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Students with special needs in the Kazakh educational system

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Abstract:

Till 1991, Kazakh education developed in line with education practiced in the Soviet Union; that is why, its system of special education and the theoretical and methodological basis were consistent with the Russian solutions. At present, education is being intensively restructured as the approach to students with special needs has changed. Inclusive education has become one of the priorities for the Republic of Kazakhstan (National Program of Education Development in the Republic of Kazakhstan in 2011-2020). A number of actions were undertaken

in this area: legislation was adopted, and the knowledge of good educational practice used in other countries as well as the forms, principles and strategies of implementing the philosophy of education for all was gained.

Data analysis showed that the majority of students with special needs (73 percent) are still in special preschools, schools, residential centers, and sanatorium- and hospital-based facilities. As part of inclusive education, special classes and groups are being organized in mainstream settings, and there are mainstream preschools and schools with groups and classes with two to three children with special needs, who have the same core curriculum as their nondisabled peers.

Many creators of inclusive education in Kazakhstan emphasize that a friendly social environment is an important condition for successful implementation of inclusive education. That is why it is still topical and important to get to know this environment and to accurately estimate the number of people who need support.

1. Introduction – relevance of the subject

For many decades of the 20th century, Kazakh education, including special education, developed in line with social science practiced in the Soviet Union (the USSR). It drew largely on the achievements of Russian scholars, but it also had a part in co-creating the theoretical and methodological basis of education. Up to the nineties of the 20th century, students with disabilities and disorders studied in separate special education settings as part of the educational system throughout the whole USSR territory. In 1991, when Kazakhstan became independent, a new period in political and social development began as well as in the development of special education.

The term a person with "limited health abilities" (LHA) was adopted in Kazakh legal acts on education and social policy (Borisova, 2009). This concept covers all people diagnosed with functional limitations due to illness, developmental impairments or defects (disabilities) or atypical state of health. Also the term students "with special/specific educational needs" is used with reference to students with LHA in Kazakh education. There are two fundamental groups of students with LHA: students who can follow a general curriculum in mainstream settings if the educational process is adapted to their needs, and those who cannot follow a general curriculum and need to attend special education settings. These are people with disabilities or others who are younger than 18 and who are not considered disabled under the established procedure but have temporary



or permanent impairments in physical and (or) psychological development that require special conditions for education and care.

Functional limitations are often the reason for educational exclusion due to the fact that the outside environment is not adapted to the basic needs of people with disabilities, and also for social exclusion due to negative stereotypes and prejudice (Bondarenko, 2009). That is why, the most important task for each country's policy should be to create a friendly educational environment and to build a tolerant society that provides equal opportunities for every citizen. Kazakhstan is trying to make up for long years of being behind in this area.

2. Problem statement

The idea of "school for all" and its operationalization was presented in the *Salamanca Statement*, adopted in 1994 by 92 countries. It includes principles, proposals and legal adaptations in the area of inclusive education. What is more, it seems to be the most important, fundamental international document on special education that has been issued so far.

The *Salamanca Statement* (1994) defines inclusion as a reform that supports and accepts diversity and each student's characteristics and that aims at avoiding social discrimination resulting from sexual, racial, cultural, social, national and religious differences, and individual abilities and skills. According to this idea, the authorities in each country should recognize the inclusion of children with limited health abilities in education provided in mainstream schools as a priority task for their educational policies (Serikov, 1999).

This article aims to examine the impact of the idea of inclusion on the system of education for students with LHA.

3. Methods

Formal and content analysis of various sources was used, including international and Kazakh legal acts, statistical data, and scientific reports and studies.

4. Results

In the world, inclusive education for children with special needs has been provided since the seventies of the last century. Its enshrinement and popularization took place in two stages – from the integrated model (the seventies and eighties of the 20th century) to the inclusive one (the nineties until today). The development of the "school for all" concept as Kazakhstan's educational policy and its introduction to educational practice are taking place as a consequence of political, social and ethical events that have happened in European countries and the US over the last 30-40 years. The Republic of Kazakhstan's legislation – pursuant to fundamental international documents on education – provides for the principle of equal opportunities for people with limited health abilities.

The term "inclusive education" was introduced into Kazakh education by the National Scientific and Practical Center of Correctional Education. In 1999, the Center launched an inclusive education project together with UNESCO, and in 2002, it organized a scientific and practical conference on inclusive education with the support of the Soros Foundation-Kazakhstan (Abayeva, 2012).

The national strategy for children for 2012-2017 (approved by the *Republic of Kazakhstan President's Decree No. 761 of June 1, 2012*) provides for the enshrinement of equal access to high quality education at all levels for children with limited health abilities, their right to inclusive education in their place of residence, and also parents' right to choose educational settings and programs for their children. Apart from this, an effective mechanism to fight discrimination in education for children with limited health abilities if their right to inclusive education is violated is planned to be implemented (Serikbayeva, 2012).

Inclusive education for people with limited health abilities has become one of the priorities of the *National Program of Education Development in the Republic of Kazakhstan in 2011-2020*. The rights of children with limited health abilities to equal opportunities in high quality education are guaranteed by the legislation of the Republic of Kazakhstan. The guarantees are enshrined in the constitution and the following acts: Act on



Children's Rights in the Republic of Kazakhstan, Education Act, Act on Social, Correctional, Medical and Educational Support for Children with Special Needs, Act on Welfare for People With Disabilities in the Republic of Kazakhstan, and Act on Special Social Services. Special education is part of the general education system, and the state creates necessary conditions for people with special educational needs to provide them with equal opportunities in education.

The gradual process of creating and improving the legislative basis for the introduction of inclusive education in the Republic of Kazakhstan is being corrected and strengthened based on the findings of scientific sociological research that has been conducted over the last decade by specialists from the National Scientific and Practical Center of Correctional Education, higher education academics, and specialists from associations and nongovernmental organizations. Foreign experiences were researched, the attitudes of various social groups to the idea of inclusive education were examined, and the dynamics of statistical data on children with special needs was analyzed across the regions in terms of actions taken by four departments: health care, education, social welfare and internal affairs. Based on the district psychological, medical and educational centers, the scale of spontaneous inclusion of children with limited health abilities in preschools and schools was determined. These studies and analysis of existing practice showed positive experiences of including children with limited health abilities in the general education process in many regions of the country. The development of courses to improve the qualifications of mainstream principals and teachers was as important as the studies and the first ones were introduced in 2002.

In 2009, nongovernmental organizations ran the *YES for Inclusive Education!* campaign. Its aim was to draw attention to the right of children with LHA to education shared with their nondisabled peers. Since 2011, a program of "round tables" supported by the Soros Foundation-Kazakhstan has been carried out in different regions of the country. It is called *Inclusive Education: International Practice and Ways to Implement it in Kazakhstan* and it is aimed at principals in the general education system. Also, an Internet project developing inclusive education in Kazakhstan is being run (see: www.inclusion.kz) to provide schools with necessary information (Abayeva, 2012). The following understanding of inclusion is being promoted: inclusion is a specially organized educational process that ensures children with limited health abilities involvement and acceptance in their peer environment in a mainstream setting, and instruction according to adapted or individualized curricula which take into account their special educational needs. What is most important in inclusive education for children with limited health abilities is their gaining social and educational experience together with their peers. The basic criterion of inclusive education effectiveness is successful socialization, introduction to culture, and wide social experiences of all children, including children with special educational needs.

The present system of education in Kazakhstan distinguishes three types of settings in the general system (except homeschooling) which students with limited health abilities can attend. These are:

1. Special preschools and schools (including residential centers, and sanatorium- and hospital-based facilities);
2. Special classes and groups in mainstream preschools and schools – inclusive education;
3. Mainstream preschools and schools with groups and classes with two to three children with LHA – inclusive education.

The two last types of settings provide inclusive education that is aimed at children with LHA mainly. According to available data, 27 percent of children with limited health abilities attend mainstream schools together with their nondisabled peers.

Also distance learning is available for children with limited health abilities. It is used in homeschooling in particular, when students cannot learn at school.

In 2014/2015, over 15,000 preschoolers attended 39 special preschools and 315 special groups. Approximately 25,000 children studied in 106 special schools and in 1219 special classes in mainstream schools. A network of special organizations is composed of 119 psychological and educational centers, 15 rehabilitation centers, 283 speech therapy points, and 58 medical, psychological and educational counseling centers.

Also children with severe and multiple disabilities are included in education. For example, in mainstream schools in the cities of Almaty (in the southeast of Kazakhstan) and Astana (in the north of Kazakhstan), special classes were opened for children with intellectual disabilities. These children lived in centers/homes that were under the jurisdiction of the Social Welfare Ministry or stayed at home with their parents or relatives.



Also, there are experimental groups and classes for children with profound emotional and volitional disorders, conduct disorders and multiple disabilities in rehabilitation centers, and special preschools and schools. There are various forms of integrated education available: classes in mainstream schools for students with hearing impairments or lowered intellectual functioning, and groups for children with motor disabilities in mainstream preschools. Students who have overcome serious speech disorders in a special school are successful at integrating with students in a mainstream school while still using speech therapy support. In 2015/2016, 570 students with disabilities entered higher education.

At present, the aim is to keep and improve the existing network of special education settings while simultaneously developing inclusive education. Special education settings serve a function as centers providing methodological support for mainstream educators, and psychological and educational counsel and assistance for students and their parents.

Since 2011, children with LHA who are homeschooled have been receiving learning resources (textbooks, workbooks, etc.) and technical resources as part of the National Program to facilitate their following their individual educational paths. For children with motor disabilities – apart from personal mobility aids – special keyboards are purchased; for children with hearing impairments – personal hearing aids and sound amplification equipment with microphones; and for children with visual impairments – special technical aids. Students are provided with information supply facilities, i.e. hardware, including Braille printers and monitors, reading devices, magnifying devices, electronic magnifiers, portable combined screen readers and magnifiers, and others.

At present, 43 percent of special education settings have educational multimedia systems (Eduplay, Multi-kid, Sound Beam) that stimulate the cognitive development of children with special educational needs. Interactive whiteboards are available in 20 percent of special schools. As many as 46 sets of computer hardware for low vision people were purchased for children with visual impairments. Approximately 95 percent of special schools have Internet access. 41 percent of special education settings have software for speech therapy, and 37 percent – speech simulators (Abayeva, 2012).

Children with disabilities, orphans and children that are not in the custody of their parents and those placed in social welfare institutions are entitled to a higher state scholarship (+75 percent) (ibid.).

New educational standards in Kazakhstan take into consideration the special educational needs of students with LHA by developing individualized education plans for them. Depending on the unique nature of their disorders, children have different special educational needs that determine the choice of instructional content and the structure of the education process:

- special instruction provided for the child once the primary developmental disorder has been diagnosed – as soon as possible – to prepare him or her for academic learning;
- individualized instruction to a larger extent than it is required in the case of children with typical development;
- special chapters introduced to the child's instructional content that are not included in the curricula for the peers with normal development;
- using special educational methods and aids (including specialist computer technologies) to facilitate learning;
- providing special temporal and spatial organization of the educational environment;
- expanding the educational space beyond the educational setting as much as possible (Denisova, 2007).

5. Discussion and summary

The process of implementing the idea of inclusive education has a short history in Kazakhstan. Nevertheless, the intensive work has resulted in many positive changes in the system of education, which is worth underlining. About one-third (27 percent) of children with special needs at the level of elementary school study together with their nondisabled peers. This rate is obviously much higher in countries with a longer tradition of inclusion; for example, it amounts to over 60 percent in Poland (Kulesza & Gosk, 2015).

Moreover, statistical data show that children with developmental disorders constitute from 10 to 15 percent of the population aged from birth to 18 in developed countries. In Kazakhstan, 2.8 percent of developmental disorders in people up to 18 years of age are detected, which covers disorders and disabilities that



clearly manifest themselves. Therefore, it is also necessary to create a more sensitive diagnostic and consultative system.

Many issues relating to the implementation of the idea of inclusive education in Kazakhstan require further decisions and further development; however, the popularization of the idea of inclusive education and its gradual enshrinement in legislation bring hope to families with children with special educational needs that they will be able to choose educational settings for their children. After all, regardless of which type of schooling parents will choose – mainstream or special education – their children's special needs should be fully satisfied. This hope is being boosted by the National Program of Education Development in the Republic of Kazakhstan in 2011-2020, which intends to increase the number of schools prepared to provide inclusion to 70 percent (*National Program ...*, 2010).

The process of creating inclusive education in Kazakhstan is complex and it projects the participation of state structures, parents' community, families, educational bodies and settings, and nongovernmental organizations. So far, educational law has been analyzed in terms of coordinating legislative acts on special and general education. Based on the results of the analysis, the following documents and resources were developed:

- project of state standards: *Conditions for the Implementation of the General Educational State Standard in the Republic of Kazakhstan by Educational Organizations Providing Instruction for Children with Special Needs*;
- document called *Concepts of Inclusive Education Development in the Republic of Kazakhstan*;
- a number of training and methodological resources and recommendations.

Furthermore, research was conducted to identify factors determining inclusive education in Kazakhstan (Association of Sociologists and Political Scientists of Kazakhstan) as part of the activities of the Center of the Social Adaptation and Vocational Rehabilitation of Children and Adolescents with Intellectual and Physical Disabilities, and a sociological study called *Inclusive Education Opportunities for Children With Special Needs, Children With Disabilities and Children Born With Disabilities*. Research was also conducted by Research Center "SANDZ," UNESCO and other nongovernmental organizations (Suleymenova, 2001).

In order to fulfill the right of children with limited health abilities to high quality educational services, work within the following scopes is continued:

- implementing the Republic of Kazakhstan's Act on Social, Correctional, Medical and Educational Support for Children with Special Needs to provide educational services through expanding the network of special and general education settings and providing specialist textbooks and technical equipment;
- improving the system of early diagnosis and correctional and educational support, including the implementation of screening (e.g., newborn hearing screening) to detect psychophysical disorders in children and timely refer them for psychological, medical and educational consultation if there is a risk of psychophysical delays.
- creating a flexible and variant system of general secondary and vocational education for adolescents with disabilities;
- creating conditions for the development of inclusive education;
- implementing information and communication technologies to improve the quality of special education management;
- cooperating with the mass media while running social programs aiming at the education and socialization of students with developmental challenges and at preparing them for independent life in the community.

The effectiveness of cooperation depends on the coordination of the efforts of all the links in a given system, and also on the coordination of activities provided by various specialists and different ministries, including health care, labor and social welfare, education and science, and it is a huge challenge for each country's policy.

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