

# Inclusive Education in Post-Soviet Countries: a Case of Kazakhstan

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Inclusive education has become a focal point internationally (Ainscow, Dyson & Weiner, 2013). In many contexts the implementation of inclusive education is characterized by contradictions, controversies, dilemmas and anomalies (Makoelle, 2014a; Slee, 2018). The fact that inclusive education came as a critique of special education raises a lot of questions as some tend to attribute it solely to education of students with disability and special needs, while in essence it focuses on a wide spectrum of diversity such as gender, race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status (Makoelle, 2016). The emphasis on disability and special needs create a framework of thinking imbued with an extreme inclination to believe that inclusion is only about disability. The fact that there are different ways in which the notion of inclusion is conceptualized means it is enacted through different practices and policy perspectives. Whoever goes through the process of enacting inclusion, experiences it differently depending on unique situation and context (Makoelle, 2014b).

Therefore, it is important that the notion of inclusive education be re-imagined out of the bounds of past special needs practices, which assume that barriers to effective learning stems from the students (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). This view about inclusion as disability and special need focused is dominant within the post-soviet countries. The emergence of special education in the USSR was characterized by segregation. It was believed that students who showed signs or barriers to learning were unhealthy, and were then diagnosed with a specific defect, and put forward for rehabilitation through a practice called “defectology” (Csapo, 1984). The understanding of inclusive education in post-soviet countries is still influenced to a great extent by this notion of defectology.

Kazakhstan is arguably leading as far as the implementation of inclusive education is concerned. The adoption of the right to education and through its State Program (2011), Kazakhstan has made the implementation of inclusive education one of the priorities of the education reforms initiated since its independence in 1991. However, like other countries, the implementation of inclusive education in Kazakhstan has not been immune to challenges (Denivarova & Abdresheva, 2015). The fact that the understanding of inclusive education has not been properly conceptualized still leaves the hallmarks of misinterpretations concerning what inclusion really means (Makoelle & Somerton, 2018). The establishment of inclusive education schools is a bold step in the right direction, however more thought needs to be invested into what inclusion really means given the international experience. More work needs to be devoted on a total overhaul of the teacher education industry in order to prepare both pre-service and in-service teachers for inclusive teaching and learning in schools. Therefore, the re-imagining of teacher education curriculum, and the training of teacher educators must take centre stage. The curriculum reforms embarked upon needs to put inclusive education at the centre of any pedagogical transformation. Assessment and school leadership dimensions have not thoughtfully considered the fact that through the creation of inclusive schools there is likely to be assorted student needs that require an assessment system that is geared to respond to these unique needs (Watkins, 2007).

In conclusion, while Kazakhstan has made a tremendous progress in making the bold pronouncement about inclusive education, it is just at the beginning of a long journey towards the realization of inclusive classrooms. Through a systematic and well-planned reform, Kazakhstan can contribute immensely towards sharing the experience of implementing inclusive education within a post-soviet education context, and thus become a hub for inclusive education in Central Asia. The articles in this special issue illustrate some of the challenges and successes in implementing inclusive education in Kazakhstan.

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