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ARMENIA: AN ISSUE OF DISABILITY INCLUSIVITY IN EDUCATION

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Internationally, disability inclusivity within education is a prominent issue. Disabled children often face discrimination and lack of access for a multitude of reasons, with negative societal attitudes and limited resources preventing them from reaching their full potential. For those with special educational needs (SEN), this prevails even more so. Armenia exemplifies this issue, with a 2016 survey concluding 71% of people thought physically disabled children should be in mainstream education, comparative to just 40% for those with SEN. People suggested these children should be educated in residential institutions, particularly in rural areas. Resultingly, they are often excluded from accessing key educational resources.

This problem begins before students reach the classroom. 90% of Armenian teachers feel they lack methodologies to include SEN pupils into classroom activities; in many cases this has led

to designating a corner for SEN children to play so they do not “disturb” the class. Disabled pupils are therefore missing out on teaching and educational resources, significantly limiting their opportunities for progress, and highlighting the need for reforms in teacher training.

In 2014, the Armenian government passed a law and pledged financial support for disabled children to be accepted into mainstream education by 2025. Whilst this set the foundation for educational rights, the focus was on deinstitutionalisation as opposed to creating an inclusive environment where needs can be adequately addressed, meaning schools are taking in students they cannot provide resources for. The oftentimes ambiguous criterion for SEN means many teachers feel unable to anticipate needs and prepare accordingly, furthering this issue. School infrastructure also poses a major problem; only 1/5 of the 1408 schools in Armenia can accommodate children with a variety of additional needs. Many schools were built during the Soviet Union period and have not been adapted, partially due to funding restrictions. This means essential accommodations like wheelchair ramps and disabled toilets are not available in most mainstream schools.

Despite the challenges, there are driving forces for change. In 1996, parents of disabled children in Armenia who wanted to be in mainstream education, but faced opposition founded the ‘Bridge of Hope’ organisation. Partnering with the Ministry of Education and Science led to country-wide implementation of the programme. The number of children in special needs schools has since declined, falling from 10,000 in 2002 to 650 in 2022.

Furthermore, as of 2019, the areas of Yerevan, Shirak, and Aragatsotn claimed to have adopted to a fully inclusive education system. However, real inclusivity and integration still requires many changes of policy, attitudes, and physical accessibility. Armenia is yet to adopt comprehensive legislation in response to the United Nations Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and has not been meeting the goals they had initially set themselves. For instance, the 2025 goal for integration into mainstream education was originally 2022, but they failed to meet this. Alongside the fact that existing reforms often overlook key areas such as pre-school, lifelong learning, and social activities, this highlights the importance of continued efforts to raise awareness and incite change.

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Story of solidarity:

Assistance from UNICEF has allowed 8 Pedagogical-Psychological Support Centres (PPSCs) to be set up in the regions of Syunik, Lori, and Tavush. Here, mainstream schools can access professional support on improving their inclusive practices, culture, and policies, meaning genuine integration, as opposed to surface-level inclusivity can happen.

Sources:

1. **UNICEF**
2. **Education Profiles**
3. **Inclusive Education Armenia**
4. **UNESCO Armenia**