

## Research Report

# Parents' Orientations on Inclusion in Schools – a narrative interview study in Armenia and Georgia (ParIS)

September 2024 – December 2025

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## SUMMARY | RESULTS OF THE STUDY

We conducted a study on the perspectives of parents on Inclusive Education in Armenia and Georgia – funded by Caritas international. The project took place from September 2024 to December 2025.

International studies show that parents play an important role in the development of inclusive education. However, the parents' views on inclusive education have so far hardly been researched.

The aim of the study was to see how parents think of their child's school situation, participation in schools and disability. The study was participatory. That means it was conducted in a collaboration of Caritas Armenia/Caritas Georgia with partner schools, University students as well as researchers from Germany.

In cooperation with the partner schools, contacts with parents of children with and without special educational needs in different school settings were established. We conducted interviews with various parents from the regions of Shirak (Armenia) and Tbilisi (Georgia).

### Results

A wide range of perspectives from parents on inclusive education became evident. The project showed that parents have different experiences with the school system and with inclusion. This depends on whether their child has Special Educational Needs (SEN) or not and which type of school it goes to. There were many similarities between parent groups, also in comparison of Armenia and Georgia.

In general, parents see inclusion as a process and a task for teachers. Mostly, inclusive education is associated with children with SEN as well as the demand for specialists. Furthermore, disability is mostly associated with behavioural difficulties and diversity in the classroom is seen as additional work.

Based on these similarities, differences could be seen among the various parent groups. These differences are presented country-by-country.

- 1) In Armenia, there are differences in the way parents view the function of school and how it should respond to the diversity of children. Parents with children with SEN see inclusive education as

an opportunity for their child to attend a mainstream school. At the same time, they strive for their child to receive specialized support. They see it as the school's responsibility to respond to differing behaviour. In contrast, parents without children with SEN see little need to change existing structures such as teaching practices.

- 2) In Georgia, differences in the parents' experiences showed up. Parents of children with SEN have a lot of interest in issues of inclusive education and disability. They are heavily involved in their children's schooling and compensate a lot. In contrast, parents without children with SEN seem indifferent and rather push children with SEN to special teachers or SNAs. Also, a difference among parents of children with SEN could be found. On the one hand, parents who send their children to mainstream schools want normality and demand the learning environment to be changed so that their child can participate. On the other hand, parents of children with SEN who send their children to a special school rather wish for a specialized, protected learning environment which addresses their children's needs.

### Understandings of Disability

In addition to that, parents have different understandings of disability.

- Parents without children with SEN often have a distanced as well as stereotyped view on children with SEN. They see disability as 'god-given', static and as a problem for the child. They hardly see the child's potential to develop.
- In contrast, parents of children with SEN are convinced that their children can learn and develop, if they get adequate support and adaptation. Consequently, they demand for individualisation as well as professionalisation to address their children's needs.
- Parents of children with SEN in mainstreaming schools rather demand adaptation of the mainstream and strive for normalisation.
- Parents of children with SEN in special schools emphasize their children's vulnerability and want their child to be protected. At the

same time, they highlight that their children can better develop in a specialised environment.

### Recommendations

These findings allow us to draw some ideas how to further improve schools and inclusive education:

- Firstly, the research team proposes that greater awareness of disability issues should be raised among staff in schools and other parents. The aim should be to increase knowledge about disabilities as well as broaden the understanding of inclusive education.
- In addition to that, the expertise of parents of children with SEN should be more taken into account in schools. This could help to break down stereotypes about disabilities and see each child as an individual with its own needs and challenges.
- Lastly, clear lines of communication (for example between teachers and parents but also among the parents themselves) should be established in schools. This could help to better involve parents and their perspective on their child.

## EXTENSIVE RESEARCH REPORT

### Background

Inclusive education in schools means that transformations are taking place in schools towards more participation. This is associated with structural changes at the policy level and in schools and at the same time – and primarily – with changes in the practices of the stakeholders in schools, for example school leaders, teachers, students and parents.

The role of parents is pivotal, for the development of their child as well as for institutional progress (Barger et al. 2019) – they are oftentimes called the motor of inclusive school development (Ziemen 2019). As international studies have shown, parents' perceptions and orientations play an important role in the development of inclusive education in schools and society. However, there are only few studies that put the situation of parents into perspective against the backdrop of the challenging structural framework conditions of inclusion (e.g. Hackbarth & Köpfer 2024). In-depth, i.e. narrative perspectives on inclusive education on the part of parents have so far been largely lacking. This is surprising, as the parents can report in depth on the child's development and the challenges associated with school and teaching from a biographical perspective.

In Georgia and Armenia, the aim is to initiate and develop inclusive education in schools and to raise awareness for inclusive education in the society (e.g. Kavelashvili 2017, Tchintchaurauli & Javakhishvili 2017). So far, in this transformation process, the role of parents and their views on inclusive education (and also disability) have not been empirically addressed.

Hence, the focus of this study is on parent's perspectives on inclusive education, based on their experiences and practices. The foundation of this research lays in a collaboration of Caritas Armenia/Caritas Georgia with partner schools. In the first phases of the project, the role of Special Need Assistants was successfully established in the project's partner schools. It was shown that this role can be of great importance in providing support to children with special educational needs (SEN) at school, but also in promoting communication and networking between the stakeholders within the school. It has also become clear that, in addition to the in-

ternal school level, the interface with external stakeholders such as parents is important. Researching parents' perceptions in a specific context like Armenia and Georgia can provide insights into the cultural and societal factors that influence orientations towards inclusion. Furthermore, it can give hints to obstacles that may hinder regular education, teachers' acceptance and implementation of inclusion in Armenia and Georgia. This understanding is crucial for adapting inspiring practices to the local context and for promoting inclusive education that resonates with the community. This knowledge can help educators and policy makers to tailor their efforts to the specific concerns and barriers that parents may have in relation to inclusive education.

Therefore, this collaborative project focused on the perspectives of parents – specifically the orientations of parents of children with and without SEN in inclusive and non-inclusive classes/schools – to gain an in-depth perspective on parents' orientations and needs.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions were raised:

1. How do parents narrate their child's school situation against the background of inclusion-oriented measures – especially Special Needs Assistants – in Armenian and Georgian schools?
2. What orientations on inclusion in schools can be reconstructed in their narrations?
3. Which perspectives on disability and disadvantages in schools are underlying?

### **Research Team and Methodology**

This study was conducted using a collaborative and participatory approach, in the sense that researcher, University students and Caritas team members were working together to gain insight into the perspectives of parents from children with and without SEN in Georgian and Armenian

schools. While Andreas Köpfer as an academic researcher brought in theoretical and empirical knowledge on parent's perspectives in inclusive education and on the methodology of Documentary Method, the University students and Caritas team members were experts for the structure, culture and practice of education in Georgian and Armenian schools.

## **Research Process**

In October 2024, the research process started with a hybrid introductory meeting in which the project idea was presented and the organizational framework was explained. In order to introduce the students to the perspective of parents in inclusive schools, their ambivalences as well as the methodology a hybrid workshop was conducted in November 2024. In the time from November 2024 to February 2025 the interview study was prepared. In cooperation with the partner schools, contacts with parents of children with and without special educational needs were established. There was a great commitment by the parents to partake in the study. Before conducting the interviews, the students gained ethics as well as informed consent. In a joint workshop in March, the students from Armenian and Georgian universities shared their experiences regarding the interview conduction. Andreas Köpfer introduced the research team to the Documentary Method (by Bohnsack) and analyses were conducted. In the time between March and June 2025 the interviews were analysed by the research team. In June 2025, workshops were held in Armenia and Georgia in which student groups interpreted, presented and discussed the results of the research. The overall results were discussed and laid the foundation for this final report.

## **Context | Research Design**

Overall, the project succeeded in obtaining a wide range of perspectives from parents on inclusive education while taking into account the different backgrounds and circumstances of the parents. The parents came from the regions of Shirak (Armenia) and Tbilisi (Georgia). The diversity of the parents was realized by distinguishing between different parent groups in advance. It was assumed that parents would have different experiences with the school system and with inclusion, depending on which parent

group they belonged to. Through the contacts of Caritas Armenia and Caritas Georgia (partner schools and beyond), a large number of parents from different types of schools were recruited for the narrative interview study – a total of 24 interviews in Armenia and 11 interviews in Georgia.

The following parental groups were, roughly equally, interviewed – using narrative interviews:

#### *Armenia:*

- o Parents of children with Special Educational Needs (SEN)
  - in a mainstreaming school
  - in a mainstreaming school with a resource room model
- o Parents of children without SEN
  - in a regular community school (with children with SEN)
  - in a regular community school (without children with SEN)

#### *Georgia:*

- o Parents of children with SEN in an inclusive school
- o Parents of children without SEN in a mainstream school
- o Parents of children with SEN in a special school

Within the research team, the co-researchers organized themselves into expert groups based on the specific parental group and evaluated each group in depth.

### **Results – Parents' Orientations**

The results of the study are summarized below. In principle, the results are presented on a country-by-country basis, i.e., first for Armenia, then for Georgia. The analysis of the interviews revealed similarities across countries. These are therefore listed together. The parents' orientations revealed homologue perspectives on inclusive education, even across the borders of Armenia and Georgia.

- a) Inclusion as a process: Inclusive education is described and viewed as a process of transformation that does not happen over-



night, but rather step by step. Legal provisions and basic information enable parents to consider inclusive education as an option for their child. Parents therefore perceive – with all due caution – that inclusive education is being addressed at the programmatic level and can be articulated on their part.

b) Inclusion as a call for special support: In this context, the call for inclusion is almost always associated with the demand for specialization or special support/attention and, unsurprisingly, with a greater need for specific information and professionalization on the part of teachers and other specialists. Overall, there is a very close connection between inclusive education and SEN – also in terms of the provision of resources for children who are perceived as different. This can be summarized as follows: Inclusive education = disability + additional resources ( $IE = D + AR$ ).

c) Inclusion as a task for teachers: Furthermore, the orientations of parents across countries show that inclusion should be anchored and perceived (also and more strongly) as a task for teachers. Parents see a lack of reciprocal communication (e.g., in terms of information exchange, feedback on child needs, and use of methods/strategies).

d) Inclusion as a contested field: Finally, the interviews reveal a phenomenon that can initially be interpreted as a positive attitude on the part of parents toward the current implementation of inclusive education. The implementation process is discussed in a positive light, and there is a general lack of active articulation of systemic and structural difficulties and the need for change. On closer inspection and deeper reconstructive analysis, it becomes apparent that the positive representations tend to occur at the programmatic level of the interviews – and therefore do not refer to the conjunctive experiences of the parents. This illustrates the vulnerable position of parents in the school system and a strategic and conscious reluctance to criticize.

## 2. Armenia (Shirak)

The following section first presents the orientation frameworks identified for each parent group and then uses these to highlight overarching patterns and areas of tension. Based on the aforementioned overarching similarities, specific orientations have emerged among the parent groups:

### A) Parents with children with SEN in mainstreaming schools

The orientations of parents who have a child with special educational needs attending a mainstreaming school reveal a high level of willingness and commitment to change existing approaches and methods at the school and adapt them to the children and disabilities in general (e.g., learning pace, materials, individual support). They are aware of different forms of disability and their needs. These parents take both an emotional and a formal approach and refer to the political will to introduce high-quality inclusion in schools.

They demand individual support and assistance for their children and criticize the poor quality of support provided to date – for example:

*“In fact, when I came to school, I encountered various problems. For example, the specialists did not know how to work with such children”. (IV | A1\_1)*

They would like to see teachers become more professional in matters of disability and inclusion and support the development of introducing special needs assistants (especially for behavioural requirements). They see specialists as important. At the same time, community, social learning with peers and the opportunity to learn in a general learning environment are important too, which is why they support inclusive education.

The stories make it clear that parents themselves have to put in a lot of extra effort in organizing and planning for their child and are willing to compensate for some of the school's responsibilities. They have to take the initiative, for example, in choosing a school or developing materials. They see disability as something individual that should be approached positively and with changes in the learning and living environment.

They also show an activist interest and a high level of motivation to change the education and school system for their child and for children with disabilities in general. This activism is very demanding and they feel burdened. They strive for an inclusive living environment, which is why their activism extends beyond school to extracurricular areas.

#### *B) Parents of children with SEN in the resource room model*

The orientations of parents of children with SEN who are taught in the newly piloted resource room model reveal high expectations for specific attention and support for the assigned children—the specialist promise, so to speak (also with regard to therapeutic support). Initially, parents were reluctant to accept the new and unfamiliar model – partly because of the potential for stigmatization, the possibility of an unprotected learning environment and the risk of increased exclusion. However, in their accounts of their experiences after the model was piloted, parents express satisfaction – particularly with regard to the combination of peer learning in the classroom and individual support in the resource room: *“The specialists carry out individual work, are attentive to the child, and show a good attitude.”* (IV | A2\_1) They are predominantly satisfied with specific didactic approaches and the learning materials. Parents perceive positive learning and behavioural development and are also satisfied with peer contact. For example, this is expressed in the following statement:

*“He didn't participate in classes before, but now he participates to some extent, thanks to a personal assistant.”* (IV | A2\_2)

It is becoming apparent that parents also recognize the special institutional attention as a compensatory relief for themselves, as some of them have stressful family situations and are happy to receive attention from specialists (e.g., also in relation to homework support).

#### *C) Parents of children without SEN in regular schools with children with SEN*

The orientations of parents without children with SEN who send their children to inclusive schools show conditional support for inclusion. Inclusion is referred to exclusively in relation to children with SEN. The

parents' accounts are characterized by a positive basic attitude, but at the same time they express uncertainty and scepticism regarding children with SEN. These feelings vary in relation to the perceived severity of the disability. In the case of children with severe disabilities, they see potential disruptions to lessons due to behaviour or a slower learning pace – for example:

“Naturally, those children are disruptive, the teacher can't leave the entire class and deal with that child. Some special teachers sit next to them and take care of them”  
(IV | A3\_1)

‘Milder’ disabilities are seen as less problematic. The perspective on disability is characterized by a positive portrayal, but this is combined with a regretful, charitable and in some cases religious attitude, which can have a devaluing effect, precisely because it emphasizes differences:

“Our child's education will indeed suffer a little, because those child[ren] will disrupt the lesson or they will definitely not sit well, but our children need to see that there are children like them and they are not to blame, of course, for being born that way.”  
(IV | A3\_2)

This is also evident in the narratives about classroom situations, in which the learning achievements of children with SEN are particularly emphasized and emotionalized – but at the same time, low expectations are placed on children with SEN. In contrast, there is a position of non-change in existing performance-oriented educational structures and a lack of educational and upbringing expectations for children with SEN.

#### *D) Parents of children without SEN in regular schools without children with SEN*

The perspectives of parents without children with SEN who are taught at regular (community) schools reveal a positive portrayal of children with SEN. Inclusive education is presented here as something positive and accepted. These portrayals are not based on experience, but rather on vague ideas about disabilities due to a lack of contact with them. This often reveals stereotypical, pitying, and religiously influenced ideas and images of disability (e.g., physical disabilities such as being confined to a wheelchair). The engagement with and commitment to inequality, difference, and disability is very distant and

based on limited knowledge, which is reflected in general statements such as:

"I know some things because my daughter studies it. I know that inclusive education means that when there is a child with a disability in a class, we call them a child with inclusive education. As far as I know, there is none in this school, but if there is, we will have a very kind attitude in the class. We don't see any problem, what difference does it make if the child is a child in a wheelchair or a person on foot?" (IV | A4\_1)

"For now, let's assume that we are in that situation and everyone ignores us. We will definitely isolate ourselves, psychological stress will arise. We should always communicate with them normally. They are human, whatever can they do, God created them in that way." (IV | A4\_2)

At the same time, clear and binary ideas of normal (children without SEN) and deviant (children with SEN) are revealed, with negative aspects and difficulties being attributed to the latter. Thus, positive representations of disability and inclusion are undermined by clear ideas that children with SEN need special schools and settings and cannot be imagined in normal school life. This becomes clear, for example, in the following statement:

"But if you ask my opinion, then I think that for these children there should be a separate class and a separate teacher, or even a separate school, where all the children would be similar to each other, even in terms of disturbing the lesson." (IV | A4\_3)

Accordingly, schools are not responsible for adapting to the specific needs of students.

## **Differences and ambivalences**

Overall, a comparison of the cases reveals a number of differences in the parents' experiences:

- Function of school and expectations of behaviour: There are differences—especially between parents with and without children with SEN—in the way they view the function of school and how it should respond to the diversity of children. This is particularly evident in the area of conspicuous behaviour or disruptions to teaching and school order. Parents with children with SEN see it as the school's responsibility – particularly through inclusion – to respond more strongly to heterogeneous behaviour. In this respect, the school reflects society

and should prepare children for it. Parents without children with SEN see little need for change in terms of expectations of learning and performance at school.

- Support/Facilitation: Parents with children with SEN see inclusive education as an opportunity for their child to attend a mainstream school. They therefore hope and strive for their child to receive support (e.g., through specific materials, adaptations, differentiation, assignment of a special needs assistant). Differences within the group of parents with children with SEN are evident in that parents who opt for the newly piloted Resource Room Model demand more specific and higher levels of support for their child. They therefore show a greater awareness of the specific needs of their children, which can be met in an appropriate Resource Room Model.
- Understanding of disability: There are significant differences in parents' orientations with regard to their understanding of disability. Parents of children with SEN view disability as a specific characteristic of the child, on the basis of which learning and development can take place with the support of the school, family, etc. (active understanding). In contrast, the orientations of parents without children with SEN often reveal a rather static and purely essentialist understanding of disability. Disability is seen—often on the basis of religious traditions—as a problem and suffering for the child. This opens up a charitable perspective, but one that is characterized by pity, implying a lack of development orientation (passive understanding).

### 3. Georgia (Tbilisi)

As with Armenia, the orientation frameworks developed by the respective parent groups are first presented for Georgia. Then overarching patterns and areas of tension are identified on this basis.

#### *A) Parents with children with SEN in mainstream schools:*

The orientations of parents of children with SEN in regular schools document a willingness to get involved in their own children's schooling and to provide specific support and compensation for the sake of participation – as, for example, the following statement shows:

*“That my child is a very good, outstanding student, and for that, unfortunately, the school has done nothing. I have put my personal life on hold, my family life on hold—everything is on hold, and I dedicate a huge amount of time to this.” (IV | G1\_1)*

In doing so, parents strive to ensure that their children receive an education as normal as possible (e.g., curriculum) and can learn together with their peers. They see it as their responsibility to ensure that their own child receives appropriate support at school. They express satisfaction with the special education teacher, but see a need for change among regular teachers and the school as a whole in terms of willingness and attitude towards support. Their role of constantly making demands is very challenging and they are sometimes exhausted and frustrated—also with regard to the orientations and perceptions of disability directed toward them and their child, seen, for example, in the following quote:

*“I shouldn’t have to teach them this. The state should develop... it should develop inclusive education in such a way that I don’t have to teach them. When I bring my child, they should already be informed”. (IV | G1\_2)*

Nevertheless, they accept the current situation. Against the backdrop of their reluctance to criticize existing school structures, they run the risk of transferring the responsibility for adapting to the classroom to their child.

*B) Parents with children with Special Educational Needs in special schools:*

The orientations of parents of children with special educational needs who attend special schools show a high degree of interest in ensuring that their children receive support tailored to their needs. The choice of school is based on a diagnosis – and on the consideration of negative experiences such as a lack of support in a mainstream school. Mainstream schools are portrayed as cold and harsh, while special schools are seen as warm, soft, and safe. This is seen, for example, in parent's reasoning on the school choice:

*"A relative of mine told me that, they had such a child, and the parents, protested, saying they didn't want an autistic child sitting with their kids. That child hasn't done anything wrong". (IV | G2\_1)*

Special schools are therefore perceived as a "safe space" – not necessarily as a professional space. The need to protect the child is high – ultimately, this means accepting a lowering of the school's performance expectations for the child. They also accept longer travel distances, shorter school hours, etc. While parents perceive the learning environment in the special school as more suitable and the teachers as more experienced in dealing with disabilities, they see room for improvement in terms of support and therapeutic services. They strive for specific attention for their child. Additionally, they see room for improvement in communication with the child as they are not familiar with the exact methods and strategies used at the special school.

*C) Parents with children without Special Educational Needs in regular school:*

The orientations of parents of children without special educational needs who attend mainstream schools reflect a high degree of conformity with the school system and institutions. Often fulfilling a dual role (e.g., mother and teacher; mother and assistant), they present inclusion as a socially important task that is, however, difficult for schools to implement—especially with regard to issues of conspicuous and disruptive behaviour.

Their primary focus on inclusion is on maintaining order in school and in the classroom. Against this background, they see the role of special



needs assistants as unreservedly helpful because they provide support and attention to children with SEN while also creating a normalizing order in the classroom. For example, this is made clear by the following statement:

*"[...] during the learning process, the assistant, to that extent, they are focused on their task, so that the other children are not disturbed, they try their best so that the lesson process is not disturbed at all, so this is good" (IV | G3\_1)*

Accordingly, the parents do not pursue a transformative agenda. They are rather reluctant to allow schools and classrooms to compensate for social inequality and make hasty changes with regard to diversity. Therefore, they also view the role and responsibility of teachers with regard to inclusion (primarily understood as supporting children with SEN in mainstream classrooms) as limited.

### **Differences and ambivalences**

Here, too, a comparison across cases reveals some differences in the parents' experiences:

- *Distance vs. proximity*: Since parents without children with SEN refer to regular classes and are accustomed to a system of normal attention from teachers, they show little interest in issues of inclusive education and disability. This is also evident among regular teachers. In contrast, parents of children with SEN show a high level of interest in issues of inclusive education and disability and are familiar with the system of diagnoses and specific needs. This seems understandable, but it leads to a binary and thus parallel system of responsibility and attention to issues of heterogeneity in schools.
- *Normalization vs. Specialization*: There is a discrepancy among parents of children with SEN regarding the goals they set for their children. Parents who send their children to mainstream schools strive to provide as much normality as possible (proximity to home, learning with peers, the same curriculum, academic qualifications). Parents of children with SEN who send their children to a special school show a keen interest in creating a specialized, protected learning environment for their children. The data also

shows that students who attend a special school have greater support needs, which suggests that these children are more vulnerable and require greater support from their parents.

- Exhaustious Compensation vs. Indifference: There was a significant discrepancy in practices relating to the school situation between parents of children with and without SEN. Indifference here is not meant in the sense of ignorance, but rather as a practice of non-interference. Parents of children without SEN – and also regular teachers – show little concern for the needs of children with SEN. Delegating children with SEN to special teachers or SNAs, they perceive as a smooth transition in terms of the provision for children with SEN in mainstream schools. Parents of children with SEN, on the other hand, are heavily involved in their children's schooling. Regardless of whether they send their child to a mainstream school or a special school, they compensate to a large extent, in their estimation. Parents of children with SEN in a special school are confronted with a high level of logistical and financial expenditure as well as short school hours (and thus more time spent on childcare, e.g. associated with less time for a job). Parents of children with SEN in mainstream schools, on the other hand, are concerned with compensatory matters such as adaptations and tasks.
- Barrier-centered (environmental) vs. Disability-centered (ontological): A final heterology can be identified between parents of children with SEN in mainstreaming schools and special schools. Parents of children with SEN in mainstream schools are more focused on barriers in the child's learning environment when it comes to dealing with disabilities. The aim is to achieve a pragmatic, general, and normalizing adaptation of learning conditions so that the child can participate as normally as possible in mainstream schools. Parents of children with SEN in a special school are more concerned with disabilities in the sense of mental and physical limitations – and accordingly with specialized and, in some cases, individualized attention to disability-related needs. The research team (see above) suspects that this may be related

to differences in the level of support required by students with SEN in mainstream and special schools.

## Conclusion

Summarized on an analytical level, an initial classification (see Figure 1) can be identified based on the documentary method. Given the exploratory nature of the study, this classification should not be considered representative; nevertheless, it allows initial findings to be expressed in a systematic and concise manner.

	Mode of Practice (person)	Dealing with support (structure)
Regular – P w/o SEN	Distant	Maintaining
Regular – P w SEN	Engaged (transformative)	Demanding
Special – P w SEN	Engaged (individualizing)	Trusting

*(Figure 1 – Typology of parental orientations, own representation)*

As the previous results of the parent interviews clearly show, parents have very different approaches to inclusive education (mode of practice) and, following on from this, different approaches to support. The typology clearly shows that parents of children without SEN tend to take a more distant approach to inclusive education and, when it comes to support at school, are more inclined to maintain existing structures and cultures. Parents of children with SEN in mainstreaming schools, in contrast, are committed to adaptations, differentiation, and social participation of their children in school and in the classroom. Within a transformative approach, they strive for changes in school structures and cultures, which they also demand (albeit not too aggressively). Parents of children with SEN who have been enrolled in a special school are also committed to compensatory and organizational activities – but in this case, they focus more on their child's (high) individual support needs. They are therefore less interested in transforming educational structures and cultures, but rather place their trust in a specialized and institutionalized system of support.

With regard to the international expert discourse, the results of this study confirm the finding that parents are crucial advocates for their children (especially those with disabilities) (Mann 2017; Mann et al. 2024; Harry & Ocasio-Stoutenburg 2021). It has been shown that parents of children with SEN who attend a mainstream school, in particular demonstrate a high degree of active advocacy. Furthermore, in line with Trescher 2020, parents are highly involved in decisions for their children. Parents, like children, are involved in powerful processes of institutional inclusion and exclusion, which can sometimes be exhausting and time-consuming. It also becomes clear that parents of students with disabilities agree more strongly with statements supportive of inclusion than parents of students without disabilities (Alsulami & Ault 2024; Paseka & Schwab 2020). With regard to a study with a similar research design in Germany, there is a high degree of agreement in the orientations of parents at mainstreaming schools (Hackbarth & Köpfer 2024). However, there is a big difference in the orientations of parents whose children attend special schools. Although parents here also show a strong focus on the individual needs of their children in their practices, parents in Armenian and Georgian schools expend disproportionately more organizational and compensatory effort.

## **Implications and Recommendations**

How can these findings contribute to the further development of educational practice? First, it is important to emphasize that this study focused exclusively on the perspectives of parents. As a result, the perspectives of other stakeholders may be underrepresented. Overall, the study is not about criticizing the educational practices of existing stakeholders in schools. It is rather about exploring the experiences of parents in greater depth in order to draw conclusions from this empirical data that can be used to improve schools.

Based on the results, the research team jointly developed the following overarching recommendations:

- Awareness Rising: Greater awareness of disability issues should be raised among stakeholders in schools and other parents. This can increase knowledge about disabilities in schools and break down stereotypes (see below). At the same time, it can show that

inclusive education includes other types of difference, not only dis/ability, but also age, gender, socio-economic status, migration etc. Furthermore, it can raise awareness of the effort, flexibility, organization, and socio-economic burden placed on parents with children who have been assigned SEN.

Concrete measures could include, for example:

- Create opportunities for parents to talk to other parents, especially during periods of transition.
  - Enlist the school administration as an initiator for inclusive school development and to invite experts to speak on specific topics.
  - Offer awareness-raising opportunities for parents of children without SEN, starting in the early years of elementary school. Topics such as diversity and equity can be discussed in particular in order to break down normative ideas in schools.
  - Sharing successful examples from both teachers (e.g., methods, projects) and children's school success stories to make topics of inclusion and disability a positive experience.
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- Assistance: Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) have proven to be a valuable support for parents, as they provide specific support for children with high needs and at the same time act as a mouth-piece for parents in schools. Nevertheless, the role is characterized by a high degree of ambivalence and requires a high level of cooperation within the school (*see previous Caritas report on Support and Assistance in Georgian and Armenian Schools in 2023*).
  - Knowledge on child: Parents have a history with their child. Parents of children with SEN in particular have family and institutional expertise that has so far been underutilized by schools. Here, the understanding of diagnosis (e.g., for SEN) could be broadened and parents' experiences taken into account to a greater extent. In addition, stereotypes about disabilities could be broken down and each child could be seen as an individual with their own needs and challenges.

Examples could be:

- Involving parents more closely in the diagnostic process for determining SEN, with regard to biographical knowledge, decision-making processes and school preferences.
  - Support schools and teachers by providing them with information and documents on how to deal with diagnoses at school (e.g., in class, during disclosure, to support peer-to-peer education, etc.).
- Communication: It is recommended that clear channels of communication are established in schools, which also involve parents and their perspective on their children. Role models in this regard include the collaborative consultation model (see Porter 1995), in which low-threshold but systematic communication takes place between stakeholders. Here, parents are invited to schools on a case-by-case basis to discuss issues relating to their children. In addition, communication models that encourage exchange between parents (especially between parents with and without children with SEN) could be useful in order to increase awareness and knowledge.

Further measures in the context of teacher support could include:

- More low-threshold meetings between parents and teachers with a focus on specific situations and problems.
- The formation of a school support team to assist teachers, e.g., with support from school psychologists. The aim is to provide practical support in the classroom as well as knowledge and skills.
- Supporting the specific professionalization of teachers, especially in rural areas, where there are often few teachers and knowledge of inclusive education is not so widespread.
- Expanding written communication and documentation between parents and teachers about the children. In particular, so that parents can bring their knowledge about their children into the school.

Since the situation in schools in Georgia and Armenia differs — among others due to the different social, cultural, and political conditions — and the two regions being compared were both urban and rural, the recommendations are rather general in nature and should be further specified for each situation in the respective school.

## Notions of Disability

Due to the close relation to inclusive education, the parents' orientations on disability (and disadvantages) in schools were also reconstructed – using the same parent sample and grouping. Thereby different orientations were found.

- First, the understanding of disability of parents with children without special educational needs (SEN) in inclusive schools in both countries as well as parents of children without SEN in community schools without children with SEN (Armenia) are presented. The two groups are presented together as a similar orientation framework is documented. Concerning these parents a distinction – especially along the line of behavioural characteristics – of children with and without SEN becomes clear. Within this difference disabilities are then weighed up again in relation to the disruption they cause with regard to the smooth implementation of lessons, thereby emphasizing the behaviourally homogenizing character of school. The severity of the disability is not determined according to ontological or medical criteria, but according to the maintenance of school and classroom order. Parents differentiate between children who disturb the order of the class and those who don't, declaring intellectual disabilities to be less disturbing:

*"There are a few difficult children, who are not as- well, in my child's class the [SEN student] only has mental retardation, but the kid is calm, friendly, warm, does not cause any problems for teachers. [SEN student] is involved in the learning process as much as possible, writes, reads, well [SEN student] isn't as developed as others, but has a very minor disorder, so to say, but in other classes there is such [SEN student] who does not sit down, disturbs other students, screams, shouts, runs away, tears down the restroom doo- ...." (IV | G3\_2)*

Academic differences, such as a widening gap between the learning and developmental levels of children with and without disabilities, are treated as less significant. The rather vague descriptions document an (emotional) distance towards the students and the pedagogical-didactic treatment of disability. The primary focus is on maintaining classroom order; while issues of learning and behaviour in all forms of disabilities remains untouched. The specific work on learning and behaviour is delegated to special education

teachers and special needs assistants (SNAs) thereby hinting at their wish for special places for children with SEN. Parents of this group seem to have little interest in inclusive education and reduce it to be for children with SEN, not for all children. In addition to that, they see disability as god-given, ontologic and static, regarding children with SEN through a lense of pity and neglecting their potential to develop. Consequently, the need for professionalisation to address the children's needs in inclusive schools is overlooked.

- Parents of children with SEN in inclusive schools (Georgia and Armeina) seem to have a broader understanding of inclusion. Just like the parents before they do differentiate between disabilities, but do not think that their children disturb the class. Instead, they emphasize a lack of adaptation, special resources and qualified personal and demand individualisation in the form of physical and methodical adaptation, special support by SNAs as well as professionalisation to address their children's needs. These parents are rather pushing and desire to change structures to fit their children's needs. They stress their children's potential and give room for development within the assigned disability. This shows in the following statement:

*"I would like to see more psychologists and speech therapists in schools to monitor the development of children. These specialists come once or twice a week and this is a problem because it is difficult for children to develop in that way." (IV | A1\_2)*

However, few parents in this group do not want to change the practices and structures of the school, but rather – through individual attention – functionalise the child within the behavioural framework of school, so that it fits in. This might be motivated by shame for the child as well as the wish for normalisation, seen in the desire for the child to follow the standard educational program. This can be seen in the following statement:

*"...we have autistic children, the whole country shouldn't have to adapt to us, we should teach our children how to adapt to this society." (IV | G1\_3)*



Nevertheless, all parents in this group stress that inclusive education allows social integration and see school as an important means for inclusion in society. Overall, the child's disability is seen as a field of expertise of the parents – asymmetrically to the professionals, as can be seen, for example, in this quote:

“The number one problem is with the specialists: they do not know how to work with such children, what methods to use, how to behave.” (IV | A1\_3)

- Parents of children with SEN in resource rooms (Armenia) mostly seem satisfied with the specialist work such as the didactic approaches. They have a broad understanding of inclusion and locate their child's disability rather in a lack of adaption than ontologically in the child itself. Consequently, they actively demand adaptation and specialised support to address their children's needs. The parents see the resource room model as successful, pointing out their children's academic progress as well as participation in the mainstream classroom: “Since my child was in the program, he has started to pay more attention during classes and be more active in the classroom.” (IV | A2\_3) However, just like the parents presented first, they seem sceptical about the social surrounding in the resource classroom and fear that children with SEN with behaviour-related deviations disrupt their child's learning progress. They seem to be positive about the specialisation as well as inclusion in the mainstream, but not about the social aspect in the resource room model.
- Finally, among the parents of children with SEN in special schools (Georgia) an orientation framework becomes evident to deal with disability in terms of institutional care. Disability is placed as a characteristic of the child, while institutional care is intended to improve the child's behavioural difficulties, which are seen as problematic. A high level of trust is placed in the trained staff. Disability in the mode of non-fulfilment of developmental norms shows in the difference that the parents make clear in the school placement. Children with SEN are presented in the mode of not being able to fulfil the regular school's requirements, thereby legitimising special schooling. Just like the parents of children with

SEN in other types of school they accept their children's difference, but in contrast do not demand systematic adaptation of the mainstream and rather chose a special place for their children. They depict the regular school as a hostile place, the special school as a safe space, where their children are secured against negative attitudes and unfulfillable expectations. In contrast to the parents of children with SEN in inclusive schools and resource rooms, they do not expect academic achievement for their children and demand an individualised, life-skills program. This can be seen in the following statement:

*"Now, he can multiply three-digit numbers, fine, division and multiplication, everything, but he can't even buy a chocolate..." (IV | G2\_2)*

Comparing the parent's orientations of all different groups both homologous and heterologous aspects are documented. They can be described as understandings of disability in relation to the practices in the institution of school. Focusing on the homologous aspects, it can be pointed out that all parents, being asked about inclusive education, focus on children with SEN. Accordingly, their understanding of inclusion is connected to disability. Another common point of reference is the binary differentiation of children in those with and those without SEN. Most parents see disability as a characteristic, located within the child which requires specialised answers within the institutional setting. Furthermore, disability is mostly addressed in combination with questions of behavioural difficulties and heterogeneity in the classroom is seen as additional work. Most parents demand specialisation and professionalisation, whereas the aim – supporting children with SEN or delegating them – differentiates. Progress in the field of inclusive education is – out of different perspectives such as inclusion or non-disturbance – commonly valued.

As seen in the detailed explanations above, clear distinctions are documented. Parents of children without SEN focus less on children with SEN and more on vague descriptions and relations along the non-disruptive order of teaching. They mostly have a stereotyped and uninformed view on disability and are distant towards children with SEN. They distinguish between disabilities (intellectual/behavioural), seem indifferent and delegate children with SEN to the expected expertise of the special teachers

as well as SNAs. These parents locate disability inside the child neglecting the children's potential to develop. Overall, disability is seen here as a vague, romanticizable characteristic, as long as the order of school is not disturbed. (DISTANCED maintaining)

Parents of children with SEN in inclusive schools, respectively resource classrooms, seem to have a broader understanding of inclusion, not only focusing on disability. They see school as a means to include their children in society and are willing to demand adaptation as well as professionalisation among staff in the general school to address their children's needs. At the same time, they strive for normalisation and want the teachers to manage their children's behaviour, so that they fit in. Disability is seen here as an (individual) deviation for which parents have the expertise (beyond pedagogical know-how). (OFFENSIVELY demanding)

Finally, parents of children with SEN in special schools seem to put a lot of trust in the institution of special school. They emphasize their children's vulnerability, fear their children are isolated in regular schools and support the idea of a safe space in a specialised surrounding. These parents want their children to be protected while highlighting at the same time that their children can better develop in a specialised environment – for example:

*"This school was the right choice for my child. There are less students in the class and there is an individual approach to teaching. Of course, public schools also offer inclusive education, but I was afraid that he might get lost in." (IV | G2\_3)*

Disability is seen here as a binary deficit (normal vs. problematic) that needs professional support and care. (DEFENSIVELY trusting)

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