

REVIEWS

Uzbekistan: Case for Inclusion

Galina Nam*

ABSTRACT

The inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream education has become an important agenda for many developing countries. The Uzbekistan government has also attempted to provide equal educational opportunities to this previously excluded group of children. Despite these efforts, however, many children with disabilities remain segregated. The total number of children with disabilities under 16 years old in the country is 97,000 (Uzbek Society of Disabled People, 2014). The majority of them either study at specialised educational institutions, or receive home-based education. Those who are placed at specialised institutions are often deprived of resources and services necessary to receive adequate education (UNICEF, 2013). While limited by the lack of reliable empirical data and research, this article aims to present the current situation in the development of inclusive education in Uzbekistan. It outlines the major legislative documents intended to support inclusive education and identifies some of the current obstacles to inclusive education practices.

Key words: *inclusive education, children with disabilities, developing countries, challenges, development, implementation*

INTRODUCTION

Located in Central Asia, the Republic of Uzbekistan was a constituent part of the Soviet Union for almost 70 years. In 1991, it declared its independence and is currently a member of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

Bordered by Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan, Uzbekistan has a total area of 447,400 square kilometres and a population of about 30 million people, comprising 125 ethnicities (United Nations Statistics Division, 2016). The country's economy is primarily based on agriculture and natural resource extraction. Apart from production of fruit, vegetables, grains, and fodder crops, Uzbekistan is the fifth-largest producer and the second-largest exporter of cotton

* **Corresponding Author:** PhD Candidate, Te Kura Toi Tangata Faculty of Education, the University of Waikato, New Zealand. Email: namgalina@yahoo.com

in the world (World Fact Book of the United States Central Intelligence Agency, 2016). Simultaneously, the country extracts natural gas, petroleum, coal, gold, uranium, silver, copper, lead, and zinc (World Bank, 2017).

In Uzbekistan, pre-school education is optional but 11 years of further education is compulsory and free of cost. Of these eleven years, four years are for primary school, five years for secondary school, and two years for high school. Academic lyceums or vocational colleges, offering three years of education, can be an option for high school (Mushtaq, 2015). Academic lyceums prepare students to enter higher educational institutions and provide them with a certificate of completed secondary education. Vocational colleges develop students' vocational skills and provide a diploma of specialised secondary education. Higher education is available at a number of national and international universities.

Children with disabilities primarily receive formal education at specialised institutions that practice medico-pedagogical approaches. In rare cases, children with disabilities study at general schools. There are still no effective interventions to develop and sustain inclusion of children with disabilities into mainstream schools (UNICEF, 2016). Challenges related to equal educational opportunities for children with disabilities, namely inclusive education, are the focus of this article.

Historically education for children with disabilities has always been segregated in the Soviet Union. Children were placed in different types of specialised institutions depending on the severity of their disabilities. Special education was conceptualised in accordance with the "science" of defectology, which combined elements of psychology, medicine, and pedagogy (Phillips, 2009). Within Soviet defectology, a child with a disability was viewed as defective and in need of medical treatment and life-long care: "Defectology formed an impure, occupationally ambiguous, therapeutic field, which emerged between different types of expertise in the niche populated by children considered 'difficult to cure', 'difficult to teach', and 'difficult to discipline'" (Byford, 2018). Segregated education was practiced across the Union and the placement of students with disabilities in self-contained classrooms not only excluded them from the society but in most cases ensured that their isolation would be permanent (Kunk, 1992). After gaining independence, many former Soviet Union countries continued practicing segregation by placing people with disabilities in residential care institutions (Gevorgianiene & Sumskiene, 2017).

The concept of "Inclusive Education" was first introduced in Uzbekistan in 1996 (Akhunova, 2007). To ensure the protection of children, the Uzbek Government

has signed and ratified several international human rights treaties, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (ratified in 1992), the Dakar Framework for Action (signed in 2000), and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities or UNCRPD (signed in 2009). The Government has also made some changes in the legislative framework to protect children with special needs, and their families. The following laws have been enacted: the Law 'About Social Security of Disabled People in the Republic of Uzbekistan' (1991), the Law 'On Education' (1997), and the Law 'On Guarantees of the Rights of the Child' (2008). Latterly, the government has also attempted to revise the normative-legislative base from the perspective of inclusion.

There have also been some practical attempts to develop inclusive education, with the support of international aid organisations. The following major projects have been implemented in Uzbekistan:

- The UNICEF project - "Implementation of a Child Friendly Attitude through Inclusive Education" (2005-2006);
- The Asian Development Bank (ADB) project - "Basic Education for Children with Special Needs (formerly, Improving Access and Quality of Basic Education to Disadvantaged Children)" (2006-2009);
- The project of the US Agency for International Development (USAID) - "Equalisation of Educational Opportunities for Children with Disabilities in Uzbekistan" (2009-2010);
- The European Union (EU) project - "Inclusive Education for Children with Special Needs in Uzbekistan" (2014-2016).

It is apparent from this that the Uzbek Government has made a start towards creating educational opportunities for children with disabilities. However, according to the UNICEF (2011), the Government often cannot support inclusive initiatives despite its commitment. As a result, many children who have disabilities are still segregated and their right to receive quality education is not exercised. There are many reasons for this policy-practice gap, such as: cultural values; no inclusive education legislation; economic factors; teachers lacking the relevant training, skills, and experience; inflexible curriculum; large class sizes; poor infrastructure at schools; a lack of parental involvement; and many others (UNICEF, 2011). Some of these prevailing problems will be discussed in the next section.

The Absence of a Well-formulated Education Policy

A closer examination of the legislation addressing education for children with disabilities reveals that it does not guarantee equal educational opportunities for children with disabilities alongside their peers without disabilities. For instance, Article 4 - 'Right to Education' of the Law 'On Education' - states that, "Equal rights to obtain education are guaranteed to all persons, regardless of their gender, language, age, race, ethnicity, beliefs, religion, social background, occupation, social status, residence, duration of living in the Republic of Uzbekistan". Disability is not mentioned amongst other possible obstacles to obtaining an education: "disability is not permitted to be a reason for not receiving formal education in a general education setting or facility" (Turdiev, 2015). Furthermore, Article 23 - 'Education of children and adolescents with deviations in physical or psychiatric development' - refers children and young people with disabilities to segregated institutions: "For education ... of children and adolescents with deviations in physical and psychiatric development ... special education institutions are established". The Article continues that Medical-Psychological-Pedagogical Commissions refer children to the specialised institutions with the agreement of their parents or legal guardians.

There is also a group of children who are considered uneducable, based on the national educational standards, and cannot be referred even to a specialised institution. Children are assigned to this group if they have more severe forms of mental and physical disabilities. According to Paragraph 25 of the Decree of the Cabinet of Ministers on approving the normative and legal acts on state specialised educational institutions for children with disabilities, these children have to either stay at home or to be referred to the boarding houses - "Muruvvat" ("Mercy") - under the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection. At boarding houses, they receive medical assistance and care, but not an education (Turdiev, 2015). This practice was also inherited from the Soviet Union: those who had severe and/or multiple disabilities were considered irrecuperable and placed at closed institutions under the Department of Social Welfare (Oreshkina et al, 2014).

In addition to the existing legislative documents, the Government has introduced three Articles into the Law "On Guarantees of Child Rights" (Articles 24, 25 & 29), added an Article "On Inclusive Education" to the draft of the revision to the Law 'On Education', and approved the regulation "About Continuous Inclusive Education for Children and Teenagers with Special Needs". In 2011, the Government adopted the Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers "About

regulatory-legislative Acts on state special education institutions for children with limited abilities” and the Annexure to the Resolution “Regulation on state special education institutions for children with deviations of physical or psychiatric development”. The documents include the regulations on transferring students with special needs from specialised institutions to mainstream institutions. Some other normative documents were drafted and adopted on first reading (Akhunova, 2007). However, none of these has been further translated into national educational policies.

Currently, inclusive education is being implemented based on the following regulations:

- Resolution of the Ministries of Public Education, Health, Labour and Social Protection of Population No. 2519, dated 24.10.2013: "On the approval of the provision on the Psychological-Medical and Pedagogical Committee (PMPC) for referring children to specialised institutions (schools, boarding schools)". The document also mentions that the PMPC gives recommendations on a transfer of a child from one specialised institution to another specialised institution or to a general educational institution for education in inclusive settings (para. 7, chapter II);

- Order of the Minister of Public Education No. 2685, dated 17.06.2015: "On the approval of the regulations to transfer students with physical or intellectual disabilities from one specialised educational institution to another specialised educational institution or to a general educational institution for teaching them in an inclusive (integrated) setting (para. 5, chapter VI), indicated in the parentheses: mental retardation, mild intellectual disabilities, hearing impairments, visual impairments, cerebral palsy, etc;

- Resolution of the Ministries of Public Education and Health No. 2691, dated 30.06.2015: "On the approval of the regulations on organising home-based education for children with physical or intellectual disabilities and those who need a long-term treatment”, which also includes regulations for organising inclusive education (para. 30, chapter IV);

The author of the current article feels that the existing normative legal Acts clearly reflect the medical model of disability and also seem to be broad and vague. None of these regulations precisely state that children with disabilities are entitled to inclusive education on the same basis as other children. Based on these regulations, medical practitioners can also recommend specialised schools, boarding schools, and home-based education, which is often the case. Therefore,

children with disabilities rarely go to mainstream schools (Katsui, 2005; Markova & Sultanalieva, 2013). Narolskaya (2013) points out that such legislation also allows administrators of regular schools, who usually avoid taking responsibility for children with disabilities, not to accept them. They may interpret laws for their own convenience by sending those children to specialised schools. This practice is quite common among “defectologists” and other specialists working with children with disabilities because they traditionally believe that these children are not able to study at mainstream schools (Rouse & Lapham, 2013). All these are a serious obstacle for inclusion of children with disabilities in the general education system.

Yet, currently, the country is undergoing seemingly cardinal economic and social reforms under the new presidency of Shavkat Mirziyoyev. The Uzbek government has taken some measures to reconsider human rights and make them more compliant with international standards. In December 2017, the President issued the Decree to improve the system of state support for people with disabilities. Inclusive education is also mentioned there as an important prerequisite for future well-being of children with disabilities. Furthermore, Uzbekistan, as a signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), is working to ratify the treaty to create better conditions for people with disabilities and empower them by involvement in political, social, and economic life of the country (Bowyer, 2018). The author of the current article considers it too early to mention the effectiveness of these measures but is appreciative of the steps the government has taken to bring in a change. It is to be hoped that the current educational policies and practices will be reviewed, so that they address the needs of children with disabilities who have remained an under-served group for a long time.

Cost of Inclusion

According to Scofield and Fineberg (2002), the cost of inclusive education for children with disabilities in developing nations often stands as a barrier. The former Soviet Union countries are no exception in this regard. After the disintegration of the USSR, these countries went through both political and economic turmoil, which had a severe impact on educational services. As a part of the USSR, their economies were strictly controlled by Moscow. After obtaining independence, they experienced difficulties in managing their economic systems and “slumped into negative economic growth” (Katsui, 2005). Therefore, although

the countries were committed to providing equal education for all, regardless of differences, they were unable to do so due to budget constraints. Since that time, many countries have reinforced their economic systems but they still do not have enough resources to enable the transition to inclusion. A recent study undertaken in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union countries also reveals that due to economic difficulties and other problems related to transition, the implementation of inclusive education there is not really supported financially (UNICEF, 2014).

However, although inclusive education is costly, it is still considered to be more cost-effective in comparison with segregated education. There is a substantial body of evidence to show that the financing of specialised institutions is more expensive than that of institutions with adaptations and appropriate resourcing (Peters, 2004; Lei & Myers, 2011; UNICEF, 2014). For example, UNICEF (2014) estimates that the average cost of educating children with disabilities at specialised institutions is seven to nine times higher than the cost of their education at general schools. Another notable example is a study examining the cost of institutionalisation of children with disabilities in Armenia, commissioned by the UNICEF Country Office. It shows that moving children with disabilities from residential care to community-based services can save money in the short and long term (UNICEF, 2014). Moreover, Peters (2004) points out that for many countries it is not about the availability of resources to support inclusive education initiatives but rather the distribution of existing funds.

Social Stigma

The Uzbeks are generally respectful and caring people. Respect for elders, strong family ties, and peace-keeping are inviolable principles of Uzbek society. Regarding attitudes towards people with disabilities, in general people appear to be compassionate, arguably due to Islamic beliefs and principles that are prevalent in the society. They believe that community members have to take care of vulnerable people. However, Zagirdinova (2005) claims that the philosophy of “guardianship over weaker citizens”, in combination with the Soviet experience, has more disadvantages than advantages for people with disabilities. In the society that practices such beliefs and standards, people with disabilities are viewed as defective and restricted “in their quest for independence”. Similarly, Katsui (2005) points out that such a guardianship makes people with disabilities very passive because they live in the world where “dependency is the only way to ‘exist’ but not to ‘live’ ”.

Although people try to follow spiritual values, many of them still have stigmatising attitudes towards people with disabilities. Some parents hide their children from the public because they feel ashamed of them and do not want to diminish their social status. Many parents are concerned about the reputation of other children and therefore hide children with disabilities not only from the public but also from friends and relatives (Hartblay & Ailchieva, 2013). Parents believe that children with disabilities may unintentionally inflict harm on their sisters and/or brothers. In the Uzbek culture, marriages are mainly pre-arranged, and prior to fixing an alliance families like to know more about the genealogy of potential partners. If parents/families find out there is a child with disability in the family of a bride or a groom, they most probably will reject a marriage proposal. As marriage in the Uzbek culture is very important, it seems to be a good solution for families to hide a child with disability from everyone.

Conversely, according to Croce (2006), parents tend to hide their children with disability, not because they have fear of stigma, but because they do not want them to be institutionalised. In the Soviet Union, children with severe disabilities had to be institutionalised as soon as their disabilities were diagnosed. By hiding children from the officials, parents attempted to keep them within the family as long as possible. Those parents who wanted their children to stay with their families had no other option because medical officials and social workers strongly insisted on institutionalisation, believing that only specialised institutions could provide proper care and support (Phillips, 2009). It is still a widespread practice in Uzbekistan. In addition to fear of institutionalisation, many families want to protect their children from bullying and social exclusion within a mainstream setting. Some of them are also afraid that identification of their children as persons with disability will make them ineligible for certain rights in the future, such as the rights to vote or get married. Regardless of the reason, by hiding their children, parents make them unknown to services. This creates significant barriers in official registration of children with disabilities, and consequently in their access to relevant medical, social, and educational services (Katsui, 2005).

Shortage of Qualified Teachers and Poor Infrastructure

Inclusive practices at schools are also not supported due to a shortage of specially trained teaching staff (UNICEF, 2011; Rouse & Lapham, 2013). Many studies demonstrate that the ability to teach students with additional needs and the willingness to do so are closely interrelated (Ali et al, 2006; Agbenyega,

2007; Sharma et al, 2009; Gal et al, 2010; Savolainen et al, 2012; MacFarlane & Woolfson, 2013; Sharma et al, 2013). Teachers often have a negative attitude to inclusive education due to limited knowledge about children with disabilities and limited experience in teaching them. Several studies show that teachers' willingness or reluctance to work with students with disabilities appear related to the levels of their knowledge, training, and experience (Van Reusen et al, 2001; Idol, 2006; Fakolade & Adeniyi, 2009). Those who hold negative attitudes towards the demands of inclusive education usually have little or no relevant training or experience. It would seem logical that these attitudes will shift, if they gain professional knowledge and experience in working with students with disabilities. With positive attitudes, they will be more likely to support successful inclusive practices for learners with disabilities (Sharma et al, 2006). Thus, in-service teacher training, where teachers can gain professional knowledge, is critical. According to Shah et al (2016), professional knowledge should include an understanding of disabling conditions, procedures required to develop individualised education plans (IEPs), and knowledge related to governmental policies for children with disabilities.

In many former Soviet Union countries, teacher-training courses are still administered by Institutes of Defectology. Some of these have been renamed but they have not made "appropriate paradigmatic changes towards an inclusive philosophy" in curriculum and pedagogy (UNICEF, 2011). Teacher-training programmes still use standardised curricular and uniform teaching methods employed during the Soviet Union era. They do not focus on a student-centred approach to teaching that pays attention to different students' backgrounds, learning styles, and abilities to learn. To change this situation, a number of international aid organisations conducted some learner-centred and equity-focussed training for teachers. However, these have been primarily 'single-shot' professional development courses, not ongoing enhanced comprehensive ones (OECD, 2003; UNICEF, 2011).

Bhatnagar and Das (2014) point out that in-service teacher training has to be part of a systematic professional development plan rather than short-term programmes. Pre-service teacher training is also a challenge in Uzbekistan and the rest of the region. Pedagogical universities do not prepare professionals for inclusive education (OECD, 2009; UNICEF, 2011; Rouse & Lapham, 2013). There have not been many changes in the curriculum at teacher training colleges and universities since Soviet times, except for Marxist-Leninist content that has been removed (Papieva, 2006).

Yet, things are changing in Uzbekistan. Recently, an introduction to inclusive education has been included in the re-training programmes for teachers of schools and kindergartens. There is no official information on its effects, but it is a good start for further development of inclusive education programmes for professionals. Preparation programmes for pre-service teachers still need to be reconsidered. Currently, only departments of Defectology offer a 32-hour inclusive education course. A similar course with a focus on inclusion for subject teachers, elementary school teachers, and psychologists has not yet been introduced. In the framework of the inclusive education project, the Republican Centre for Social Adaptation of Children has developed a 24-hour programme for teachers and psychologists. The programme has been approved by Tashkent State Pedagogical University but is still being considered by the Ministry of Public Education. Given that inclusion of children with disabilities in a mainstream setting is a worldwide trend, it will be interesting to see whether this initiative will lead to reconsidering teacher preparation programmes from the perspective of inclusion.

In addition to teacher training programmes, teachers have to be provided with relevant working conditions, such as resources, small-size classrooms, and more time to prepare teaching materials (Talmor et al, 2005). In Uzbekistan, general school teachers usually work in large multi-level classes with limited instructional resources. In addition, they are poorly paid and have excessive workloads (Narolskaya, 2013). Hanuskek and Rivkin (2007), state that teachers' working conditions and salaries are potentially very important in determining the effectiveness of their work. Nowadays, despite serious challenges, many teachers remain enthusiastic and committed to their work. However, they still need to be supported and provided with appropriate working conditions, including additional support in the class, in the form of teacher aides and a decent salary. Studies of Avramidis et al (2000) and Chhabra et al (2010) show that if teachers are supported, they will be more motivated to implement inclusive education and extend their practices to admit more children with disabilities into mainstream schools.

Infrastructure is another important aspect in the acceptance of students with disabilities by general education institutions (Madan & Sharma, 2013). However, according to the Uzbek Society of Disabled People (2014), there is not even a single general school or a college in the country that would be fully adjusted to the needs of students with mobility impairments. Without reasonable accommodations, education in a mainstream setting for many of these students

is not possible. Children who are admitted to such schools or colleges usually are not able to stay there due to physical obstacles on the way to school and within it. Urban infrastructure and public transport are also inaccessible. There are often no proper wheelchair ramps around the cities and the existing ramps are often very steep and difficult to climb. Public transport does not have access ramps and special places for wheelchairs. All these conditions make many children with physical disabilities study from home, where other forms of support are not available. There are some slow changes in this area as well. By order of the President, pre-school educational institutions are presently being reconstructed. There is also a plan to reconstruct schools to make them more accessible for children with mobility impairments.

Lack of Parental Involvement

There is mounting evidence that empowering parents who are raising children with disabilities, to participate in the process of developing and implementing inclusive programmes, is crucial (Mittler, 2000; Beveridge, 2005; Forlin & Hopewell, 2006; Levy et al, 2006; Xu & Filler, 2008; Hornby & Witte, 2010). Parents can play an important role in their children's success at school by contributing to the decision-making process regarding their education. As Forlin and Hopewell (2006) point out, "Parental expertise should be acknowledged, appreciated and utilised, especially when considering the more demanding needs of children with disabilities". Yet, parents of children with disabilities in Uzbekistan are rarely involved in the education of their children. According to Katsui (2005), in Central Asia parents are often passive when it comes to support or protection of their children, due to the Socialist legacy and strong disability stigma in the society. Some parents are very "determined to give education, medical treatment or some other necessary opportunities to their children" but there are not many of them (Katsui, 2005). There might be also a variety of other factors influencing their level of involvement, such as socioeconomic status, marital status, parents' level of education, their beliefs, their efficacy, and so on (Resch et al, 2010; Afolabi, 2014). However, the main reason appears to be a lack of support, which leaves them vulnerable. Sammon (2001) notes that parents of children with disabilities in the former Soviet Union countries face specific challenges, unlike other caregiving families around the world. They suffer from a lack of social, educational, and medical services, and pressure from medical officials to place their children in segregated settings. Families left to survive on their own are less likely to be involved in the education of their children.

Schools can play a critical role in the involvement of parents of students with disabilities in the education process and in forming a partnership with them (Beveridge, 2005). However, in the opinion of the author of the current article, at this stage mainstream schools in Uzbekistan are not yet capable of responding to students' needs and parents' concerns. Schools' capacities have to be increased first in order to make them effective in supporting parents of students with special needs (Ainscow, 2005). Currently, Disabled People's Organisations (DPOs) established by parents of children with disabilities and disability-related Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs) are the most active and effective in supporting and empowering care-giving families. These organisations provide support in social adaptation, disability rights, and rehabilitation. They try to create parents' networks and provide information on medical, educational, and financial resources for their children (Uzbekistan Humanitarian Information, n. d.). Thanks to the efforts of DPOs and NGOs, the number of parents who try to overcome social and cultural barriers to ensure their children have equal rights, is growing.

Due to a long history of discrimination, empowering parents of children with disabilities and involving them in the development process of inclusive education may not be easily achieved. However, there is hope for uniting parents for civic activism in Uzbekistan. Kazakhstan and Tajikistan can be good examples of countries which are witnessing parental activism, with no previous history of it (Markova & Sultanalieva, 2013; Whitsel & Kodirov, 2013). Parents' associations across these countries are primarily working to change prevailing stereotypes of people with disabilities in their societies, and to support other families who have children with disabilities. In Tajikistan, there is a prominent Association of Parents of Disabled Children, which was founded by the mother of a child with disability. The organisation provides legal assistance for parents of children with disabilities. Another key mission of the Association is to encourage parents to include children in different spheres of life, including education at regular schools: "As more and more parents bring their children out of the shadow, there will be greater demand for a more inclusive school and society" (Whitsel & Kodirov, 2013). In Kazakhstan, a few mothers of children with autism also founded the parent club "AshykAlem" ("The Open World") to help other parents and attract key players to participate in a dialogue on autism-related problems. The organisation also provides support to those children who study at mainstream schools, although the founders acknowledge it is not easy and is time-consuming. Yet, their practice proves that if there is cooperation between

parents and teachers, inclusive education for children with autism is achievable (Markova & Sultanalieva, 2013).

CONCLUSION

The evidence shows that Uzbekistan is facing many obstacles in the process of enacting inclusive education. It is true that the road to inclusion is not easy and requires effort, time, and resources. Nevertheless, the development of inclusive education is not only about financial provision. A number of other countries with few resources have developed inclusive education programmes that are on the way to success (Charema, 2010). The author of the current article believes that inclusive education is primarily about attitudes, values, and political will. Lack of political will is one of the main barriers to inclusion. The Uzbek government often delegates the implementation process to international and national NGOs, limiting its own role to changing education policies. However, this is not enough for successful inclusion. Policy-makers have to be directly involved in the development process. For that purpose, they need to be educated and committed to inclusive education and to understand how it is implemented.

Willingness and participation of decision-makers are key elements to facilitate inclusion; however, successful implementation of inclusive education is not limited to their involvement only. The inclusion of children with disabilities also requires the involvement of educators, parents of students with disabilities, and communities. Mainstream teachers and school administrators need to re-think their values regarding education for children with disabilities, and then adapt programmes and facilities accordingly. Parents need to provide their critical inputs throughout their child's school career by sharing their knowledge with other professionals and contributing to a decision-making process regarding education for their child. Communities need to raise awareness about people with disabilities among community members and to plan buildings, roads, and facilities to accommodate them. It is only the commitment of these interested parties and cooperation among them that can create equal educational opportunities and a better future for children with disabilities in Uzbekistan.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This article was supported by Roger Moltzen, Emeritus Professor, Te Kura Toi Tangata Faculty of Education at the University of Waikato. Many thanks to

Professor Moltzen for his comments that helped improve the article. Currently Professor Moltzen is supervising a research project on inclusive education in Uzbekistan that the author is working on.

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