INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN ACTION (PHASE 2) - EMPOWERING TEACHERS

DEVELOPING ASSESSMENT PRACTICE IN ARMENIA

Overview

A eight-month consultancy project was implemented in Armenia to support the revision of special educational needs assessment and education planning procedures in alignment with the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF-CY) and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Commissioned by UNICEF-Armenia, this project entailed the collaboration between consultants and a local team of experts, in a scaffolding process based on existing resources and needs. The outcomes included a package of tools and procedures for a holistic and dynamic assessment, and an effective methodology for the design of Individualised Education Programs (IEPs) focused on enabling environments for inclusion.

Themes

- **Pre-service teacher education**
- **Continuing Professional Development**

What are the main aims of the initiative/programme of work?

The work had as a main aim supporting the shift of special educational needs assessment procedures from deficit-based models of disability (centred on identifying students' impairments) to current social-ecological approaches. Using the ICF-CY (WHO, 2007) as a guiding framework, the described consultancy process sought to build a common language and understanding of disability processes, approaching them as a gap between individuals' needs and provided environmental supports. Framed in such a perspective, a package of assessment tools and procedures was developed in order to produce functioning profiles that can better inform individualised planning of educational responses.

Background

In the last decade, Armenia has made substantial progress in the field of inclusive education, expanding the network of inclusive schools and gradually transforming special schools into resource centres devoted to supporting inclusive education (Hunt, 2009). Concurrent to the aim of realising the right of children with disabilities to inclusive education, came the need to restructure special needs assessment

procedures and additional support provision for children with disabilities. The assessment processes conducted by the Medical- Psychological-Pedagogical Assessment Centre (MPPC) were - until the beginning of 2013 - mainly focused on medical diagnosis and on child developmental tests, targeting the identification of areas of difficulty with reference to normative indicators (Poghosyan, 2012).

Aligned with current international trends, the challenge was to revise the assessment measures and procedures so that they can provide multidimensional and interrelational descriptions of each child's participation. In focus was the assessment - conducted by the MPPC in cooperation with schools - of all Armenian children who may have additional support needs targeted by special education responses.

With that purpose, a collaborative relationship was established between consultants and the local team of experts from the MPPC. As required for the project, consultants had expertise in the principles and practice of inclusive education, and in the evaluation of special education policies and, specifically in the use of the ICF-CY as a reference framework in educational contexts. The team responsible for the assessment of children's special educational needs in Armenia, the experts from MPPC, were from different disciplinary areas, including psychology and social work. The collaboration also included representatives of key-entities in education and inclusion in Armenia such as the Bridge of Hope, the Ministry of Education and Science, the Pedagogical and Yerevan State Universities and the National Institute of Education.

The products resulting from the consultancy project were later subject to dissemination, through the training of teams of other Assessment Centres that are spread over different regions of Armenia.

Issues addressed

At this point, the development of methodologies that can support a close connection between theoretical and practical domains are of global interest. In the field of disability and inclusion, such intent has been reflected in a wide range of efforts to put into practice processes of special needs assessment that coincide with context-sensitive perspectives of human functioning. Actually, parallel to the emphasis placed on inclusive education as a human right, there has been a move from "within-child" perspectives of disability toward ones that acknowledge the environmental role in functioning and disabling processes (Florian at al, 2006; Simeonsson, 2006). The pragmatization of this social-ecological view requires the implementation of comprehensive assessments that support the description of students' functioning profiles, documenting not only their responses to environmental demands, but also environmental responses to their needs

(Simeonsson et al., 2008). Since its' publication, the ICF-CY has been considered as a framework that reflects the evolutionary process from individually oriented approaches towards socio-ecological perspectives, by considering: (1) a conceptual component explicitly dedicated to the environmental role on disablement and functioning processes; (2) reciprocal relationships between conceptual components; and (3) a neutral and positive language defining different components (WHO 2007). Concretely, it provides a taxonomic structure that allows a multidimensional and interrelational description of human functioning with reference to the Body Functions and Structures (BF), the Activity and Participation (AP), and the Environmental Factors (EF).

The reported experience embraces, not only a methodological path for the revision of an assessment package of tools and procedures aligned with the ICF-CY framework, but also an approach to the collaborative relationship between consultants and consultees that enabled a transition of practices built on knowledge and on the locally-existing beliefs, resources and needs.

With regard to the methodological path, two guiding principles were considered in the design of the revision process: (a) the assessment of students' needs and the description of his/her functioning profile demands an holistic approach; (b) the gap between students' capacities and environmental demands and/ or between students' needs and available supports is a key-feature for defining IEPs' goals and strategies.

Considering these principles, the contents of the existing-toolkit used in Armenia, that was organized by age-groups, were scrutinized and adapted having as a reference ICF-CY 'developmental code sets' from Ellingsen and Simeonsson (2011) - defining 'what to assess' in each age-group. Based on the defined assessment-targets, the revision of the toolkit involved the development and selection of measures that meet the requirement for holistic and dynamic assessments – i.e., focused on the environmental impact on students' performance. Following the assessment, the collected information was integrated into functioning profiles - describing the relationships between BF, AP and EF. These were addressed as the basis for the problem-solving reasoning underlying the IEP design.

Concerning the collaborative approach - and engrained in Theories about Diffusion of Innovations (e.g., Greenhalgh et al., 2004; Wood et al., 1998) -, the entire consultancy process was founded on the assumption that, as any other innovation, the adoption/assimilation of a new praxis of assessment and intervention, demands to be referenced and built up on adopters' experiences and beliefs. Based on that, consultees' experience was always valued, through the use of a scaffolding strategy focused on establishing a constant linkage between prior assessment knowledge and strategies and new assessment approach. As such, the current Armenian

practices (resources and needs) were always adopted as a starting point to outline, together with consultees, adaptations and changes to be introduced in the assessment toolkit and procedures. As shown in table 1, such an approach entailed diverse actions as a systematic comparison between Armenian existing practices and the state of the art of knowledge, the building of a common language and understanding of disability and a constant feedback about the work developed.

Implementation

The scaffolding support provided by the consultants to the MPPC team of experts, was developed through on-site visits and the exchange of web-based communication. Implemented as an evolutionary process, the consultancy process encompassed six progressive and cumulative stages.

Stage	Description
1st *Document Analysis: 'How was Armenia located with regard to the state of art and other international practices?'*	Formal analysis of Armenian special education policies as well as a practical analysis of the existing assessment toolkit and procedures. A systematic comparison was made between existing policies, assessment toolkit and procedures in Armenia and the state of art of knowledge, considering different guiding questions such as: what domains should be considered in the assessment; how the assessment should be carried out in terms of measurement and documentation of assessment results; how assessment findings should be used to develop the IEPs.
2nd *Workshop in ICF-CY and inclusion*	Implementation of a two-day workshop with the aim of building a common knowledge base and language about inclusion, and an uniform use of the ICF-CY framework and taxonomy.
3rd *Mapping the existing assessment toolkit into the ICF-CY*	Linkage of the existing set of tasks and measures used by the Armenian assessment teams into the ICF-CY framework, in order to: (i) analyse the coverage of different ICF-CY components by the existing toolkit – with reference to age-group developmental code sets (Ellingson & Simeonsson, 2011); (ii) identify in the existing toolkit what it is missing as a target of assessment; (iii) identify the need to add or change the assessment measures to collect the needed information.
4th *Revision of the literature about assessment tools and support on the development of new toolkit*	Review of methods and tools for collecting data of uncovered assessment targets. Development of a protocol in "how to assess", identifying what assessment tools to use, by whom and where. Assessment measures and procedures considered: natural environments of participation; children's interests, meaningful activities and opportunities; current and maximum performance according to best support/ assistance.
5th *Analysis of case studies*	Experimental implementation of the new toolkit and assessment procedures through case studies. Analysis of the perceptions of MPPC team of experts about the experiences arising from the use of the new assessment toolkit and procedures, considering: (i) how the toolkit was implemented (e.g., approach, time consumed, difficulties); (ii) how data were summarized; and (iii) perceived strengths and weaknesses.
6th *Guidance on the translation of assessment results into functioning profiles that can base the IEPs design*	Demonstrations on how to integrate the collected information into dynamic functioning profiles, describing: (i) disability processes – impairments, activity limitations and environmental barriers underpinning participation restrictions; and (ii) functioning processes – mapping environmental facilitators that support students' participation. The monitoring of the development of IEPs, made use of guiding templates for translating assessment results into intervention goals and strategies (e.g., Adolfsson et al., 2010) and IEPs' quality indicators (e.g. Revised-Goals and Objectives Rating Instrument – R-GORI from Notary-Syverson & Shuster, 1995).

Key outcomes and impact

As outcomes, the consultancy process produced:

(a) a revised package of tools and procedures for special educational needs assessment. The revised toolkit encompassed the adapted-use of different referenced tools (that, among others, included the Supports Intensity Scale from AAIDD (2003; 2012) and the Transdisciplinary Play-Based Assessment from Toni Linder (1993; 2008)) and the development of 5 questionnaires directed to parents and to teams of staff in educational settings. The toolkit was organized into three age-groups: 3 to 5, 6 to 12 and 13 to 17 years.

(b) a procedures manual – designing the procedures and approach to be adopted in the assessment process;

(c) a methodology for translating the assessment results into functioning profiles;

(d) a proposal of a methodology for the design of IEPs based on students' functioning profiles.

Evaluation

The development of the consultancy process was monitored through a continuous exchange between consultants and the MPPC team of experts, mediated by in-site missions and a reciprocal exchange through virtual supports. The impact of the consultancy was also examined through the analysis of case studies in in-site visits, comparing the range and nature of information obtained through the new toolkit and procedures with the previous one. Based on those information sources (case studies and the teams' perceptions), the new toolkit and assessment procedures allowed the gathering of a wider spectrum of information and a comprehensive approach to students' needs. The assessment results – obtained with the use of the new toolkit – enabled the description of functioning profiles that can be used for: (i) eligibility determination; (ii) the identification of relevant services and supports for students' participation (inscribed in IEPs); and (iii) the monitoring of students' progress.

The challenges and risk factors in the implementation of the new assessment toolkit and procedures were based in the complexity of the approach, demanding the development of specific knowledge and skills, and a strict collaboration within assessment teams and with school staff.

Future developments/sustainability

As announced by Greenhalgh et al. (2004), besides the introduction of an innovation per se, its' adoption depends on the establishment of efficient mechanisms of diffusion and sustainability, ensuring its' implementation and routinization. In other words, beyond the development of a new assessment toolkit that can improve students' participation, the challenge was to disseminate the new set procedures and make them routine. Within the scope of the consultancy process, recommendations for diffusion and sustainability of the new assessment approach were outlined, including: (i) the implementation of knowledge dissemination strategies - e.g., training programs for professionals involved on different assessment levels; creating 'sharing stations' of materials and difficulties-based problem solving strategies; (ii) implementation of monitoring procedures on the practical use of the toolkit and assessment procedures; and (iii) creating consistent communication mechanisms within and between different assessment teams; between school staff and region assessment teams.

Learning points

At a time when several countries are focusing effrots on implementing a context-sensitive approach to support provision for young people with disabilities, this project developed a generalizable model for the revision of assessment practices, through the use of the ICF-CY. Lessons learnt from this experience point to: (i) the importance of a change build up in a scaffolding process, strongly connected with existing needs, resources and professionals' beliefs; and (ii) the suitability of the proposed methodology, based on the ICF-CY framework, to guide the process of revising assessment toolkits.

Supporting materials

Sanches-Ferreira, M., Simeonsson, R., Silveira-Maia, M., and Alves, S. 2014. Systems and policy environments in child health and education: Portugal and Armenia experiences in ICF-CY in educational context. Summer Institute – Global Education and Developmental Studies (GEDS) Transatlantic Consortium, Porto.

 Sanches-Ferreira, M., Silveira-Maia, M., and Alves, S. 2015. The ICF-CY in educational context: the revision process of the assessment toolkit and procedures in Armenia. UNICEF meeting: Regional inclusive education teacher preparation workshop, Zurich.

(2 PPT FILES TO ADD)

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