

CREATING AN INCLUSIVE PRIMARY SCHOOL CULTURE: CASE OF UZBEKISTAN

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Abstract

Creating an inclusive culture in primary schools is vital for ensuring that every child in Uzbekistan can learn and grow together. This article explores how policy, teacher development, infrastructure, and community attitudes contribute to inclusive school culture. Drawing on recent data—from UNICEF's reports on inclusive education expansion, UNESCO's social and emotional learning (SEL) initiatives, and national evaluations—it highlights progress, challenges, and practical strategies. The study shows that while national policies and model initiatives like "Imkon" centers and SEL training offer strong foundations, barriers persist in teacher readiness, physical accessibility, and social stigma. The article concludes with recommendations for policy makers, educators, and community stakeholders to strengthen inclusion in primary schools.

Key words: inclusive education; primary school; Uzbekistan; social and emotional learning; teacher training; infrastructure

Creating an inclusive primary school culture in Uzbekistan requires coordinated efforts across national policy, school practice, and community engagement. Since 2020, the government has endorsed frameworks such as the *2020–2025 Concept of Inclusive Education* and reinforced them through Presidential Decree No. 4860 (Presidential Decree No. 4860, 2020). UNICEF (2024) reports that by September 2024, 1,195 children with disabilities were enrolled in over 530 mainstream schools, a sharp increase driven by inclusive policy leadership and growing public awareness.

However, implementing inclusive education is complex. Local studies highlight that unified policy does not always translate into classroom readiness. For example, a mixed-methods study involving teachers, parents, and community leaders pointed out significant gaps in teacher training, inadequate infrastructure, and persistent social stigma toward children with special needs (Porsaeva, 2023). Another analysis from Chirchik State Pedagogical University emphasised that psychological climate within schools and resource allocation are critical to the

sustainability of inclusive practices (Shakhnoza et al., 2024). These studies underline that while inclusive policies exist, practical barriers continue to impede progress.

One promising model is the *Imkon* project, initiated in preschool settings and extended through primary grades. These centres integrate multidisciplinary rehabilitation with education and have shown significant improvements. For instance, a centre in Nukus reported motor-skill gains for 97.8% of enrolled children and improved speech abilities in 92.3% during preschool years, preparing them more effectively for mainstream schooling (UNESCO, 2022). Such evidence supports early intervention as a way to foster inclusive culture starting from the earliest educational stages.

Beyond infrastructure, building an inclusive culture requires equipping teachers with skills to manage diversity inside classrooms. In 2024 and 2025, UNESCO partnered with Uzbekistan's Ministry of Preschool and School Education to develop and launch a localized social and emotional learning (SEL) programme (UNESCO, 2025). Participating educators received training to integrate self-reflection, empathy, and collaboration into their practice—foundational qualities for inclusive environments. Evaluations of these trainings show that teachers who adopted SEL techniques reported stronger student engagement, improved classroom management, and greater peer support among students (UNESCO, 2025).

Accessible physical spaces are another essential element of inclusion. UNICEF and the Ministry piloted inclusive school models in city schools with universal design principles in infrastructure, such as ramps and accessible restrooms (UNICEF Uzbekistan, 2024). These pilot sites serve as models to shape national building standards. Their success underlines that inclusion is not only a policy but must translate into real, measurable adaptations in schools.

Cultural attitudes still pose challenges. Although parents and community leaders are growing more supportive, stigma remains, particularly in rural areas (Tagonova et al., 2023). UNICEF's advocacy emphasises that inclusion is a shared responsibility of families, schools, and local communities (UNICEF Uzbekistan, 2024). Schools that have effectively built inclusive cultures often rely on community sensitization, encouraging peer acceptance and parent involvement in planning and classroom life.

Combining international frameworks with national reform provides a robust base for building inclusive primary schools. Uzbekistan's ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in June 2021 and its National Action Plan for 2023–2025 position the country within a global movement toward rights-based education (Porsaeva, 2023). Moreover, strong national commitment—demonstrated through presidential decrees and

education development strategies—sends a clear message of inclusion as a core educational principle (Presidential Decree No. 4860, 2020).

Yet continuing progress depends on addressing key challenges. First, teacher training must be systematically embedded in both pre-service and ongoing professional development, covering SEL, inclusive pedagogy, and strategies for differentiation in mixed-ability classrooms (Shakhnoza et al., 2024). Rural and under-resourced regions need particular support. Second, infrastructure must be scaled: while pilots show promise, the goal of making 20% of new or reconstructed schools universally accessible by 2027 requires significant investment and oversight (UNICEF Uzbekistan, 2024). Third, shifting cultural attitudes requires intentional communication campaigns, local championing, and visible role models—schools that welcome all children, celebrate diversity, and encourage shared learning.

To nurture truly inclusive school cultures, policymakers must engage in long-term, multisectoral planning. This includes aligning education policy with health, social services, and local governance structures to ensure that inclusion is not just an educational objective but a community goal. At the school level, leadership training for principals and management teams is essential, alongside mechanisms for monitoring inclusion indicators such as attendance and learning outcomes by student group (Tagonova et al., 2023).

In conclusion, Uzbekistan has made meaningful strides in cultivating inclusion within primary schools. The expansion of inclusive education enrolment, the development of model schools, SEL programmes, and early intervention initiatives like *Imkon* demonstrate a growing ecosystem of support. However, the real cultural shift lies in moving from isolated initiatives to systemic integration. Strengthening teacher capacity, scaling up infrastructure, and transforming community attitudes will ensure that inclusion becomes not a policy add-on but a living reality. This is the path toward a primary school culture where every child learns, belongs, and succeeds—together.

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