

Challenges in Inclusive Education in Kyrgyzstan

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Abstract:

Every child has the right to have access to education regardless of mental, physical, or emotional disabilities or economic difficulties. While inclusive education has become one of the major aspects of the education system of Kyrgyzstan since the mid-90s, it has been still challenging to achieve full inclusiveness in schools. This article explores challenges and barriers to achieving inclusive education in the schools of Kyrgyzstan and analyses the roles of major actors such as parents and schools in this process. A list of recommendations and suggestions is also given, which could turn into effective interventions towards making schools more inclusive.

Keywords: Kyrgyzstan, inclusive education, learning disabilities, barriers, schools, parents.

Introduction

Education is the greatest investment in human capital. It is vital to educate all children and not exclude any child from acquiring an education which is the essence of inclusive education. What does inclusive education mean? The term inclusive education refers to “when all students, regardless of their individual characteristics, are placed in age-appropriate general education classes to receive quality instruction, interventions, and supports that enable them to meet success in the core curriculum” (Bui, Quirk, Almazan, & Valenti, 2010; Alquraini & Gut, 2012). The fact is not everyone is able to have access to the education they want due to several factors: economic, physical, or mental. According to UNICEF, hundreds of millions of children worldwide are out of school because of various obstacles, predominantly due to their learning disabilities. The latest report by UNICEF indicates that 85% of disabled primary-school-age children never attended school (UNICEF, 2016).

Inclusive education, in its general meaning, is the approach that should be accepted and adopted by schools to teach children with learning disabilities and those who are vulnerable together with their non-disabled peers within the same classroom. It ensures that all students feel

welcome and their needs are met and valued (Amzad, 2016; K-News, 2015). No student must be excluded from such opportunity and access. According to Ioannidi and Samara (2019), children with learning disabilities are often led to a stalemate in academic processes and while socially interacting with their peers mainly due to their medical inabilities which include:

- Cognitive and linguistic/intellectual inabilities in memorizing/remembering basic things that normal children do remember.
- Speech, incomplete vocabulary, hearing disorders.
- Lack of perceptual and kinetic coordination.
- Lack of strategic approaches to learning.

as well as because of emotional inabilities such as:

- Low self-image and self-esteem
- Lack of attention, feeling of being marginalized.
- Minimum learning incentives, which can even lead to constant thinking; ‘no hope for the future.’

The education system in Kyrgyzstan as in many other low- and middle-income countries is still facing challenges and barriers in achieving inclusive education. Children with learning disabilities in the country are being deprived of obtaining proper education due to key factors such as medical disabilities (mental and physical) and economic obstacles caused by a high level of poverty. Recent data in 2017 shows that in total, children with special needs in Kyrgyzstan were around 30 000, and only 13.6% of those children with learning disabilities attended kindergartens and schools leaving the other 83.4% uneducated (Kaktus Media, 2018). Moreover, in Kyrgyzstan number of children with special needs has grown by 42% from 2009 up to 2017 putting more pressure on the education sector in terms of increasing demand, financially and logistically, in achieving inclusiveness (Kaktus Media, 2018).

Until the mid-1990s, in Kyrgyzstan, there was segregation of children with limited learning disabilities from their normal and healthy counterparts. Inclusive education was later introduced to ensure that all children will have the same opportunity to have access to education. However, the term inclusive education in this context refers to a certain approach in education that enforces schools to assess the needs of each student and adapt curriculum and teaching programs accordingly (Orusbaeva, 2016).

Challenges to inclusive education in Kyrgyzstan arise from several factors. These include poor understanding and weak participation of parents in inclusive education, misperception, and reluctant attitudes of teachers towards inclusive education, and most importantly, lack of systemic mechanisms at the school level that would improve inclusiveness. These challenges are somewhat

driven by barriers or obstacles including value barriers, power-related barriers, practical barriers, psychological barriers, and socio-pedagogical barriers (Budnyk & Sydoriv, 2019). This paper explores the major challenges and barriers in Kyrgyzstan in achieving inclusive education in schools and the factors influencing these challenges. Based on good practices globally, it also identifies key roles that teachers, parents and school administrators should play in achieving inclusiveness.

Methods

Data for this study were obtained from field research conducted in the Osh and Talas oblasts of Kyrgyzstan. Field research was carried out to understand inclusiveness at the school level involving three approaches of data collection namely.

- *Surveys* with school leadership, academic staff and parents
- *In-depth interviews* with two experts in the education sector; one local expert with more than 10 years of experience, and an international expert from Tanzania, a C4C consultant, who also has very rich experience on systemic issues of schools.
- *Focus group discussions* with schoolchildren at grades 9-11 in selected schools.

The data were collected involving 19 school leaders and 185 teachers, 53 classes of 9-11 grades with about 15-20 children in each class. The field research was conducted in 19 schools in Osh and Talas provinces where NAMA Foundation has the most pilot schools. Also, schools in these two provinces could represent both the southern and northern parts of Kyrgyzstan.

Selection of schools

To capture the overall situation in inclusive education in schools, the following categories of schools were taken into consideration. The 19 selected schools consist of

- *Three* suburban schools and *sixteen* rural schools, *four* of which are highland schools in remote regions located more than 1500 m above the sea level and far from the town centre, where living conditions are harsh, infrastructure is poor and villages are vulnerable to natural disasters such as earthquakes, flood, and mudflows.
- *Three* gymnasium schools and *sixteen* typical public schools Gymnasium schools normally accept students from 5th grade through competition and educate them till 11th grade.
- *Two* Uzbek and *two* Russian- medium schools, where subjects are taught mainly in these two languages.

- *One* 9 year-school, whose graduates either choose to continue in another school or in a vocational school or decide to migrate to seek employment.

Findings and Discussion

The characteristics of disabled children are diverse and widespread in the context of Kyrgyzstan. Therefore, it is worth exploring what challenges and barriers exist and what can be done to overcome these challenges. The data revealed that teachers including school principals in Kyrgyzstan have a very poor understanding of inclusiveness. Over 90% of respondents (school leadership and academic staff) were limited with an answer that ‘inclusiveness’ means ‘working with disabled children. However, there is a wider concept that inclusiveness should also capture children from poor families and those who are vulnerable or isolated. Close to 70% of the respondents stated that children with such characteristics often do not graduate from schools particularly in rural areas due to a lack of relevant facilities and learning materials. Out of 19 schools, respondents from 13 schools (mostly schools in rural areas and mountainous regions) reported that they lack the necessary facilities and learning materials to teach children with learning disabilities. Comparatively in urban areas, there is somewhat better access to schools for kids with special needs and currently, throughout the country, 675 such schools are educating over 4000 children aged 6-17 years with special needs and around 2000 of pre-school age, below the age of 6 (K-News, 2015).

The interviewed experts noted that every feature of any specific disability needs to be addressed accordingly through an inclusive education system containing inclusive psychopedagogical approaches and academic staff with an inclusive mindset. This requires certain measures and attention from schools to provide education for this group of children. Western Europe, Canada, the United States, and some of the Nordic countries have already adopted inclusiveness into their education systems with countries in Eastern and Central Europe catching up with this global trend (Budnyk & Sydoriv, 2019). However, socialization and integration of students with learning disabilities in post-Soviet countries like Kyrgyzstan are still very low. Looking at wider perspectives of inclusiveness-related challenges, Budnyk & Sydoriv (2019), introduced the following barriers faced in achieving inclusiveness which also exist in Kyrgyzstan as in many other post-Soviet countries:

Value barriers – there are conflicting situations and obstacles while integrating students of different categories which include children from poor families, children representing ethnic minorities, and children with physical learning disabilities. As per current research, apart from children with physical disabilities or severe medical inabilities such as speech, hearing disorders and inability to walk, over 80% of schools [of this, over 90% are rural schools] responded that they have not faced such value-related issues. This is perhaps because of spontaneity in teaching children with special needs in remote regions and villages (Karabalaeva & Tokbergenova, 2019).

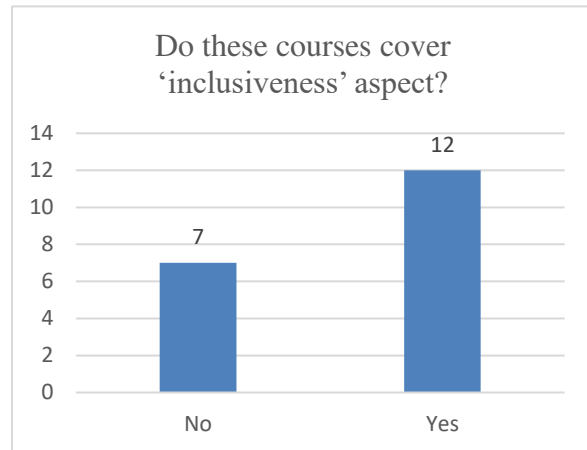
Furthermore, almost all schools in the rural areas are monoethnic public schools, which aim to provide education for all regardless of the socio-economic status of families.

Power barriers – no reform can be made possible if inclusiveness is not introduced collectively with the involvement of everyone in this process (teachers, medical staff, psychologists, social workers, etc). It is not only the schools' obligation to embrace inclusion, but all stakeholders should decisively work together to promote this. Chynbekova and Kurmanbaeva (2018) revealed that parents think that educating kids is the sole responsibility of teachers, which is a false belief. Instead, effectiveness in achieving inclusiveness in education hugely depends on a combination of team responsibility, mutual understanding and efforts of stakeholders including schools, healthcare workers, parents, etc (Budnyk & Sydoriv, 2019). Karabalaeva and Tokbergenova (2019) also noted that there is a need to increase awareness of public and other stakeholders with an aim to deliver the message that children with learning disabilities are ordinary kids who need special care and more attention and that they have full rights to acquire education and use other social services. This requires a collective approach to raise communities' awareness - schools, civil society, government agencies and medical workers should all work together.

Practical barriers – inclusion requires applying in practice what is written in documents developed within the Ministry of Education, which aims to improve inclusive education to ensure access for everyone to be able to learn (National Strategy of Improving Education for 2021-2040, pp. 7-8). The Strategy is not limited to taking care of children with special needs only but also focuses on promoting ethnic and religious diversity, and pluralism with the utmost respect to cultures and religions practised in Kyrgyzstan. Karabalaeva and Tokbergenova (2019) argue that within the education system of Kyrgyzstan, there is a lack of efficient mechanisms which could foster a change towards achieving inclusive education. Data from this study revealed that only 63% of surveyed schools partially celebrate and practice diversity and pluralism (diversity of race, ethnicities, religion, etc) to promote diversity. These schools represent suburban and gymnasium type of schools, where diversity and pluralism can be observed. The remaining 37%, especially monoethnic schools do not practice any kind of events and activities that promote inclusiveness and pluralism. In addition, both the interviewed experts mentioned the lack of enabling facilities and learning materials in schools targeted at children with learning disabilities. Similar research by Kurmanbaeva and Chynybekova (2018) also revealed that 95% of their targeted schools in Naryn and Osh provinces do not have facilities needed to provide inclusive education. This is mainly due to the lack of government funding to improve school infrastructure and update learning materials with a focus on children with learning disabilities.

Psychological barriers – often participants (teachers and parents) in inclusive education are resistant to a positive change due to traditional views and values. Overcoming such psychological barriers can be a long-term process requiring additional support from mental health specialists (Budnyk & Sydoriv, 2019).

Lastly and most importantly, *socio-psychological, and pedagogical barriers* – faced mainly by teachers. It is hard to achieve inclusiveness if teachers do not have an ‘inclusiveness mindset’. At the end of the day, it is a teacher’s major responsibility to facilitate the positive perception and environment for children with learning disabilities and treat them according to their specific needs (Budnyk & Sydoriv, 2019). Apart from parents, teachers are the most responsible individuals for children, especially for those with learning difficulties as they are supposed to be with, and, educating them daily (Cikili & Karaca, 2019). While teachers, as well as school leadership, seem to be less aware of inclusiveness, schools do practise it widely. In this study, all 19 interviewed schools in both oblasts mentioned about availability of short-term courses to improve the capacities of teachers in a timely manner. However, 7 out of 19 schools responded that short-term capacity building-courses do not cover the inclusiveness aspect of education. These are mainly rural and mountainous schools, whereas suburban and gymnasium schools do include inclusiveness in short-term courses. In addition, there is a lack of specialists and experts countrywide with expertise in inclusive education (Karabalaeva & Tokbergenova, 2019).



Conclusion and Recommendations

Earlier studies have shown that inclusive education benefits both children with disabilities and children without disabilities. Schools in Kyrgyzstan are found to be not fully *inclusive* due to several existing factors such as value barriers, power barriers, practical barriers, psychological barriers, and socio-psychological and pedagogical barriers. There are institutional challenges faced by schools, classroom level issues and poor learning environment and facilities that hinder from including children with learning disabilities into the learning process.

The list of recommendations includes but not limited to the following:

- Support schools in creating a learning environment and facilities to teach children with special needs. This includes improving school infrastructure designed and developed to provide access for disabled children, designing and reviewing all learning materials in order not to exclude kids with learning disabilities.
- Introduce and organize ‘a visiting teacher’ program which would allow students with medical inabilities to learn in their household settings.
- Training on inclusive education should be provided for teachers and senior students studying at pedagogical institutions.

- Capacity-building activities with a focus on socio-psychological and pedagogical support for teachers, who should be the best practitioners of inclusive education.
- Facilitate proper allocation of students as per grade and their special needs to avoid large-size class and the low ratio of teachers which reduces the motivation of teachers to teach.
- Consult with highly qualified education experts. ‘Mentorship program’ could be launched in schools which would enable schools to attract independent experts to support and supervise them in improving conditions and learning environment.

Acknowledgement

Sincere gratitude to the NAMA Foundation for financial support to conduct this research aimed at assessing inclusiveness and quality of education in schools of Kyrgyzstan.

Special thanks to the staff of NICE Kyrgyzstan and PF “Ala-Too” for clear guidance and feedback throughout the process of conducting the research. Big gratitude to Mr. Sapar Omorov and Ms. Medina Erkinbekova for their valuable comments on field data collection and analysis as well as the content of the research.

Many thanks to enumerators from Osh and Talas for their contributions and commitment while collecting data from target schools. Sincere thanks to education experts for agreeing and sharing their life-long experience and thoughts on how to make schools more inclusive and improve quality education so that ‘no child is left behind’ from getting an education.

Finally, many thanks to school leadership, teachers, and senior grades among school children in Osh and Talas for participating in data collection and helping us to have a deeper understanding of the situation in schools in terms of inclusiveness and assessing quality education.

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