# Policy Brief

**Developing Inclusive Education in Kazakhstan**

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This Policy Brief outlines the policies and procedures adopted in Kazakhstan to develop Inclusive Education, and the positives and challenges that currently exist. It provides international alternatives to thinking and practice upon which recommendations are made to support the strengthening of an appropriate and contextually relevant Inclusive Education system in Kazakhstan.

**Context and the Scope of Problem**

Inclusive Education as a movement internationally is focused the education of *all* learners, including Children with Disabilities (CWDs) and Special Educational Needs (SEN) in mainstream settings (UNICEF, 2019). Efforts to achieve an Inclusive Education system in Kazakhstan are notable with the government's commitment to fulfilling its responsibility to achieving SDG4 and improving access and quality education for all learners, particularly those marginalised (Nazarbeyev, 2011). Of note is the 2016–2019 State Program for Education and Science development which supported the move towards making 70% of all schools in Kazakhstan inclusive (MERSK, 2016), and the establishment of Resource Centres to support the development of Inclusive Education environments, fostering collaboration with parents and providing necessary support and expertise for children with disabilities. As a result, this has led to an increase in the number of children with special or additional needs and abilities in mainstream schools. Kazakhstan has 102,610 children between the ages of 7 and 18 with additional needs in schools, of which 23,970 are in mainstream classes and 11,352 are in special classes (Information Analytic Centre, 2017). Concomitantly, the number of kindergartens has increased to 9,828, widening the participation of most children in early childhood stages of schooling (Information Analytic Centre, 2017).

The challenges Kazakhstan faces concerning the implementation of Inclusive Education are not unique and are shared with other countries. However, it is important to recognize the complexity of social and cultural contexts when implementing systemic change of any kind. We must ensure any change does not negatively impact or further marginalize vulnerable people or already disadvantaged groups particularly in light of recent challenges with the COVID-19 pandemic forcing schools to deliver education through distance learning (DL). We highlight the importance of respecting and taking into account the social and cultural values of Kazakhstan when re-conceptualising practices examined from other contexts.

In saying this, it must also be highlighted that creating 'inclusive societies' that are tolerant of diversity and difference begin in schools and in the classroom through Inclusive Education. Therefore, we have prepared a list of challenges drawn from recent research relevant to the Kazakhstani context. There are some parts of Kazakhstan where these challenges have more impact than others, particularly in areas that are more isolated, rural, or have transient or migrant populations. These challenges limit the move towards inclusive schooling for large numbers of children with disabilities and special needs who continue to receive their schooling at home or in special schools or correctional classes (UNICEF, 2014):

- Inclusive Education as a concept and practice is not clearly understood in Kazakhstan (Makoelle, 2020a; Helmer et al., 2020 Somerton et al., 2020). In this context, Inclusive Education reform and language has remained largely focused on disability, which was heavily influenced by the Soviet legacy (Makoelle, 2020). A medical approach is adopted in Kazakhstan starting with Psychological Medical and Pedagogical Commissions (PMPCs) diagnosing children with SEN for placement, and special education support from defectologists in special or 'correctional classes' (Rouse & Lapham, 2013; Zholtayeva et al, 2013; Makoelle, 2020). This is based on the belief that children with disabilities and special needs are better served in separate special settings, with specialised programs developed by specialists.

- There is a lack of consistency between legislation and policy from government and ministerial level through to institutional and school level (Meirbekova, 2018). This is closely connected to inconsistencies how the concept of Inclusive Education is understood in Kazakhstan.

- Current policy does not provide practical guidelines to schools for the implementation and development of Inclusive Education and inclusive schools (Meirbekova, 2018).

- Slow progress has been attributed to attitudes towards disability (Zholtayeva et al, 2013). Research has suggested that while teachers believe in the successful implementation of Inclusive Education, they are resistant to including all children, particularly those with severe disabilities (Makhmudayeva, 2016).

- There is a need for teacher training on Inclusive Education as key to responding to the unique needs of all pupils in their classroom (Zholtayeva et al, 2013; Shani and Hebel, 2016). Teachers in Kazakhstan therefore require training on the specific needs of children across the range of special needs and disabilities and strategies to support their learning in inclusive classrooms (UNICEF, 2014).

- The Resource Centres (RCs) adopt a medicalised approach underpinning practice and unclear collaboration with other professionals in developing individual educational plans and parental involvement (Helmer et al, 2020; Somerton et al, 2020). There is a '*lack of necessary professional development and teacher training required to work effectively with shared understandings and collaborative practices*' and confusion around concepts and practices engaged in by teachers, school leaders and other specialists while implementing practices (Somerton et al, 2020).

**Policy Alternatives**

The alternatives presented are based on international trends, which are recommended for Kazakhstan to move forward in the development of Inclusive Education. This will lead to addressing current thinking and practice in the local context and enable inclusion of greater numbers of students with special needs and disabilities in quality mainstream education.

Based on the 1994 Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), which was a turning point for a global agenda on inclusion of children with special needs and disabilities, the right of every child to be educated in regular schools, with additional support where needed, needs to be affirmed in the local context. The notion of inclusive education has evolved into a notion of 'inclusion' which is about *all* learners, particularly those who are poor and most disadvantaged, including working children, remote rural dwellers and nomads, and ethnic and linguistic minorities, children, young people and adults affected by conflict, hunger and poor health; and those with special learning needs (UNESCO, 2010, 2018).

There is increased recognition that exclusion is a result of barriers within contexts, which need to be removed to ensure inclusion and the full participation of individuals (Booth and Ainscow, 2016; Armstrong et al, 2010). The focus has moved from an individual deficit focus which sees the learner as having the problem, to a social focus on barriers which result in challenges. Inclusive Education is therefore about addressing barriers which hinder learning and participation. It has moved away from the focus on remediating and correcting individual 'deficits'. The focus is on valuing, accepting and supporting diversity in schools and ensuring that every child and young person has an equal opportunity to learn.

Inclusive Education is a therefore a recent internationally mandated policy phenomenon that stipulates the rights of all students, including children with special education needs (SEN) and disabilities, to quality mainstream education. It moves away from segregation of children into separate settings and is concerned with issues of human rights, equal opportunities and social justice (Slee 2010,2018; Pather, 2007). It focuses on the inclusion of *all* learners through effective educational approaches which respond to learner diversity. It aims at challenging power inequities and enhancing the learning and participation of disenfranchised groups of students. Inclusive Education is therefore defined as the process of increasing the participation of learners, within, and reducing their exclusion from cultures, curricula and communities of neighbourhood centres of learning; the focus is on developing inclusive cultures, policies and practices in educational settings (Booth and Ainscow, 2016). In terms of cultures, it's about building community and establishing inclusive values. Attitudes towards disability as an 'abnormality', curse or punishment, which lead to children being shunned or abandoned, need to be addressed. Inclusive policies should focus on developing a school for all and organising support for diversity. Inclusive practices should orchestrate inclusive learning and mobilise resources both human and material, to support learning in mainstream settings.

**Policy Recommendations:**

- Conceptualisation of inclusive education in line with international trends. There is a need to clearly define inclusive education in consideration of international understandings and ensure this is articulated within and across all policies and documents associated with education, health, and social support. Media campaigns should be implemented to help change negative cultural attitudes toward difference.
- Revision of language used in inclusive guidelines and policy documents. There is a need to ensure that the way that disability is represented is inclusive within all dimensions of education (guidelines, policy documents, and statements) reflecting the appropriate language. Rather than a focus on deficit, disorder, deviation or defectology consider alternatives that frame disability on a 'needs' basis. For example, a student that needs a wheelchair rather than an invalid.
- Development of school leadership to support the development of inclusive schools. Studies have shown that the attitudes of principals are critical in the continued successful development of inclusive schools (Sharma and Desai, 2008).
- Conduct a review of pre-service teacher education curricula and integrate student centred approaches such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to better prepare teachers to deal with inclusive pedagogy and support a range of diverse learning needs, including children with special needs and disabilities. Based on the review, strengthen teacher education curricula to prepare teachers to apply inclusive pedagogy and support a range of diverse learning needs, including for children with special needs and disabilities.
- Develop Resource Centre Hubs which include Resource Centres supporting satellite mainstream schools within communities. This is a sustainable approach which encourages a community approach to supporting the inclusion of children with disabilities and special needs in mainstream schools in their local communities while continuing to offer some of the extra services such as speech or occupational therapists.
- Develop accessibility of early intervention services which further link to Resource Centres and schools allowing smooth transitions for children from pre-school into school settings. Accessibility of early intervention which is developed as part of education system is essential for allowing more children with special educational needs and disabilities to successfully continue their studies in mainstream school settings.
- Strengthen school and parent partnerships through wider consultation, including children who are home-schooled. The ultimate goal should be to provide venues for children to move from predominantly home-schooled mode to classroom mode of instruction.
- Review current policies in consultation with relevant parent and community organisations and NGO's. Strengthen collaboration between schools and community partners, including parents, PMPCs, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), Disabled People's

Organisations (DPOs), etc. Involvement of NGO's recognizing their capacity to contribute to the provision of methodological support to schools and professionals, promote cultural change about perceptions of people with special needs, and inform parents, the state, and the public more broadly about the needs of children requiring additional educational supports (Rollan & Somerton, 2019).

▪ Conduct a technology audit of rural schools to identify those in need and direct the appropriate training and resources that provide more equitable access to learning for all students. Ensure equitable distribution of technology resources (Kurmangaliyev, 2020).

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