

## **Armenian teachers' dichotomous perspectives on children with high-functioning autism**

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### **Abstract**

This article uses the views of student teachers and serving teachers from a post-Soviet context in order to better understand current thinking around teachers' perceptions of children with what might be termed 'hidden' disabilities. Drawing on social comparison theory, and adopting a phenomenographical approach, the study explores teachers' perspectives of autism in the Republic of Armenia, offering an insight into the impact of its social, cultural and political history. Whilst serving teachers demonstrated contrastive and downward comparisons when presented with a vignette of a young person with Asperger's Syndrome, student teachers expressed more connective comparisons. The data suggest, then, that Armenian student teachers represent progressive attitudinal change towards individuals with disabilities. These results also shed light on how social comparison theory might be used to tease out assumptions and taken-for-granted attitudes in the global West.

**Keywords:** Teacher attitudes, student teacher attitudes, Armenia, social comparison, autism

### **Introduction**

Studies on the preparation of teachers for a knowledge society that is both diverse and equitable have raised questions about the relationships between skills, knowledge and attitudes (Cochran-Smith et al., 2015) and the degree to which pre-service teachers understand what is meant by inclusive educational practices (Lancaster and Bain, 2018). This theory/practice divide has the potential to objectify learners to better fit ideological priorities evidenced in many developed countries, as exemplified by the reporting of data from the Programme for International Reading Literacy Study (PISA) tests.

Alongside these debates, discussions around the Politics of Disablement (Oliver and Barnes, 2012) and the intersection of identity, politics, agency and oppression (see Goodley, 2014; Goodley et. al. 2017) pave the way for a re-examination of 'wicked problems in special and inclusive education' (Armstrong, 2017). It is, perhaps, no surprise that many post-Soviet contexts, including the Republic of Armenia, are currently under-represented in these debates.

Additionally, much has been written about the aetiology of hegemonic ideologies of *special education* in the West, and the resultant manifestation of perceptions of educability (Rutherford, 2016). These debates are important on two levels: firstly, they are increasingly relevant for nation states in the midst of political flux, particularly those whose educational structures were previously built on the forms of performativity and economic success promoted in contexts such as the Soviet Union. As argued by Perepa (2014, 323), 'the importance given to the 'deficit' social behaviours associated with ASD is not universal but a social construct [which] is influenced by a number of factors including culture'.

Secondly, many of these debates take little account of the political, economic and social reality of countries such as Armenia which has been subjected to periods of government censorship of the media, a general conceptualisation of science as a means for improving national security, and an intensification of 'restrictions on freedom of expression' (Donabedian and Carey, 2011, p. 214). Drawing on social comparison theory as a framework for conceptualising phenomena (Hedley and Young, 2006; Huws and Jones, 2015; Locke, 2014), this study sought to explore whether teachers, as powerful social actors, mitigate or promulgate exclusionary practices. This is particularly timely

as the country's government is dedicating the next decade to establishing schools as wholly inclusive environments (Anapiosyan, Hayrapetyan & Hovsepyan, 2014).

### **Armenian education**

Armenian education policy is formulated through the Education Development State Programme, and only around 4,000 children with special educational needs (approximately half of the estimated total) have been identified as being 'covered by special general education institutions and inclusive education programmes' (Sargsyan, 2011, p. 5). With around 70% of children in orphanages having a disability, educational and societal integration continue to be significant concerns (Human Rights Watch, 2017).

Alongside the mainstream system, there are *special* (boarding) schools and *inclusive* schools, the latter of which offer access to the mainstream curriculum for children with special educational needs. Admission to a special or inclusive school involves medical, psychological, and pedagogical assessments in order to gain a curriculum recommendation (UNESCO, 2015). However, as reflected in the case studies in Rouse and Lapham (2013), systemic processes that reflect the bureaucratic structures [and the training of bureaucrats] of the Soviet era are often predicated on notions of defectology. As a result of this, parents often struggle to make their child 'visible' in a society where there is official refusal to admit that marginalisation and vulnerability existed under state socialism (Larskaia-Smirnova & Russell, 2013, 222).

In addition, even with an assessment of need, tensions can be seen in the quality of provision in relation to infrastructure and staff knowledge, whereupon,

Children with disabilities are among the most marginalized groups facing multiple deprivations: 71% do not attend preschool, 18% do not attend school, 12% attend special schools, 13% live in institutions (special schools and orphanages) (UN Armenia, 2015, p. 23).

These remnants of Communism - wherein 'individuals were valued according to their productivity and contributions to the advancement of the State' (UNICEF 2012, p. 20) - may be tacitly perpetuating the poor social status of individuals with disabilities. As Phillips (2009, p. 1) reminds us in an article entitled 'There are no invalids in the USSR!', those with 'physical and mental disabilities in the former Soviet bloc...[were]...stigmatized, hidden from the public, and thus made seemingly invisible'. Actions of this nature are a by-product of the many societal misperceptions of disabilities, grounded in the aforementioned legacy of defectology (Hartblay, 2014; Hartblay & Ailchieva, 2013; Phillips, 2012). For this conceptualisation of how individuals with disabilities are perceived, we draw on social comparison theory.

### **Social comparison**

As far back as the 1950s, Leon Festinger (1954) hypothesised that humans are compelled to self-evaluate their opinions and abilities, and that these are largely influenced by the opinions of others. However, subsequent research has

suggested that people are more often interested in social comparison as a source of social information, independent of the usefulness of that information for making objective assessments (Locke 2014). Specifically, Perepa (2014) draws attention to the fact that cultural background influences which behaviours are considered problematic, a crucial point for the purposes of this article.

According to O'Byrne and Muldoon (2017, p. 308), 'Perception of discrimination occurs along a consistent and predictable developmental trajectory with children engaging in social comparisons from seven years.' Individual social comparisons are often weighted towards an in-group (people with whom the comparer identifies), thus resulting in 'stereotypes that devalue individuals placed within the out group' (Huws and Jones, 2010, p. 333). Indeed, behaviour that is seen to conflict with the identified norm - such as exhibiting autistic traits - is often denigrated. As such, Huws and Jones (2010) present social comparisons that are either upward - identifying, from an aspirational perspective, the norm as an emblem of prestige - or downward, where an individual reinforces their well-being by self-perceiving as socially superior.

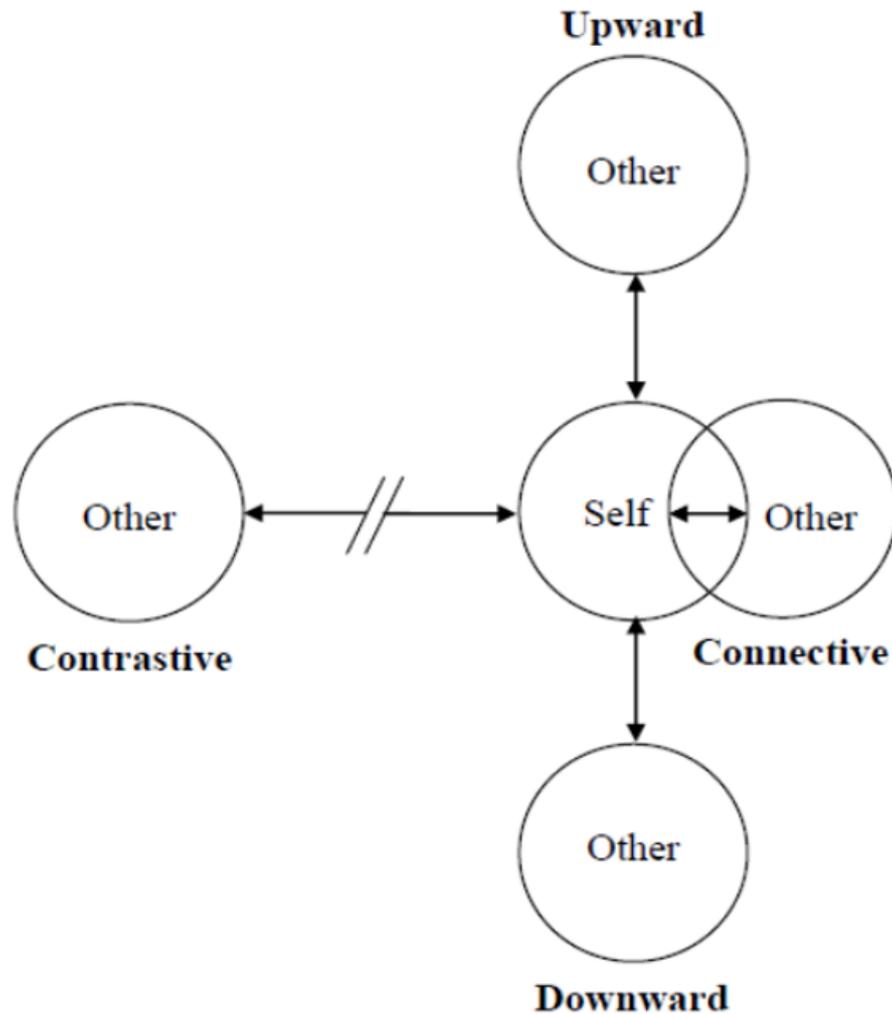
These upward/downward comparisons appear to deal with *objective* criteria; those in positions of power, and who negatively perceive individuals with disabilities, may perpetuate inequalities through discriminatory practices. Teachers, for instance, can be powerful actors, particularly as students with disabilities are often measured against normative practices and 'labelled as 'not ordinary'' (Gaffney, 2014, p. 365). Again, this argument relates to objective criteria about how a 'norm' is defined.

Social comparisons can therefore generate negative perspectives, resulting in downward projections on some students. In addition, some students with disabilities may, via perceived objective criteria, view themselves as superior, thus perpetuating downward comparisons that can lead to depression and feelings of worthlessness for others (Hedley and Young, 2006). Indeed, it has been reported that individuals with autism often self-identify using 'the same information base that has resulted in the development of lay perceptions by the general public' (Huws and Jones 2010, p. 342). Whether such perceptions serve to humanise, or dehumanise, particular members of society is examined later in this paper.

In their study, Tiwari, Das and Sharma (2015) found that more than half of their participant teachers perceived a typical disability as in need of medical attention. Objectively, this is likely to result in a downward comparison for the teachers' self-evaluation in terms of agency. However, it cannot be assumed that the need for medical support negates connective comparisons when values and feelings form the basis of comparison.

Further, whilst many physical disabilities are reduced to epidemiological factors, it has been argued that to conceptualise autism as a 'partial disability' (Huws and Jones, 2015) is equally detrimental. In this way, there may be a deficient understanding of behaviour, whereupon the child is perceived as failing 'to conform to social norms of behaviour' (Chambres et al. 2008, p. 1320). Social comparison, then, presents a theoretical understanding of the societal interplay between individuals of varying social status.

**Figure 1.** The four basic social comparison directions (Locke 2014)



To extend these models, Locke (2014) sought to identify nuances in social understanding by focussing on *subjective attributes*, including feelings and beliefs, that result in horizontal comparisons which illustrate different dimensions of individual-to-individual connectivity (see figure 1). Contrastive comparisons are used where an individual does not conform to the social norm, while connective comparisons illustrate an identification with other behaviours, thus creating a connection. In highlighting this conceptual difference, Locke points out that 'contrastive and downward comparisons with the unfortunate target may protect

or enhance our sense of agency but at the cost of undermining communion' (2014, p. 17).

### **Teachers' perceptions of autism: The international picture**

The stigmatization of children with autism is an international concern (Al-Sharbati et al., 2015) leading, in many cases, to the 'destructive dichotomizing of students' (Rutherford 2016, p. 128) that inevitably emerges from attainment-led teacher education programmes. For example, in the Australian context, questions have been raised about the degree to which shifts towards the inclusion of children with ASD are founded in teacher positivity or merely reflect 'changes in ideological attitudes aligned with current educational standards and expectations' (Garrad, Rayner & Pedersen, 2019, p. 63).

Contact theory, building on Allport (1954), has shown conclusively, in the meta-analysis by Pettigrew & Tropp (200, p. 768), 'that intergroup contact can promote reductions in intergroup prejudice'. This hypothesis is interesting because strengthening relationships 'between individuals who belong to different groups can foster the development of more positive out-group attitudes' (Vezzali and Stathi, 2016, p. 1). By adopting this practice, teachers may revise the positioning of their social comparisons, whereupon all students become members of the in-group and student marginalisation may be reduced (Spratt and Florian, 2015).

Notwithstanding the successful implementation in many countries over 'the last four decades [of] policies in favor of including SWDs [students with

disabilities] in general education classrooms' (Tiwari et al., 2015, p. 129), teachers' knowledge of needs such as autism remains problematic. Indeed, the trajectory from policy to practice is often fraught with difficulties. In Oman, for instance, many teachers hold misconceptions, such as defining autism as a consequence of child neglect (Al-Sharbaty et al., 2015), whilst in Hong Kong 'inclusion is still not accepted by the majority, and efforts to include children with disabilities are lacking' (Mak and Zhang, 2013, p. 104).

Education, then, is arguably 'one of the most powerful sources to enhance the developmental opportunities for children with autistic spectrum disorders' (Manti, Scholte & Van Berckelaer-Onnes, 2013, p. 64), and teachers' attitudes can prove a crucial influence when individuals with special educational needs, such as autism, are included in mainstream education (Garrad, Ratner & Pedersen, 2019; Park & Chitiyo, 2011).

Thus, teacher education needs to go beyond merely raising awareness of classroom diversity in order to focus on the acquisition of the skills necessary to support individual needs (Francisco et al 2016). That is, teacher education must move away from narrow compliance-led forms of training towards teaching for social justice or, at the very least, teaching to reduce social injustice.

## **Methodology**

Methodological choice is paramount when conducting international research as there is greater potential for inconsistency, and thus compromised data, if cultural context is not taken into consideration. Thus, this research began with the piloting

of several research instruments in the Republic of Armenia in order to assess their suitability. These included questionnaires, focus group discussions, and individual interviews. The most efficacious method was found to be a vignette of an individual with autism as this resonated with the respondents' experiences. Data were collected from student teachers and serving teachers, focussing in particular on their perceptions of children with autism.

### *Participants*

The participants ranged from student teachers to serving teachers who, in some instances, were significantly experienced professionals. The participants were drawn from two representative groups:

- *Student Teachers*  
10 female, 10 male, all between 19 and 24 years old.
- *Serving Teachers*  
10 female and 10 male, all between 28 and 57 years old.

Most phenomenographic studies use sample sizes between 8 and 12 in order to reach data sufficiency. For this study, the sample comprised a total of 40 student teachers and serving teachers in order to explore the full extent of data sufficiency in a culture unknown to the researchers.

### *Using vignettes*

The use of the vignette as a research tool can be seen at least as far back as Piaget, with his explorations of 'story situations' as a means of collecting data on children's moral reasoning (Piaget, 1965). The vignette can facilitate the capture of data in sensitive areas, and when well-structured will present the opportunity to arrive at multiple conclusions (Seguin & Ambrosio, 2002), thus enabling research participants to employ flexibility and agency in their responses.

Universities and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Armenia agreed to pilot a vignette and from this prototype it was found that greater complexity was needed and the revised version can be seen below. To reduce translational adaption and cultural misinterpretation, the vignette was double-translated before it was administered.

*Elena is ten years old and was recently diagnosed with Asperger syndrome. She has been attending a mainstream school since the age of five but has been excluded from three schools due to what her teachers describe as erratic behaviour. Her previous teacher described her as being the perfect child until she was asked to sit at a group table or take part in social activities. She has always found free time and lunchtime difficult to cope with. Elena is very interested in astronomy and likes to talk about it all of the time, she enjoys working on the computer and prefers the company of adults.*

Elena's 'condition' is identified in order to help the participants to focus on Asperger syndrome and thus to discourage misrecognition. The participants were required to read the vignette and respond to the following questions:

1. What human rights does Elena have?
2. Where should she be educated?

### 3. Why should she be educated there?

The researchers identified data sufficiency once new responses ceased.

#### **Data analysis**

The data were coded using NVivo and analysis drew on the methodological framework of phenomenography due to its connection with empiricism (Åkerlind, 2005) and the argument that humans (as actors) experience phenomena in limited ways (Marton, 1994). Such phenomena are identified as categories of description and have been defined in various ways, such as 'conceptions' (Marton, 1981) and 'understandings' (Sandberg, 2000).

Using phenomenography enables multiple conceptions to be seen and can thus proffer variations in perspectives (Åkerlind, 2005). In this way, the research adopts an exploratory approach; the objective being to capture phenomena rather than prove/disprove a hypothesis. The resultant element of each category is then structured as being hierarchically inclusive in relation to the observed phenomenon (Järvinen, 2004) and this forms an *outcome space* (Marton, 1994). Thus, each category is an incorporation, and subsequent development, of the previous one which facilitates interrater reliability when interrogated by another researcher. For our research, the categories were scrutinised to identify different elements in the phenomenon, and to ensure that there were identifiable, and hierarchical, links between each category. Finally, the outcome spaces were examined to ensure that each comprised the minimum

number of categories that define the phenomenon in order to illustrate variation in the participants' responses (Marton and Booth, 1997).

## Results

### *Serving Teachers*

The outcome space for serving teachers indicates four clear themes/categories that emerged from the data, offering a hierarchically inclusive view of attitudes towards, and perceptions of, Elena. In terms of the position of pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in the schooling system, serving teachers offer a view that is generally consistent with current practice in Armenia, which remains firmly embedded in an exclusionary view of education. In expressing somewhat less than progressive attitudes towards the vignette, a significant number of respondents appeared to be drawing on perceptions based on their experiences of former times. It is noteworthy that the minority of serving teachers who expressed more positive attitudes were the younger members of this group of respondents or were those who had experience of working with pupils with similar needs to Elena.

**Table 1.** Outcome space for serving teachers

Concern
Practicality
Benign Paternalism
Marginalisation

The first theme/category, *marginalisation*, reflected a strongly expressed standpoint that 'othered' Elena, focussing on her differences, which placed her outside the scope of the general education system; arguments were proposed here for exclusion and segregation. This was expressed in two ways; firstly, by positioning Elena through a deficit model as unlike/different to pupils in the mainstream, and secondly, by emphasising the detrimental effect that the presence of Elena would have on the successful education of those pupils without assessed and labelled special needs.

In the first case, one respondent, noting the need for Elena's aggressive behaviour to be controlled, saw this as possible 'with the help of a doctor and medicine' (female, aged 29), and expressed a belief that teaching someone like Elena was not part of her role as a teacher. A second respondent offered a medicalised view of Elena's condition and argued that, 'because of non-prognoses and aggressive behaviour' (female, aged 52), she should be educated separately. The right of Elena to receive an education was acknowledged, which might, in itself, be evidence of attitudinal change when compared to practice prior to the dissolution of the USSR, but this only went as far as being seen as something that was not the role of 'normal schools' (female, aged 52). Instead, the sense of marginalisation was emphasised, with special schools being seen as more appropriate for the development of individuals with autism, even where this also emphasised separateness and difference.

In the second, a view was expressed that the allocation of pupils such as Elena to special schools prevented the disruption of the learning of other students

by her behaviour, something that breached their right to receive an education (female, aged 47). This viewpoint has an obvious comparison with practice in England, where a pupil with an EHCP can be refused a place in a mainstream school on the grounds of an anticipated impact that such a placement would have on the quality and efficiency of the other pupils' education. A further example of the dismissive attitude towards the inclusion of pupils with SEN can be seen in the following comment:

[People like Elena] should be educated at mainstream schools because they can control their behaviour themselves (male, aged 55).

It is likely that this sort of ingrained response reflects the beliefs and attitudes of teachers who were educated and trained within a system that was historically very different to current educational positioning. A further example can be seen in the following comment:

She cannot work on a computer. Regular people have difficulties with that and of course she will as well. She can be employed for other type of a job – something requiring less intelligence (female, aged 58).

The second category in the outcome space is identified as *benign paternalism*, an arguably more progressive standpoint. Whilst rejecting any direct involvement with Elena, serving teachers were able to express a more benevolent view of the educational possibilities available to pupils with SEN than might have been the case previously. Here, Elena has the right to 'study in a special school' (male, aged 30),

a setting with distinct advantages for her where specialist professionals will understand her and not limit her freedom (female teacher, aged 39)

Whilst this category is less marginalising than the first one in this outcome space, there is an expression here of a potentially patronising outlook that distances Elena from the field of professional expertise commensurate with mainstream education; at the same time, it recognises the emergence of a new reality in relation to SEN and disability:

You see more people like this in society nowadays. They aren't hidden away as much as they would have been 20 years ago (female from an urban district beyond Yerevan, aged 57).

There is a recognition of the existence of autism here, yet this is categorised as non-normative, and therefore outside of the remit of 'normal' education, and by extrapolation, something that is not the concern of this group of teachers.

The next category – *Practicality* – is concerned with the logistics of support for autism, and here the serving teachers illustrated a greater propensity to align the behaviour of individuals with autism more closely with normative practices. In the data, the teachers appeared to acknowledge the possible presence of pupils with SEN, without accepting full responsibility for their education; rather, the responses appeared to focus on distancing Elena to become the responsibility of other professionals:

Elena needs special attention from doctor. I don't know whether there are such departments or not which will help Elena (female, aged 30)

Alternatively, they were aimed at helping her to adapt her behaviour towards a non-specified normative level:

We must address Elena's behavioural problems. Initially, we must involve her in activities in pair with someone and then slowly introduce the group activities (male, aged 31).

The issue of behaviour was clearly one that caused considerable concern and further suggestions were made about meeting both Elena's 'erratic behaviour' and what might be assumed to be conceptions of the behaviours associated with a person who is diagnosed with Asperger syndrome:

A plan/strategy IEP, developed beforehand, for her involvement in social activities that will take into consideration her abilities, interests, and needs (female, aged 28).

When at school, she needs more attention (male, aged 29).

Within the area of practicality, some suggestions were offered that suggest a professional interest in meeting Elena's perceived needs:

She should attend those lessons that are within the sphere of her interest. Distance learning is also an option (female, aged 31).  
and:

She should have a disability-adapted environment, a visual schedule, assistance of a special educational needs teacher, an individual study plan (female, aged 35).

In summary, responses within this category that considered the practicalities involved in supporting Elena, for example, 'schools need to provide support for her in order to give the right assistance' (female, aged 41), are juxtaposed with her right to be educated in a school of her choosing, along with her general 'right to learn' (female, aged 30).

Finally, the fourth category – *Concern* – represents responses that promoted Elena's statutory rights. However, it should be noted that only a small number of serving teacher respondents were identified as being within this category and, perhaps not surprisingly, it was the teachers who had the most experience in supporting students with SEN who identified and empathised with Elena's situation:

As an equal member of the society, [Elena] has the right to study at a public school, in a class that is appropriate for her age. First of all, a school must create a calm and encouraging environment for her. Along with other teachers, a psychologist and a special education needs teacher must work with Elena. (SEN teacher, female, aged 34).

The implications for implementing such actions, however, were seen to be a barrier, amid concerns over equality in education:

We have some way to go before we become a civil society' (female, aged 32).

### *Student teachers*

The outcome space for student teachers indicated three clear themes/categories that emerged from the data. The most obvious feature of this outcome space is the way in which it differs from that identified for Serving Teachers, above. The most significant element is that Student Teachers, whilst

being aware of the difficulties inherent in developing inclusive practice, demonstrate attitudes and perceptions that align with a rights-based approach to diversity and social justice. Elena is not distanced but is seen as fully entitled to an education consistent with the obligations contained within the international conventions to which Armenia subscribes. As such, this group of respondents appear to be more closely aligned to the possibility of new and emerging practice, rather than in harking back to practice based on former ideological standpoints. A further comparison also needs to be noted: unlike the group of Serving Teachers who were drawn from the whole of Armenia, all student teachers in this study lived in Yerevan due to the siting of pedagogical training in that city.

**Table 2.** Outcome space for student teachers

Social Justice
Emerging inclusive philosophical stance
Acceptance of marginalisation

The first theme in the outcome space reflects a general awareness in the respondents of issues of educational marginalisation and social exclusion, which are deemed to infringe human rights, particularly for individuals with SEN. In the first category, *Acceptance of Marginalisation*, these issues are perceived as an inevitable consequence of the system, where the ideal is tempered by pragmatic necessity:

I think Elena can study with others in inclusive schools because she needs help and assistance from the others...She needs help and maybe [a] special programme for her study (male, aged 24).

This would seem to indicate an awareness of a form of partial inclusion or integration, where Elena is present but is provided with specific support that removes her from general education programmes. The benefits of such approaches were expressed both in educational and social terms; some respondents even viewed this as a circuitous route to societal inclusion:

I think children like her have to study with others in inclusive schools. Otherwise she will not become a part of society (female, aged 21).

For many respondents, the need to accept marginalisation in a system predicated on inclusion was met with frustration, where 'the possibility for [Elena] to engage in social interaction is minimal' (male, aged 22). Furthermore, this acceptance was expressed in terms of powerlessness in the face of a system that offered no possibility for better outcomes; here, resistance to entrenched practice seems futile:

[Elena] should be educated in her local school but they would probably want her to go to a special inclusive school (male, aged 20).

In addition to structural bureaucratic barriers, other difficulties within current practice were identified, for example in relation to teachers' professional development, with another student (female, aged 21) suggesting that 'if the teachers were trained to understand [Elena] she would need less individual help.'

Many of the responses that related to the second category, *Emerging Inclusive Philosophical Stance*, demonstrated a duality of understanding and attitude. Here, alongside accepting that marginalisation was occurring within the education system, respondents articulated a value system based on inclusive

practices. For example, in offering a response to where Elena should be educated, one student teacher suggested:

At secondary school. She mustn't feel alone. Gradually, she will start communication with [other] children. Children will also learn a lot of things from her, e.g. tolerance (female, aged 23),

whilst a second offered the view that social interaction is an important part of development in school, because 'while communicating with friends she will become more interested in learning' (male, aged 22), a position endorsed by a third respondent who indicated placement in a public school as it will 'help [Elena] to adapt to the social environment and communicate (female, aged 20).

A significant number of respondents articulated an awareness of a more progressive attitude towards inclusion within current educational policy in Armenia, with one noting that 'Inclusive education is very important in our country nowadays' (male, aged 21). That this position is based on an assumption of equal rights for all pupils was also demonstrated in the responses. An example of the personal rights attributed to Elena, and therefore to all pupils, was expressed in the following comment:

We mustn't make her do what she doesn't want to do (female, aged 23).

In a more general sense, respondents also identified an extension of the rights that accrue to all citizens, including to those that would previously have been denied access to them. Here we see that the comments are moving towards situating Elena in a much more equitable position in society:

She has many rights and should continue studying at a public school (female, aged 21).

This view is strongly supported by another respondent:

Elena should have] the right to education and the right to be accepted as a member of the community (male, aged 22).

The third category in the outcome space for student teachers – Social Justice – was framed within an awareness of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children (1989) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), suggesting that adherence to international conventions such as these is crucial in attaining an equitable progression towards a society based on social justice. Indeed, the category is typified by assertions that Elena should have 'full human rights as described by the UN convention [and should be educated] in any school' (female, aged 23).

Of particular importance for this category is evidence that student teachers were cognisant of the wider international concerns outlined in the treaties. In relation to the rights-based presumptions contained within Armenia's adoption of UN Conventions, one respondent noted that Elena has 'all rights like other children constitutionally (female, aged 23), while another commented:

According to the Convention on Children's Rights, she has the same rights as the other children (male, aged 23).

From the perspective of creating a socially just society based on egalitarian principles, many student teachers argued that Elena's rights and opportunities should be no different from other children because,

She is a full member of society so she has a right to get education at any public school (female, aged 21).

This was extended by reference to the benefits that accrue from creating a society that is non-exclusionary:

She must be integrated in the society (female, aged 23).

## **Discussion**

It is clear that Elena's educational prospects are framed differently by the participants in this research. The outcome spaces illustrate the major element of this variation in terms of the differential attitudes towards, and expectations of, Elena. Serving teachers predominantly express views that position Elena as different, where this difference is expressed as a deficit in comparison to the normative behaviours expected in the general school population. By contrast, the student teachers, while still acknowledging difference, see this difference as a normal part of the diversity of, and in, pupils who can, and should, be part of a schooling system that values inclusive practices

In practice, whilst all teachers are likely to perceive their own practice as normative, the serving teachers, as a group, held that behaviours outside of narrowly conceived parameters are non-standard, resulting in individuals being marginalised. By contrast, the student teacher group noted the variation in behaviours but did not see this as limiting the propensity for all children to be included in mainstream settings, even where this might offer a potential hindrance to the teaching and learning of other children.

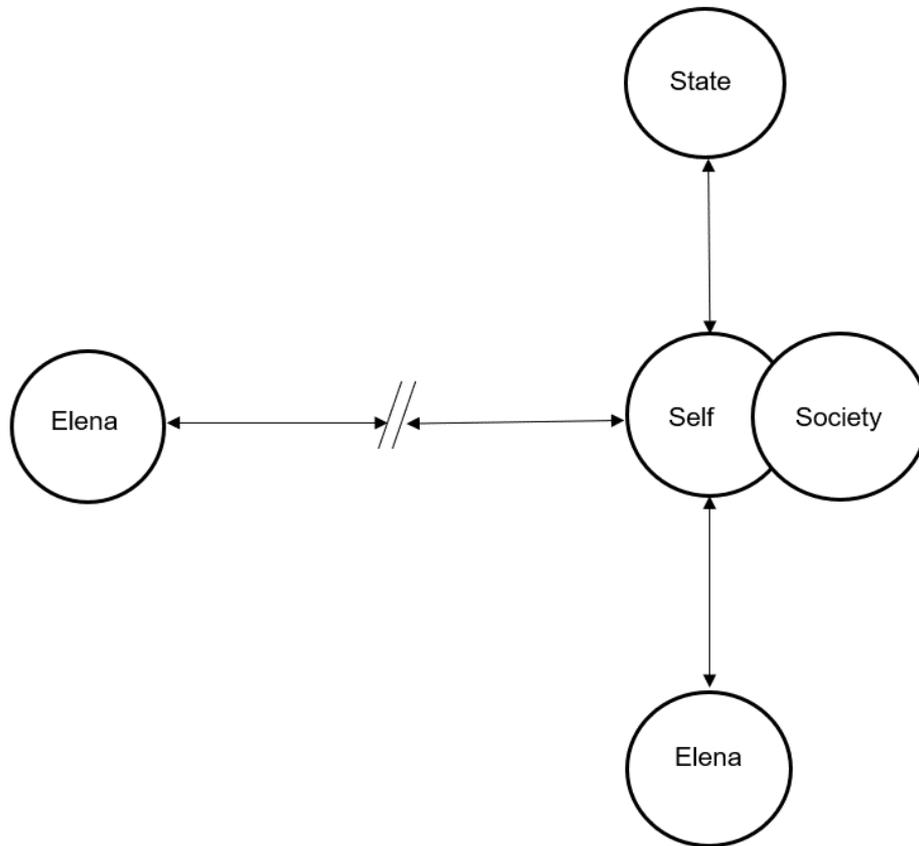
It can be suggested that a further examination of the ideas expressed in the word normative is needed here to avoid confusion with the use of non-

normative and normative categories in the SEN literature. It might be that serving teachers conflate Elena's lack of adherence to social norms of expected behaviour with the normative category of Asperger's syndrome, resulting in an unwillingness to accept a student with that diagnosis into their classrooms, whilst the student teachers view Elena's erratic behaviour as one facet of her diverse character, and one that is shared by other pupils who challenge the social norms of behaviour in any school.

It is here that social comparison theory offers a useful perspective on the outcome spaces, particularly in relation to the lateral nature of connective or contrastive comparisons (Locke, 2014). It is suggested that serving teachers make connective comparisons laterally with society, as evidenced through dominant cultural and social norms (Perepa, 2014), whilst making both contrastive and downward comparisons with Elena, as illustrated in figure 2. Thus, serving teachers connect laterally with the students without a disability and include them in their in-group, whilst contrastive and downward comparisons on students like Elena result in them being conceptualised as members of the out-group (Huws and Jones, 2010).

Downward projections often reflect situations where individuals use comparisons to self-affirm (O'Byrne and Muldoon, 2017). Many of the serving teachers involved in this study attributed blame to Elena by downwardly comparing her behaviour with that of other students, establishing a norm which favoured those students who did not present with autism.

**Figure 2.** Serving Teachers



Moreover, this norm was clearly biased towards the experiences of the teacher which, in effect, represents further injustice or, at best, benign paternalism. Individuals such as Elena may be excluded, albeit not necessarily to support their personal development in a more suitable environment. Instead, they are moved to avoid becoming a 'disruption' to the system.

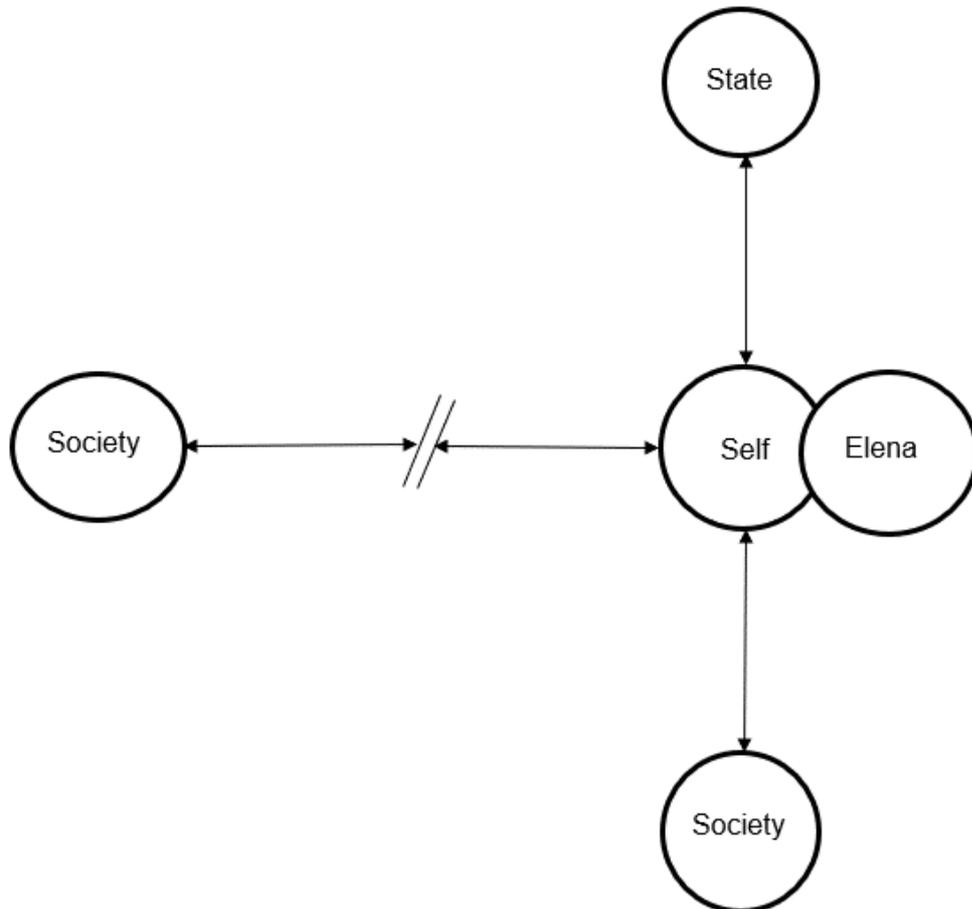
However, responses to the vignette through downward comparisons cannot be perceived as absolute or unchanging; rather, they draw attention to the complexities of cultural experience and knowledge, via an insight into the 'societal and cultural reality in which disability is experienced' (Vehmas and Watson 2016, p. 13). For serving teachers, this reality is likely to draw heavily on an educational and social reality that has its roots in Soviet ideology. It is important to remember

that for most of the serving teachers, independence for Armenia lies within memory. The continued existence of Soviet bureaucratic structures of assessment and diagnosis, within an ideology of defectology, is a feature noted in the case studies of three former Soviet bloc countries by Rouse and Lapham (2013) and Armenia has yet to shed these practices.

It is perhaps understandable, therefore, that the attitudes shown by the serving teachers are characterised as less progressive, and contrast strongly with those shown by their younger counterparts. Indeed, in the 'concern' category of the teacher outcome space, we can see that some teachers express disquiet about the potentially destructive consequences of current educational practices, a response that might be linked to contact theory and centred on changing social perceptions of disability, something that will be discussed later in this section.

By contrast, a very different model of social comparison can be suggested for the Student Teacher group of respondents (see figure 3). In the lateral direction, concerned with subjective elements such as values and beliefs (Locke, 2014), it appears that Elena is seen as occupying a connective position, where the student teachers see difference rather than deficit, and therefore include Elena within their in-group; arguably, the out-group is identified through the student teachers' awareness of current educational practice, and can be configured as serving teachers/society sharing values and beliefs that contrast with those held by the soon-to-be classroom practitioners.

**Figure 3.** Student Teachers



Here, both the lateral and downward comparisons emerge from a perception that the experiences of pupils such as Elena in education are detrimental to those with SEN, establishing a norm of inclusive practice that places current practitioners within the out-group.

As can be seen in the difference in attitudes illustrated here, it is clear that Armenia has made some progress in raising awareness of individual rights, particularly with regard to student teachers. Given that the self-identity of an individual with autism is often constructed on the same foundation of information

that influences the lay population (Huws and Jones, 2010), teachers are arguably in a key position to challenge negative perceptions (Manti, Scholte & Van Berckelaer-Onnes, 2013; Park & Chitiyo, 2011). The negative perceptions identified in the serving teachers' discourse dichotomises the student group (Rutherford, 2016) into those with SEN and those without, while student teachers appear to exhibit a much closer connective lateral comparison to Elena, suggesting attitudes much more akin to social justice and inclusion. In general, there is a positive trend in the data towards greater acceptance from newer teachers (Sosu, Mtika & Colucci-Gray, 2010). Whilst there is much reluctance in serving teachers to integrate students like Elena, student teachers exercise more laterally connective comparisons towards her, illustrating their openness to address inequalities.

The social comparisons identified in this research highlight the difficulties experienced in a country that is committed to international human rights conventions but has yet to embed these political commitments in complexity of educational practice. Student teachers, who recognised the need to conform to UN Conventions on the rights of the child and on the rights of those with disabilities, articulated frustration with educational policy and practice. It is clear that the content of the training courses being undertaken by these teachers has a strong theoretical base, something that is seen as necessary.

Despite this, however, there are structural and cultural constraints that may later discourage student teachers from challenging such inequities. Not least in this context is what is termed 'reality shock' (Korthagen, Loughran & Russell, 2006), where newly qualified teachers are seen to revert to practices familiar from

the past, and to display a dislike for theoretical knowledge. It can be argued that the field of special education, in practice, tends towards practical rather than theoretical knowledge (Walton, 2016) and it is here that the strong theoretical base alluded to above might serve to 'innoculate' the student teachers from the worst excesses of this shock. However, for some student teachers, an attitude of acknowledgement yet acceptance (albeit reluctant) could manifest that fails to challenge student marginalisation, and this is a process which is perpetuated in multiple ways (Hallett & Allan, 2017).

The need for a stronger knowledge base is an issue that mirrors, to some extent, the perceived limitations that teachers – in what might be termed 'developed' countries – also face when trying to support such needs (Francisco et al., 2016). Thus, it can be argued that teacher education provides a fantastic opportunity for trainees to widen their appreciation of the incredibly diverse world in which we live, and to tailor their teaching to ensure that all students can feel included and can develop accordingly.

In sum, whilst many of the serving teachers have yet to show any inclination to adapt to the integration of students with SEN in mainstream education, there is evidence that educational injustices are being identified within the country and thus there is potential for change. In line with studies conducted by human rights organisations (SCI, 2012; UNESCO, 2015), the findings here suggest that student teachers in Armenia are representative of a change towards a more progressive attitude. However, the danger remains that, through the influence of social and cultural factors (Perepa, 2014), everyday social comparisons will continue to disenfranchise those with SEN (Huws and Jones,

2010), exemplifying the argument that the notion of inclusion is somewhat illusory (Atkins, 2016); that is, it becomes meaningless in practice.

As policy is devised in relation to the needs and experiences of a variety of social actors (Avramidis, 2013), the relationship between those that legislate and those that enact educational policy can be fraught with tension and misinterpretation. A lack of awareness of various types of disabilities, along with 'the limited capacity of social actors to accommodate special needs' (UNESCO, 2015, p. 3), renders the desire to combat inequality for children with SEN problematic at best.

In Armenia, the commitment to include children with disabilities in mainstream education represents a step in the right direction, with the potential for many social injustices to be addressed. The views of the student teachers involved in this research represent a move in a positive direction, towards the acceptance of diversity and away from marginalising practices such as segregated provision; yet, in the broader field of social justice, the move might be seen, at times, as little more than acknowledgement. The next development, then, would be to challenge social inequalities further, to the extent that progress would amount to more than merely awareness raising. It is important to acknowledge that although 'prejudice and conflict remain intractable characteristics of the societies in which we live' (Vezzali and Stathi, 2016, p. 1), a greater level of interaction between all teachers and all students, including those with autism and other special needs, can go a long way to reduce these prejudices.

## **Conclusion**

The progressive attitudes shown by the student teachers in this study contrast strongly with those espoused by the serving teachers and this might be explained by contact theory. In line with this theory, it is likely that serving teachers have experienced significantly fewer interactions with people with disabilities or pupils with SEN (Glashan, MacKay & Grieve, 2004), resulting in significantly more downward social comparisons towards this group. This is likely to be particularly true of teachers who are older and were trained in a context founded on the Soviet principles of defectology (Rouse and Lapham, 2013), and those who live outside of the Armenian capital, Yerevan, where exclusionary practices are more likely to remain embedded. By contrast, the student teachers living in Yerevan, and of a younger generation, are more likely to have experienced contact with a range of diverse groups, including those with SEN. Thus, opportunities for constructing stronger relationships between the new generation of Armenian teachers and students with SEN could lead to long-term sustainable change in thinking and practice.

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