

Armenia

Country Overview

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Country name

Armenia

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Introduction

The primary concern of Armenian education is its limited resources that prevent many children from access. Still, Armenia has participated in an initiative that mentions social and emotional skills (SES) development. It is the Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action for the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all (2016). Both international and national organisations are contributing to early childhood development and specifically to the development of children's social and emotional skills.

Development

The practices for promoting early childhood SES development in Armenia are developing gradually within the efforts to strengthen early childhood education in general. Early childhood education's (ECE) focus is to provide access to the most vulnerable groups of children: children with disabilities and children from vulnerable communities. This development has been initiated mostly by foreign organisations who, along with this agenda, introduce SES concepts.

Since 1993, Armenia has established a number of Early Childhood Intervention centres, which offer Inclusive Preschool Education for all children. World Vision International is also implementing a programme named Early Childhood Development (ECD) as part of delivering humanitarian aid after the devastating earthquake in 1988 (World Vision International Homepage, Armenia, 2022).

Dallakyan (Даллакян) (2016), a professor of pre-school education at the Armenian State Pedagogical University, is a scientist who has conceptualised the transformation of the Armenian pre-school education. She argues that ECE must be transformed through improvement of upbringing priorities that stimulate the child's autonomy, self-upbringing, self-knowledge. In order to achieve those, Mihailova (Михайлова) (2017) argues that teacher-children interactions have to be transformed from the traditional subject-to-object activities to subject-to-subject process that makes these activities difficult, non-standard, creative. Both authors agree that the teachers have to abandon the old traditional authoritarian style in their relationships with the child by considering them as a subject rather than as an object of the teacher's interventions. Dallakyan (2016) argues that the skills the child should develop during the pre-school education are: reflexivity of their own activities and self-education skills, skills developed in "more natural conditions for self-realisation and self-satisfaction" (Dallakyan, 2016), and the autonomy rather than the child's controllability.

When it comes to ECD in Armenia, the priority is to promote the Healthcare (Childhood immunizations; Well-child visits), Nutrition, Early leaving (parenting programmes and childcare, especially for working parents), Social (Policies to protect rights of children with special needs) and Child protection (Mandated birth registration, and job protection and breastfeeding breaks for

new mothers, specific provisions in judicial system for young children, etc.). Social and emotional development in early childhood was not considered a priority, and not much, by few institutions, have been done in this scope (SABER Country report, 2012).

Nevertheless, the Government officially supports few non-governmental organisations (NGO) national initiatives, such as the Early Childhood Development Program (ECDO), which aim to improve the abilities of parents and service providers for children under 5 years of age, in order to create an environment for their healthy growth and development (Early Childhood Development, 2015).

Some of these organisations are:

Save the Children International;

Kindergarten at Skagerak International School;

CIS Armenia, and;

Step by Step Foundation.

Without focusing on SES exclusively, those skills have been introduced within the ECE programmes developed by three organisations working in Armenia: UNICEF, World Vision and Save the children. The reports published by these organisations agree that the early childhood education in Armenia is in its early stage of development and the reports share their concern regarding the vulnerable children's limited access to ECE in general. So far, the biggest effort is for the groups of disabled children and children without parents. Therefore, all the programmes provided by those organisations focus on broadening the access of vulnerable children and on inclusive education.

UNICEF states that 70% of children in the country do not receive the care and education that would allow them to reach their full potential, pushing to make a shift from early learning pilot projects to universal access to inclusive early childhood education, which should ideally start at 3 years of age, especially for the most disadvantaged children. The First target is universal access to one year of preschool for all children of five years of age in Armenia, with early education being understood as a critical investment in human capital (UNICEF Country Office Annual Report, Armenia, 2019).

World Vision Armenia ECD programmes focus on early child development to support the healthy growth and development of children under 5 years of age. They are working in two directions: Enhancement of the quality for healthcare and preschool educational services in 200 communities of Armenia (Early Childhood Development, 2015).

Save the children, with the goal to stimulate “emotional, personal, and social development; cognitive and speaking skills; safe behaviour; and attitude towards learning/ studying” (Save the Children International, 2016). They have built twenty-one centres all over the country, two of them are in the capital Yerevan. They provided access to ECD services for more than 3,600 children in nineteen rural communities of Armenia. Each child completed a 10-month pre-school programme and were successfully enrolled in primary school. Capacity-building was provided to forty-eight early and preschool teachers and parental education methodology. 2,452 parents and caregivers enhanced their knowledge and skills on children's health and development. Twenty-one Parental Resource Centres were established as well, and parental classes conducted for parents/caregivers of children 0 to 6 years of age (Save the Children International, 2016).

SOS Kindergarten Armenia. Working with children of vulnerable families from neighbouring communities, implementing a “Parental Education” program within the framework of which various meetings and trainings were organised for parents. These events provided a great opportunity for parents to develop their knowledge on childcare, as well as on their physical, social, emotional and intellectual development.

The educational process in SOS includes various games, thematic planning and interactive activities. All these methods were adapted to the individual needs, interests and peculiarities of children, as well as taking into consideration special needs of the kids (SOS Kindergarten, 2022).

Step by Step Foundation offers and implements individualised teaching and learning approaches, which are child centred and are based on democratic principles of education (Step by Step, 2022).

Assessment

As the field is not well developed yet, there are no official evaluation programmes conducted. SOS Kindergartens are measuring their day-to-day progress with the children using internal metrics. The same is with Save the Children programs.

There is a promising evaluation conducted by World Vision Armenia. It assessed the effectiveness of the integration of an ECD counselling model within an integrated maternal, neonatal, and child strategy intervention in Armenian rural communities but it focuses on the cognitive development of the children rather than on the SES (Rosales et.al., 2019).

Intervention

Save the Children project includes:

- 1) improving the learning environment for children;
- 2) gross and fine motor skills; emotional, personal, and social development; cognitive and speaking skills; safe behaviour; and attitude towards learning/ studying;
- 3) child initiated Developmentally Appropriate “creative curriculum” that targets all the interest areas such as blocks, dramatic play, toys and games, art, library, discovery, sand and water, music and movement, cooking and outdoors;
- 4) self-reflection;
- 5) autonomy;
- 6) social competencies related to the inclusion of vulnerable groups.

World Vision ECD programmes are carried out in two directions: “Enhancement of the quality for healthcare and preschool educational services and Increasing awareness among parents on child rights for health care and education, as well as for child care, nutrition and upbringing” (2015, Early Childhood Development). Major activities includes:

“Professional development lectures, practical and theoretical trainings for medical workers of the beneficiary communities to improve the quality of health care services;

Each centre is created in a way to improve the environment at preschool educational facilities through equipping them with development materials, toys, books, game simulations, etc;

Supporting 80 parental schools established in 2016 providing training materials including video lessons and leaflets on childcare, nutrition and positive parenting, and;

Another set of educational booklets and video lessons has been developed on nutrition, childcare, safety and upbringing – widely circulated in parental schools”.

Step by Step programs (2022) provides practical methods such as:

Development of critical thinking in preschool children;

Diverse thinking styles;

Inclusive education;

Life skills, and;

Parental education.

Cis Armenia International School curriculum includes:

1. Personal, social and emotional well-being

To provide opportunities that enable them to learn how to co-operate and work together;

To be able to concentrate on their own play or on group tasks;

To gain an enthusiasm for knowledge and learning and a confidence in their ability to be successful learners, and;

To become a valued member of their group and school community so that a strong sense of self-image and self-esteem are promoted.

2. Problem solving, reasoning

To help children develop their understanding of numbers, measurements, patterns, shapes and spaces through various songs, poems, games and group activities;

To allow them to practice, enjoy and talk about themselves;

Knowledge and understanding of the World;

To allow children to explore the world around them;

To find out about their environment, to learn about people and places that are significant to them;

To investigate, experiment, predict, plan and question, and;

To share their discoveries with others.

3. Creative development

To allow children to explore and share their thoughts, ideas and feelings through creativity in art, music, dance, imaginative play and design and technology.

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