

Challenges and Prospects of Inclusive Education in Kazakhstan: A Critical Reflection on Policy Implementation at a Mainstream School

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Introduction

After ratifying the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD) as part of its “Future without Barriers” initiative (2015), Kazakhstan implemented inclusive education by aiming to make most of its schools inclusive (Allan & Omarova, 2021). The historical context of education in Kazakhstan, particularly during the Soviet era, involved stigmatizing students with special needs in separate institutions, influencing societal perceptions and creating barriers to inclusive education (Rollan, 2021). In this paper I will critically review the application of the inclusive education policy in practice in one of the mainstream school in Astana city.

The school is a mainstream educational facility that aims to foster an inclusive environment and supports students with special educational needs. Currently, the school has around 40 students with special needs out of the total student population, including individuals with Down syndrome, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Dyslexia, speech impairments, and hearing impairments. This paper will specifically focus on the significant barriers to implementing inclusive education policy at one of the schools in Astana which were observed during the workshop for teachers, reflect on their impact, and propose actions to overcome these obstacles.

Misunderstanding of Disability and Inclusive Education

One of the primary barriers to implementing inclusive education at a mainstream school is the widespread misunderstanding of disability and inclusive practices within the community. The conceptualization of disability and inclusion in Kazakhstani society has not yet been clearly identified. In most cases, the medical model of disability is predominant, and it is referred to as the impediment to inclusive education. Parents of children with special needs often struggle to accept their child’s condition due to societal stigmas and misconceptions. As evidence, the research done by Allan and Omarova (2021) demonstrates that parents of non-disabled children in Kazakhstan are resistant to inclusive education, expressing concerns about integrating fears of potential negative behavior. While some parents believe that such behavior is outdated, a few still hold negative views, impacting the progress of inclusion. According to researchers, mixed opinions exist among parents regarding the effectiveness of educational provisions, with some favoring mainstream inclusion while others are dissatisfied, citing issues such as unfulfilled promises of special classes and limited social engagement opportunities (Allan & Omarova, 2021). Thus, there is a belief that individuals with disabilities should be segregated and educated separately, leading to

resistance towards inclusive education. Negative biases, stereotypes, and myths about disability further contribute to the reluctance to embrace inclusive practices.

Policy Challenges

Another significant barrier is the lack of a model of inclusion and guidelines for policies regarding inclusive education in Kazakhstan. Several countries have created an educational environment that supports the development of inclusive education. Developed countries have spent several decades transitioning from special education for students with special needs to the notions of “normalization” and “inclusion” (Sanagi, 2016). Therefore, countries, where inclusive education is just being legislated should depend on international standards of inclusive education but consider the national education system specifics and conditions.

In Kazakhstan, contextualizing inclusive education based on international standards is challenging due to the lack of specific models for implementation and assessment based on the country’s specific context. For example, Yada and Savolainen (2019) argue that inclusive education depends on the national educational system’s sociocultural contexts. In the same vein, the Western concept of inclusive education may not be appropriate because of differences between traditional local culture and Europe’s approach to inclusion in education (Sharma et al., 2017). As an example, an approach of Response to Intervention (RTI) model has been widely recommended as an inclusive framework to identify students with special needs in the United States and Finland, which outlines early intervention and deliver evidence-based instruction through progressively intensive levels of support (Bjorn, 2018). According to the study done by Fuchs and Fuchs (2005), RTI helps to track student with special needs systematically, while informing decision-making across stakeholders as administrative, instructional and parental, by involving research supported instruction to students within the general educational setting. However, the Kazakhstani educational settings prerequisites such as data collection, progress monitoring schools, and trained personnel to implement early interventions are lacking. In addition, the absence of affirmative action measures, such as stimulating greater diversity and providing support for students with disabilities, hinders the effective implementation of inclusive practices. Additionally, the lack of a structured assessment framework and policies for accommodating students with diverse needs creates uncertainty and inconsistency in educational practices.

Practical challenges

The practical challenge is considered the biggest challenge in implementing an inclusive approach at one of the mainstream schools, which includes several factors such as methodological, infrastructural, and resource barriers. Inclusive teaching and learning in educational institutions require the curriculum to be adapted in such a way that it promotes inclusion. Four dimensions are significant in developing inclusive teaching and learning, i.e., institutional commitment, curriculum design and content, pedagogy and curriculum delivery, assessment, and student feedback (Thomas & May, 2010). Accordingly, in the case of Kazakhstani teachers, they may lack the necessary training and support to effectively cater to students with special needs, leading to inadequate inclusion strategies. The limited availability of specialized professionals and resources further impedes the provision of tailored support for students with diverse learning requirements. The study by Makoelle and Burmistrova (2021) reveal that higher educational institutions of Kazakhstan preparing pre-service teaching in inclusive education have a general awareness of government policies on inclusion. Yet, none had well-articulated policies and lacked strategic details and resources. Thus, newly hired teachers are not aware how to work with students with special educational needs which mostly occur in our school, resulting in challenges related to practice, access, and support for students with disabilities. Moreover, insufficient infrastructure and methodological frameworks hinder the creation of inclusive learning environments that address the individual needs of all students.

Overall, these barriers profoundly impact implementing inclusive education at a mainstream school. The misunderstanding of disability and inclusive practices perpetuates societal resistance and hampers the acceptance and integration of students with special needs. Without clear policies and guidelines, the school struggles to establish consistent and effective inclusive practices, resulting in a lack of support for students with diverse needs. The absence of affirmative action measures exacerbates inequalities and limits opportunities for students with disabilities to thrive in an inclusive setting. Additionally, practical challenges, such as teacher preparedness and resource constraints, impede the school's ability to create an inclusive and supportive learning environment for all students.

Actions to Remove Barriers and Implement Inclusive Education

To address these barriers and enhance the implementation of inclusive education at mainstream schools, several actions can be taken to promote equity and justice in education. One of the first recommendations is to learn from the challenges and limitations of other international education systems and avoid simple "borrowing" of inclusive education policies, to recognize Kazakhstan's distinctive social and cultural values. The educational settings should fully recognize the acceptance of all children's right to education as established in UNCRPD (2006) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989).

The positive attitudes of non-disabled children, already evident, should be nurtured and developed within the educational settings. Moreover, collaboration is paramount with parents, local organizations, and advocacy groups to promote acceptance and understanding of inclusive practices. A whole system educational perspective, from kindergarten through to higher education, working collaboratively with Health and Social Services, by including physiotherapists, speech and language pathologists, psychologists and other special trainers in inclusive education. In the case of this school, inclusive leadership system can provide teacher training lessons, workshop for parent who have special needs by attracting national and international stakeholders in inclusion.

There should be an advocacy for the development of clear and comprehensive policies on inclusive education, including guidelines for assessment, support mechanisms for students with disabilities, and affirmative action measures to promote diversity and inclusion, by ensuring that policies are effectively implemented and monitored to support inclusive practices. The schools should provide a coordinator of special learning needs committee, which can help to provide early intervention and accommodation for students from the beginning of the school start. Also, special learning needs committee can conduct ongoing training and professional development opportunities for teachers to enhance their knowledge and skills catering to students with diverse needs. From the infrastructural perspective, school environment is conducive to accommodating students with special needs by allocating resources and funding towards improving infrastructure, acquiring necessary materials and equipment for implementing inclusive education. There should be an allocation of resources and funding to enhance infrastructure, acquire necessary materials and equipment, and implement inclusive practices. Ensure that the school environment accommodates students with special needs and promotes inclusivity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, implementing inclusive education at one mainstream school faces significant barriers related to societal misunderstandings, policy challenges, and practical limitations. By addressing these barriers through community engagement, policy development, professional development, and resource allocation, we can create a more inclusive and supportive learning environment for all students. Embracing inclusive practices is a legal requirement and a moral step to ensure that every student, regardless of their abilities, has the opportunity to learn, grow, and succeed within our school community. By taking proactive steps to remove barriers and promote inclusivity, we can foster a culture of acceptance, diversity, and equity at mainstream schools.

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