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# Teaching Assistants and Tutors in Inclusive Education in Kazakhstan

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## Context and Legislative Framework

Kazakhstan has formed a legislative framework for the development of inclusive education. Following the World Conference on Special Needs Education in Salamanca, with the establishment of Education for All agenda by UNESCO as one of the Millennium Development Goals, Kazakhstan declared its shared vision and values of the movement towards inclusive education [20]. This educational reform aims to support diversity among all learners regardless of their social, economic, cultural, or health condition and to include them into a mainstream educational system, which would facilitate the creation a more just and equal society [16; 24]. Achieving this aim requires transforming the system of education and fostering social values around tolerance and welcoming diversity. In 2015, Kazakhstan ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities which has a purpose to protect the rights and dignity of people with special needs.

The rights of people with disabilities in Kazakhstan are also ensured by the Constitution, as well a right for education to every child. The equal rights and opportunities of all people to education are also highlighted in the State Program of Education and Science Development [10], which is currently the major strategic document on educational development in Kazakhstan.

In 2009, the Ministry of Education in Kazakhstan presented the first Concept on Inclusive Education that outlines the major steps in the reform implementation. By 2020, 70% of all schools in Kazakhstan are expected to become inclusive. In 2015, a revised Conceptual Approach to Inclusive Education was suggested by the national academy of education named after Altynsarin with its amendments on the terminology and timeline of inclusive education development. According to this revised concept [12], 2015-2016 are the years for the creation of a legal and normative base as well as programs to prepare the teachers for inclusion. The next step in 2016-2017 includes transforming the infrastructure, learning and teaching materials, methods, equipment, and support suiting the needs of diverse learners. Lastly, the implementation of a nationwide inclusive education should be achieved through 2018 to 2020. Overall, the state direction towards inclusive education has been supported on international as well as state levels.

## Barriers to Inclusive Education

Inclusive education currently being on the early stage of its development in Kazakhstan meets numerous barriers in the implementation process. All of the main stakeholders involved in this process have their own set of challenges that need to be address to ensure the success of inclusive education in the modern realia of Kazakhstan. In this section, we will focus on such stakeholders as government, society, schools and teachers.

The government body is an essential support of any reform in Kazakhstan. Overall, there is an absence of understanding of inclusion and no unified vision on inclusive education as it is often being considered as the education for students with disabilities [27]. As a result, many other disadvantaged groups, experiencing permanent or temporary challenges, are falling behind, and this issue is left

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unattended by the government.

Most of the current policies in Kazakhstan related to inclusion of persons with additional needs offer quite vague definitions and instructions. This is mainly due to a top-down policy consultancy [14]. The general society and interest groups have a weak role in the policy making process and therefore cannot make a significant contribution to informing the government about the current issues of inclusive education. Thus, there is a lack of definite and comprehensive inclusive policies that would offer the stakeholders involved in the implementation a set of clear guidelines to follow in order to make this process successful and productive [2;13]. These guidelines should make certain what groups of people should be provided with additional support in educational institutions, what kind of support this should be, who should fund this support and who is responsible for the implementation process. Besides, this policy should also clearly identify the rights and obligations of the participants.

The government should also give more attention to the control over the implementation of inclusive education in Kazakhstan. At this moment, different state reports simply highlight that inclusive education is being implemented, but nothing is being said about its quality, the number of students included in the schools that are considered to be inclusive and what disadvantaged groups they represent [13; 14].

The general society due to a large number of representatives has a significant influence on acceptance and successful implementation of inclusive education. However, a medical model of treating persons with additional needs creates a significant barrier [21]. According to this approach, people with diverse needs are considered as “defected” and therefore need to be made “normal”, and until they are corrected, they should be kept in segregated institutions or not be given additional attention.

Insufficient awareness about the benefits of inclusion for all participants and concerns about the quality of inclusive education results in resistant and often negative societal attitudes towards inclusion [25]. The understanding that the needs of people with special abilities are better addressed in correctional institutions dominates in general.

Apart from that, one of the biggest issues of modern Kazakhstani education is the inadequate funding [14]. That results in the shortage of pedagogical staff due to low salaries, poor school infrastructure and resources. This problem is especially relevant to the case of inclusive education, because it requires the change in the school facilities to make them more accessible, the provision of special educational materials and equipment, as well as additional teacher trainings.

Another issue is a limited autonomy of schools [14]. Thus, all aspects of educational process, especially the curriculum and assessment, are strictly regulated by the national strategic planning that does not focus on students falling behind and schools cannot provide the necessary support.

Teachers are the main agents of change in inclusive education. Therefore, it is crucial to minimize the challenges they have in this regard, including the lack of special training preparing teacher to work in inclusive classrooms as a part of teacher education [13;2], stavka payment system that leaves the teachers underpaid [14], and heavy workload and overload with the administrative work that leaves teachers little time for professional development and effective lesson planning. There is also no system of pedagogical-psychological support [28] at state schools that would respond to the concerns of teachers and prevent their burnouts especially in relation to inclusive education. The common understanding that inclusive teaching means additional unpaid work and obligations for teachers also negatively affects their motivation and engagement in the implementation of inclusive education [2].

It is crucial to minimize the workload of teachers to raise their enthusiasm for professional development especially in inclusive education. The help of tutors and teaching assistants appears to be one of the most effective ways to address these issues [2]. These professionals would address different challenges of teachers accordingly. For example, teaching assistants would take the

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administrative work therefore giving teachers more free time and tutors would create comfortable educational environment for individual students with additional needs, support teachers and consult them on effective inclusive lesson planning that would address diverse needs of students. This would potentially bring positive results and help to overcome multiple barriers associated with inclusive education.

### **The Role of Teaching Assistants in Inclusive Education**

To evaluate the significance of the influence that teaching assistants have on development of inclusive education, we decided to refer to the international experience in this field. Thus, in England, there were several studies conducted on the influence of teaching assistants in secondary school education, which revealed that due to this assistance, students had more active form of interaction with the teacher and more individualized teacher attention [3]. Therefore, the assistance in classrooms enables teachers to have more time for differentiated teaching practices and this is one of the key elements of inclusive teaching.

The direct interactions of teaching assistants with students also promote the active learning of the latter. The research by Reynolds and Muijs [15] confirmed that those children, who were considered to be underachieving in math, improved their skills in the period of targeted intervention from teacher assistants.

Apart from that, teaching assistants' support enhances the literacy skills of students with identified difficulties in learning [4]. Due to this fact, in Finland, the role of teaching assistant in inclusive and special classrooms is becoming increasingly important [22].

Another study in England collected students' views and feelings about the presence of teaching assistant in the classroom [5]. The findings have proved that students feel more open and comfortable when they receive additional support in the learning process. This is especially true for the young learners aged from 5 to 11, who expressed significant positive attitudes towards this experience. Namely, they perceive the support of teaching assistants as valuable and quite helpful.

One of the ways to introduce the additional student assistance in the classroom that has shown to be effective is peer teaching or co-teaching practices. This is a type of cooperation between students where one is an expert and the other one receives the guidance. Thus, Peer teachers reinforce their own learning by instructing others. In their study Walther-Thomas, Bryant and Land [26] found out that when the mainstream school provides a good service coordination and peer collaboration, children with diverse educational needs achieve higher academic success and have better social integration. For example, this is the type of assistance used in such Kazakhstani schools as NIS and Haileybury and it has shown to be very beneficial not only for the students, but for teachers too as their practice became more individualized and inclusive.

The support of teaching assistants also provides teachers with more free time that can be used for the professional development, for example, attending seminars on inclusive education. In this case, teachers will also have more time to focus on the inclusive lesson planning that would respond to the needs of all students. This is very important for the development of inclusive education. Teachers are overloaded with administrative work; they have to work extra hours because the salary is insufficient and usually have a big number of students in the classrooms. This has a great negative influence on the motivation and involvement of teachers and therefore the quality of education [19].

### **The Role of Tutors in Inclusive Education**

Tutor in inclusive education is a key figure to eliminate the resistant attitudes and potential risks for the participants involved in this process. Their main goal is to create a comfortable and tolerant educational environment for students of all abilities [18]. Apart from that, they consult teachers and other school staff on their questions and concerns about inclusive practices [29]. Thus, tutors assist with lesson planning [8],

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collect the information on additional needs of students and inform teachers and school administration about these needs to find the best way to respond to them [6]. Tutors also provide students the practical help. This includes personal care [1] such as the help with mobility, orientation, translations and other functions and the design of individual development programs for students with diverse needs [8], and assistance in building cooperation between students, parents and teachers [29]. Therefore, the tutors ultimately ensure an effective and successful development of students with additional needs in mainstream classrooms.

### **The Current State of Teaching Assistance and Tutoring in Kazakhstan**

There are some examples of schools that have adopted the wide system of teaching assistance. These include Haileybury schools, Miras School, Nurorda School, and QSI schools in some cities of Kazakhstan. In general, Kazakhstani state schools do not provide teacher assistants. Regarding the state of tutoring in Kazakhstan, it is at the very early stage [23]. There are no figures on the exact number of tutors in the state. However, it is a common knowledge that there is a great scarcity of tutors who underwent some formal training or preparation. Most tutors for children with special needs are mothers of these children. In some schools that introduced inclusive education, tutors are not considered as school staff members and are paid by the parents. This creates barriers to families with lower income to afford such tutor and, therefore, attend inclusive classrooms. Overall, measures to increase the number and the availability of prepared and trained tutors as well as teaching assistants must be taken as a vital step towards introducing inclusive education in Kazakhstan.

### **Policy Recommendations**

Since the move towards inclusive education in Kazakhstan faces numerous barriers, it requires transforming current system and ensuring the availability of additional support for teachers and students. Therefore, this policy initiative argues for introducing additional positions of teaching assistants and tutors in schools undergoing this transformation towards inclusiveness.

Teaching assistants (TAs) should assist the teachers with administrative and paperwork, class material preparation, and curriculum development and/or differentiation. They should also be present in the classroom to identify the diverse needs and abilities of students, their interests, and concerns to inform the teacher for preparing the teaching content appropriately. They can help some individual or groups of students during the class. Upon negotiation with the teacher, TAs can deliver some portions of the class material as instructors. Also, they should supervise the examinations, allowing more time for teachers to concentrate on class planning. The number of TAs in the school could be limited with an opportunity to have one TA for a couple of teachers due to budgeting concerns. This policy vision does not provide estimations on the exact number of TA positions in the school, but the issue must be discussed with relevant stakeholders to address financing aspects.

The role of tutors focuses more specifically on students with special needs such as those with mental delays, behavioral and neurological disorders, visual or hearing impairments, and other conditions and syndromes limiting the abilities of students for full engagement in the classroom [11; 17]. Tutors would ensure following individual educational plans for children with special needs. They should develop, implement, monitor, and evaluate the support provided to meet the learning needs of students. Their role is also essential in educating other school staff members about inclusive education and involving parents into this process. The eligibility requirements for students on receiving tutoring should be discussed further. Tutors should be available to all schools and be employed upon the school request if there are eligible students planning to enroll the school. Funding initiatives are vital as the school should be able to pay salaries of tutors, instead of leaving this as the responsibility of families. Adequate funding would allow equal access of all student with special learning needs to supportive services.

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Unlike many other views on inclusive education, introduction of teaching assistants and tutors may be one of the best options in Kazakhstan to address the existing barriers. Teaching assistants would allow the teachers to gain more time for lesson preparation and quality instruction and to have an additional instructor to consult with [9]. TAs would help to work with students with additional needs such as underachievers, high achievers, and those who might be dyslexic or with other similar concerns. Therefore, a more individualized and student-centered teaching approach would emerge. Tutors, on the other hand, would serve as specialists on helping children with special conditions such as autism, Down syndrome, hearing or visual impairments, mental delays, etc. Instead of re-training all school teachers to gain the skills of special pedagogy, which is heavily demanding resource- and timewise, preparing only tutors becomes a more affordable measure [7]. These tutors who would know how to address the needs of children with special needs and advise the teacher on preparing the class content and instructing in inclusive classrooms. For the context of Kazakhstan, this option may be quite effective.

It should be noted that the suggested policy on teaching assistants and tutors available in all inclusive schools might work best in conjunction with other policies aiming to transform the system of education in Kazakhstan. The desired policy framework should include the school strategies for inclusion defining the roles, rights, and responsibilities of all actors involved in implementation of inclusive education, revised assessment criteria and curriculum avoiding heavy standardization, stavka system revision, and creation of an adequate disability-friendly and diversity-oriented infrastructure. These policies together would signify the transformation of educational system in Kazakhstan serving the purposes of inclusive education.

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