

# SOVIET, GLOBAL AND LOCAL: INCLUSION POLICIES IN SCHOOL EDUCATION IN AZERBAIJAN AND RUSSIA<sup>1,2</sup>

## SOVIÉTICA, GLOBAL E LOCAL: POLÍTICAS DE INCLUSÃO NA EDUCAÇÃO ESCOLAR NO AZERBAIJÃO E NA RÚSSIA

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**ABSTRACT:** In this article, a specific picture of the formation of inclusive education in the countries of the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) is revealed, using the case of Azerbaijan and Russia. The processes of dismantling the Soviet special education system and the implementation of global principles of educational inclusion were valid for both countries. It is argued that while implementing the reforms, both countries have faced similar cultural and organizational barriers. Meanwhile, the cultural and political specifics of the states manifested in certain ways of overcoming those contradictions. It is documented up-to-date countries' attempts to build overall national systems, in which Soviet, global and local elements are intertwined. Current achievements and ongoing problems are discussed.

**KEYWORDS:** Inclusion. Educational equity. Children with Special Educational Needs. Post-Soviet studies. Education policy.

**RESUMO:** Neste artigo, é revelado um quadro específico da formação da educação inclusiva nos países da antiga União das Repúblicas Socialistas Soviéticas (URSS), utilizando o caso do Azerbaijão e da Rússia. Os processos de desmantelamento do sistema de educação especial soviético e de implementação de princípios globais de inclusão educativa foram válidos para ambos os países. Argumenta-se que, durante a implementação das reformas, ambos os países enfrentaram barreiras culturais e organizacionais semelhantes. Ao mesmo tempo, as especificidades culturais e políticas dos estados manifestaram-se em certas formas de superar essas contradições. Documentam-se as tentativas atualizadas dos países de construir sistemas nacionais globais, nos quais elementos soviéticos, globais e locais estão interligados. As conquistas e os problemas atuais são discutidos.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Inclusão. Equidade educativa. Crianças com Necessidades Educativas Especiais. Estudos pós-soviéticos. Política educativa.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

This year marks the 30th anniversary of the adoption of the Salamanca Declaration – a significant event in the history of inclusive education. This document emphasized the principle of overall children involvement in mainstream schooling to be crucial for elimination of discriminatory beliefs and movement towards the inclusive education system (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 1994). In response to this global statement, countries around the world have shifted their efforts towards implementing this idea. However, the journey towards inclusivity is not without challenges. Despite a worldwide agreement on the importance of inclusive education and protecting the rights of children with Special Educational

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Needs (SEN), the path towards putting this into practice is complex and uneven. There is a growing conversation cautioning against idealization and advocating for careful examination of the methods used in real-world situations (Ainscow, 2020a; Reindal, 2016).

Furthermore, there is significant variation between countries in how SEN are understood, and in the policies and approaches to inclusive education (Buli-Holmberg et al., 2023). It is important not only to compare national practices to established standards (Brussino, 2020; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2023), but also to carefully investigate the unique national contexts. Comparative research that focuses on understanding these differences is crucial, especially given the diverse national policies that aim to adopt a single global approach (Huilla et al., 2024). It is also important for academics to question the impact of categorizations and examine ethical standards and social justice in education, which often follows models from the Western world (Hallett et al., 2019).

The examination of contextual variables is crucial to avoid the shortcomings associated with blindly copying supposedly universal solutions and, at the same time, to identify opportunities to promote the realization of inclusion and equality principles within educational systems (Ainscow, 2020b). This becomes even more important considering the visible differences in how inclusive principles are put into practice, even among wealthy nations with apparently similar cultural and socio-economic policies (Huilla et al., 2024; Keles et al., 2024). There is a notable lack of research on the policies and practices of inclusive education in low-income areas and non-Western environments, where comparative studies could provide valuable insights (Mendoza & Heymann, 2024).

The lack of research in post-socialist regions, including countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and the former Soviet Union republics, is evident. These regions are facing challenges in adopting global educational reform movements for inclusion (Fylling et al., 2019; Hallett et al., 2019; Iarskaia-Smirnova et al., 2024). The discussion on inclusive education is more prominent in societies that have recently implemented these reformative practices, such as Eastern European nations and former Soviet states (Florian & Becirevic, 2011; Leijen et al., 2021; Stepaniuk, 2019). Importantly, there is a consideration of the Soviet legacy of defectology – a discipline focused on studying disabilities in children (Florian & Becirevic, 2011; Hallett et al., 2019).

However, there is a lack of scholarly focus on examining how the details of implementing inclusive education align with the overall courses of transitional societal reforms, especially those concerning the social sector and education (Mladenov, 2017). Conducting such research is crucial for comprehending the subtle dynamics that influence the acceptance and implementation of inclusive education in these quickly changing post-socialist educational environments.

This study aims to examine the complexities of inclusion policies in school education in Azerbaijan and Russia, contributing to the discussion on post-Soviet inclusive education research. It will explore how Soviet, global, and local factors interact to shape national systems, highlighting both achievements and ongoing challenges. The research methodology involves a case study approach, utilizing input from experts in the field to provide a comprehensive understanding of the unique aspects of the post-Soviet context. The goal is to shed light on the

significance of inclusion studies in the region and their relevance to broader scholarly conversations on inclusive education in the post-Soviet sphere. Ultimately, this article emphasizes the importance of the research endeavor and its impact on ongoing discussions in the field.

## 2 SOVIET BACKGROUND

The government's approach to children with disabilities and SEN was reflective of a broader governance strategy in the context of the Soviet Union. Since the inception of Soviet governance, there was a strong commitment to providing universal education, aiming to ensure comprehensive educational access for all citizens, regardless of physical or intellectual challenges they may face. This policy was consistent with Soviet ideology, which emphasized the collective needs of the state over individual aspirations.

The Soviet government had a responsibility to facilitate the education of children with SEN to integrate them as productive members into the society, according to a predefined societal model. The family's role in the state-mandated educational system was mostly disregarded, reflecting an authoritarian approach to public welfare. Soviet policy dictated the social and economic integration of individuals with disabilities jointly neglecting their autonomy and personal agency. The ability to influence or direct societal participation was hindered respectively.

Unlike Western ideas of inclusion, Soviet concept of 'inclusion' did not involve incorporation of individual needs and aspirations into education and society. Instead, the Soviet Union followed a utilitarian approach to 'integration', which, while seemingly assimilating individuals into societal structures, actually highlighted their inferiority and shortcomings, undermining the solidarity and integrity of the socialist collective. This perspective ingrained the view that people with disabilities were second-order members of society, viewed as burdens to be borne collectively. The policies of segregation of educational environments and increased social isolation of people with disabilities were established. That led to departing from international standards of inclusive education (Lesko et al., 2010; Mosin, 2010).

The Soviet approach to working with this group combined the medical model and integration principles. Children with SEN were accounted for as 'defective,' with the 'defect' hindering their inclusion in socialist society. Therefore, it was crucial to address or correct the defect through specialized educational conditions outside the mainstream education system. Robust diagnostic and correction methods from Soviet defectological science were utilized respectively (Matyusheva, 2011).

Children with disabilities faced stigma within the Soviet educational system and society as a whole. The segment of special correctional education was heavily segregated internally, leading to a growing number of special schools as diagnoses advanced. For example, the 1926 Decree of the SNK of the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic (RSFSR) established specialized facilities based on student age, including support groups for intellectually disabled children and teens within regular schools. By 1950, there were only three types of special schools organized by diagnoses, expanding to nine by 1990 with a strict division between children deemed educable and uneducable (Khitryuk, 2008; Matyusheva, 2010).

The successes and failures of the Soviet system of special correctional schools are still debated (Alehina, 2018; Lubovsky, 2017). Benefits included timely social and educational rehabilitation, specialized textbooks for all classes, vocational training, and the possibility for integration into mainstream institutions after graduation. The system also featured dedicated support staff, proper technical equipment, and the development of compensatory resources.

In the Soviet Union, early state policies prioritized the education of children with disabilities and special needs. Aligned with the aim of universal education, the state aimed to provide accessible education for this population. However, this approach prioritized state interests over individual rights, leading to government-imposed educational models that ignored family perspectives. Education for those with unique needs was controlled by the state, limiting their agency in society and hindering their ability to plan their own future. As a result, Soviet ‘inclusion’ was integrative but lacked genuine inclusion — considering the opinions of those being served. This resulted in systematic educational segregation, with special education provisions isolating children with disabilities in separate schools or home environments (Lesko et al., 2010).

The Soviet protocol focused on children considered to have disabilities, combining a medical approach with an inclusion framework. This approach aimed to address or correct the disability to facilitate their integration into socialist society by providing specialized educational settings informed by defectological science. However, this led to the discrimination and separation of children with disabilities and SEN, exacerbated by the growing number of special schools based on evolving classifications. Legal documents dating back to 1926 categorized institutions according to the educational requirements of specific student groups and classifications. This number has increased three times by 1990, creating a clear division between those considered capable of being educated and those who were not (Matyusheva, 2010).

The Soviet special correctional school system offered specialized textbooks, vocational training, and transition options to students after completing general education (Lubovsky, 2017). Despite the perceived benefits, criticisms included inadequate socialization, societal isolation, limited adaptive potential of students, increased risk of self-stigmatization, and reduced employment prospects post-graduation (Levchenko et al., 2013).

The Soviet correctional education system aimed to rehabilitate children to reach standard developmental and educational milestones and acquire vocational skills. Some individuals were deemed “uneducable” based on assessments by medical and pedagogical committees, though the criteria for this classification were not clearly defined at the national policy level (Shipitsyna, 2005). Efforts to integrate sensory-disabled individuals, such as the deaf in the 1950s and the blind in the 1980s, into mainstream schools were unsuccessful (Lubovsky, 2017).

Efforts to integrate children with disabilities into mainstream schools during the Soviet era, particularly deaf and blind students, were unsuccessful. However, the concept of ‘reverse inclusion,’ involving the education of students with hearing issues alongside their typically developing peers within a corrective environment, is still being explored in modern discussions (Malofeev, 2023).

### 3 CASE OF AZERBAIJANI

After gaining independence following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Azerbaijan took over a special education system that was filled with widespread and internal challenges. The extensive research study “Education of Children with Disabilities in Azerbaijan: Barriers and Opportunities” (2008) identified various systemic obstacles that hindered the educational inclusion of children with disabilities (CWD) before the discussion of inclusive education in policy reforms (Mikayilova et al., 2009):

1. **Availability:** The provision of education for CWD was unevenly distributed, with specialized schools and integrated classes mainly located in urban areas. Most children especially those in rural regions did not have access to this education. The only nationwide accessible option was home-schooling. In addition, there was a shortage of trained professionals, especially in rural areas, to meet the needs of CWD.
2. **Accessibility:** Only a small number of educational institutions were equipped to meet the needs of CWD. The lack of proper public and specialized transport in rural areas limited children’s ability to attend mainstream schools.
3. **Affordability:** Cost did not seem to be a barrier to the education of CWD. However, families in rural areas felt more financial strain compared to those in urban areas. Parents often expressed dissatisfaction with the level of state assistance, with poverty being a common reason for placing CWD in institutional care and education (Burchell, 2015).
4. **Quality:** The study also highlighted factors that affected the quality of education for CWD, including the adequacy of teaching materials, teacher preparedness, a lack of support networks for educators, evaluation tools, specialized teaching techniques, student-focused approaches, and educational facilities. The subpar quality of education limited the opportunities for CWD to access education effectively.

Moreover, having a special education credential did not guarantee children with disabilities the ability to progress academically or find employment. Children with severe disabilities were considered unteachable (E-Qanun [E-Law], 2001). Consequently, the educational system only catered to a small number of children with disabilities, while the majority were completely excluded from educational opportunities. Data from 2011 showed that only 15% of children with disabilities were enrolled in education (Mardanov, 2011), a situation that was similar in other post-Soviet countries. A United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) regional analysis confirmed that many children with disabilities were still not part of the school system (UNICEF, 2007).

UNESCO (2009a) argues that achieving inclusive educational systems and a more inclusive society depends on governments recognizing the seriousness of these issues. However, at the beginning of educational reforms in Azerbaijan, the prevailing model of segregated education for children with disabilities was rarely questioned. Like other post-Soviet nations, Azerbaijan upheld the traditional specialized educational system as the only way to teach children with disabilities. British activist Gwen Burchell, who conducted a study on boarding schools in 2001, introduced an alternative perspective (Burchell, 2015).

The move toward change was prompted by independence, which allowed for more external influences. This was reflected in the growing local civil society, supported by international aid organizations. Grassroots initiatives and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), often led by parents, especially mothers, of children with disabilities, raised awareness about the lack of community services, limited educational opportunities, social integration, and employment prospects for children with disabilities. International aid organizations worked closely with local NGOs to enhance their abilities and promote professional development. NGOs established by parents of children with disabilities pioneered the creation of community-based rehabilitation centers (CBRCs) and took on roles as paraprofessional psychologists, speech therapists, occupational therapists, and more. Despite efforts to include children with disabilities in regular schools, these attempts were hindered by the schools' limited capacity to accommodate these students. As a result, these NGOs united to push for educational, social, and vocational inclusivity for their children, increasing pressure on the government. Ultimately, the idea of inclusive education gained momentum on the government's agenda, thanks to the combined efforts of local activists and support from international donors.

By using the framework proposed by Haddad and Demsky (1995), the evolution of inclusive education in Azerbaijan can be divided chronologically into two distinct phases as outlined by Mikayilova (2019): the initial period from 2005 to 2011 and the subsequent continuum from 2013 to the present day.

Starting in 2005, the Ministry of Education began implementing the State "Development Program on the Organization of Education for Children with Special Needs (CWD) (2005-2009)" (E-Qanun, 2005). This program was specifically designed to ensure the educational rights of children, facilitate their transition to inclusive educational settings, provide equal educational opportunities, enhance social protection for state-supported children, and modernize the technical and pedagogical infrastructure of dedicated educational institutions in line with current standards (Mardanov, 2011). The introduction of inclusive education was carried out on a trial basis in certain mainstream educational institutions, focusing on pre-school and primary education without extending to extracurricular areas.

The National Education Law (E-Qanun, 2009) guarantees the right to education for children with disabilities, prohibiting discrimination based on health status. The Education Law includes provisions for specialized or integrated education, and the Special Education Law (E-Qanun, 2001) considers the inclusion of children with disabilities in regular schools, where conditions allow.

International mandates, such as Article 24 of the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, support the establishment of an inclusive educational model and the phasing out of segregated institutions (D'Alessio, 2011). However, the focus of the State program was not on empowering mainstream schools to accommodate children with disabilities, leading to the continued separation of educational systems. Most of the allocated funds were directed towards improving the infrastructures of special schools rather than strengthening inclusive teaching environments in pilot schools.

Provisions were made for parents of children with disabilities with minor to moderate disabilities, giving them the option to enrol their children in mainstream programs. To



support the pilot projects, the Ministry of Education implemented temporary measures, such as reducing the number of special education students in schools, creating teacher assistant positions, referring children with disabilities to suitable pilot schools, and providing financial assistance for transportation for participating families. Educators and assistants received continuous training in inclusive teaching methods, with technical assistance from organizations like the Council for Exceptional Children (Lesko et al., 2010), which majors in special education.

Services and specialists needed for children with disabilities to be included in inclusive classrooms were contracted through NGOs led by parents of children with disabilities. They managed Community Based Rehabilitation Centers (CBRCs) as well by 2011, the pilot phase of inclusive education was implemented in 17 schools and 13 kindergartens in various regions, integrating 268 children with disabilities into inclusive classrooms. That was equivalent to the average enrollment in a special education institution. With support from donors, an academic course on inclusive education was created and offered as an elective at the State Pedagogical University. The course was incorporated into teacher training programs but not included in ongoing professional development for educators.

Despite positive results, the Ministry of Education did not officially evaluate the pilot initiatives. Instead, international aid organizations funded a series of four empirical studies from 2003 to 2011, showing the positive impact of inclusive education on children, regardless of their disability, as well as on their families and the broader school community. These studies addressed the crucial question of whether a reform was necessary, something that the pilot programs aimed to tackle (Haddad & Demsky, 1995). However, this initial phase had minimal influence on the nation's overall education policy.

From 2006 to 2015, the Ministry of Education administered a significant State Program on Alternative Care and Deinstitutionalization (DI Program) (E-Qanun, 2006). This program aimed at accelerating the transition of children with SEN from institutional care to family settings and establishing family-centered support and rehabilitation services. Despite similarities with inclusive education reforms carried out by other former Soviet states, the Azerbaijani version of inclusion remained on the periphery of the broader DI Program, limiting the potential synergy between social service reform and inclusivity initiatives (Jigaylo, 2014; Mikhailchenko, 2012; Skhemova, 2013).

In Azerbaijan, under the State DI Program, specialized boarding schools began a transformation into “hybrid” institutions that aimed to integrate an inclusive educational component and also function as centers for remediation and family counselling. The transformation was not in line with UNESCO's recommendations for the transformation of special schools into resource centres offering services to regular schooling systems and family guidance for at-home support (UNESCO, 2009b).

The implementation of the State DI Program ultimately revealed a pattern similar to that of its predecessor: the government's idea of inclusion for children with disabilities did not mean moving away from segregated education but rather adding an inclusive education aspect as a supplement. This view was consistent with criticisms from international scholars who argue that inclusive education is often mistakenly seen as just an extension of special education rather than a distinct shift in paradigm (D'Alessio, 2011).

The implementation of a new phase of inclusive education policy in Azerbaijan began with the approval of the State Strategy for the Development of Education in 2013 (E-Qanun, 2013). This strategy outlined various initiatives aimed at promoting inclusive education, including

the preparation of developmental and inclusive education programs for children with special needs; the advancement of inclusive education methodologies; the facilitation of optimal inclusive education models; the establishment of universal regional advisory centers offering consultation on matters pertaining to the education and development of children with special needs. (E-Qanun, 2013)

A subsequent project, funded by the European Union and implemented with the assistance of UNICEF, was piloted in traditional schools during the second policy cycle. This cycle started amidst what has been described as a “paradigmatic shift,” sparking hope for the advancement of inclusive education in the country and the nation (Mikayilova, 2019).

As a reflection of the changing societal attitudes towards greater inclusivity, the government introduced the second State Program on Inclusive Education (2018-2024) (E-Qanun, 2017), outlining strategic national efforts in this area. Through collaboration between national authorities and local and global developmental organizations, this program aims to eliminate barriers to full and meaningful educational inclusion for individuals with disabilities. In partnership with UNICEF, goals include amending legislation to align with international standards, creating supportive structures for inclusion, enhancing educator capabilities, providing necessary resources, and promoting inclusive education while enhancing oversight of its implementation (E-Qanun, 2017).

Key initiatives since 2018 have involved identifying schools capable of serving students with mild cognitive or physical impairments, building institutional capacities, and raising awareness of inclusivity in education. In the 2021-2022 academic year, eight specific classes were launched in eight general educational institutions, each hosting one class. This initiative involved 16 students (11 males and 5 females) and 36 education professionals across the inclusive classes in these schools (Mikayilova et al., 2023).

#### **4 CASE OF RUSSIA**

In the 1990s, following the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), the Russian education policy aimed to de-ideologize, increase autonomy, and diversify while integrating accessibility and inclusivity in education. It also addressed accessibility issues for groups of children with special needs. The 1992 Education Law established the principle of universally accessible education that is adaptable to students’ developmental needs, including those with developmental disabilities, and secured rights to native language education (Law of the Russian Federation “On Education”, 1992).

Accessible education for all students has been a state priority since the early 20th century. It was focused on removing barriers and promoting inclusivity, especially for children with health and developmental challenges, as outlined in the 2020 Federal Program for the Development of Education (Federal Law On the approval of the Federal Program for the



Development of Education, 2000). The education modernization concept until 2010 prioritized medical-psychological support and specialized schooling conditions for children with health limitations.

In Russia, the institutionalization of inclusion had significant moments with the signing (2008) and ratification (2012) of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and the 2012 Federal Law “On Education in the Russian Federation”, which defined educational inclusion. This law provided detailed mechanisms to ensure the rights of students with disabilities and specialized educational programs and conditions for students with health limitations, using adapted programs for general education.

Inclusion has been integrated into major strategic documents for Russian education, such as The National Strategy for Children (2012-2017), various inclusive education plans (2016-2017), and the Strategy for the Development of Education until 2025. There are federal educational standards for students with health limitations (2014) and professional teaching standards (2013) covering psychological and pedagogical strategies for vulnerable and special-needs children. The 2022 Ministry of Education School Concept sets requirements for modern Russian schools, emphasizing inclusive education for students with health limitations and disabilities, with self-assessment indicators for provided conditions. Ensuring inclusive education is a permanent item on the political agenda, aiming to support children with additional educational needs until 2030.

Researching the actual opportunities available to children with SEN, including those with disabilities, reveals significant changes over time. As of 2023, 5.4% of students in mainstream general education schools are classified as having SEN or disabilities (978,398), which is a notable increase from 2.6% (514,000) two decades earlier. Of these, 59.9% are enrolled in inclusive classes, while 40.1% attend separate SEN classes, with a gradual shift towards the former (a 6.5 percentage point increase over the past five years).

The number of specialized correctional schools has decreased by over 20% in the 21st century, but there are still 1,581 institutions. Experts agree that equal educational opportunities, especially for children with SEN, are not fully realized in Russia (Hanssen & Khitruk, 2021; UNESCO, 2021). Despite legislative measures ensuring rights and standards for inclusive education, implementation has been difficult and systemic results seem unachievable, with a significant gap between goals and capabilities. Educational practices evolve slowly, with tendencies for imitation and avoidance of issues becoming increasingly apparent (Alekhina, 2016).

A national survey conducted in 2023 revealed that half of parents believe that their children’s schools are not adequately equipped to educate students with SEN (VTSIOM, 2023). One major issue is the transition of children with SEN to mainstream schools that do not have the necessary resources mandated by law. They can lead to difficulties in adaptation and inadvertently reinforce segregation models for students with health limitations (Alekhina, 2016). A significant number of students with SEN are not placed in schools or specialized institutions but are instead educated at home, where they often do not receive the required hours of instruction. At the beginning of the 2021/22 academic year, approximately 20% of students with SEN were being home-schooled, highlighting a gap in the guaranteed right for parents to choose their preferred form of education. Correctional schools often admit children who

are deemed capable of following a mainstream education program according to assessments by the Psychological-Medical-Pedagogical Commission (PMPC) but are not either accepted into regular schools or are directed by parents to specialized correctional schools. Now such schools are characterised with long waiting lists due to the lack of necessary special education resources in mainstream schools. This situation underscores the difficulties in effectively implementing policies that promote inclusive education and addresses the unresolved issues at the intersection of legislative frameworks and educational practices (Klotchko, 2023).

In the case of children who are identified by the PMPC as capable of mastering a mainstream educational program but are not accepted into regular schools, correctional schools are required to provide home education for this specific group. This group primarily consists of children with severe multiple disabilities and profound intellectual delays (Klotchko, 2023). The formal criteria for identifying students with SEN, based on PMPC assessments, exclude a significant number of children with SEN from receiving the necessary specialized resources and individual support. This includes children with disabilities who have not been officially recognized by the PMPC. The current education laws do not address the education of children with disabilities who have not been identified as having SEN. They also require specialized resources such as medical support, adapted physical education, and nutrition programs – areas that are not covered by Law 273-FZ (Federal Law “On Education in the Russian Federation”, 2012). This results in unequal treatment of children with disabilities who have been identified as having SEN and those who have not.

Further complicating the matter, children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, dysgraphia, and other non-categorized conditions are not recognized as having SEN. The term “children with special educational needs” is employed widely in both social and academic discourses; however, the regulatory framework for managing the inclusive process in education utilizes the term “health limitations” (Alekhina, 2016).

The existing legislative definition of inclusion is close to the notion of integration, which may convey the impression that the realization of inclusive education in Russia has not yet embraced the fundamental shift towards addressing equity in education for all (Hanssen & Alekseeva, 2024). A contemporary, broader interpretation of inclusion, emphasizing not only children with SEN but also the attainment of quality education for all children based on their individual characteristics, still lacks necessary substantiation and clarification at the legal and legislative level. It has not been assimilated into professional culture (Hanssen & Alekseeva, 2024; Kosaretsky, 2023). Consequently, the stigma associated with the category of children with SEN persists within mainstream schools.

Significant disparities in financial and organizational resources at regional and district levels prevent the assurance of the requisite level of guarantees proposed at the national level (Alekhina, 2016; Kulagina, 2019; Rytova et al., 2021). The proportion of students with SEN and disabilities being educated in regular classrooms varies from 18 to 97% across Russian regions (with an average of 59%).

In numerous regions, the provision of adequate funding for children with SEN and disabilities is not actualized. Current funding practices meet less than one-fifth of the requirements necessary to create appropriate educational conditions for these students in mainstream

schools. This leading to unmanageable class sizes and a lack of individualized support from specialized professionals (Klotchko, 2023).

The scarcity of specialists contributes to the ineffective implementation of individual education plans for SEN students (Mertsalova et al., 2022). Meanwhile educational professionals were unprepared for the swift policy transition toward inclusive education (Malofeev, 2018). In-service educators often exhibit ambivalence or resistance to the inclusion of students with disabilities, grounded, in part, in their insufficient knowledge of special education methodologies — a recognized gap in the professional capacity (Kutepova & Suntsova, 2018; Mertsalova et al., 2022; Naumov, 2017). Despite some incorporation of inclusive education in teacher training programs, there is a lack of a comprehensive strategic framework for equipping educators with the competencies required for inclusive teaching (Hanssen et al., 2021).

Governmental strategies have evolved to emphasize practical support, improved infrastructure, enhanced funding, and professional development for inclusive education. Additionally, expanded access to best practices and professional dialogue, supported by online platforms, has improved the implementation of inclusive education.

Despite these advancements, parental perspectives reflect tension and resistance related to perceived risks of inclusive education, such as the lack of individualized teaching strategies and the potential psycho-emotional impact on students with SEN (Hanssen & Erina, 2022; Iarskaia-Smirnova & Goriainova, 2022). These concerns are heightened by inadequacies in specialist training and broader societal and psychological resistance to the shift towards inclusive education (Khusnutdinova, 2017). Parents often struggle to navigate the optimal educational paths for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), a challenge that is even greater within lower socio-economic groups (Iarskaia-Smirnova et al., 2024). Legislation outlining parental rights and involvement in inclusive education presents a paradox, showing both contradictions and conflicts that limit genuine participation (Alekhina, 2017).

Despite the complexity of legislation, parental associations supported by NGOs have increased their support for families with children with SEND, improving awareness and oversight of inclusion policies (Hanssen & Erina, 2022; UNICEF, 2012). Parents have actively participated in reform discussions, using various channels, from rallies to digital platforms, to voice their concerns and consult with authorities (Iarskaia-Smirnova et al., 2024).

Recent research indicates deep-seated societal barriers to embracing inclusive educational models in Russia, along with a reluctance to move away from segregated approaches (Hanssen & Alekseeva, 2024). However, recent surveys show a positive shift in public opinion: one-third of parents now acknowledge the enrolment of children with SEND in mainstream schools, a majority support inclusive education (with higher rates among those with personal experience), and two-thirds of the population advocate for integrated educational settings (VTSIOM, 2023).

## 5 CONCLUSION

In the advent of the 21st century, the Russian Federation and Azerbaijan have expressed a commitment to the international principles of inclusion and inclusive education, under-

taking significant efforts to incorporate the model of inclusive education into their educational systems. Their journey has been characterized by significant changes, yet the main goal remains an unfulfilled aspiration: ensuring the rights of children with SEN to attend regular schools tailored to their unique needs still.

The educational models for children with SEN that have emerged in both countries possess common characteristics as well as unique aspects. Together, both models can be described as hybrid constructs, blending elements of both special (segregated) education and inclusive education approaches. The idea of hybridity, as a representation of “local variations [...] [with] different degrees of application [...]” (Ball, 1998, p. 125) within political agendas, was highlighted by the author in his examination of the localization “and reconceptualization involved in the realization [...] of policy in special national [...] settings” (p. 119). These instances illustrate how the push for inclusive education reform has been put into action, influenced by the “national and cultural contexts” (p. 127).

Inclusive education aims to break down barriers to participation and achievement in schools for all children (Grimes et al., 2019). Both the Russian and Azerbaijani education systems affirm a dedication to equity for all children (Allahverdieva, 2020), with their laws emphasizing the right to quality education for every child. Their respective constitutions support the advancement of children’s educational rights and freedoms, and their Education Laws endorse equal educational opportunities for all (E-Qanun, 2009; Federal Law “On Education in the Russian Federation”, 2012).

Nevertheless, more than two decades later, these countries have initiated inclusive education efforts, yet the gap between stated intentions and actual practices remains substantial. This evaluation looks into potential reasons for this prolonged process.

During the initial phase of inclusive education reform, the concept of inclusion was somewhat unfamiliar to both the educational community and society in general. The lack of internal demand for inclusive education meant that these reforms were driven by international aid organizations, leading to a lack of national ownership of these concepts. Rooted in traditional pedagogical approaches, the established pedagogical community opposed the inclusion paradigm, and there was a lack of dialogue.

As Ball (1998) mentions, “National policy making is inevitably a [...] matter of borrowing and copying bits and pieces of ideas from elsewhere” (p. 126). We notice several characteristics that are not fundamentally different from those observed in European countries upon examining the complexities of implementation of an inclusive education model in Russia and Azerbaijan. These include inconsistencies within the legal framework, attitudes of educators and parents, a shortage of teacher skills, challenges in funding and methodological support for practices, and even a mix of segregationist, integrative, and inclusive elements.

However, certain unique aspects of the process can be linked to the specific historical and socio-cultural characteristics of the countries, as well as the nature of reforms during the transitional period. The intricacies of the inclusion process in the former Soviet states are closely connected to policies and practices concerning children with disabilities in the Soviet Union.

Importance of human and children's rights, consideration for minority interests, adaptability and individualization in education, and the value of diversity – principals essential to an inclusion policy – were new compared to the ideology of the Soviet era. This is relevant both in the context of human rights in general and in the Soviet state's paternalistic approach to childhood and education.

Soviet model of education for children with disabilities has focused on the child's limitations (defectology), aiming towards differentiated learning and optimizing content and methods for defect correction and teaching to achieve the highest accessible level of knowledge. The inability to fulfill this task within the mainstream school was argued as a reason for isolated instruction of children in specialized institutions. It also has formed the basis for criticisms of the concept and outcomes of implementing inclusive education (Lubovsky, 2017; Malofeev, 2023).

Conversely, the global discourse on “inclusion for everyone” emphasizes children's rights and overcoming discrimination, embracing diversity, and underscoring equality and fairness to meet the varied needs of students. Inclusion in this context aims to “empower and enable children with special needs to grow up with a feeling that they are equal members of society and with the dignity to fully participate in the life of the community,” thereby contributing to society. In this discourse, specialized institutions are perceived as segregationist (Leijen et al., 2021).

The delineated contradiction, in our view, explains the common application of the inclusive education concept only to children with disabilities, neglecting the rights and needs of other minorities and at-risk groups in both Azerbaijan and Russia. Inclusivity and inclusive education are narrowly defined, and diversity is exclusively associated as a disability issue.

Significantly, the development of inclusive education in Russia and Azerbaijan lacked a robust foundation in Soviet and Russian scholarly work. The fundamental achievements of Soviet defectology and corrective pedagogy could not be feasibly translated into mainstream schools without significant adaptation. That was due to their development and implementation within a specialized education framework. Moreover, the hesitation among mainstream educators to embrace inclusion may stem from the Soviet-era belief that issues of “special” education were solely for dialectologists to address. This led to a belief that teaching children with mental and physical disabilities was outside the purview of regular education professionals, which was widespread within the educational community (Malofeev, 2018). Additionally, the state of developmental science in Azerbaijan and Russia concerning differentiated instruction, individualization, classroom management, and other aspects, remains at a relatively low level.

The global inclusivity discourse positions parents as stakeholders in the education of children with SEN, with the state and professionals obligated to offer a selection of individualized educational pathways. However, providing rights and stimulating a new stance does not equate to their automatic acceptance. In the post-Soviet social fabric, there is a distinct lack of experience among parents in exercising an active role concerning the education and upbringing of children, particularly those with developmental differences.

On the other hand, in this stage, there is a distinct neoliberal shift in social policy — a focus on individual needs through adaptable support is being replaced by placing the onus on the

individual, essentially abdicating systemic responsibility (Apple, 2001). There is cause to believe that the state continued to apply new principles within its conventional logic, disregarding the voices of those it purported to “care” for, assuming it “knew better” what was good for them.

There was a lack of focus on developing the agency of families with children with disabilities and SEN, the necessary informational support, and nudges. Indeed, access to proclaimed rights and varied opportunities often required significant efforts from the families and children themselves, which were not consistently supported by the state and its institutions. Therefore, reflecting on these identified disparities and conflicting interpretations is vital for further progress.

The misinterpreted understanding of inclusive education as a concept and process stands as another obstacle. These constructs are not neutral; they embody “ideologies, positions, and perceptions” (Cannella, 1997) as to the nature and intention of inclusive education. As policies are reviewed, the underlying positions of these concepts must be elucidated, possibly leading to the eradication of all discriminatory terminology and language.

In the policies concerning inclusive education, typical traits of educational and, by extension, societal reforms in Russia and Azerbaijan during transition periods have emerged. These include top-down implementation without due consideration and alignment of the interests of diverse groups, especially beneficiaries, the presence of declared guarantees, rights, and opportunities without robust mechanisms for their realization, a rush in promoting and monitoring the implementation without adequate detail, and limited education budgeting (Mladenov, 2017; Iarskaia-Smirnova et al., 2024).

For Russia, the capacity of individual territories to provide the necessary level of national guarantees, not subsidised from the top, plays a crucial role. In Azerbaijan, the pronounced influence of international organizations is noteworthy, as well as a more significant influence of socio-cultural and historical factors on the nature and quality of the implementation of initiatives and projects in inclusion.

The situation diverged from that observed in other countries due to unique aspects of Soviet social policy and a distinct model of special education. These factors should not be overlooked when evaluating the progress of integrating the inclusive education model. Often, problems are simplified by associating them with the unaddressed legacy of the Soviet model of segregation and discrimination (Hanssen & Alekseeva, 2024). Comparative research on the implementation of inclusivity and inclusive education policies rarely considers the institutional and socio-cultural differences between countries, even within Europe (Buli-Holmberg et al., 2023; Leijen et al., 2021; Malofeev, 2018; Stepaniuk, 2019). Understanding these differences is crucial in addressing the growing disparities in policy, practice, and approaches to inclusive education, as well as in the recognition of SEN in different countries (Ainscow, 2020a; Brussino, 2020). The existing tension, or “struggle,” and cultural and identity “wars” (Leijen et al., 2021) should not be ignored. Otherwise, we risk being captives of a simplified notion of progress in this domain and the feasibility of universal solutions, which can be indiscriminately applied across countries without regard for local contexts and meanings, rendering such an approach counterproductive in the quest to actualize the values of inclusion. We hope our work contributes to the advancement of these positions in scholarly discourse.



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