



Overcoming Barriers to Inclusive Education in New Uzbekistan: Challenges, Strategies, and Future Directions

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the multifaceted challenges in organizing inclusive education in New Uzbekistan and proposes evidence-based strategies to overcome them. The aim is to ensure equitable access to quality education for all children, including those with physical and intellectual disabilities. The study adopts a qualitative-descriptive approach by analyzing current policy frameworks, infrastructure readiness, teacher competencies, and societal perceptions. Findings reveal that significant barriers include insufficient infrastructure, lack of specialized teacher training, limited public awareness, weak legal enforcement, and inadequate individualized support services. These issues are deeply rooted in systemic gaps that hinder the full realization of inclusive education. The discussion emphasizes that inclusive education is not only a human rights imperative but also a key factor in fostering social equity, economic inclusion, and sustainable development. As a response, the article highlights the need for integrated efforts including infrastructural investment, policy reform, stakeholder engagement, and the development of support systems tailored to students' individual needs. The impact of addressing these barriers extends beyond the education system—it contributes to building a more just and inclusive society.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has become a critical component of international development agendas, particularly through the framework of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which seeks to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (Rad *et al.*, 2022; Boeren, 2019). This global commitment recognizes that education systems must be responsive to the diverse needs of learners, including children with disabilities, ethnic minorities, and those from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds (Ainscow, 2016). The principle of "Education for All" (EFA) has thus evolved to demand not only access but also meaningful participation and achievement within mainstream education settings (Lerch, 2023).

In the context of post-Soviet Central Asia, Uzbekistan has undergone significant political, economic, and social transformation. The government’s current modernization initiative, often referred to as "New Uzbekistan," prioritizes education reform as a cornerstone of national progress (Manakov, 2021). This includes efforts to transition from traditional, centralized models of education to more inclusive and student-centered approaches. Various legislative reforms, such as the Law on Education and the Concept of Development of the Public Education System until 2030, signal strong political will to embrace inclusive practices. However, the gap between policy intentions and practical implementation remains wide (Lukesch *et al.*, 2020).

Despite commendable progress, substantial barriers to inclusive education persist in Uzbekistan, particularly in the areas of infrastructure readiness, curriculum adaptation, teacher preparation, and social inclusion. Many mainstream schools lack physical accessibility features such as ramps and adapted toilets; curricula remain rigid and exam-oriented; and teachers are largely unprepared to differentiate instruction or manage diverse classrooms. Furthermore, deeply entrenched social attitudes— Influenced by stigma, limited awareness, and cultural misconceptions—continue to marginalize children with disabilities, leading to their exclusion from mainstream educational opportunities (Tang, 2025).

Previous research on inclusive education has been largely shaped by global or Western contexts, often overlooking the local realities of countries like Uzbekistan, where systemic inertia and cultural resistance play a significant role. As a result, the academic discourse lacks context-sensitive analyses that consider the interplay between national policy reforms and on-the-ground educational practices. There is a need to understand inclusive education not just as a pedagogical shift, but as a societal transformation involving multiple stakeholders: educators, parents, policy-makers, and the wider community (Rollan, 2024).

This study seeks to fill that gap by conducting a comprehensive analysis of the challenges in organizing inclusive education in New Uzbekistan. It examines five interlinked domains— policy and legal frameworks, infrastructure and accessibility, teacher training and pedagogical readiness, societal attitudes, and individualized support services. By using a multidisciplinary lens and drawing on both national documentation and international frameworks, this article aims to generate actionable insights for education stakeholders.

The novelty of this research lies in its integrative and context-sensitive approach. Rather than viewing inclusive education as a discrete intervention, it is conceptualized as a systemic reform that requires coherence across legislation, school infrastructure, teacher development, community engagement, and institutional accountability. The ultimate

objective is to contribute to the realization of a more inclusive, equitable, and resilient education system in Uzbekistan—one that respects diversity, promotes participation, and enables all learners to flourish both academically and socially.

2. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative-descriptive methodology, relying on document analysis, expert interviews, and review of existing literature on inclusive education in Uzbekistan. Primary data were sourced from national education policy documents, strategic reports, and publications from the Ministry of Public Education. Secondary data included research articles, NGO publications, and international frameworks such as UNESCO guidelines. Challenges were categorized into five key domains: infrastructure, teacher training, societal awareness, legal frameworks, and individualized support services. A thematic analysis was conducted to identify recurring patterns and root causes, enabling the formulation of comprehensive and contextualized recommendations.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study illuminate a deeply layered and multifactorial landscape of challenges that hinder the effective implementation of inclusive education in New Uzbekistan. Although policy reforms and international commitments, such as those aligned with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), have laid a legal and moral foundation, the realities within schools, communities, and institutions reflect persistent gaps between intention and execution. The five central domains identified—infrastructure, pedagogical readiness, societal attitudes, legislative enforcement, and individualized services—are not isolated issues but interdependent barriers that must be addressed holistically ([Hasan et al., 2017](#)).

3.1. Infrastructural Barriers and Physical Inaccessibility

The physical environment of schools in Uzbekistan remains one of the most tangible obstacles to inclusive education. A significant proportion of school buildings were constructed during the Soviet era and are characterized by standardized architectural designs that fail to meet modern accessibility standards. Basic features such as ramps, tactile flooring, accessible toilets, auditory signaling systems, and elevators are missing in most educational institutions, particularly in rural and economically underdeveloped regions. Moreover, classroom layouts and school transportation systems are not designed with the principles of universal design in mind, further limiting access for children with mobility, visual, or auditory impairments. While retrofitting old buildings and investing in new, accessible infrastructure require substantial financial resources, the lack of budget prioritization and coordinated implementation strategies has led to a situation where inclusion begins and ends at the legislative level, with limited material realization in everyday educational practice ([Rahman et al., 2024](#)).

3.2. Pedagogical Challenges and Inadequate Teacher Training

The second core challenge lies in the limited capacity of teachers to deliver inclusive pedagogy. The transition from traditional teaching models to inclusive practices requires not just a shift in mindset but also a transformation of classroom methodologies. However, many pre-service teacher education programs in Uzbekistan offer minimal training on inclusive education or special needs pedagogy. In-service training opportunities are sporadic,

underfunded, and often lack practical application. Teachers are frequently unprepared to adapt curricula, implement differentiated instruction, manage behavior in mixed-ability classrooms, or assess students using flexible and inclusive methods. This skill gap leads to unintended exclusion within inclusive settings, where students with disabilities may be physically present in mainstream classrooms but receive limited meaningful engagement or individualized support (Onyishi & Sefotho, 2020). Furthermore, class sizes in many schools remain large, compounding the difficulty of implementing student-centered learning approaches. As such, the pedagogical infrastructure of the education system continues to reinforce traditional hierarchies rather than facilitating inclusive and participatory learning environments (Papaioannou et al., 2023).

3.3. Societal Attitudes, Cultural Misconceptions, and Stigmatization

Beyond material and instructional factors, the sociocultural context significantly influences the success of inclusive education. Stigma and deeply embedded cultural beliefs surrounding disability and difference continue to shape attitudes among teachers, school administrators, students, and families. In many communities, disabilities are still viewed through a medical or deficit lens, often associated with pity, shame, or spiritual misfortune. These perceptions contribute to the marginalization of children with disabilities and can result in their exclusion not only from education but also from community life. Parents of children with disabilities often face societal pressure to keep their children at home, especially when local schools lack the capacity or willingness to accommodate their needs. In other cases, families themselves may internalize stigma, perceiving inclusive education as a risk to their child's emotional well-being or as an inferior alternative to specialized institutions. Additionally, misinformation and lack of awareness about what inclusive education entails—among both families of children with disabilities and those of typically developing children—can lead to resistance and tension within school communities (Kwok & Kwok Lai Yuk Ching, 2022).

3.4. Weak Policy Implementation and Legislative Enforcement Gaps

Although Uzbekistan has introduced several progressive laws and national strategies—such as the Law on Education (2020), the Presidential Decree on the Development of the Education System (2020–2030), and ratification of the UNCRPD—the implementation of these policies is inconsistent and uneven across regions. There is a notable lack of clear operational guidelines for schools on how to enact inclusive practices, accompanied by insufficient financial and human resources allocated for monitoring and enforcement. Furthermore, a lack of cross-sectoral collaboration among the Ministries of Education, Health, and Social Protection creates silos that hinder integrated service delivery (Mukhopadhyay et al., 2012). In many cases, local education authorities operate without clarity regarding budget lines for inclusion, resulting in fragmented implementation and ad hoc efforts that lack sustainability. While the national policy rhetoric strongly endorses inclusion, a corresponding accountability framework with measurable indicators, inspection protocols, and sanctions for non-compliance is largely absent (Subramaniam et al., 2017). As a result, the responsibility for inclusion often falls entirely on individual schools or educators, many of whom are ill-equipped to bear this burden without institutional support.

3.5. Absence of Individual Support Service and Professional Personnel

Perhaps the most critical and least developed component of inclusive education in Uzbekistan is the provision of individualized support services. Children with disabilities often require not just differentiated instruction but also personalized therapeutic interventions,

such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, psychological counseling, and behavior support planning (Stauter *et al.*, 2017). However, such services are rarely available within mainstream schools. There is an acute shortage of trained special educators, clinical psychologists, and allied professionals who can assess student needs, collaborate with teachers, and implement individualized education plans (IEPs). Even where such specialists exist, they are typically centralized in urban resource centers, leaving rural and remote communities severely underserved. This shortage is compounded by the lack of interprofessional collaboration mechanisms and the absence of a regulatory framework for multidisciplinary support teams. Without these critical services, inclusion remains superficial, and students with complex needs are often left to navigate school environments that are not responsive to their developmental and emotional challenges (Will *et al.*, 2018).

3.6. Integrated Discussion: Toward a Transformative Vision for Inclusive Education

The interaction of these five domains—physical, instructional, social, legal, and service-oriented—suggests that inclusive education in Uzbekistan cannot be advanced through isolated reforms or short-term initiatives. Instead, a systemic and transformative approach is needed (Young *et al.*, 2020). This means embedding inclusion not only in policy documents but also in budget planning, teacher education, architectural design, public discourse, and institutional evaluation systems (Madon *et al.*, 2009; Ozga & Jones, 2006). Moreover, building inclusive education requires the active participation of multiple stakeholders, including children with disabilities themselves, their families, civil society organizations, local communities, and international partners (Rollan & Somerton, 2021). It also calls for a redefinition of inclusion from a reactive measure aimed at integrating students with disabilities into existing systems, to a proactive, equity-driven process of redesigning education systems to accommodate diversity from the outset. To realize this vision, Uzbekistan must commit to long-term investments in teacher professional development, inclusive curriculum design, universal design principles, community engagement programs, and intersectoral governance mechanisms (Ibraimova *et al.*, 2011). Inclusive education should not be seen as a separate or specialized program, but rather as a benchmark of overall education quality and human rights fulfilment (Alston, 2005). Only by addressing the intersecting structural and cultural barriers identified in this study can New Uzbekistan achieve its aspirations for an inclusive, resilient, and equitable education system that truly leaves no one behind.

3.7. Discussion

The aspiration to build an inclusive education system in New Uzbekistan represents not merely a sectoral reform but a broader societal transformation rooted in human rights, equity, and sustainable development (Fozilova & Husain, 2014). This study has shed light on the multifaceted and interconnected barriers that continue to hinder the realization of inclusive education (Sarker & Unzum, 2023). These include persistent infrastructural inaccessibility, insufficient teacher preparedness and pedagogical adaptation, entrenched societal stigmas and cultural misconceptions about disability, weak enforcement and operationalization of inclusive education policies, and the critical absence of individualized support services necessary for learners with diverse needs (Ressa, 2020; Kaeane & Molokomme, 2025; Khumalo & Mji, 2014).

It is evident that achieving inclusivity in education requires far more than legislative declarations or symbolic commitments (Vlachou, 2004; Popkewitz & Lindblad, 2000). Rather,

it calls for a comprehensive, cross-sectoral, and culturally responsive strategy that is informed by both global best practices and the unique social, historical, and institutional contexts of Uzbekistan (Rollan, 2024). Inclusion must be redefined—not as the mere physical placement of students with disabilities into mainstream classrooms, but as the intentional design and continuous adaptation of the educational environment, pedagogy, and support systems to ensure equitable learning outcomes for every child, regardless of their ability, background, or location (Vakil et al., 2009; Wilson et al., 2020).

To this end, several priority areas emerge as critical for the transition from policy to practice (Karou & Hull, 2014; Glowacki et al., 2012; Head, 2007; Barry et al., 2010; Sewart, 1980):

- (i) **Infrastructure and Accessibility:** A national audit and targeted investment program are needed to modernize school facilities, ensuring that all new and existing educational spaces meet universal design standards. This includes not only physical access but also access to learning through assistive technologies and inclusive teaching materials.
- (ii) **Teacher Capacity and Inclusive Pedagogy:** Pre-service and in-service teacher education programs must be restructured to integrate comprehensive training in inclusive education, disability awareness, and differentiated instruction. Incentive mechanisms and continuous professional development opportunities should be institutionalized to support educators working in inclusive environments.
- (iii) **Cultural Change and Community Engagement:** National awareness campaigns and school-community partnerships are essential to dismantle stigma, challenge discriminatory norms, and foster a culture of empathy, acceptance, and shared responsibility for inclusion. The empowerment of parents—especially those of children with disabilities—as advocates and co-creators of inclusive policies and practices is also vital.
- (iv) **Policy Coherence and Implementation Mechanisms:** The government must strengthen the coordination among relevant ministries, clarify roles and responsibilities, and allocate dedicated budgets and accountability mechanisms for inclusive education. Monitoring frameworks must be developed to track progress through disaggregated data, ensuring transparency and continuous improvement.
- (v) **Individualized Support Systems:** Scaling up the availability and quality of multi-professional services—such as special educators, psychologists, speech therapists, and social workers—is indispensable. Every child with a disability should have access to an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) co-developed by a collaborative team of professionals, families, and educators.

Furthermore, inclusion must be embedded as a guiding principle across all education sector plans and reforms, aligning with Uzbekistan’s commitments to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG 4 on inclusive and equitable quality education, and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). These international frameworks offer not only normative guidance but also practical benchmarks for measuring national progress.

The transformative potential of inclusive education extends beyond the boundaries of classrooms. It shapes a future society where diversity is valued as a strength, where every individual—regardless of ability—is recognized as a full and active participant in the social, economic, and political life of the nation (Mäkinen, 2013). Thus, advancing inclusive education in New Uzbekistan is not simply an educational challenge; it is a moral imperative and a strategic investment in building a resilient, democratic, and socially just society.

The findings of this study reaffirm that inclusive education, when genuinely and holistically implemented, is a powerful lever for equity, empowerment, and nation-building. While the path is complex and demands sustained commitment, the benefits are profound—not only for learners with disabilities, but for all students, educators, families, and the country at large. The success of inclusive education will ultimately redefine the national identity of Uzbekistan as a nation that embraces all its children, ensures no one is left behind, and prepares every learner for a future of dignity, participation, and opportunity.

4. CONCLUSION

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is characterized by detachment from reality, self-isolation, lack of response to external stimuli, passivity, and a tendency to be extremely vulnerable in interactions with the environment. For children with early childhood autism, speech development has distinct features. These include impairments in the communicative function of speech, echolalia (repeating words or phrases), the absence or delayed emergence of personal pronouns, underdeveloped dialogue skills, specific prosody disorders (issues with rhythm, stress, and intonation), the creation of neologisms (new, non-standard words), and a tendency toward autonomous speech, where children speak more to themselves than to others. The study analyzed the unique characteristics of communication skill development in preschool children with autism syndrome. Based on the collected data, differentiated pedagogical correctional approaches and content were developed to help shape their communication abilities. In addition, a speech development process model was created within the educational cluster environment, alongside game-based methodological tools designed to support the development of speech and communication skills.

5. AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. Authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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