

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN RURAL KYRGYZSTAN: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY BASED ON A TEACHER'S INTERVIEW

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ABSTRACT

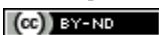
Inclusive education has become a central element of contemporary educational policy aimed at ensuring equal access to education for children with disabilities. In post-Soviet countries, including Kyrgyzstan, inclusive education is formally supported at the legislative level; however, its practical implementation remains uneven, particularly in rural areas with limited resources. This study explores the everyday practices, challenges, and perceptions of inclusive education through a qualitative case study based on a semi-structured interview with a primary school teacher from a rural public school in Kyrgyzstan. The research focuses on teachers' understanding of disability, instructional strategies, assessment practices, emotional support, infrastructural constraints, and the gap between inclusive education policy and its real-life implementation. The findings indicate that inclusive education in rural contexts largely depends on teachers' individual initiative, professional commitment, and informal adaptive practices rather than on institutional mechanisms. Major challenges include insufficient infrastructure, lack of specialized teaching materials, limited professional training in inclusive education, health-related interruptions in learning, and restricted physical accessibility of school environments. The study contributes empirical evidence from an underrepresented Central Asian context and highlights the importance of strengthening teacher training, improving school infrastructure, and developing practical mechanisms to support inclusive education in rural schools.

Keywords: inclusive education, disability, rural schools, teacher perspectives, Kyrgyzstan

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has increasingly become a key principle of contemporary educational policy aimed at ensuring equal access to education for all children. In post-Soviet countries, including Kyrgyzstan, this principle is formally supported at the legislative level. However, its practical implementation remains uneven, especially

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in rural areas where schools face structural and resource-related constraints. In rural contexts, teachers often play a decisive role in translating inclusive education policies into everyday practice. Limited infrastructure, lack of specialized materials, and insufficient professional training place additional responsibility on teachers, who must rely on personal experience and informal strategies to support children with disabilities. For this reason, examining teachers' perspectives is essential for understanding how inclusive education functions in practice. This study explores inclusive education in rural Kyrgyzstan through a qualitative case study based on a semi-structured interview with a primary school teacher. The article focuses on everyday teaching practices, assessment approaches, and perceived barriers to inclusion.

In Kyrgyzstan, inclusive education has been formally promoted through national policies and international cooperation initiatives. However, significant disparities remain between urban and rural areas. Rural schools often face limited infrastructure, shortage of specialized personnel, and insufficient access to assistive technologies. As a result, the implementation of inclusive education in rural settings presents unique challenges that are not fully captured in policy-level analyses. Studying inclusive education in rural Kyrgyzstan is particularly important because these contexts reveal how educational policies are translated into practice under conditions of limited resources. This allows for a deeper understanding of the gap between formal frameworks and everyday teaching realities. Despite increasing policy attention, empirical research on inclusive education in rural Kyrgyzstan remains limited, particularly at the level of everyday educational practices.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Inclusive education is commonly understood as an educational approach aimed at ensuring equal access to learning opportunities for all students, regardless of their physical, cognitive, or social differences. According to UNESCO, inclusive education involves the transformation of educational systems to accommodate diversity and promote participation, rather than expecting students to adapt to rigid structures. The concept is closely linked to the social model of disability, which views disability not as an individual deficit but as a result of environmental and institutional barriers. Within this framework, inclusive education emphasizes removing structural obstacles, adapting teaching practices, and fostering a supportive learning environment. In low-resource and post-Soviet contexts, inclusive education is often shaped by a combination of formal policy adoption and informal practical adaptation. Researchers highlight that the success of inclusive education depends not only on legislation but also on teachers' agency, institutional support, and availability of resources. Previous research emphasizes that inclusive education in low-resource contexts is strongly influenced by teacher agency and local adaptation strategies. Studies show that teachers in rural settings often compensate for institutional shortcomings through individualized instruction, emotional

support, and flexible assessment practices. At the same time, scholars note persistent barriers such as inadequate infrastructure, lack of assistive technologies, and insufficient professional development opportunities. Research on post-Soviet educational systems highlights a significant gap between formal inclusive education policies and their practical realization. Teachers frequently operate without clear methodological guidance, relying instead on personal experience and informal peer learning. These findings underline the importance of examining inclusive education not only at the policy level but also through micro-level educational practices.

METHODOLOGY

The interview was conducted in the Kyrgyz language and subsequently translated for analytical purposes. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, allowing key themes related to inclusive education practices, assessment strategies, and institutional constraints to emerge from the data. The study is exploratory in nature and does not aim at generalization, but rather at providing an in-depth understanding of inclusive education in a specific rural context. This study is exploratory in nature, as it is based on a single qualitative interview and aims to provide an in-depth understanding of inclusive education practices in a specific rural context. Rather than seeking generalizable results, the study focuses on capturing lived experiences and identifying key themes that may inform future research. Participation in the study was voluntary. The interviewee provided informed consent prior to data collection and was informed about the purpose of the research and the use of data for academic publication. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, all identifying information, including the name of the school and geographic location, has been removed from the published version.

FINDINGS

The teacher perceives disability primarily as a condition associated with social vulnerability rather than solely as a medical issue. Inclusive education is understood as a means of social adaptation and integration, enabling children with disabilities to participate in society rather than remain isolated at home. *“Children who stay at home cannot integrate into society. Inclusive education is important because it helps children adapt and feel part of the community.”* Instructional practices are highly flexible and adapted to students' physical and emotional conditions. These include simplified assignments, reduced lesson duration, visual and audio materials, and individualized pacing. Emotional well-being and motivation are considered central to learning. Home-based education is commonly used due to mobility limitations and lack of accessible infrastructure. Digital tools such as audio recordings and multimedia materials are applied, although face-to-face interaction is perceived as more effective. Assessment

is based on students' individual abilities rather than standardized benchmarks. Diagnostic and formative assessment practices dominate, with an emphasis on encouragement and positive reinforcement. *"Children should be assessed according to their abilities. It is better to motivate them with praise than discourage them with low grades."* Negative grading is deliberately avoided to prevent emotional harm and demotivation. Major barriers include narrow classrooms, lack of ramps and elevators, insufficient teaching materials, and absence of specialized equipment. Teachers also report limited access to professional training in inclusive education. Health-related interruptions further complicate educational continuity for children with disabilities.

CONCLUSION

The findings demonstrate a clear gap between inclusive education policies and their implementation at the school level. While national policies emphasize inclusion, everyday practices in rural schools depend largely on teachers' personal commitment and adaptive strategies. This observation is consistent with previous studies highlighting the central role of teacher agency in low-resource educational settings (Singal 2016; Florian 2014). In the absence of sufficient institutional support, inclusive education becomes an individualized and emotionally demanding process. Teachers are required not only to adapt curricula and assessment methods, but also to provide emotional support and motivation for children with disabilities. This reliance on individual effort raises concerns about the sustainability of inclusive education in rural areas. This qualitative case study demonstrates that inclusive education in rural Kyrgyzstan is largely driven by teachers' professional dedication rather than institutional structures. Although inclusive education policies formally exist, their effectiveness is constrained by infrastructural limitations, lack of resources, and insufficient professional training. To enhance inclusive education, policymakers should prioritize practical teacher training, improve school accessibility, and develop comprehensive support systems for children with disabilities in rural areas. This study is based on a single interview and reflects the experience of one rural school. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to all educational contexts in Kyrgyzstan. Nevertheless, the study provides valuable insights into inclusive education practices in under-researched rural settings and may serve as a basis for further qualitative research.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Develop systematic training programs for teachers in inclusive education
- Improve physical accessibility of rural schools
- Provide specialized teaching materials and assistive technologies
- Strengthen coordination between education and healthcare services.

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