

Inclusive Human Rights Education in Tajikistan



Mohirakhoni Husnidinzoda

1 Introduction

There needs to be a lot more emphasis on what a child can do instead of the conventional wisdom of what [she or] he can't do.

Temple Grandin¹

During Soviet times, education for disabled children had always been segregated, the vestiges of which remained after Central Asian states became independent in 1991. Tajikistan is one case study of many, which illustrates how, depending on the severity of the disability, children were placed in various types of special schools. The “science of defectology”, which integrated components of psychology, medicine, and pedagogy, was used to develop special education. Soviet defectology viewed a child with a disability as defective and in need of medical treatment and lifelong care. The branch evolved as an unclear, “occupationally ambiguous therapeutic field” for children considered “difficult to treat”, “difficult to teach”, and “difficult to discipline”. Segregated education was implemented throughout the Soviet Socialist Republics, placing pupils with disabilities in self-contained classrooms, which not only isolated them from society, but also “ensured that their isolation would be permanent in most cases” (20). Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, many former Soviet republics have continued to pursue a policy of segregation, placing people with impairments in residential care institutions (Gevorgianiene and Sumskiene 2017).

Today, according to Wang (2009), the segregation of disabled children from mainstream education, as well as economic and social activities, is significantly higher in economically less developed countries. In the context of the five post-Soviet Central

¹ Quoted in Stubbs 2008, p. 31.

M. Husnidinzoda (✉)
Civic Education and Critical Thinking, Khujand, Tajikistan
e-mail: m.husnidinzoda@osce-academy.net

Asian states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, issues around limited access to education for children with special needs have not been given much attention. The newly independent postcommunist governments have been heavily influenced by the Soviet legacy, characterized by a special “correctional approach” and segregation when dealing with children with special needs. That said, the problems associated with educational exclusion and the rights of children with special needs to quality education are increasingly on the agendas of policymakers worldwide, with many developed and developing countries (including in the post-Soviet space) adopting the concept of IE (Bines and Lei 2011: 420). The introduction and adoption of the concept in the laws of many post-Soviet states began between 2008 and 2010. As a result, children with special needs were granted the right, at least in formal terms if not in practice, to study in regular schools (Gevorgianiene and Sumskiene 2017).

An interview with an education specialist working for the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) in Tajikistan in 2021 revealed that over several decades, the situation regarding disabled children’s access to quality education had supposedly improved and become more of a priority in the Tajik government’s education agenda. In the past children with special needs would have attended special schools. More recently, however, the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream education, claims the specialist, has become an agenda item for the Tajik authorities.²

Nonetheless, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), such as Save the Children, ranked Tajikistan 99th out of 180 countries surveyed in its 2020 “End of Childhood Index”, highlighting serious threats to children’s well-being and measuring the effects of other factors such as “ill health, malnutrition, exclusion from education, child labor, child marriage, early pregnancy, conflict, and extreme violence”, giving the country the worst score of all postcommunist countries in the post-Soviet space and the broader region of Eastern Europe (Save the Children 2020). A recent UNICEF report indicates that despite the Tajik government’s supposed attempt to provide equal educational opportunities to children with special needs and children with disabilities (CwD), the vast majority of CwD remain excluded from quality education. Of the estimated 150,000 people with disabilities in Tajikistan, approximately 26,000 are children and a high percentage are young people ages 15 to 24 who are not in education, employment, or training. On the local level, the situation varies widely across the country. Overall, however, it indicates a tremendous waste of human potential in Tajikistan (UNICEF 2019).

Considering the aforementioned and bearing in mind the importance of issues pertaining to education for children with special needs, and especially the need for broad awareness of these issues in Tajik civil society and society in general, this chapter aims to provide a critical overview of the current situation in the development and implementation of IE for children with special needs in Tajikistan, and to assess improvements (or lack thereof) in recent years. It also examines the remaining gaps

² Interview with Shahnoz Valijonbekova, UNICEF education specialist, Dushanbe, 10 June 2021, Dushanbe (via Zoom).

in the relevant legislation and government programs, as well as societal perceptions of the issue of IE.

2 Development of Inclusive Education

Muhammadieva (2002: 6) claims that on paper, the Republic of Tajikistan recognizes that a mentally or physically disabled child should live a full and decent life in conditions that “ensure dignity, promote self-reliance, and facilitate the child’s active participation in the community”, as stated in Article 23 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which Tajikistan ratified in 1993 (UNCRC 1990). While the definition of “disability” according to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) is based on the social model and stated as follows:

Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others (UNCRPD 2006: 2)

The definition in Article 1 of Tajikistan’s Law on Social Protection of Persons with Disabilities is based on the medical model and defines an “invalid” as a person whose.

health is damaged due to long-term impairments caused by impairment of body functions, complex illnesses, trauma, physical and intellectual defects resulting in limited ability to carry out day-to-day tasks and leading to the need for social support (IPHR 2018: 17)

By definition, a child’s disability is a long-term “social maladjustment” caused by a “chronic disease” or “pathological condition” that severely limits their capacity to integrate into an environment appropriate for their age (6). Disabled children require constant and special care, which is supposed to be provided by the state through Tajikistan’s Ministries of Public Health, Labor and Social Protection, and Education. There are also a number of NGOs that deal with issues affecting disabled children, focusing on the protection of children’s rights, as well as the “rehabilitation and socioeconomic support” of disabled children, largely through foreign-funded projects and programs. The Ministry of Public Health is usually in charge of putting together the list of “medical and social indications and counter-indications” for placing children with physical or mental developmental handicaps in a children’s home, special children’s preschool institutions, residential schools, or residential homes for children with different disabilities (Aiyubova 2013: 7).

In sum, Tajikistan has long used separate and segregated school systems for healthy children and CwD. Special schools for CwD have been established, which have both advantages and disadvantages. Due to issues such as a lack of special educational facilities and the inability to enroll all disabled children in special secondary schools based on their physical disabilities, as well as a lack of favorable conditions and access to quality education in special and boarding schools, in addition to massive

lobbying by child rights advocates, the Tajik government may have been compelled by law to create favorable conditions for disabled children to study at the same level with children with no disability. Eventually, the Tajik government decided to move away from the segregated system inherited from Soviet “defectology” toward an inclusive educational system where children with and without disabilities are placed in regular general secondary schools, as a means of integration of children with disabilities into society (Aiyubova 2013).

The regulation on inclusive education is now included in Tajik legislation such as the Law on Education of the Republic of Tajikistan (2013) and the National Strategy for Education Development (2006–2015), and the National Concept of Inclusive Education for CwD (2011–2015), authorized by President Rahmon. The latter conceptual framework was developed to make it possible to provide the conditions necessary for children with disabilities to get an education in kindergartens and regular schools, allowing them to exercise their rights to a quality education with minimal restrictions. The framework outlined the strategy for implementing IE, as well as the objectives and expected outcomes (Aiyubova 2013).

3 Legislation on Inclusive Education

The Tajik government’s education policy aims to drastically alter the education system by drafting and supposedly implementing several laws and regulations governing the country’s educational system. The Republic’s highest levels of government claim to be supportive of initiatives to build and improve on IE (GoT 2011). The right to education is guaranteed in the 1994 Constitution of Tajikistan, which was amended in 2003 and now states: “Everyone shall have the right to education...” (Article 41). The Constitution obliges the government to provide free basic education, general vocational education, primary special education, vocational special education, and higher special education in public schools. The nondiscrimination provision guarantees equal rights and freedoms “regardless of nationality, color, sex, language, religious beliefs, political affiliation, knowledge, social, or property status” (Article 17). In terms of specific groups, in Article 34, the Constitution ensures that orphans and CwD are protected and educated (GoT 1994).

The 2011–2015 National Framework for IE for CwD was developed by a working group within the Ministry of Education and Science, which included representatives of different agencies and NGOs with the aim of developing an IE system from preschool to general education to enforce the rights of all children and young people to quality education “with minimal restrictions”. The National Strategy for Education Development (2006–2015) had aimed to create an appropriate system for early detection and correction. It had continued to support special education, in part by “improving interministerial cooperation for the education, rehabilitation, and socialization” of CwD.

The 2013 Law on Education defines IE as the creation of favorable conditions for children in education regardless of “gender, race, language, nationality, religious

beliefs, physical or mental disabilities, abilities, cultural and social status” (Article 1). The law guarantees inclusivity of education for various vulnerable groups, and special education for CwD. To do this, special educational establishments, which provide particular conditions tailored to the children’s needs and special education programs, as well as medical and social rehabilitation, are supposed to be created throughout the country.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and its Global Education Monitoring Report (2021) highlight that although the Tajik legal system does not explicitly promote an exclusively IE system, it does provide the legal underpinning for its implementation, in accordance with the 2013 Law on Education (UN Commission on Human Rights 1990, UN SDG GA 2015, UNESCO 2008, UNESCO 2017, UNICEF 2017). All children and young people, including those with disabilities, have the right to an education under the Law on Education (Article 16.5). However, the law stipulates that children with disabilities who are unable to attend ordinary schools must be educated in special education institutions (Article 22.3). As a result, the law “preserves elements of the medical and defectology approaches” by concentrating on limitations to identify a disability.

According to the International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR) (2018), Tajikistan’s National Development Strategy up to 2030 considers IE a crucial indicator for the quality improvement of the education system. The objective of implementing IE and developing a system capable of responding to students’ specific needs, particularly those at risk of exclusion, is also indicated in this national strategy. However, the IPHR report also points out that there is no publicly available information on the activities implemented in relation to PwD under numerous national programs. Some parts of the National Program for the Rehabilitation of Invalids, for example, were labeled “pending international funding”, and no information about the budgetary resources spent or allocated for this program were publicly available, making it impossible to determine which plans have been implemented let alone evaluate them (13).

Furthermore, the analysis of the Tajikistan’s legal norms in the field of education and the Law on the Social Protection of Persons with Disabilities, conducted by the IPHR (2018) discovered a “lack of regulation and consistency for the learning process of PwD, particularly children with various types of disabilities”. According to this report, there is no clear outline of the curriculum for children with visual impairments or hearing difficulties in general education. There is also no clear vision of the conditions that must be provided for these children.

Another shortcoming in legislation pertaining to issues around the inclusion of PwD and CwD indicated by IPHR is “the declarativeness of rights and guarantees of inclusion and lack of enforcing mechanisms of these guarantees”, which are evidenced by the IPHR’s analysis of government standards in various forms of education. One such mechanism was in fact put in place in Tajikistan with the adoption of the 2011–2015 National Concept of IE, which also lacked monitoring for phases that have been implemented (15). The Ministry of Education and Science did not report whether the first stage of the concept’s implementation had been completed or when the second is expected to begin, which indicates the inadequate attention

paid to the proper development of Tajikistan's education system as a whole and for CwD, in particular.

To date, developmentally impaired children have mainly attended special institutions and boarding schools (for children with impaired hearing, vision, speech, and motor skills or for children with intellectual and learning disabilities). In Tajikistan, the results-oriented inclusion of developmentally challenged children in a regular school environment is carried out on a case-by-case basis, taking into account individual factors and experiences (IPHR 2018). To provide the conditions necessary for exercising basic educational and social rights, Tajikistan provides consultations for children with suspected developmental impairments conducted by "psychological, medical, and pedagogical commissions" (PMPCs) in the cities of Dushanbe, Khujand, and Isfara (in the northern Sughd province) and Qurghonteppa (southern Khatlon province). The PMPC services are supposedly provided by a wide range of "practitioners from different professions" including social workers, specialists on visual and/or hearing impairments, and experts in developmental disabilities. The main goal of this type of commission is to examine children under the age of 18 to assess and diagnose any particular developmental needs early on, as well as to determine the curriculum, methods, and type of schooling that will best fit each child's specific needs. Based on the diagnosis, PMPCs recommend an education placement, which may include assigning children to boarding schools, mainstream schools, or homeschooling under the supervision of a local institution should there be a lack of accessible infrastructure (IPHR 2018: 18).

4 Shortcomings in Inclusive and Human Rights Education

According to a UNICEF report (2019), many children in the early years of life in Tajikistan, particularly CwD, are still denied access to quality education and early childhood development services. There is also a shortage of trustworthy data on CwD, since there is no suitable data collection mechanism in place. For example, according to the Ministry of Health and Social Protection, there are over 28,000 children with impairments, but this number only includes those children who are registered and receive a disability allowance. Despite the fact that Tajikistan ratified the UNCRPD in 2018 and the UNCRC in 1993, the country has failed to make even the smallest of steps toward fulfilling these commitments. In Article 24 (Education) of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities it states:

States Parties recognize the right of persons with disabilities to education. With a view to realizing this right without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity, States Parties shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning directed to:

- a. The full development of human potential and sense of dignity and self-worth, and the strengthening of respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms and human diversity;
- b. The development by persons with disabilities of their personality, talents and creativity, as well as their mental and physical abilities, to their fullest potential (UNCRPD 2006 Optional Protocol: 16).

Nevertheless, all children in Tajikistan are denied learner-centered teaching and learning due to the country's knowledge-based system that lacks child-friendly facilities and suffers from a shortage of qualified teachers and educational materials. The government has supposedly begun curricular reform to improve the quality of education and learning outcomes for all children. However, current professional conventions based on a medical model of disability, in which CwD are considered better served in institutions with specialized medical support, are impeding further progress in the integration of children with disabilities at the community level. Additionally, according to a UNICEF report (2019), Tajikistan also lacks a learning assessment system, and learning outcomes are not consistently measured. This means that educational reforms are based on unreliable or no data at all, and recent examinations have shown that early grade reading skills and comprehension are poor.

According to the concluding observations of a report by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2017) on the report Tajikistan is required to submit to the Committee, serious concerns are raised about the inadequate protection of children with disabilities from discrimination. The Committee particularly indicates the following shortcomings: "(a) Shortage of reliable data, which hinders the delivery and evaluation of services for children with disabilities; (b) Continued limited physical accessibility of public institutions, transportation and housing; (c) Limited availability of State-funded early detection and diagnosis of disability and rehabilitation services; (d) Absence of a comprehensive approach to the needs of children with disabilities and their families, and particularly to the needs of adolescent girls with disabilities; (e) Insufficient social welfare allowances and services provided to children with disabilities with high needs and their families that do not sufficiently encourage and provide support for families to keep their children at home, resulting in a disproportionate number of children with disabilities continuing to live in institutions; (f) Extremely limited access to quality education for children with disabilities" (7).

In light of the serious concerns raised above, the UN Committee repeats its previous recommendation and urges Tajikistan to adopt a human rights-based approach to disability and to develop a "comprehensive strategy" for the inclusion of children with disabilities (7).

Based on my personal empirical observations and anecdotal evidence, despite the work that has been done by the government, there are several serious issues with the way Tajikistan's educational institutions operate. Among other things, there are still not enough preschool facilities and regular schools in the country that are capable of implementing IE for CwD. Neither specialized institutions nor general schools have enough and/or qualified psychological/medical/pedagogical advisors. There are also not enough developmental disability specialists, such as teachers for the hearing impaired and speech impaired. Moreover, one of the determining factors in providing comprehensive support for disabled children is taking preventive measures designed to lower health risks to newborns and infants. In Tajikistan, most women and adolescents do not have access to healthcare and do not receive medical treatment (IPHR 2018). People are unable to get checkups because there are not enough medical services, especially in rural areas. A major obstacle to the

implementation of IE in Tajikistan is the public's lack of awareness, which sees children with developmental disabilities being excluded or ignored and subject to social stigma throughout the country despite the lobbying efforts of numerous NGOs (Gevorgianiene and Sumskiene 2017).

In addition to what has already been mentioned, UNESCO and GEM (2021) identified problems associated with learning environments, particularly in terms of infrastructure, as well as curriculum and teaching and support personnel, as obstacles to the successful inclusion of CwDs in Tajikistan. Though state authorities are required to regulate the building of barrier-free social infrastructure, including educational institutions and amenities and transportation services, as specified in the 2010 Law on Social Protection of Persons with Disabilities (Article 25), most existing infrastructure in Tajikistan is still not accessible for PwD.

5 The Virtual Nature of Inclusive Education

The Tajik government's advocacy for the rights of disabled people, including children, is in fact far more "virtual" than real. Despite the government's avowed attempt to provide quality educational opportunities to all CwD and to pursue a policy of IE, the form of IE that currently exists in Tajikistan is reduced to nominal integration of children with special needs in mainstream education, with almost no environmental (physical, visual, and auditory) and curriculum adaptation for CwD.

To test the aforementioned claim that the Tajik government's advocacy for IE is only of a virtual nature and integrated and inclusive education are conflated, a range of in-depth semi-structured interview questions were created that included five categories of people directly involved in the topic under examination, such as (i) heads of local NGOs or their representatives ($N = 4$) that claim to promote IE in Tajikistan; (ii) school principals or teachers who teach CwD in mainstream schools in Sughd province ($N = 6$); (iii) parents of CwD who have had a positive or negative experience with the inclusion of their children in education as well as the children themselves ($N = 10$); (iv) human rights experts and education specialists working for international organizations (IOs) in the fields of CwD and PwD inclusion in education ($N = 4$); and (v) government officials in the State Committee on Children's Rights and in the Sughd provincial Ministry of Education ($N = 4$). Of the number of respondents indicated, 20 (or 71%) agreed to be interviewed. These interlocutors were in the cities of Khujand and Dushanbe, and the northern Sughd districts of Chashma, and Bobojon Ghafurov. The interviews were conducted via whichever mode was preferred by the respondent and practical for both the respondent and myself. Nine were conducted in person, four via Zoom, and seven by phone. To analyze whether or not the concepts of inclusion and integration of CwD are muddled in Tajik educational practice, I benchmarked universally agreed standards for IE and the definition of IE according to the UNCRPD and the UNESCO Salamanca Statement that state "recognition of the need to work toward 'schools for all'—institutions which include everybody, celebrate differences, support learning, and respond to individual needs regardless

of differences or disabilities” (UNESCO 1994: 14). I thus begin testing my argument by looking at the definitions and perceptions of IE among my interviewees.

6 Perceptions and Misperceptions

While defining the concept of IE, those of my interlocutors representing families with disabled children, teachers, and school principals unanimously highlighted the right of every child to be educated at general mainstream schools together with children without disabilities (GoT 1994). However, limited attention was paid to the need to provide access to quality education with the conditions necessary to accommodate the needs of every learner (GoT 2011, GoT 2016, IPHR 2017). For instance, when defining the concept of IE, Madinakhon Sulaimonova (not her real name), a secondary school teacher who teaches children with disabilities, responded that, for her, “IE means all children have the right to study together at general educational institutions.”³ Similarly, the right of CwD to be educated in mainstream schools was repeatedly stated by other schoolteachers and some parents of CwD. The responses of the UNICEF education specialist I spoke to as well as representatives of the “Iroda” and “Ranginkamon” NGOs indicated perceptions of IE that were more comprehensive and resonated with the universal understanding of what inclusion means. According to the UNICEF specialist, Shahnoz Valijonbekova, IE means “quality education adapted to the needs of each and everyone, regardless of her/his status, religious beliefs, ethnicity and abilities”.⁴ According to this expert, in practice, IE has characteristics of integration in education because until recently, inclusion of children in Tajikistan’s general secondary schools was primarily advocated, promoted, and requested by parents of CwD and parent associations. This resulted in a significant demand for IE, prompting the Tajik government to pay more attention to the issue and recognize the need to take measures in an effort to provide quality inclusive education for CwD.

In recent years, international policy and underlying views of disability have shifted from being based on the “medical” to the “social” model in much of the world. Reiser (2012), in turn, describes the disability movement’s influence on education as “the hammer” which met “the anvil” of parents’ desire for their children to be part of the local community (23). Perhaps there was a similar movement in Tajikistan which prompted the government to adopt IE policy—albeit one whose effectiveness is questioned by the interlocutors interviewed for this study.

The abovementioned UNICEF specialist, for example, stated: “our country lacks the vision of how to transform the system to fulfill the required criteria of inclusivity [for CwD] and lacks a strategic plan of action” when putting this concept into

³ Interview with Madinakhon Sulaimonova, Tajik language teacher, Secondary School # 5, Khujand, in-person interview, 13 September 2021.

⁴ Interview with Valijonbekova, *op. cit.*

practice.⁵ Additionally, the head of the NGO “Ranginkamon” (Rainbow), Baroat Aminova (not her real name), argued:

Although we have adopted a national concept of IE that focuses on integrating most children with physical disabilities, what practice shows us is that the policy lacks clear mechanisms for a stage-by-stage implementation; [the reality is that] in our country, IE implementation and initiatives happen in a chaotic manner.⁶

She further commented that even when CwD is accepted in schools, after just two or three months, parents are usually advised by school officials to transfer their children to special schools, informing them: “Your child’s abilities don’t fit our school’s curriculum.”⁷

Given the above responses and other evidence, it appears that the existing form of inclusion implemented throughout Tajikistan’s secondary schools is reduced to nominal integration of those disabled children with the type of physical disability that makes integration easier, whereas children with intellectual disabilities are directed to boarding schools after taking into account the diagnoses of psychological, medical, pedagogical advice (PMPC). In one of the interviews, a representative of the NGO “Nazari Digar” (Alternative) highlighted that children with Down syndrome are often not accepted in mainstream schools even when a parent can provide PMPC approval for their child to be educated at a general school. Schools justify this rejection by stating that “the school staff don’t know how to work with such children whereas specialists in boarding schools can meet the child’s special educational needs.”⁸ In some cases parents are asked to provide an “approval statement from psychiatric hospitals” as well as from the PMPC to demonstrate that the child can be educated. Such attitudes discourage parents from sending their children to secondary schools where their child will probably not be supported or accepted for who they are. According to one mother of a child with Down syndrome, “I was told that studying at a mainstream school wouldn’t benefit my child as she has a mental impairment and wouldn’t be able to follow a learning program.”⁹ It is not unusual for parents to receive such recommendations from schools and very often even those whose children have only mild intellectual disabilities are discouraged from sending them to general schools with the argument that the children’s needs are best served by specialists in boarding schools.

Despite evidence of the damage institutionalization inflicts on children, many professionals in Tajikistan still seem to favor institution-based special education over community-based IE. The inefficiency of the institutions and poor functioning

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Interview with Baroat Aminova, Director of NGO “Ranginkamon”, Khujand, phone interview, 7 August 2021.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Interview with Parvinakhon Mahmudova, NGO worker, “Nazari Digar” (Alternative), Khujand, in-person interview, 25 June 2021.

⁹ Interview with Shanozakhon Sharipova, mother of child with Down syndrome, Khujand, phone interview, 10 July 2021.

of the model in practice in Tajikistan are also highlighted in a report by the NGO “Ishtirok” which indicates that.

....the PMPC [in many districts of the country] fail with their structure of psychologists, speech therapists, and other professionals to provide quality services. Most ‘comprehensive’ schools are not able to provide the suitable infrastructure for schoolchildren with disabilities (ramps, elevators, toilets) or training for children with special needs, since there are not enough teachers who know sign language or Braille. There are no special programs for such students, nor are there enough tutors to support such children ...” (ASPBAE and Ishtirok 2018: 17)

Even when children with mild intellectual or physical disabilities are accepted in mainstream schools, they are not provided with a quality education, because the school curriculum is not adapted to the child’s individual needs, school educators are not given sufficient training and are not equipped to teach CwD and schools do not have the accessible infrastructure. Parents themselves acknowledge the fact that while attending mainstream schools, their children gain socializing skills, but little else.

7 The Policy-Implementation Gap

For sidewalks, transport and public and private buildings including schools, dormitories, medical institutions, and places of work, Tajikistan’s Law on Social Protection of Persons with Disabilities, Article 25, paragraph 4, obliges the state to provide access to persons with disabilities to relevant institutions and social infrastructure, in addition to transport services (GoT 2010). Organizations providing transport services to the public are obliged to equip buses and vehicles, bus stops, bus stations, airports, and other places with facilities to make them accessible to PwD, claims the law. In reality, however, the law is not upheld and such rules and regulations are practically never enforced.

There is a clear shortage of highly qualified professionals to work with CwD in schools, and provide psychological, medical, and pedagogical consultations, despite the fact that the government’s IE policy for 2011–2015 outlines the necessity of training specialists. One of the reasons for the shortage is the absence in Tajikistan’s higher education institutions and education institutes of further training and study programs for special education and psychology geared toward IE (Save the Children 2016). There are virtually no specialists in these disciplines. Scientific and methodological approaches to the issues around the early stages of development and education of children with intellectual and physical disabilities are not developed in existing state institutions, such as in the Academy of Education.

In addition, the needs of CwD are not taken into account in the education standards of preschool and general secondary education, despite several supposed program revisions. As the interview with Dिल्фуза Hodiboeva (not her real name), a teacher in Khujand, revealed, children with and without disabilities, in her experience, follow the same learning program approved by the Ministry of Education and the same

school curriculum, which has not changed since Hodiboeva's school began accepting CwD in 2018. Moreover, she believes that IE within the current system only benefits children with mild physical disabilities, thus leaving the majority of CwD to attend boarding schools.¹⁰ "The failure by the government to provide inclusive education or appropriate education for CwD living in specialized institutions breaches the UN [Convention on the Rights of the Child]" (Jones 2002: 8). The Tajik government fails to comply with these obligations as it has still not developed a proper functioning policy and strategy to implement IE for CwD. There is thus a significant policy-implementation gap when it comes to IE in Tajikistan.

8 Unclear Inclusive Education Assessment System

The existing system of education for children in Tajikistan lacks a learning assessment system meaning that learning outcomes are not consistently measured. As a result, educational reforms are not based on systematic data, and school examinations have shown that early-grade reading skills and comprehension are poor, especially among CwD. According to Zulaikho Rahimova (not her real name), a teacher in Khujand, CwD are often taught the bare minimum from the curriculum, and they often fail their school exams, but still move on to the next level of instruction, supposedly to avoid discouraging or demotivating them from studying. The same interlocutor saw the goal of the IE learning program for CwD as an opportunity "to teach CwD the basic necessary knowledge and the social skills that they would need to interact with others in adulthood".¹¹

Another example that illustrates the shortcomings mentioned above is that society's widespread response to disability and attitude toward disabled persons in Tajikistan is one of compassion and charity. During the period of research, several schoolteachers stated that it is difficult for CwD to keep up with the lesson in a classroom of 35–40 pupils and therefore some teachers work individually with CwD after classes without compensation for the sake of "*savob*" (reward from God) and "*uvol*" (compassion). As a result of such attitudes—despite the good intentions of such educators—disabled people in Tajikistan are typically viewed as victims in need of social protection, rather than as active participants with full rights equal to those of any other member of society. According to Sabohat Hakimzoda, the director of an NGO, although work is being done at the local level by civil society organizations to shift disability issues toward a social-legal model based on human rights, the Soviet

¹⁰ Interview with Dilfuza Hodiboeva, teacher, secondary school #7, Khujand, in-person interview, 20 September 2021.

¹¹ Interview with Zulaikho Rahimova, teacher, secondary school #4, Khujand, in-person interview, 14 September 2021.

legacy of the medical model still prevails in the perceptions of as much as 80% of the Tajik population.¹²

9 Conclusion

The exclusion of children with disabilities from education has long been based on misconceptions about their ability to benefit from and participate fully in education. Historically, worldwide, efforts to educate CwD relied on separate schools, with particular impairments being specifically targeted in specialized institutions. Such institutions served only a small percentage of those in need and were therefore found to be inefficient. In a context of violations of the rights of PwD/CwD and their stigmatization by societies, the need for a rights-based approach toward education for CwD arose and the concept of inclusive education emerged for the first time in general guarantees set forth in the UN's 1948 Universal Declaration on Human Rights. Much later, this was reaffirmed more forcefully by the 1990 World Declaration on Education for All, and in more detailed form in the UNESCO's (1994) Salamanca Statement on Principles, Policies and Practice in Special Needs Education and lastly in the 2008 Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Inclusive education aims for all children, with and without disabilities, to learn together provided that systematic modifications tailored to the needs of each individual child are put in place. Inclusive education is based on transforming the education system, unlike a special and integrated system of education, which primarily focus on changing the child to fit the system. Before the concept of IE and the 2006 UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, disability was predominately approached using the medical model. Now, however, the social model is widely employed in this field. Yet, the aim of "education for all" and IE is, for many countries, still in its infancy, including the countries of Central Asia, which already struggle to provide good education for all. For people with disabilities, especially children, all over the world, there is much work to be done to combat stigma and unfavorable attitudes, to adopt legal frameworks, adapt inclusive pedagogy, and ensure a proper infrastructure and transport systems and Tajikistan, the focus of this study, is no exception.

In this chapter, I aimed to show that there is still a long way to go to reach children in all parts of the country and to ensure that Tajik children with all kinds of disabilities have access to quality education that is tailored to their needs. Most state schools have no specially trained teaching staff, psychologists, social workers, therapists, or facilities and equipment to address the needs of children with disabilities. Children who need additional support are not entitled to an assistant to help them at school. Parents of children with disabilities often have to be very persistent to find their child a place in a state school, despite the fact that the right of disabled children to

¹² Interview with Sabohat Hakimzoda, Director of the Association of Parents of Children with Disabilities, Dushanbe, Zoom interview, 20 October 2021.

education is enshrined in national legislation, and even if they do, teachers are often unable or unwilling to tailor their teaching to the disabled child's needs. Children with disabilities and their parents still face a high level of stigmatization from other students, parents, and teachers. The general public tends to perceive disability as something to be pitied and disability issues are still approached using a medical model with very little evidence of a shift toward a social one.

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