

# **East Meets West**

## **Cooperation Project between Armenia and Switzerland**

### **Developments in Special Needs Education**

#### **How it started**

In 1988 – as you might remember – there was a horrible earthquake in Armenia. Soon after, there was a call for nephrologists, especially paediatric nephrologists. The head of the department for nephrology at the university children's hospital of Zurich, Prof. Ernst Leumann, followed that call.

Once in Armenia, he realised that much more was needed than emergency aid and he started to cooperate with the Arabkir Children's Hospital in Yerevan.

#### **A Long Way to Go**

In 1989, Prof. Ernst Leumann, our former head of nephrology, and his wife, a former hospital teacher and at that time head of speech therapy in our rehabilitation centre for children founded a charity organisation called VAD, an abbreviation for the German "Verein Armenienhilfe Direkt" (in English: Association for Direct Aid in Armenia).

As a partner organisation in Armenia the non-governmental-organisation DAA (Direct Aid Association) was founded.

Prof. Ernst and Christina Leumann found wonderful co-workers and sponsors in Armenia and Switzerland in order to support the project. Over the years, they have raised a substantial amount of money to improve the equipment at the hospital. Everything has been done in an extremely sustainable way. There has been no new machine without careful checking whether it was a real need of the professionals in Yerevan, how it would work in the long term and nothing was introduced without prior training. The trainees have always been chosen very carefully by the Leumanns from the most motivated, committed, open-minded and young professionals in Yerevan.

It started with nephrology but soon, more and more disciplines were involved and joined.

In the meanwhile there have been programmes in:

neurology, endocrinology, developmental paediatrics, neonatal screening, general paediatrics, diagnostics, paedoaudiology, occupational therapy, physiotherapy, speech therapy, social work, psychology and so on.

Fortunately, thanks to the commitment of the Leumanns, more and more grants and finances also from governmental organisations could be found.

From the very beginning there have always been cooperations with other NGOs in Armenia such as Unicef, Mission East etc.

#### **My First "Go" in April 2005**

My commitment started long before I went to Armenia. On several occasions Armenian psychologists, social workers and teachers came to our hospital school for training. All these psycho-social services were new for Armenia and these professionals from the Arabkir children's hospital were pioneers. Liana Sanamyan was in Switzerland just before we went to the last HOPE congress to Brussels together.

Not only has the cooperation with her been a great pleasure, but it has also been extremely efficient. She was my translator for language and culture. As we introduced new concepts and therefore new terms into the Armenian language, precise translation was crucial. We were in constant e-mail exchange. I sent her my lectures, she wrote back to me with what I needed to change because in Armenia it would not be understandable and what was very well known etc. Were it not for her translation work, our lectures would never have been so successful.

Finally, in April 2005 I flew to Yerevan for the first course in special education. All these lecture courses, whatever subject they have, are mainly based on lectures of a Swiss

professional but also on lectures of outstanding Armenian professionals. The organisation of these courses is always done by DAA and they always take place in the well equipped lecture hall of the Arabkir hospital.

I was very surprised that there were mainly physicians, social workers, psychologists etc. in the audience and only a few teachers. I gave an overview of different hospital school models all over the world, made an introduction into progressive, on-going assessment (what we call in German "Förderdiagnostik") and lectured about methodology for math and language, mainly based on learning through playing. These topics were the wishes of the DAA hospital teachers.

## **My Second „Go“ in June 2006**

In autumn 2005 Christina Leumann travelled again to Armenia, this time to visit schools for children with special educational needs all over the country. Based on what she had seen there and what the teachers had expressed as their needs, we planned the second course. We chose the first week of the official summer school holidays for our course so that all teachers who wanted could take part. It was right after a course in developmental paediatrics, which was also no coincidence as there was a cooperation with the physician who held that course so that both of the courses fitted together.

This time, teachers were the target group and there were over 100 teachers taking part, even teachers from the far regions. Because of their low salaries, they could never have afforded to travel to Yerevan and to stay there for the duration of the course had not organisations such as Unicef and Mission East covered these expenses.

This time the DAA teachers, who had already been trained in Switzerland and during the last year's course, were much more involved in the course and very committed with the workshops in the afternoons. They were also experts for questions such as: "Where can I buy educational games or didactic material in Armenia?"

One very important side effect of having such a lot of professionals from the field of special education gathered together for the first time was that we could build up a network, the basis for a future national organisation for special education.

## **From Defectology...**

In order to support the development in special needs education in Armenia, we have to know what is going on in the country. There is a faculty at the university in Yerevan called "Defectology". It is based on the former Soviet union philosophy which aimed at erasing the defects and it is mainly for studies in "Surdopedagogy" which means education for deaf children. For a Swiss teacher this is very much in contradiction to our approach where the resources and abilities are focused and not the defects. However, the Armenian professionals working in this field are not so different from us as we would assume, knowing their backgrounds. Fortunately, there are some very committed and inventive teachers among them who are very keen on learning from our experience.

In Armenia, there is still the problem that many children with handicaps are still hidden away in their families and it is difficult to know where they live.

The DAA and the hospital schools connected with DAA are pioneers in special education and wonderful teachers. Although they earn very little, they are extremely committed and play a major role in advancing the field of special education within the whole country.

## **From Defectology Towards Inclusion**

Mission East and Unicef are implementing integration projects in different schools all over Armenia. However, the integration is far away from what we would call inclusion. There are schools with classes for children with special needs. As you can see in the photos the schools are still run in a Soviet manner with drill and "chalk and talk". Nevertheless there are promising efforts and wonderful professionals, that could enforce the improvement.

There is still a very clear need for training in this field.

The German branch of Mission East, in cooperation with German professionals is about to implement a curriculum for children with special needs in Armenia. For me, as a Swiss

professional, it sounds odd as we do not have such a curriculum for children with special needs and our approach would be different. Based on our professional background and ongoing, progressive assessment (in German "Förderdiagnostik") we do not need a special curriculum for children with special needs. In contrary, we assess every single child on his / her own and we set individual goals.

However, as the basis and the history and mentality in Armenia is different to that, I think it is a wonderful idea to introduce a curriculum for children with special needs in Armenia and it is therefore clear that I support this project. All the people involved have the same aim - namely to improve the situation. The means and ways might be different but the aim must be the same and as long as that is guaranteed, every effort is more than welcome!

## **Good Project People**

All the people involved in east and west have to be curious and interested in another culture, other systems and other people. They have to be open-minded, respectful, committed, modest and flexible, they have to be ready to analyse and question their own work and to develop it further. There should be the belief that it is possible to have a real exchange and benefit for oneself and ones own work.

## **What Is Important?**

What is very important is that there is at least one capable translator, not only if you want to have your hair cut like in the photo above! In our case, we are so lucky to have Liana who is a genius at languages but also at cultural translations. The success of the projects has been very much based on her abilities.

Christina Leumann, who was the person who introduced and improved the psycho-social services in Armenia, is a wonderful networking person. Together with the president of DAA in Yerevan, Hasmik Tadevosian, who is Liana's mother, they brought together all charities and organisations working in the field of special education in Armenia. It is so important to cooperate and use the synergies in order to gather all resources.

## **What Would Be Wrong?**

Forcing the changes with missionary zeal would be horrible.

Leave behind you and fixed ideas and expectations as how things should be. Developing the situation in a foreign country means to be on the way together and to find out what is right and wrong for this region in this situation. They do not have to make the same mistakes we made and while being on the way together, I sometimes realise the mistakes we are still making in our country which is a great chance for me!

Forget about what was good in your country. It might be wrong in the other country. For Armenians – here in the photo below a physician – it might be fun to try out our "Büchel" (the short brother of the "Alphorn") but she will go back to Armenia and use her mobile phone instead, which is more efficient!

## **Conclusion**

It is important to be a good listener,  
to get in touch,  
to meet the real needs, not the ones which you think and assume,  
to be on the way together,  
to make real friends and also have fun  
and to become one family!

## **Enrichment and Empowerment**

...opens the door for development in all countries.