Inclusive education in Azerbaijan: challenges in classrooms

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Introduction. Education of children with special educational needs (SEN) has been in the center of national and international discussions for the last few decades. A number of international documents, such as, the Salamanca Statement, UNESCO Dakar Framework for Action Education for All: Meeting our Collective Commitments, the Madrid Declaration and others have been signed to reaffirm education as a basic human right, and foster the idea of inclusion of children with SEN in mainstream schools as one of the most effective ways to ensure it. Inclusive education considers schools as establishments which can nurture the needs of students from different backgrounds and abilities, and thus, eliminate exclusion experienced on the basis of such variables. Children with disabilities (CWD) are usually among the most vulnerable groups exposed to marginalization in a society, as well as, in education as its essential constituent.

Key words: special educational needs (SEN, Children with disabilities (CWD), relevant amendment.

Body part.In some countries the scope of inclusive education is limited to the consideration of children with disabilities only (Ainscow, 2005). However, it is important to note that inclusion aims at eradication of social exclusion which can result from changing attitudes based on the race, ethnicity, religion, social class, ability or gender (Vitello and Mithaug, 1998). I have to mention that I touched the problem from the disabilities point of view since this issue is the most important factor in our educational system nowadays.

Currently inclusion of CWD into mainstream schools in Azerbaijan is in the stage of status shift from overlooked issue to priority question. The current thesis reflects the study of the challenges experienced by the staff of schools practicing inclusion. The aim of the study is to find out the practical experiences of managerial and teaching staff of these schools, from the perspective of practitioners themselves, and to consider possible developments in this field. The objectives of the study are:

- To examine the general context for inclusion;
- To define the main challenges experienced by the professionals who practice inclusive education, and to   check the validity of these findings with the help of education specialists;

- To define the aspects to be addressed in order to overcome the difficulties;

Inclusive education is in the center of rising attention in Azerbaijan. Education of CWD in Azerbaijan has relied on the model established by the Soviet Union for quite long time (CIE, 2009). However, CWD, as any other disabled people, used to be treated not as equal members of the society, but rather as the helpless who are in need of constant benevolence and care from others. Teaching them apart the class is itself one of main shortages.

I assure you that we had passed the integration period of inclusive education. Integration means the process of transferring CSN from special schools to mainstream schools (Thomas, 2005). The main issue is that the children have to fit in to the classroom setting and school environment and find out experienced staff who teach them the process of study at mainstream schools.

The attitude of Azerbaijan society towards CWD can be estimated as positive; however, this positivism does not go too far from the existing labels and stereotypes (UNICEF, 2011). According to the results of the research on the issue the great majority of parents and teachers are in favor of educating CWD, as well as, educating them in inclusive classrooms (CIE, 2009).

The most frequently mentioned conflicting moment is about graduation examinations for CWD. These examinations take place at the end of the 9 and 11 year compulsory education. The material provided at the examination is in no way adapted to the needs of CWD. At the same time, there is no assistance provided for sorting out the examination tasks, or orientation in the examination sites. The buildings where examinations are conducted are not adapted to accommodate disabled people. There are not ramps, elevators, audio signals or visual signs in these building for people with walking disabilities, hearing or sight impairments.

The findings reveal several key issues to be addressed in order to overcome the challenges in practicing inclusive education in Azerbaijan.

These are:
- Legislation
- Coherence and cohesion
- Monitoring and inspection
- Academic ground and training
- Content adaptation
- Staff restructuration

- Society

The current research aims to examine the aspects in which teachers and managers in schools practicing inclusive education find it difficult to cope with their new obligations related to inclusive practices, and to clarify their vision for its prospects. In other words, this research studies teachers and school managers in their habitual environment with the consideration of their interpretation of existing experiences. The research looks for the insider view-point, that is, not how the things should be, but how they actually are in practice. Therefore, qualitative research methods are more relevant for this research.

There is official initiative, "State Program on the development of inclusive education in Azerbaijan Republic 2018-2024", prepared by the Ministry of Education of Azerbaijan Republic. "Azerbaijan 2024: Look into the Future". This State Program (Ministry of Education, 2018) has set its aims as the following:

- To make relevant amendments in the legislation in order to organize inclusive education in all levels of education
- To take relevant steps in order to adapt educational establishments and programs to the needs of children with disabilities
- To prepare and train pedagogical staff for the organization of inclusive education;
- To prepare the database of people with disabilities;
- To promote the importance of the involvement of people with disabilities in education and their social integration;
- To set up relevant services for the integration of people with disabilities into the society;
- To adapt city and regional infrastructure and transportation to the needs of people with disabilities

I believe that government-supported changes are taking place within the educational system that will have both an immediate and a long-term effect on the nature of the provision deemed necessary to cater for these pupils. From my point of view, collabration is an important aspect of inclusive education and we have to contribute with state program to overcome this issues. I anticipate that the new state program for special education and its social importance will been fully recognized.

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INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

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- A number of international documents, such as,

- The Salamanca Statement

- UNESCO Dakar Framework for Action Education for All: Meeting our Collective Commitments,

- The Madrid Declaration and others have been signed to reaffirm education as a basic human right.

Contd..

The Salamanca Conference, UNESCO, 1994:

School should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, linguistic or other conditions.

Includes:

- ✓ disabled and gifted children,
- ✓ street and working children from remote or nomadic population,
- ✓ children from linguistic, ethnic or cultural minorities and
- ✓ children from other disadvantaged or marginalized areas of groups.

- In some countries the scope of inclusive education is limited to the consideration of children with disabilities only (Ainscow, 2005).

- It is important to note that inclusion aims at eradication of social exclusion which can result from changing attitudes based on the race, ethnicity, religion, social class, ability or gender (Vitello and Mithaug, 1998).

- I have to mention that I touched the problem from the disabilities point of view since this issue is the most important factor in our educational system nowadays.

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Many countries passed the integration period of inclusive education. **Integration means the process of transferring CSN from special schools to mainstream schools (Thomas, 2005).**
The main issue is that the children have to fit in to the classroom setting and school environment and find out experienced staff who teach them the process of study at mainstream schools.

The attitude of Azerbaijan society towards CWD can be estimated as positive; however, this positivism does not go too far from the existing labels and stereotypes (UNICEF, 2011). According to the results of the research on the issue the great majority of parents and teachers are in favor of educating CWD, as well as, educating them in inclusive classrooms (CIE, 2009).

Some of main problems which I had observed during my investigation:

1) The material provided at the examination is in no way adapted to the needs of CWD.
2) There is no assistance provided for sorting out the examination tasks, or orientation in the examination sites.

3)The buildings where examinations are conducted are not adapted to accommodate disabled people. For example:
There are not ramps, elevators, audio signals or visual signs in these building for people with walking disabilities, hearing or sight impairments.
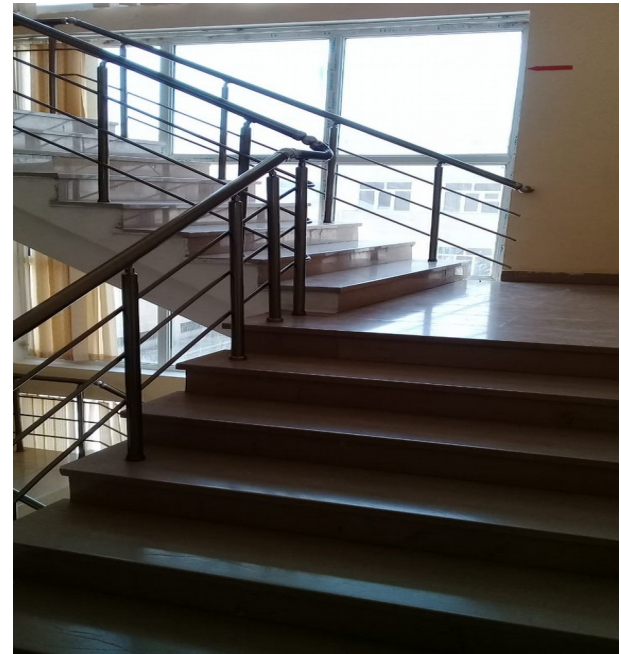
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2)Coherence and cohesion

3)Monitoring and inspection

4)Academic ground and training

5)Content adaptation

6)Staff restructuration

7)Society

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