to education for all, regardless of age, ability, gender, social class, or other differences (Nilson & Townsend, 2010). It is about public, so segregation here is not acceptable. The fact that parents accompanying their children with SEN to school in order to provide them assistance seems to be very distressing. While talking about this, it is important to recommend the implementation of teacher assistants' institution within the system of inclusive education – totally different from the one already existing. Parents need to have their own private time and teachers in schools should not be overloaded by their presence during school day. Here teachers'

assistants are the one and only efficient and prolific solution that should be implemented by the government on the well assessed and right background. Nevertheless, there is a need to understand if it is pupils' assistant in reality or teachers' and only then to reflect the status and primary responsibilities.

The teachers expressed their support for the idea of inclusion as well as to the human right for equal education for all children. Teachers considered inclusive education vital, and this goes in line with Savolainen et al. (2022). The authors concluded that teachers' self-efficacy predicts their attitudes towards inclusive education, especially teachers' concerns towards carrying out inclusive teaching in their own classrooms. Theoretically, teachers perceived inclusive schools to be focal and meaningful for the development of all children. Furthermore, they realized the fact that these schools didn't provide the equal opportunities for children with SEN. The most significant recommendation should be delivered to ministries and policy makers to take into consideration all the points made by teachers coming from the field and experiencing all the difficulties on a daily basis. Still much research needs to be carried out, and only based on results new mandatory recommendations need to be stated. Unfortunately, research is missing in the country on the policy-making level: the respective researches are mostly conducted by non-governmental or international organizations, and the results very often are not taken into account.

In summary, the teacher interviewed in the present study commented primarily on the everyday challenges of inclusion faced (e.g., lack of professional personnel support, oversized learner's groups). The teachers expressed feelings of worry and frustration. Some even commented that they did not feel qualified to do the important job they were required to do. However, they all also reported that they could see the bigger picture, the importance of inclusion.

It was also stated that the necessary tools were not provided for the correct functioning of inclusiveness.

Social cognitive theory, as the fundamental theoretical basis of this study, allows to generalize some personal factors and behavior patterns of the participants. Teachers were alarmed and frustrated as they described the daily challenges of inclusion, struggling with insufficient support, and giant classrooms. Some doubted their abilities because they were unprepared for such an important task. Despite all the negative aspects, all participants clearly understood the importance of inclusion. At the same time, they felt that they could not effectively implement the tasks to create a successful, inclusive environment due to a lack of necessary resources and training.

We should also admit some limitations that this study assumes. First of all, the qualitative methods very often do not allow generalizability due to the small number of participants. Therefore, the findings might be seen as a delimited collection of evidence against the larger experiences of teachers working in inclusive schools. The fact that participants were interviewed individually, without the use of other measures like in-class

observations, should be considered a limitation too. In addition, the research sample drew only from the capital city, so the rural areas were not represented. Besides, all the teacher-participants were involved upon the school principals' recommendation, which might be viewed as an assailable fact too. However, similar results about challenges of inclusion have been reported by the studies conducted by Egilson and Traustadott (2009) in Iceland, and Friend et al. (2011) in the USA. The authors mention the importance of active and full participation in school as a positive influential factor for the development of children with SEN both socially and cognitively. Learning and teaching in this regard need to be acknowledged and emphasized through their interpretation of events and experiences.

Conclusion

Although still in its infancy, inclusion in the Armenian educational system is increasing. The old, categorical system of special education, based on the medical model, is beginning to change (Kapranov, 2011). Historically, the general attitude towards children with SEN has not been highly positive. Nowadays, those fears and anxieties still exist among many parents of children with SEN as well as general teachers. Now, the government is intending to modernize schools, and for this purpose, they have already required the universal inclusive education. However, the emergence of this new system has been a bumpy path providing little support for the general and special education teachers who are meant to fulfill this new policy. As evidence of this, the teachers involved in this study revealed that they commonly felt neglected and insufficiently trained to realize their perception of what inclusion should entail. They tended to blame themselves for the shortcomings and challenges while implementing inclusion in their schools. These results are supported by the research of Anapiosyan et al. (2014).

Practical and ideological issues appeared as two main categories which do not yet fit together in Armenia. Armenia's journey towards inclusive education aligns with the stages described by Fullan (2015). They are currently in the implementation phase, actively putting the policy into practice across schools. Over time, as the system becomes embedded and accepted, it will likely move towards the institutionalization stage, where inclusive education becomes the norm.

In order to directly address the issues identified by the teachers of this study, changes need to occur at many levels. Firstly, ensuring the success of inclusion requires a critical review of the curriculum for elementary teachers in pedagogical universities and faculties. The content of their coursework needs adjustments to align with the demands of inclusive classrooms.

Relatedly, teachers in training need to have experiences with children having SEN (with "master teachers") as well as inclusion classroom. Secondly, the current plan for

training teachers who are already working in inclusive classrooms does not appear to work effectively. The quality and quantity of the training in Armenia vary greatly from school to school and province to province (UNICEF, 2012). And thirdly, the support training for teachers already teaching in inclusive schools needs to be more widely and consistently available for teachers who are facing the most challenging inclusion issues such as challenging behavior and significant curriculum adjustments.

Based on the all directions mentioned above future research directions are required in the field of teacher training and education, in the area of cooperation between teachers and psycho-pedagogical support service specialist, parents of children with SEN to understand their satisfaction and challenges related to system changes and children as well. Thus, more research and theory development on the holistic aspects of inclusion in the society is strongly needed.

Acknowledgements

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Armėnijos bendrojo lavinimo mokyklų mokytojų, dirbančių inkliuzinėse mokyklose, patirtys: įžanginis tyrimas

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Santrauka

Įtraukusis ugdymas yra viena iš naujausių tendencijų Armėnijoje: specialiųjų poreikių mokiniai integruojami į bendrą klasės aplinką. Šiame tyrime pristatomas bendrojo ugdymo mokytojų inkliuzijos proceso suvokimas. Įgyvendinant šį tyrimą mokytojai atsiduria dėmesio centre, todėl jie atitinkamai veikia kaip geriausi informantai. Siekiant įsigilinti į mokytojų asmeninę patirtį ir suvokimą, taikytas kokybinis tyrimo metodas. Atlikus interviu su 10 mokytojų, nustatyta, kad, nors mokytojams patinka inkliuzijos etosas, tačiau jie mano, kad yra prastai pasirengę tai įgyvendinti praktiškai ir negauna paramos. Tai rodo, kad mokytojams trūksta reikiamų įgūdžių ir žinių. Tyrimu įrodyta, kad, norint sukurti veiksmingą paramos sistemą, skubiai reikalingi nuolatiniai mokymai ir kvalifikacijos kėlimas mokytojams, kad būtų sudarytos palankios sąlygos visų mokinių ugdymui. Tyrimo rezultatai atskleidžia, kad tikslinga įgyvendinti švietimo reformas įtraukiai švietimo aplinkai sukurti. Be to, reikia gerinti mokymo programų kokybę, skirstyti išteklius ir taikyti įtraukųjį požiūrį, apimantį įvairias švietimo sistemos suinteresuotąsias šalis. Remiantis šiomis išvadomis, rekomenduojama suformuoti strateginę kryptį, kurioje būtų numatoma aprūpinti mokytojus priemonėmis ir suteikti paramą įtraukios aplinkos visiems besimokantiesiems kūrimui.

Esminiai žodžiai: *įtrauktis, įtraukusis ugdymas, specialiųjų poreikių mokiniai, mokytojų kompetencija, mokytojų suvokimas, bendrojo ugdymo klasė.*