

Giving Disabled Children a “Place at the Table”

BY KATHRYN UTAN

Kathryn Utan is AIHA's staff writer.

For a mentally or physically disabled person, the Soviet healthcare system provided “cradle to grave” support. According to Tim Hobbs, associate professor of education at the University of Scranton in Pennsylvania, “Following the so-called ‘invalid model,’ this meant that disabled people were taken care of by the system rather than provided with the services and support necessary for them to take care of themselves.” The result was that those with disabilities were marginalized, remaining under the close care and supervision of their families or placed in institutions. In either case, they were literally cut off from the rest of the world.

Otar Gerzmava, director of continuing education at the National Health Management Center in Tbilisi, agrees. “The Soviet system was very good at supervising people with disabilities, but not at integrating them into society or providing any special educational or vocational services that would help them live more productive lives,” he states.

In Georgia—as in most CEE and NIS nations—professional services for people with disabilities are severely limited. In Tbilisi and other parts of the country, disabled children or adults are rarely seen in public and often lack the social and cultural accommodations common in most Western nations.¹ “Some 80,000 children in Georgia today collect disability pensions, but only a small fraction of them are integrated into the ‘normal’ education system, let alone into ‘normal’ society,” Gerzmava notes.

In addition to this cultural marginalization, limited access to special education or rehabilitation opportunities further hampers the ability of the disabled to function within society at large—a fact that many education and rehabilitation specialists in Georgia are striving to change.² Responding to this void, these specialists are beginning to work together with

other interested parties—such as various non-governmental organizations dedicated to the disabled, parents of children with disabilities, public health professionals, government leaders, and school teachers—to find ways to integrate this segment of the population into their communities and society at large. This movement of inclusion in Georgia was recognized and supported by members of AIHA’s Tbilisi/ Scranton partnership.

The Seeds of Change

“This whole project actually started with our AIHA partnership,” explains Daniel J. West, associate professor of health administration at the University of Scranton and US representative of the Tbilisi/ Scranton alliance. “Rather early in our

collaboration, our Georgian colleagues pointed out that clinicians and health managers in Georgia needed training in the specific areas of rehabilitation and behavioral health and, as we began that process, we discovered that there was almost a total lack of programs or services for disabled children.” Rather than adopting a purely medical model, the partners decided to tackle the problem by focusing on the entire continuum of care.

Their efforts paid off in August 2000, when the US Department of State’s Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs awarded the University of Scranton a grant to support a project titled, “The Georgian/American partnership for Rehabilitation and Special Education,”



which focuses on the fields of rehabilitation and education for disabled children in Georgia. Given the economic hardships the country is facing as it struggles to make the transition to a market economy, the funding is crucial to the project. But, as Hobbs is quick to point out, a lack of financial resources is not the only challenge. “How the Georgian educational and healthcare infrastructure, and the culture itself, are organized is part of the problem that exists today. After all, institutions by their very definition exclude people. As the Georgian people are rethinking their system, I find that they are constantly criticizing themselves about this, but of course they shouldn’t,” he says, explaining that the same thing was true of the United States a few decades ago. “It has only been over the last generation that we have seen a revolution in the integration of disabled people into our societies. It took 20 or 30 years to accomplish this in the United States and Western Europe, so why shouldn’t it take just as long in Georgia?”

Taking the First Steps

The Georgian/American partnership began their work in earnest by organizing a workshop on the topic of integrating disabled children into classrooms at regular schools last year. “On the first day, 20 people attended the sessions. By the final day, more than 120 people showed up, and many of them stayed until almost midnight, discussing the problem and possible solutions,” Gerzmava says. Encouraged by the high level of interest this first meeting generated, additional collaborative projects were pursued, culminating in an international conference titled, “Education and Social Inclusion of Children with Disabilities,” held May 22, 2002, in Tbilisi.

With more than 100 attendees present—including representatives of the

Georgian Ministries of Education and Labor, Health, and Social Affairs, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the Georgian Research Institute of Pedagogy, Tbilisi State Medical University, the Georgian Association of Disabled Persons, the Tanadgoma Cultural Center for Disabled Children, and Caritas-Georgia—the event was a forum for frank discussion about strategies for opening new doors to children with disabilities.

Speaking at the opening plenary, Hobbs encouraged participants to invite disabled people—particularly children—into mainstream society. “We have excluded children with disabilities from our society

for far too long. This is an international problem, as well as an international embarrassment.” Calling the whole process of working to build a more inclusive system an adventure, he offered the following recommendations:

- Create a consistent set of diagnostic and education definitions regarding mental and physical disabilities so specialists from various disciplines such as education, psychology, social work, and medicine can effectively collaborate.
- Draft legislation that mandates that education and social services for disabled people are basic human rights, rather than privileges.
- Develop undergraduate and graduate-level programs for special education teachers.

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- Establish national licensing guidelines for special education teachers.
- Encourage people with disabilities to enter the profession of special education so that the concept of inclusion and integration extends to every level of society.

These suggestions laid the foundation for further discussions, including debate regarding the role of traditional residential schools for children with profound disabilities, and possible barriers to successful integration of disabled children into the general school system. Addressing the latter topic, Nana Tsartsidze from the Department of Correctional Pedagogy and Psychology at the Georgian Research Institute of Pedagogy explained that challenges such as public discomfort with the idea of bringing disabled children into mainstream society,



focusing on their similarities to the other children, not their differences—ensued.

The event also served as a venue for the release of several publications sponsored by the Georgian/American partnership relating to special education and rehabilitation. A Georgian-language textbook—the first of its kind—titled, “Special and Inclusive Education of Children with Disabilities,” provides useful information and guidelines for psychologists and teachers involved with integrated classrooms, while the premier issue of the *Journal of Education and Rehabilitation for Children with Disabilities* offers research and case studies on relevant topics.

Sharing his thoughts on the outcomes of the event, Hobbs states, “The Georgians who attended the conference asked all the right questions. They are the same questions communities around the world have asked or are asking right now. But there are no fixed solutions that can be neatly applied to every situation. The solutions they find will be their own and their greatest resource as they work toward this goal are the Georgian people themselves.”

Looking Toward the Future
Currently the Georgian/American partnership is working to set up two model classrooms: one at the Research Institute of Pedagogy that will support training of special education teachers, and a

second at Gymnasium #6 that will serve as a model of “best practices” that have successfully, used to bring disabled children into the general education system. “The classroom at the Research Institute will serve as a practice site or teaching laboratory, where education students will gain the skills necessary to teach in an integrated setting,” West explains, noting that establishing the classroom in the ‘normal’ school is more challenging.

“We have planted the seeds already by holding meetings and discussion groups with members of parliament, teachers, and parents of both disabled and ‘normal’ children. One of the problems we are facing, however, is that the subject is so new for most people,” Gerzmava acknowledges, explaining that he hopes shining a light on the subject will start a social movement for change. “To achieve this, we are taking the process one step at a time. Right now our main goal is to educate parents, teachers, and society as a whole. We want to show them what can be accomplished by setting up this integrated classroom, which will vividly illustrate the positive changes that can be made,” he continues.

Echoing Gerzmava’s call for change, Hobbs concludes, “If you have ever been fortunate enough to enjoy a meal at the home of a Georgian friend or colleague, you quickly come to realize that everyone has a place at the table. That is what this project is all about, making sure that—as far as education goes—disabled children in Georgia have their place at the table.” ■

References

1. Hobbs, Timothy, *et al.*, “Special education and rehabilitation in Georgia: Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats in a Newly-Independent State of the Former Soviet Union,” *J. of Intl. Special Needs Edu.*, 5, 30, (2002).
2. *Ibid.*

fear on the part of some parents, and lack of qualified special education professionals would all need to be overcome. “This will require political support for our efforts, as well as active cooperation with the mass media, parent groups, teachers, and other stakeholders,” she stated.

Heated debate arose when several teachers who currently work in general education schools expressed the concern that some disabled children may feel ostracized in a public school setting or develop a heightened sense that they are different. Most of the audience disagreed, explaining that being segregated for one’s entire life is the cause of far more problems and feelings of isolation for most disabled people. Suggestions for various ways of making disabled children feel welcome in the classroom—primarily by