

**STUDENTS' ATTITUDE TOWARDS THEIR PEERS WITH DISABILITIES:
CASE OF GYUMRI SCHOOLS
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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aims to understand children's attitudes toward their peers with disabilities in the city of Gyumri (Armenia). As the inclusion of students with disabilities in regular schools has been increasingly promoted worldwide in the last few decades, starting from 2016, full (universal) inclusive education entered into force in Armenia, and children with and without disabilities are included in the classrooms in all regular schools in the country. Based on the new changes related to inclusive education, the research on children's attitudes toward their peers with disabilities is valuable and essential.

Method: A narrative qualitative approach is used as a methodological basis of this study to uncover the attitudes of non-disabled students towards their peers with disabilities. Qualitative in-depth interviews with 60 students from inclusive schools in Gyumri have been conducted within one month. Analysis of the interviews was performed using the thematic analysis method.

Findings: The findings suggest four essential categories of responses: **Looking forward, Belief in overall inclusion, Pessimistic view, and Unfavorable conditions**. Each topic is formulated based on themes that describe the interview's global and detailed expression and formulation. In general, it was found that both personal and environmental variables relate to the attitudes of students without disabilities, such as experience with inclusive education, knowledge about disability and social participation, and social inclusion of students with disabilities.

Keywords: inclusive education, students with disabilities, attitude, inclusive school, students without disability, narrative.

INTRODUCTION

Incentives for Conducting this Research

The structure of education in the whole world is changing and developing continually. Education is a constitutional right of each student with and without disabilities and it is not a privilege given to them which is listed in the Constitution of the Republic of Armenia.

Inclusive education is a means of securing equal educational rights for all persons (Haug, 2017). Inclusive education is one of the most sensitive topics. It is a fact that not all children gain an educational experience to develop their full potential (Mag, Sinfield & Burns, 2017). Still, according to many authors, inclusive education is defined as "a process of high-quality implementation of aspects that are important for the psycho-emotional and academic development of students with and without special educational needs" (Schwab, Sharma & Loreman, 2018; p. 32; Lübke, Piquart & Schwinger, 2021). During the past ten years, development towards inclusive education has gained momentum in the Republic of Armenia. Like many other developed countries around the world, Armenia also ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). It declared inclusive education as a non-discriminatory approach to teaching that serves the child's best interest.

The researcher chose this topic because of the observed inconsistency between the implementation of state and non-state organizational initiatives and the reality on the ground. This research will conclude and make recommendations from on-the-ground observations.

The discrepancies between the theory, practical implementation, and the reality on the ground will be explored. The research will zoom in on attitudes toward inclusive education held by the main stakeholders – the students of the mainstream schools themselves. These students have been exposed to the practical reality of inclusive education in the context of the "full" or "universal" reforms introducing inclusive education as of 2016 (The Protocol decision of the Government of Armenia N6 as of 18.02.2016). Thus, their attitudes are quite valuable within the context of understanding the recent post-reform reality in Armenia.

According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD) (2006), the Armenian government has ratified the commitment to "ensure and promote the full realization of all human rights and fundamental freedom for all persons with disabilities" (Article 1). According to the Protocol decision of the Government of Armenia N6 as of 18.02.2016, all regions in Armenia have shifted, are shifting, or will shift towards so-called "universal" (direct translation from Armenian) inclusive education, which means that special schools are relocated into regional educational-psychological support centers, and support services specialists of these centers start to provide in-school services to children with special educational needs (Harutyunyan, Hovyan, Saratikyan, Azatyan, Muradyan, & Tanajyan, 2019).

This study contributes to research on inclusive education, and its recommendations can support the Armenian government, non-governmental organizations, teachers and other educators, as well as parents of children with disabilities.

There is little published research on inclusive education practice in Armenia. Since 2016, since shifting to so-called “full” or “universal” inclusive education in Armenia, there has been no research precisely focused on the attitudes of students without disabilities toward their peers with disabilities. There is little knowledge about children’s perception of mainstreaming and the situation through their eyes. As they are key players in the positive outcome of inclusive education efforts, children must be included in the research. In settings where some students are not part of the main groups (those who are different), exclusion and lack of will to integrate into other groups can result in their marginalization or isolation. Because of this, children with disabilities often might not seek the company of others because they are concerned about not being accepted (Juvonen, Lessard, Rastogi, Schacter, & Smith, 2019).

M. Gaboyan discusses the integration level of and educational benefits for children with disabilities in inclusive public schools of Armenia (Gaboyan, 2016) to understand the attitudes of children with and without disabilities towards each other and to measure progress accomplished over the recent year. This article discusses “integration through tendencies in friendships and neglectful attitudes based on disabilities and its impact on academic performance of disabled children” (Gaboyan, 2016). Building upon Gaboyan’s article, the current research conveys key messages about progress in inclusive education implementation.

Motionless, inclusive education is a process of taking into account the diversity of the needs of all students, taking into account the involvement of all children, and reducing exclusion from the education system. Inclusive education means the necessary individual support for people with disabilities to ensure their effective education and maximize their educational and social development (Khosrovyan, 2021). According to Gaboyan (2016), within the frame of inclusive education, the cooperation of children is not a friendship yet, and that underlines the negative attitudes between children in the school environment.

Conceptual/analytical framework and definitions

UNESCO defines inclusive education as a process intended to respond to students’ diversity by increasing their participation and reducing exclusion within and from education. It is related to the attendance, participation, and achievement of all students, especially those who, due to different reasons, are excluded or at risk of being marginalized (UNESCO, 2017).

The Republic of Armenia ratified many international agreements on inclusion, such as the Salamanca Statement (U.N. Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, 1994). In 2014, the Armenian Government ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CPRD)

where the concept of inclusive education and education for all children can be found under Article 24. The UN CPRD recognizes the right to inclusive education for all persons with disabilities and states that *parties should provide an inclusive education system at all levels, ensuring that children with disabilities are not excluded from the general education system based on disability and that they can access inclusive, quality and free education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live.* The Republic of Armenia ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC) in 2010, which refers to children with a disability and their right to a full and decent life in conditions that promote dignity, independence, and an active role in the community. By ratifying the UN CRPD, the Republic of Armenia took the responsibility to revise its national legislation in correspondence with the Convention (Article 23 of the UN CPRD).

The narrow definition of inclusion is described as a pedagogical approach developed to place children with special educational needs in regular schools and teach them alongside their peers without disabilities (Kruse & Dederling, 2017). In addition to this universal fitting, it seems reasonable that different strategies could be more or less important to support the confident academic and social needs of learners. Focusing on precise capacities of support rather than diagnosed disorders discourses the fact that even students with the same diagnosis have different needs for school support (Lübke, Pinquart & Schwinger, 2021). Despite the fact, that inclusion is often shortened to the placement of students with disabilities in regular classes, it goes far beyond this (Mitchell, 2014) (p. 302). A shared aspect of many methodologies to define inclusion is the adaptation and modification of education taking into consideration peculiarities and the individual needs of students (Macedo, 2013; Loreman, 2009).

At the Governmental level, the policy impact is observed in the organizational design of the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport, the Department of Education, and contiguous departments. Until 2016 there were three types of schools existing in Armenia: special schools (schools for children with auditory disorders, schools for children with visual disorders, schools for children with learning disabilities, etc.), regular schools (schools not recognized as those who can provide inclusive education and not financed by the state accordingly), and regular schools providing inclusive education services (schools recognized as those who can provide inclusive education and funded by the state accordingly). By 2025, all public schools will be transformed into inclusive ones, and the number of special schools will be decreased (Protocol decision of the Government of Armenia as of 18.02.2016).

Problem Statement and Rationale

The inclusion of students with disabilities in regular schools has been increasingly promoted worldwide in the last few decades. At the same time, students with disabilities are lagging in social participation in general education. At this point, negative peer attitudes are often mentioned as the main barrier. Taken together, there are various theoretical and conceptual interpretations of social exclusion

in educational settings. Children of different ages gravitate toward alike peers and away from different classmates, in this manner contributing to a lack of integration, inclusion and participation (Juvonen, Lessard, Rastogi, Schacter, & Smith, 2019). Still, it is a matter of fact that the lack of contact or competition maintains preconceptions and consequently may result in exclusionary behaviors, especially when teachers do not encourage diverse children interactions and relationships in school activities and daily life. It is critical that teachers and other specialists working with children in schools and out understand all these peculiarities and dynamics to be able to prevent and decrease the social exclusion of children with disabilities in schools (Juvonen, Lessard, Rastogi, Schacter, & Smith, 2019).

Based on the information above, the main problem within the framework of this study is to understand to what extent the attitudes of non-disabled students influence the social participation of disabled students in mainstream schools. This point is discussed in the context of recent reforms taking place in Armenia and the implementation of inclusive education in each school in the country.

The Armenian government called this reform “universal.” After its protocol decision on 18.02.2016, the government now regulates “full” inclusive education. Unfortunately, the field was not prepared for this kind of global change. Without preparation, such a drastic upheaval in the education system could not bring about significant positive results in its first years of implementation.

After 2016, all special schools were reorganized into regional educational-psychological support centers over a short period of time. Children with disabilities no longer attended school at these institutions (Harutyunyan, Hovyan, Saratikyan, Azatyan, Muradyan, & Tanajyan, 2019). It was an emotional and psychological shock for children, parents, and families. Little to no preparatory work had been conducted beforehand to understand the real needs of students with disabilities and their families. Parents were not properly prepared or equipped for the change, and they were not included as key voices in the transition. This insufficient groundwork is likely one of the primary reasons for the finding which indicates that the overwhelming majority of parents of children with disabilities believe a “special school” to be the best place for their children to get an education.

Another problem is the “othering” experienced by disabled students in mainstream schools. The transition from special schooling to mainstream schooling did not sufficiently prepare students with disabilities to face the challenge of being “othered” or prepare students without disabilities to accept their peers as one of their own. Research shows that students with disabilities in mainstream schools have frequently been labeled as “inclusive schoolchildren.” This is not an official term, but rather, one used in schools by teachers and children without disabilities. Most of the interview respondents mentioned the word “inclusive schoolchildren” or “inclusive child.” Though few research papers have been written on inclusive education in Armenia, the term “inclusive children” has also been used in these articles. According to this research, “inclusive schoolchildren” tend to be less accepted by their peers

without disabilities than the latter group among its own. To note, the terms “inclusive kid/child” or “a child from inclusive class” are perceived as stigmatizing or stereotyping in nature. These expressions are no longer acceptable, and stakeholders in the field try to avoid their use.

In sum, the journey toward integration and inclusion has been a bumpy road with just a few success stories. There are many well-grounded challenges related to perceptions and attitudes that will be difficult to overcome. Disabled children continue to be isolated psychologically and socially from their classmates (Gaboyan, 2016). This fact reinforces the importance of studying the attitudes of students without disabilities toward their disabled peers.

More inclusive schools lead to a more inclusive society. The vital aspects of inclusion in the community are students’ attitudes, intentions, and behaviors toward their peers with disabilities. These are important to students’ mutual co-existence and development in the school environment and community life. Social interaction between students with and without disabilities is necessary for optimal conditions to promote status equity and discourage stereotypes. Therefore, this research will focus on the importance of the attitudes of students without disabilities towards their peers with disabilities as a crucial success factor and metric in the implementation of inclusive education in Armenia.

Hong, Jeon, and Kwon (2014) found that children’s understanding of disability is positively correlated with their prior contact and experiences with people with disabilities. Children’s understanding of disabilities was a significant moderator of the relation between their behavioral intentions and activity contexts or types of disabilities (Hong, Jeon & Kwon, 2014).

Attitude change toward people with disabilities is a long journey that entails social interactions and the positive coexistence of people with and without disabilities (Huskin, Reiser-Robbins & Kwon, 2018).

Attitudes toward individuals with disabilities have been one of the most important and focal topics in disability studies. Generally, people who had regular contact with persons with disabilities, across all types of disabilities, tended to have lower social distance scores than those who never had contact or sometimes met individuals with that disability type (Huskin, Reiser-Robbins & Kwon, 2018). In this regard, school is the place where challenges while interacting with children with disabilities might occur, and this problem is considered to be holistic, and schools are not going to accomplish it alone.

Integration, let alone inclusion, cannot be achieved by simply placing diverse people in the same classroom. Laws and policies, in the same way, are not the only prerequisites for the successful implementation of inclusive education.

The ideology of inclusion is a social phenomenon, and inclusion at schools depends not only on laws but also on the perceptions and attitudes of students and society at large toward people with

disabilities (Gaboyan, 2016). That is to say, the enactment of laws is not enough to change attitudes toward disability and specifically toward students with disabilities who attend school but are not fully integrated and are categorized as "inclusive children" (Gaboyan, 2016).

Obstacles toward full inclusion are not any more governmental or institutional issues. Legislations endorsed by governments will not solve the barriers and challenges facing people with disabilities (Huskin, Reiser-Robbins & Kwon, 2018).

Research objectives and research question

This study aims to understand children's attitudes toward their peers with disabilities. The current study will be the first one of its kind in the field of Inclusive Education in Armenia, where students' attitudes toward their peers with disabilities are explored through open in-depth interviews. There is little knowledge and research about children's perception of mainstreaming and inclusive education in Armenia. Thus, research with students without disabilities was necessary for seeing the reality on the ground.

Based on this, the study has as an objective to examine students' perspectives on an effective inclusion program based on the reforms done in Armenia. The research question is formulated as follows: *How do children without disabilities describe their social interaction with their peers with disabilities?*

METHODOLOGY

Narrative as a qualitative approach was used within the framework of this study (Clandinin, 2000) to explore the attitude of non-disabled children toward their peers with disabilities within the inclusive schools in Gyumri, Armenia. Narrative research looks for ways to understand and then present real-life experiences through the stories of the research participants (Creswell, 2005; Clandinin, 2000). Within the framework of the current study, the narrative approach allows for a detailed description of the attitude experiences of children and an exploration of the meanings that the participants derive from their experiences. Here the narrative analysis is used to understand how research participants build their stories and narrative from their own life experiences. Narrative inquiry amplifies voices that may have otherwise remained silent (Wang & Geale, 2015).

Participants

The purposeful sampling method was used to understand the non-disabled children's attitudes toward their peers with disabilities within inclusive schools. The most experienced inclusive schools (a total of 6 schools) with the most significant number of disabled children in Gyumri (the urban municipal community and the second-largest city in Armenia) were selected.

In every school, the principal and vice-principal, teachers, and multidimensional teams were informed about the nature of the study and its confidentiality directly from the researcher. The purposeful

sampling method is based on selecting information-rich cases to illustrate the questions under investigation (Bernard, 2000). After that, the random selection method was used while selecting students for interviews.

By drawing a random sample from a larger population, the goal is that the sample will be representative of the larger group and less likely to be subject to bias (Cherry, 2020). The age range of participants was 12-15 years old (7-9 grade students). Sixty non-disabled students were randomly selected based on the attendance journal every class has. Based on this method, every fifth child has been interviewed.

Ethical issues and Gaining Access

Before data collection, official approval was received from the Head of the Shirak Region of the Republic of Armenia. At every school, the principal and vice-principal responsible for educational affairs were informed about the purpose of the study and its confidentiality. The essence of the interviews was introduced in detail. Also, the first section of the questionnaire clearly stated the confidentiality of the data. It was communicated to every participant and parent of each student that participated in the research was completely voluntary. The data collection was anonymous and they would not be identified individually in the data analysis.

It is worth noting that the permission document also highlighted the value of such a research initiative and that it was being conducted within the framework of the Executive studies at the Graduate Institute of Geneva.

For conducting the first set of interviews, the head of the school administration requested to have a prior meeting to discuss the essence of the interviews and also asked to have copies of the interview papers. The school head, the gatekeeper, claimed that he would give access but then insisted that he would choose the students to be interviewed.

The next day, in the process of interviewing the schoolchildren, the researcher noticed that the answers were all positive and of a similar nature. By preparing the school pupils to answer a certain way, the headmaster (the gatekeeper) stepped strongly into the position of what knowledge they thought was appropriate and tried to take control over constructing the interview. It also reveals a concern that the researcher would hear the 'wrong' answer, thus demonstrating the tension around the issue. In doing this, school headmasters revealed their understanding of 'the right answer.' What they identify as 'the right answer' and which 'should' come out at the interview is very telling! It shows what they think *should* be happening - regardless of whether or not it is. What they think *should* be happening shows their reading of what they think inclusive education should be. After the first case of "interview failure," which was a lesson learned, the approach for conducting the rest of the interviews was changed. Contact with the headmasters was made via email and phone, after which direct contact was made only with vice

principals or school administrators. No interview questionnaire was handed over to school administrators beforehand. They were simply informed about the nature and purpose of the interviews.

Data collection

In-depth interviewing is a qualitative research technique that involves conducting intensive individual interviews with a small number of respondents to explore their perspectives on a particular idea, program, or situation. Within the framework of the current study, in-depth interviews with 60 participants were conducted. All the interviews were conducted in the Armenian language and took place in schools. Each participant was interviewed once.

The interviews were intentionally narrative in nature to understand the students' responses to questions. Indeed, interviews are considered to be the most beneficial means of collecting data while constructing research on the narrative methodology. The objective of this kind of interview was to have the participants restructure their experience within the topic under study. Therefore, the questions were open-ended, focusing on experiences of interacting with students with disabilities in an inclusive school environment. For this purpose, an interview guide was designed and used (Annex 1). The questionnaire of the current study was originally composed in English and later translated into Armenian.

The participants were asked to describe, as concretely and in as much detail as possible, their attitudes and experiences while studying and interacting with students with disabilities. The duration of each interview was 20-30 minutes.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, the goal of which is to identify themes, i.e. patterns in the data that are important or interesting, and use these themes to address the research or communicate something about an issue (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). The themes in this data analysis were derived from the main interview questions. The thematic analysis method was used to analyze the qualitative data which is usually applied to a set of texts, such as interview transcripts. The data has been closely examined to identify common themes—topics, ideas, and patterns of meaning that come up repeatedly (Caulfield, 2019).

The technique suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) involving four steps of thematic analysis – transcribing the data, generating meaning units and codes, forming categories, and defining and naming emerging themes – was applied to this study. The citations were presented for creating meaning for the category represented (Kvale, 2002).

The 60 interview transcripts were read several times to get a sense of the meaning of each participant's words. Then, meaning units were identified in the transcripts by locating keywords or phrases (Garland, 2005). All keywords were coded and the codes identified a feature of the data which

was collected into categories of themes. Based on the correspondence and citations of the participants related to the questions, the themes were created.

RESULTS

Within the frame of the current study, the process of enunciating the results helped to understand the problem from the inside, to break it into small fragments, and to understand the research problem from several perspectives. The full results of the paper include data generated from the research.

While articulating their thoughts, understanding, and attitudes about inclusion, participants of the study expressed their thoughts differently. However, there were many common themes. Through thematic analysis, four categories were established:

1. Looking forward,
2. Belief in overall inclusion,
3. Pessimistic view,
4. Unfavorable conditions

Each of the mentioned themes evolved from a logical pathway of codes and categories which were developed based on the citations of the children – participants of the study (see Figure 1).

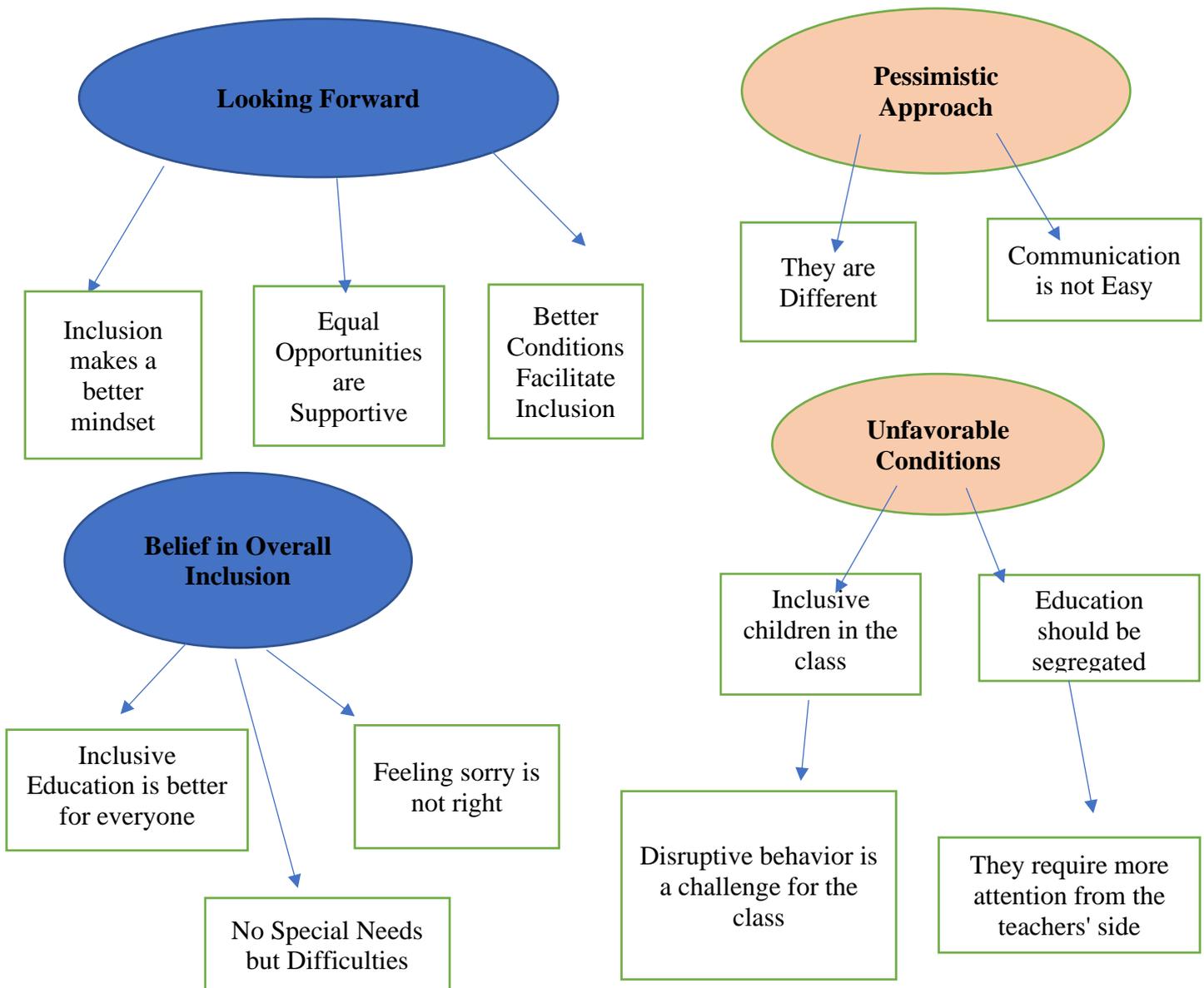
Topic 1. Looking forward: within this topic, the following themes were generated with sufficient quotes coming from the transcribed data.

Inclusion makes a better mindset

Some children noted that having a diversity of students in the classroom positively changes their thinking. *“We communicate and yes, we communicate and talk on different topics during the breaks. It is easy to get along with them”* or *“We should support them, providing them with more knowledge. They need that.”* At the same time, comments from students without disabilities who participated in the study reflect that inclusive education is a positive change that they feel is realistic and possible. *“If everyone communicates with him, he will feel better at school”*; *“It would not be the same. We have a better mindset by interacting with them. They do not make it difficult,”* and *“We have to be next to them so they don’t isolate themselves.”*

In response to the question regarding segregated education, almost half of the respondents highlighted that students with and without disabilities should study together: *“Because together with us, they feel complete”* or *“Together with us, to feel complete.”*

Figure 1. Thematic Map of Attitudes Commonly Encountered



Equal opportunities are supportive

Students without disabilities highlight the point of equal opportunities in almost half of the interviews: “They should study with us so that they would not feel segregated,” “They should study with us because they are not different from us.” and “I want them to study with us. That will be beneficial for them.” It is interesting to note that some of the study participants mentioned the benefits of inclusive education for students with disabilities. Conversely, the benefits for non-disabled students were rarely mentioned.

Better conditions facilitate inclusion

The respondents frequently mentioned the issue of a lack of adaption and the inaccessible environment for students with physical disabilities. They often stated the need for better conditions and

presented their perspective that students with physical disabilities often have difficulties participating in school activities: *“The school only has to have conditions; for example, my classmate cannot go up to the second floor, there is no device,”* and *“There are no facilities at school; they can’t move around if we do not help them.”* In sum, the addition of physical accommodations in schools would make them more welcoming for students with disabilities.

Regarding the creation of better conditions for their classmates who have intellectual disabilities, some respondents stated the need for a special professional who would work specifically with students with disabilities: *“There should be good conditions and special teachers only for them so that they could attend the class,”* *“They have to study with us, but if they can't sit in classes, special professionals have to work with them and only then come to school after a while, but they must study with us,”* *“They should stay with us. That way, they will not be different, but the specialists should work with them separately.”*

Reasonable accommodations of school settings and their physical environment are often mentioned as hindrances to school participation of students with disabilities and their integration with their peers: *“Let's create conditions so that they can come to class often,”* *“There is no need to support anything. It would be better if they had more books and could learn.”* Obviously, from the perspective of students, the inclusion of students with disabilities involves making adaptations and accommodations to enable their participation within a school setting as well as outside of the school environment. This, of course, is beneficial for all members of society, including those with other needs, such as parents with strollers and elderly folks. *“There should be good conditions for them not only at school but everywhere.”*

Topic 2: Belief in overall inclusion

Inclusive education is better for everyone

Half of the participants of the study feel the importance of inclusive education; the feeling of belonging and of not being treated differently from others was quite a crucial component for them: *“They should study with us so that they would not feel segregated”;* *“We should study together; they should not be separated.”*

While not stated explicitly in the language of rights, the right to equal opportunities was mentioned by the participants many times: *“Let them learn with us so that they do not differ”* or *“They should study with us because they are not different from us,”* *“I want them to study with us. That will be beneficial for them.”*

Other participants made comments reflecting the true meaning of inclusive education: *“There is no need to support them. Everything is fine with them. Inclusive education provides place and opportunities for everyone.”*

Through the following comment, some participants indicated that students are first of all students, not people with or without disabilities: *“They should study with us. In this way, our class is accomplished/fulfilled,”* and *“I think they do not need support. If they have, they will say, and we will support them.”* And an exciting point was concluded in the following quote: *“There is no need to support them specially. If we pay less attention to them, they will become more independent.”*

No special needs, but difficulties

It was intriguing to note how children transform the ideology of special needs into difficulty, and how they perceive a classmate with a disability as having “problems”: *“No, we don’t have a disabled student in our class, but a student who has difficulties. She cannot sit for a long time and makes strange movements. When she is in a good mood, she shows that she is clever, but most of the time, she doesn’t.”*

Participants also shared the idea that everyone has difficulties and there is no need to consider them as having special needs: *“No, they don’t have special needs. Maybe they have difficulties. Everyone does. They may not learn well or understand everything. Other students may have the same problems,”* and *“They have no special needs. They may have problems learning or moving on their own,”* or *“No. If they were not in our class, we would all be equal; they are learning something a little different. Sometimes they make difficulties.”*

Feeling sorry is not right

Participants showed empathy, and at the same time, they did not want to feel sorry for their friends with disabilities. They seemed to feel it was not right to show pity: *“Yes, we communicate. It becomes easier for you to put yourself in their shoes and understand how you would like to be treated if you were one of them. Yes. There is a child who is a little different from us, and we try not to differentiate her from the others. He is different in his way of thinking and his movements. Yes, we communicate. It is easy to communicate with them. Sometimes I feel sorry but I know I should not feel sorry. This is not right. So that they do not feel that they are different from us and we all feel sorry for them”.* Here it is possible to see the parallels between being different and feeling sorry, which participants of the study show directly: *“Do not do anything special for them. Do not show you are sorry, no. If she is not given more attention, she will become more independent.”*

Topic 3: Pessimistic view

They are different

The expression “they are different” has been used by most of the respondents and discriminatory attitudes have been observed: *“There is a girl who doesn’t look like us. She is from an “inclusive” education. She is different with her manners and with everything,”* *“Yes, there is a girl who differs from us with her character/type. She is childish and kind and speaks the truth all the time.”* The reality of being different is something outstanding that was interpreted by the participants. Generally, they seemed

to consider it as mostly negative: *“Yes, there is a boy with disabilities in our class. He is different, he is not like us. He would often sing during the classes, he is strange. He often gets excited when we cheer him for singing,”* and *“Yes, they have special needs, they are different. They need to be accompanied by someone. The problem is that other kids at our school would make fun of them and mistreat them. That is not nice, but it is because they are different.”* At the same time, participants found that being different might be the reason for the change in the class: *“When she comes, the atmosphere changes, everyone tries to help, but I think she can be upset about it; we should not make a difference. Yes, she is a disabled student, she is different from us, but I don’t want to show that she is different so that she doesn’t feel bad,”* and *“He is smart, he participates with us, but he is very narrow-minded and insular. I think for this kind of child, a school is a strange place where children are and do incomprehensible things. Because they are different, it is difficult to be integrated.”*

Communication is not easy

Students gave a range of answers regarding their levels of communication with peers with disabilities. Some of the respondents mentioned that they communicate with everyone equally. Others noted that communication is very limited with classmates with disabilities: *“We communicate somehow. It has not been easy initially, but now we got used to how to talk to them.”* There were specific cases in which students noted that they communicate extremely rarely: *“He has communication difficulties; not everyone communicates with them.”*

In their comments, some of the children mentioned their fear that they would suddenly say something wrong or harm students with disabilities: *“It is tough to communicate with them because they are emotional and take everything close to their hearts.”* The ease or difficulty of communicating with classmates with disabilities, according to the majority of respondents, depends on the nature of the difficulties the child has. In other words, communication may differ if the child has a severe mental disability or a verbal communication issue: *“It is not easy; you have to say something to them a thousand times.”*

Topic 4: Unfavorable conditions

Inclusive children in the class

All respondents experience learning alongside a child with disabilities in the classroom. For some of the students, disability was particularly associated with walking and physical difficulties. Some respondents called their classmates with disabilities "inclusive" children meaning that he or she has special needs. They hear the term "inclusive children" or "a child from an inclusive class" from the teachers and this is how they refer to their classmates with disabilities: *“There is a child; she is from inclusive education. Well, she is a girl, makes abrupt movements, and speaks little.”* The term "inclusive child" is not perceived positively in the Armenian language. It is considered a label.

The lack of friendship between students with and without disabilities was indicated by the respondents: *“Inclusive children have many difficulties, they cannot speak normally, understand, learn, they have few friends.”*

The necessity of friendship was also highlighted: *“They need friends and need to be accompanied.” “I think that he will feel better if everyone talks to him and makes friends with him.” “I can support her by making friends with her and talking to her more often.”*

Most of the respondents mentioned that students with disabilities are often absent from classes because of different reasons and that is a hindrance to frequent communication and the development of friendship: *“If they come to classes often, everyone will be friends with them.”*

For some respondents, making friends with students with disabilities is not easy: *“There are students with whom it is easy to talk to and make friends but not with this boy from our class.”* Empathy towards students with disabilities has been detected in some answers and students commented that: *“Some teachers and students need to develop love and care towards students with disabilities”* or *“They have special needs, the problem is that there are many teachers and students in the school who do not accept them.”*

Education should be segregated

When asked whether students with disabilities should study in mainstream classrooms or separately, more than half of the respondents answered that they should study separately. They were ready to point to several reasons for this segregation. Comments included: *“Learn separately so as not to disturb us,” “Separately, it will be better for them and us,” “Learn separately so that they pay more attention,”* and *“Learn separately because our lessons are slow because of them going on.”*

In some cases, participants mentioned that the classroom should not be segregated, but should include all students. However, they opined that segregated education could be to the benefit of a classmate with a disability. They noted; *“He would disturb the class and make the teacher concentrate only on him. It is OK for us, but I think it’s not OK for him. He should have his environment to study.”*

The question of studying together or in segregated settings is a key indicator of true inclusion and the attitude toward inclusive education. In some answers which were moderately positive toward inclusive settings, students highlighted the role of professionals. *“[Students with disabilities] have to study with us, but if they can't sit in classes, special professionals have to work with them. Then, they come to school after a while, but they must study with us sometimes.”* On one hand, students want to study with their peers with disabilities. Some express the perspective that *“both options [together or segregated] are acceptable,”* but still mention that, in any case, *“specialists should work with them separately.”*

The students without disabilities commented on the “benefit” of segregated education: *“It seems to me that it will be more convenient for them to study separately, that way the teachers will pay more attention to them.”*

Disruptive behavior is a challenge for the class

Even if students are determined to concentrate and ignore distractions, the behavior of other students in the room affects their psychological state and ability to focus in the classroom: *“She doesn’t like the school. In the classroom, she cries, makes noises, and disrupts the lesson. This is all because she doesn’t like the school”* or *“Yes, I communicate; it is easy and interesting with them; they look at life differently, maybe. But, for example, when my classmate, who has autism, is not in a good mood, he is very aggressive, and sometimes we are afraid...”*. Some respondents appear to draw a correlation between the disruptive behavior of students with disabilities and their enjoyment of school. It is also interesting to note that other participants try to find excuses or explanations for the disruptive behavior of their peers: *“Yes, there is a boy who got mental issues after the death of his father. He cannot generally sit calmly during the class, he shouts, and he is mischievous”*, and *“Maybe they don’t like the school, that’s why he shouts during the lesson and wants to leave the class”*. From another point of view, students view disruptive behavior as unacceptable: *“Yes, there is a shouting and crying student in our class. I wouldn’t say I like loud voices, and it makes me angry when he shouts. He does it always. He makes the learning process difficult and disturbs it always; there are days that he is calm, but still, he disturbs the process.”*

Too much or too little attention from the teachers?

The participants of the study reflected on the teachers’ role in including all students and the equal (or unequal) distribution of teachers’ attention. They made interesting arguments like the following: *“Yes, I know that he has special needs. That’s why the teachers work with him more than with other students,”* and *“Yes, they do need more attention. As it is with small children, there must always be people with them so that they are not harmed. In our class, the teacher is mostly responsible for his behavior,”* *“Yes. They need more attention,”* and *“Yes. They need constant attention so that they do not harm themselves and us.”*

When asked how the classroom would be different if students with and without disabilities studied separately, one noted: *“Teachers would focus more on us. They do not make it difficult, but they slow it down.”* Another said: *“Yes, teachers will spend more time on them than on us.”*

Noticing the importance of equal attention, one respondent made an intriguing comment: *“She loves school, especially the classes during which the teachers treat her well.”* In response to the follow-up question “what does that mean?” the student responded: *“That means to pay attention to them equally as we all do, not ignore them.”*

Students noticed the unequal distribution of teachers' attention towards children with disabilities, noting: *“Teachers do not treat her like us, they pay less attention; she always sits at the back of the class. And when she is not noticed, she misbehaves to attract attention”* and *“It would be better if the teachers communicate with and pay more attention to her”* or *“They should also learn separately (in a particular school) so that teachers will be more attentive to them.”*

Other respondents noted the importance of a combined classroom while recommending a special professional dedicated to working with children with special needs. Comments included: *“She needs such kind of teachers who would explain to and teach her in an accessible way”* and *“There should be good conditions and teachers only for them so that they could attend the class.”*

DISCUSSION

The research outcomes revealed two radically different perspectives: pragmatic and obstructive. This picture might be connected with the fact that the Armenian government based on its 18.02.2016 protocol decision launched the reform towards “full” inclusive education without properly arranging for this global change. The responses of participants have identified “two sides of a coin” within the scope of perception and understanding of inclusive education from the point of view of children without disabilities.

In their responses, both negative and positive, most of the respondents discussed what is beneficial for students with disabilities and what should be good for them. In an attempt to appease the interviewer, the respondents in some cases mentioned that all the students regardless of their abilities should study together while noting that the teachers should work with them separately or special professionals are needed.

It was interesting that the gender difference was not emphasized in the answers, whereas the researcher might have considered the stereotype that “females would be more sympathetic.” Girls and boys presented both positive and negative answers relatively equally.

The pragmatic perspective of the study showed mostly the meaning and importance of equality and equal opportunities for children. This was mostly a humanistic perspective influencing the change of mindset and creation of better conditions. It was clear that children see their peers not as persons with special needs, but as persons who experience some difficulties, and they also mirror themselves as persons having difficulties as well. So they do not see this fact as something extraordinary, but something that is normal and exists, and which affects every human being. In this regard, the position of Huskin, Reiser-Robbins, and Kwon (2018), which reflects the fact that people who had regular contact with persons with disabilities tended to have a closer relationship and less social distance, seems to be compatible with the findings of this study.

The obstructive perspective reflected a negative association between the placement of children with disabilities in mainstream schools and the attitudes of children without disabilities toward their peers with disabilities. Many children were thinking that children with disabilities are different and communication with them is quite difficult. For that reason, children with disabilities need to have their personal space and environment for education, something which would be to the benefit of both groups of children – those with and without disabilities. In this regard, Gaboyan (2016) concluded integration through tendencies in friendships and neglectful attitudes based on disabilities and its impact on the academic performance of disabled children.

It was quite remarkable to see that findings also revealed that the disruptive behavior of students with disabilities is challenging for their peers without disabilities. Peers without disabilities reflect on this point not only from the perspective of communication but also as a challenge while organizing the process of the lesson as a whole. In this regard, from the perspective of inclusive education, there is a need for teachers to deal with very altered situations and diverse difficulties. Hereafter, teachers require a broad repertoire of strategies to cope with heterogeneity and challenging situations (Lübke, Pinquart & Schwinger, 2021).

The role of teachers was also highlighted as an important factor, and the attention distribution in the class was also mentioned. Children feel the difference in a teacher's attitude and her allocation of time. They do not observe differences in attention as normal or natural in the learning process. They took it as something that should not take place. They also felt that the lesson should not be disturbed by the fact that a child with a disability needs more attention. The success and the full integration of students with disabilities into inclusive education practice also depend on teachers' attitudes. One respondent seemed to equate "treating well" meant giving equal attention to all students. Educators play a crucial role in the success of the inclusion process; however, this particular study is specifically focused on the observation of the attitudes of nondisabled students toward their peers with disabilities. There is limited research on the attitudes of teachers toward inclusive education and the exploration of this observation is left for future studies (Alaverdyan, 2018).

Even if the research outcomes revealed two fundamentally different perspectives, pragmatic and obstructive, it is a matter of fact that decision-makers should listen to and consider the opinions and feelings of children. Pedagogical approaches should be used to formulate and reformulate the values and respect towards "being similar" and "being different." Attitudes of authorities affect children in both beneficial and unbeneficial ways. Policymakers and field specialists should heighten their attention to the perspectives of students to correctly adapt the school environment so that it is conducive to inclusiveness.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

As the study uses qualitative methods, it has some limitations connected with the generalizability of data. There was a relatively small sample size of study participants. The study cannot be generalized to the whole country since it has been carried out only in six Gyumri schools.

The findings of the study are seen as a small collection of evidence and the fact that the participants have been interviewed individually, without the use of other measures like observations, should be considered a limitation too. In this regard, it will be very interesting to see, for example, how the participants will share their perspectives during focus group discussions when they hear each other's opinions and answers to suggested questions. But still, despite all this, it is possible to notice similarities in students' answers and the results of the data analyses.

CONCLUSIONS

Conclusions derived from the analysis of the findings have formed the basis for the recommendations of this study. Regarding the objective of this study, it can be concluded that students' attitudes are influenced by different factors that can be clustered into opposite poles. The study showed that students might lack knowledge about disabilities and students will likely be more accepting when their knowledge and understanding of peers with disabilities increases. This point needs to be developed further in other studies, using more elements from the analysis of these findings.

To improve attitudes using interventions, it seems logical to focus on ideas that can be used to modify attitudes such as knowledge about disabilities, fostering peer acceptance, or the effect of knowledge about disabilities on students' attitudes. Still, it is essential to realize that attitude change is constant work and it does not happen in one day. All actors in the process of change and transformation into inclusive education should be aware of this while working to implement inclusive education. This point is strongly recommended to take into consideration as a specifying dimension with strict identification of intervals, based on the fact that towards "full inclusion" educational reforms are planned to be completed by 2025 in Armenia.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the study, the following recommendations are made. They are divided according to relevant structures, subdivisions, and official bodies. It is highly recommended to:

- organize large-scale public discussions (including children with and without disabilities, their parents and family members, teachers and specialists, community representatives, and official bodies) based on the concept of inclusive education;

- increase public awareness regarding the importance of fully inclusive education and disability issues and the inclusion of people with disabilities in society through various TV programs, social networks, and social advertising;
- assist the state in implementing regular training programs focused on children with special educational needs and the specificities of fully inclusive education, involving students with and without disabilities, their parents, and specialists working with them in and out of schools at the community level in both rural and urban areas. These kinds of training may be organized in schools and other formal or non-formal educational settings, involve different activities and arrangements, linking directly as well as indirectly to the topic of a suggested training program (excursions, picnics, visits to different cultural places, other joint activities);
- accommodate and modify the classroom environment to help all children become successful learners and active participants in classroom activities and include all children in the class in this process of modification, let children be decision-makers, help them to choose and justify their choice;
- since inclusive education has been implemented in the country as a reform in the field of education, it is very important to adopt a research-based approach to understand best practices in the field regarding forming children's attitudes, as well as perspectives of all stockholders and beneficiaries in the field. It is highly recommended that different state and non-state, national and international organizations and universities, in strong cooperation with the state bodies responsible for education, investigate and conduct in-depth research in the field of inclusive education. They should involve different actors and stakeholders, and the results of this research should be used in the development of state legal documents and policies related to inclusive education in Armenia.

Taking into consideration the recommendation and its link to the aim of the study and research question, it becomes obvious that children's voices need to be heard everywhere, even though they have positive or negative connotations. Those who are responsible for creating a favorable school environment for every child should construct each activity and make every step considering the primary stakeholders' voices. They should build an inclusive education ideology based in part on what they learn from children. keeping in mind those voices and building inclusive education ideology and routes based on it.

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ANNEX 1

The researcher conducted interviews in six schools (N7, N11, N15, N31, N23, N40) of Gyumri, Armenia, in November and December 2021. The interview participants were non-disabled students aged between 12-15 who were selected on a random base, male and female.

See the questionnaire below.

Questionnaire

1. Do you have classmates with disabilities? Who are they? Can you tell me about them?

2. Do you know that your classmates have special needs? Do you think they have any particular difficulties at school? Can you tell me about them/what they are?
3. How do you think they feel about school?
4. Do you cooperate during the class? If yes, then how?
5. Do you speak with your classmates with disabilities]?’ Do you spend time with them during breaks?’ ‘How do you find it? Is it easy to talk/work/study with them?’, ‘Why (not)?’
6. Do you think the classroom would be different without pupils with disabilities? How? Would you like it more? Do you feel like pupils with disabilities make it harder for you and other pupils to learn? If yes, how does that look?’
7. How do you think we could support the pupils with disabilities in your class? What would make school better for them?
8. Do you think that students with disabilities should study together with you? Or should they look elsewhere? Why?

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