

John Hills Impact and Inclusion Award Report: 'Building Access' Project Gyumri/Yerevan, Armenia

The 'Building Access' project has been running over the past year at the Emili Aregak Centre in Gyumri, a development centre for disabled children and young adults. As part of the project, we have met regularly with both children and their mothers. With children, we have worked both one-to-one and in groups to discuss their experiences of school and what they would like school to be. We have used drawing-in-dialogue, video-making, and interviews. With mothers, we have conducted interviews. On the 29 June, we held the project's first public event at the American University of Armenia in Yerevan. It was attended by around 20 people, including social workers, NGO representatives, teachers, disability specialists, and journalists.

After an initial introduction and welcomes, the knowledge exchange event began with an invited presentation and Q&A with the Director of the Emili Aregak Centre, Tigranuhi Hakobyan. Tigranuhi shared her own qualitative, interview-based research on the opinions of the peers and teachers of disabled children on their presence at school. Centre psychologist Mara Harutyunyan and I turned to our work with disabled children and their family members themselves. We briefly introduced our project and shared a short video made with the children with whom we worked. Rather than presenting the research in more detail ourselves, we then allowed time for people to interact freely with a mini-exhibition on it.

The exhibition, made up of quotations and drawings, shared voices of parents and children on their experiences – positive and negative – of school. We invited participants to write directly on the quotes on the walls and tables, annotating them with their reactions and questions. We asked them to answer some questions on flipchart paper, and themselves participate in one of the exercises completed with the children: drawing their imaginary ideal school. Guided by the exhibition, the remainder of the event was spent in an open circle discussion about access and inclusion in education and in wider society.

The event was fully interpreted in Armenian and English. We aimed to model modes of accessibility and fun – and were really pleased to have positive feedback on the informal and welcoming mode of the event. Participants commented that often such events are formal and do not create space to listen to everyone's opinions. In contrast, at this event, they felt that we had built a warm space where everyone could participate. In September, we plan to hold another event with the participation of the children and young people involved in the project. At this first event, more than 15 people signed up for our mailing list to continue to be informed about future events and activities. A new direction found at the event was the creation of a support group for people working at schools and other state-run structures; particularly those who moved from civil society to state-funded workplaces described burn-out and lack of motivation. We are currently looking into the possibilities of creating a semi-regular support group for these practitioners.

Below are some pages from the initial project brochure and event posters, as well as some photographs from the event. The first four photographs (p.6-7) are credited to AUA Communications. Other photos are from participants (p.8-9).



BUILDING ACCESS

LEARNING
FROM
CHILDREN WITH
DISABILITIES'
EXPERIENCES
OF SCHOOL

**SUPPORTED BY THE JOHN HILLS
IMPACT AND INCLUSION AWARD**



THE PROJECT

The **Building Access** project has worked with children with disabilities and their parents, playing and drawing in conversation to understand children's experiences at school.



THE PROJECT

Based at the Emili Aregak Centre in Gyumri,
Building Access reimagines an accessible
school - foregrounding children's own voices
and experiences to lead the conversation.

Whether children don't want maths or do want
driving lessons, there is a deeper conversation
about the **freedom to choose**.













