Creating conditions for inclusive education in Kazakhstan

A case study of three school-based resource centers in Nur-Sultan City

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The publication *Creating conditions for inclusive education in Kazakhstan: A case study of three school-based resource centers in Nur-Sultan City* presents the results of research conducted by a team of professors from Nazarbayev University Graduate School of Education (NUGSE) in the scope of a project “Different, but Equal: Creating Inclusive Society in Kazakhstan” implemented by DARA Foundation and supported by the fund for development of social projects: Samruk-Kazyna Trust.

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This publication is for the use of the general public, governmental organizations, inclusive education experts, teachers, parents, professionals working with children with special educational needs, non-governmental organizations, mass media organizations, and all other readers interested in the development of inclusive education and society in Kazakhstan.

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This research on three school-based inclusive education resource centers in Nur-Sultan City in Kazakhstan is an inquiry into practices of school communities planting seeds for inclusive education in Kazakhstan. This study shows once again that inclusive education is a process, which rests on collaboration between everyone involved with the school. This research is also an outcome of a good will to work together in order to support inclusive education practices in schools of Kazakhstan.

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Introduction

As part of Kazakhstan’s goals to rank in the top 30 global economies by the year 2050 (Nazarbayev, 2012), emphasis has been placed on educational reforms that are designed to provide the necessary framework for its burgeoning economy. One of the many dilemmas facing key stakeholders in educational reforms is how to create an educational system that increases opportunities for all children to contribute and participate in this future economy. Out of several reforms that have already been announced, inclusive education has been identified as a major initiative with Kazakhstan aiming for 70% of its schools to become “inclusive” by 2018 (The Ministry of Education and Science, 2016).

In the context of Kazakhstan, the concept of inclusive education refers to the integration of children with functional impairments or special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream schools and classrooms (IAC, 2017). Stakeholders involved in this effort include the national government, local governments, non-governmental organizations, universities, schools and parents. Many diverse initiatives are aimed at supporting the development of inclusive education conditions in the schools of Kazakhstan. This research report describes one of these initiatives—the development of school-based inclusive education resource centers in Nur-Sultan City, the capital of Kazakhstan.

Within the scope of this study, a team of researchers from Nazarbayev University Graduate School of Education who work in the area of inclusive education (hereinafter Inclusive Education Research Group), conducted case studies of resource centers established with the support of the DARA Foundation (hereinafter DARA) in three mainstream schools of Nur-Sultan City. The purpose of this study was to learn how school-based resource centers are contributing to creating inclusive education conditions in mainstream schools of Nur-Sultan City. Researchers sought to examine the impact of school-based resource centers on the developing attitudes and practices that are favorable towards inclusive education processes in schools. The study also sought to discover the challenges and areas for improvement in the work that takes place in such school-based resource centers. Since these resource centers operate in a specific national and local context, this study also accounted for the factors of national and municipal policies that influence the way schools work.

To answer the research questions guiding the study, the Inclusive Education Research Group conducted 22 interviews with representatives of school leadership, inclusive education resource centers, national and local public education administrators, NGOs, and parents of SEN children enrolled in the schools studied. The data collection took place during September and October 2018. In line with ethical practices in research, this report will not disclose the names of any research participants and the cases studied. To achieve transparency in data reporting, an interview number (see Appendix 1 for the anonymized list of participants) identifies the research participants quoted in this report.
This report is structured in the following way. It first describes a broader context for inclusive education school-based resource centers in Kazakhstan. Then it describes the concept of DARA supported school-based inclusive education resource centers. Since resource centers operate within the context and limitations of available public resources, the following separate section briefly focuses on funding for resource centers and inclusive education. Further, the report proceeds to describe the impact of DARA supported inclusive education resource centers in three schools of Nur-Sultan City. This section is followed by a discussion of challenges and areas for improvement in the work devoted to advancing inclusive education at mainstream schools in Nur-Sultan City. Recommendations for steps to strengthen the movement towards inclusive education in schools are presented prior to the concluding section of the report. The report contains an appendix (Appendix 2) of a review of the literature that was consulted, and which speaks to the concept of inclusive education, resource centers, and the need for collaboration to advance the development of inclusive education.
The context for inclusive education school-based resource centers in Kazakhstan

In Kazakhstan, legislation defines inclusive education as the process of ensuring equal access to education for all, including SEN children (Information and Analytics Center, 2017). The national framework document for education policy places emphasis on developing the kind of school infrastructure that would enable children with special needs to access school buildings (Ministry of Education and Science, 2016). In 2018, the government of Kazakhstan started implementing a World Bank project, where one of the goals is the creation of 17 inclusive education resource centers (Ministry of Education and Science, 2018).

Meanwhile, resource centers for inclusive education are already present in Kazakhstan. In 2017, there were seven resource centers in Kazakhstan, which provided expert support to teachers and parents of children with special educational needs (SEN) across a city or region. There was one center that was located in the Aktobe region, one in the Akmola region, one in Karaganda, two in Western Kazakhstan, one in the Kyzylorda region, and one in The National University of Abay in Almaty (IAC, 2017, p. 19). A review of the description of these resource centers by The National Academy of Education named after Y. Altynsarin (2018) indicates that there is not one shared model that informs the way these resource centers work. Most resource centers are located in schools, which have been pioneering novel practices of including SEN children in the mainstream educational process in Kazakhstan. Such examples include school Nr. 19 in Kokshetau, school Nr. 13 in Petropavlovsk, and school Nr. 65 in Nur-Sultan City. The focus of these schools is on understanding the needs of a school implementing inclusive education. A different model of supporting inclusive practice is applied in Karaganda where, since 2013, the resource center at school Nr. 27 advises teachers and parents of SEN children across the city (Int#21; NAE Y. Altynsarin, 2018).

Responding to the need for supporting inclusive education development in the country, NGOs have also stepped in to collaborate with schools and municipalities. In 2014, an NGO advocating for the rights of children with autism, Ashyk Alem, supported the opening of a resource room for children with autistic spectrum disorder at school Nr. 23 in Nur-Sultan City (NAE Y. Altynsarin, 2018). Autistic children who need some time off from their inclusive classroom use this resource room, or it serves as the main space for the education of autistic children who attend their inclusive class for a limited time and activities (NAE Y. Altynsarin, 2018, p. 151). In 2016, school Nr. 79 and school Nr. 25 joined this project as well.

Resource centers and rooms to support the inclusion of SEN children in mainstream schools are a new type of organization in Kazakhstan. There are other types of organizations with an older history in the country. There are 12 rehabilitation centers, 143 centers of psychological pedagogical correction, and 725 speech therapist rooms. These organizations work to minimize the functional impairments of children, helping them to become physically and socially prepared
for integration in the school environment. Of all the children who have received these early intervention services, 40% to 60% go on to study in mainstream schools (IAC, 2017).

Early intervention programs carried out by the above-mentioned organizations are effective in preparing SEN children to continue their education in a mainstream school. The problem that emerges at this stage, however, is the readiness of mainstream schools to accept SEN children [Int#1; Int#9]. Although the situation is slowly improving, mainstream schools are often resistant or unprepared to include children with special needs [Int#1]. To ensure that SEN children can continue their education in an inclusive school environment in mainstream schools, the NGO DARA Foundation has expanded its work to establish resource centers in neighborhood schools in Nur-Sultan City and other cities of Kazakhstan. By November 2017, DARA had supported the opening of resource centers in schools Nr. 68, Nr. 59, Nr. 19 and Nr. 41 in Nur-Sultan City. School Nr. 68 is a school with Kazakh as a language of instruction; schools Nr. 19 and Nr. 41 have Russian as a language of instruction; and school Nr. 59 has both Kazakh and Russian as languages of instruction. At the time of this study, a DARA supported resource center at school Nr. 3 in Aktobe was also in operation. Schools hosting DARA supported resource centers for inclusive education employed different approaches to integrating and including SEN children. Some schools had several students in home-based education, which means that these students did not attend the school; instead, teachers visited them at home. Some had correctional education classes for SEN students only. In some schools, like school Nr. 3 in Aktobe, the principal together with teachers and school staff worked to dissolve all correctional classes and include SEN children into mainstream classes (Information provided by DARA, 2018).

Several participants in the current study mentioned and other research shows that “invisible children” – children with special needs – are becoming visible in Kazakhstan (Rouse & Lapham, 2013). A principal [Int#3] of one of the schools in this study said:

When I started working in this school as a teacher, there was not even a question about students with different needs – that there needs to be a different approach. However, over the past 15 years [the situation has changed]. It used to be that there was only one [SEN] child at school. But with every year there are more and more children with special educational needs. I think [that the reason for this] is that society has become more open [to accepting SEN children].

In the point of view of this principal, parents also have become more confident in bringing their SEN children to neighborhood schools. Thus, there is a burgeoning need for school-based inclusive education resource centers. The next section of the report describes the concept of DARA school-based inclusive education resource centers. Then it proceeds to describe the national and local context for launching these centers.
The concept of DARA supported resource centers

Although the concept of an inclusive education resource center is not formally defined in Kazakhstan’s inclusive education policy, there is a shared understanding that the role of an inclusive education resource center is to provide teaching support to educators, other professionals, and parents of SEN children. In its report describing a framework for monitoring inclusive education development in Kazakhstan, IAC (2017) has recommended expanding the network of school-based inclusive education resource centers. This would enable teachers at mainstream schools to have access to the counseling they need for inclusive teaching [Int#2].

The legal stipulation of what an inclusive education resource center is, however, is not merely a formality. Stipulating a resource center’s status in national policy documents would provide legitimacy to this form of organization [Int#1]. A typical approach, advised by the Ministry of Education and Science at the time of this study, for establishing resource centers was to call this form of organization an experiment on the local governmental level. When an NGO was involved in establishing a resource center, there would typically have been some agreement between the NGO and the local educational authority to stipulate a pilot for including SEN children into the general education environment. Such a formal solution was needed for schools to satisfy the legal requirements of various governmental inspections and justify the implementation of this pilot program. There are plans to address the status of inclusive education resource centers through the scope of the World Bank project in education, which was started in 2018 [Int#2].

DARA supported resource centers established in Nur-Sultan City was the initiative of this NGO. DARA approached neighborhood schools offering its support in the opening of an inclusive education resource center. DARA representative recalls:

We [DARA] come to school and ask if they have children with special needs? Would the school like to implement inclusive education? We are here to support the school in this effort. … We simply ask, let’s look closely at these [SEN] children. You have them already in the school. They are either placed spontaneously in general education classes or in correction classes, or they are home-schooled.

The model of an inclusive education resource center that DARA offered the schools included the designation of a physical area for a resource center at the school. It would help to create a space for a dialogue to occur between teachers, students, parents, and support professionals such as psychologists, and speech therapists. It was also intended as a space for SEN children who need to take a break from their mainstream class. DARA covered the expenses of setting up and equipping this physical space. Schools requested and Nur-Sultan City’s Education Authority allocated additional staff positions for the resource center at particular schools.

In the resource center model put forward by DARA Foundation, a crucial position is that of the Inclusive Education Coordinator. Such a coordinator has a central role in the operation of the inclusive education resource center. The coordinator’s task is to build the team of support
specialists of the school. In the view of the DARA representative, the coordinator needs to be able to build the system of inclusion around the child using resources available, including out-of-classroom socialization opportunities. Within the school, the Inclusive Education Coordinator is tasked with communicating with teachers to determine whether they are comfortable seeking advice. As one of the research participants put it [Int#1]: “Teachers are always the most private. They do not want anyone near their classroom. Teachers need to be taught to ask for help if they need [it].”

The overarching task of an Inclusive Education Coordinator is to raise awareness about inclusive education opportunities within the school, facilitate a gradual introduction of children on home education into the school, and transfer children from special to mainstream classrooms. The DARA representative described it in the following way:

There were cases when parents [of home education SEN children] never came to school for some festivities. At [one] school … the school director herself was glad that she invited … [home based SEN] children. They sat by the tea table with other children [who attend school]. I mean, there was nothing strange about it, and a question appeared to us – why are these children on home education? When we reviewed documents, we saw that it is possible to work on bringing these children to school. … That is, [Psychological Medical Pedagogic Committee] PMPC directed these students towards home education and that’s all – for the school it is comfortable, with additional hours [for teachers], additional income. But when you take the child out [into public], it is, anyway, an effort, you need to talk with parents, need to talk with children. So, one of the tasks for the [inclusive education] coordinator is to straighten out this process. First, to take a look at what children there are in home education, and in correction [classes]. To develop an approach to build awareness, develop a way for creating individual educational routes [for SEN children], to convince teachers, make them professionally interested in [bringing the child to school]. This is how it started in school [the name of the school] … with a boy who has autistic spectrum disorder. He was on home education. He was coming to school to some celebrations. … there can be more done to bring the child to school when planning the lessons schedule… this boy liked English very much and he was able to spend exactly one hour and 40 min at the school [because of his condition]. In this one hour and 40 minutes it was important to cover important lessons [for the child] recommended by [support] specialists. When planning the schedule, there was a discussion of how we can accommodate this student and increase the length of the time [the student spends at school] to an hour and 50 min, to two hours. Now the boy spends 80% of the time at school, and he is used to coming to the resource center during every recess. He rests in the resource center; he just comes in, does something there and leaves. The resource center gives him some [time to] rest.

In the model established with the support of DARA, a school-based resource center serves as a buffer zone for children on home education, says the DARA representative. Yet, exactly how the resource center is used to introduce, integrate and include SEN children in the mainstream education process, depends on how the Inclusive Education Coordinator has organized this work, which varies according to the school.
DARA is currently working with each separate school where it has established a resource center. The DARA representative explains that the goal would be to achieve a multiplier effect with more experienced schools running their own resource centers and implementing inclusive education would support nearby schools. Inclusive education coordinators from DARA-supported resource centers have been engaged in trying to reach out to nearby schools and helping to disseminate information about inclusive education. A DARA representative has observed that there is a need to further develop the competencies of inclusive education support specialists, such as special education teachers and psychologists, on working with children who have complex functional impairments. Such impairments include hearing impairments, requiring them to wear a cochlear implant, cerebral palsy, or autism. The DARA representative stresses the importance of having a government supported resource center at the national level that would allow the staff members of school-based resource centers to receive training and advice.

There is such a plan to develop a network of well-funded and equipped inclusive education resource centers in Kazakhstan in the scope of the World Bank project. When the project comes to an end and the World Bank funding for these centers ceases, the resource centers might be transferred to the regional level (oblast) for funding [Int#2]. Thus, on the national scale, the concept and the provision of funding for inclusive education resource centers is still a policy in the making.
The experience in Kazakhstan shows that early intervention programs supporting the development of children with special needs advances the readiness of children with functional impairments to continue their education in mainstream schools [Int#9]. The question then is about the ability of mainstream schools to successfully include these children in the education process. As the stories shared in this research about inclusive education development in Nur-Sultan City reveal, schools which admit students with special needs into mainstream classes, have been making small steps, learning from this process, and with their success, convincing the local government and the larger society that inclusive education is possible in Kazakhstan. For this development to continue, there needs to be the funding to compensate teachers, support specialists, provide continued learning opportunities to teachers and support professionals, develop facilities, and equip schools with supplies needed for an inclusive educational process to occur.

There is no annual funding that is specifically designated for school-based inclusive education resource centers in Kazakhstan from either national or municipal sources. The funding for resource centers is provided on a case by case arrangement, with schools often seeking different sources of funding. The creation of inclusive education resource centers researched in this study was possible due to financial support from DARA and its sponsoring organization Samruk Kazyna Trust. Additional support was provided by other private businesses, and the Nur-Sultan City’s Education Authority which provides salary for staff at these resource centers.

In Kazakhstan, school personnel who work with SEN children receive an additional 40% to their monthly baseline salary. In the per-capita education funding model, implemented in Nur-Sultan City in September 2018, the principle “money follows the student” applies [Int#8]. Schools receive more funding for SEN children than children without functional impairments. According to the per-capita funding model, the amount of funding per child is 230 thousand tenge. For a child with special needs this amount is more than a million tenge [Int#8]. It is the responsibility of the school administration to distribute this funding in a way that ensures that the needs of SEN students are met, and teachers are compensated accordingly [Int#2].

On the municipal level, the Education Authority is responsible for distributing such funding to schools. If the school has pressing needs that are not covered by per-capita funding, it can file a separate budget request to the local municipality to cover these needs. The city’s Education Authority may satisfy this request from the existing financial resources or request additional funding from the city’s budget committee [Int#8].

An example of additional support to a school is the Nur-Sultan Education Authority’s funding for developing a Republican Resource Center at school Nr. 68 [Int#8]. This school was the first to host a DARA supported school-based resource center in Nur-Sultan City. In order to develop further, the school has requested municipal funding for additional staff salaries, additional funding for the premises, some expenses for repairs, furniture and equipment. Nur-Sultan City’s
Education Authority has provided funding for this expansion from funds that are additional to per-capita funding. A representative of the municipality’s Education Authority explains:

… per-capita money follows the student. We are creating the resource center because we want to develop more comfortable working conditions for teachers and specialists who work with children who are in need for correctional support. Therefore, we do not use resources of per-capita funding for the needs of resource centers. These are separate expenses.

The opportunity to apply for funding to develop their resource centers also exists for other mainstream schools. Their requests will be evaluated and if deemed justified, the municipal Education Authority will seek additional finances to provide to these schools.

The challenge for resource centers, however, might lie in retaining qualified personnel due to low wages in the public sector. Compensation for support personnel in the public sector, such as speech therapists, is far below what these specialists earn providing the same services in the private sector. One of the research participants [Int#9] says that a support specialist working with SEN children “could receive up to 7,000 [tenge] for one hour of work with a child. She could get half of her [monthly] salary [of what she receives in the public sector] in one day [working in the private sector].”

The possibility of increasing wages in the public sector depends on the national government which sets the salaries for public administration employees. In order to ensure that support specialists arrive in Nur-Sultan City and are employed in the local public sector, the municipality tries to provide additional stimuli, such as support with housing [Int#8; Int#9].

An additional area where municipal support is needed is in Professional Development Programs (PDP) to support inclusive education. There are PDPs funded by the Ministry of Education and Science. However, they are very few compared to the needs of PDP for inclusive education, says one of the research participants [Int#9].

In 2019, Nur-Sultan City’s municipality has planned a PDP for support specialists working in special educational institutions [Int#8]. At the time of the study, there were no municipal PDPs planned for support specialists working to support SEN children going to mainstream schools, despite the fact that this is extremely important. More and more parents are choosing to send their children to mainstream schools. For example, the number of children with cochlear implants in Nursultan City is increasing and more specialists who can work with children after this surgery are needed. A research participant who conducts early intervention work [Int#9] explains: “Only a doctor can tell if the speech processor is set up properly… but a speech therapist must know that as well. The success of rehabilitation [of a child] depends on it.” Specialized training is needed to prepare these professionals, and the cost of this training is substantial for modestly compensated public sector employees. “A teacher, for example, receives 80,000 tenge [a month] and she has to pay 40,000 [tenge] for this training. This is wrong,” asserts participant in this research [Int#8]. Thus, organizations willing to train their employees, need to seek other PDP funding opportunities.
The impact of resource centers on creating conditions for inclusive education

School-based inclusive education resource centers established in three neighborhood schools of Nur-Sultan City with the support of DARA have planted seeds of inclusive education in educational organizations that had not prioritized these ideas previously. The presence of a school-based inclusive education resource center raises the issue of including children with special educational needs as a permanent matter on the school agenda. The benefits of establishing a resource center include a change of attitude towards the possibility of incorporating inclusive education at a mainstream school which systematically leads to changing the culture of the school towards a more inclusive focus. This section presents further evidence illustrating this positive impact of school-based resource centers.

Planting seeds of inclusive education – changing the culture of the school community

DARA’s initiative of approaching neighborhood schools and helping to create resource centers has been recognized as an effective approach for supporting a move towards inclusive education awareness in schools which enroll SEN children.

One of the school principals [Int#3] interviewed for this research said: “Because it is a mainstream school, it is necessary to open a resource center. … And it is necessary to somehow find and arrange the space for the resource center [in school] because the number of children with special needs is growing.” Initially this principal was skeptical about interaction with DARA Foundation:

Dara Foundation began to invite us [to their events] because they knew that we have correctional classes in every parallel [track] in our school. At first, when I went there, I was skeptical. I thought that it was another organization that wants to inspect us. And then, when I saw their work, what they do, when I saw the children in other schools, I believed them.

This experience illustrates that accepting inclusive education practices sometimes requires experiential learning.

The change in the attitude of the school administration towards inclusive education was noted after the resource center had begun its work in other schools as well. “The school administration has changed its attitude a little. They have understood [now] how important inclusive education is” and “The school administration changed their attitude and there was a shift in their behavior towards us [the resource center]. There is a shift in the way they think about
inclusive education and supporting students with additional needs” were statements given by staff at resource centers of two other schools [Int#5; Int#19].

The administration of the schools was only one group of people who, through the work of a resource center at their school, recognized the need for and possibilities of inclusive education. Another major group to be convinced that inclusive education can be beneficial in their classroom were teachers. During their interviews, several resource centers’ staff shared that in some cases teachers were not just skeptical but rejected the notion that inclusive education could be possible. A coordinator [Int#22] at one of the resource centers stated: “First of all, the teachers do not believe that inclusion can happen, and it takes time to convince them that it is possible, and to educate them.”

Participants in this research suggested that the resource centers located in the neighborhood schools were pivotal to introducing the concept of inclusive education. They recognized that the resource centers are crucial for promoting acceptance of inclusive education among school’s personnel as a possibility at their school. In other words, resource centers were helping to plant seeds of inclusive education and provide the support for them to blossom.

Developing a network of support

The school-based resource centers are creating a network of expertise for inclusive education. During the interviews conducted for this research, school administrators, teachers, inclusive education support specialists, and parents spoke about how the resource center has helped them and SEN children become part of a larger network and feel supported by being a part of this community.

The principal [Int#3] of one of the schools in this research said:

Before [we opened a resource center] we were somehow alone with [SEN] children. Now there are more people and specialists involved [in or work with SEN children]. We can receive advice, we can invite [other experts], visit [other schools], learn and observe. This is an aspect of the resource center’s work.

A similar sense of the network support was shared by a speech therapist [Int#6] working in a resource center at a different school:

We used to know that there were such children [with special needs], but there was no support [in schools] and we did not know whom to turn to [for help]. I myself was looking for those specialists in the city. I did not know who to contact. [Now with the resource center] It feels as if there is a guardianship as if there is someone you can ask for advice. You don’t have to go look for people who work in this area. They are near here; if I have questions I always ask, and they help.
A positive impact of the resource center was acknowledged by a principal [Int#4] of another school as well: “They [the resource center] have been working with our kids for two years now. [There is a] defectologist and a speech therapist [at the resource center]. This resource center helped us a lot as if they are part of our team.”

The principal [Int#15] of the third school in this study emphasized that the resource center has helped the school gain access to the support professionals they need:

The resource center provides us with specialists, because he [a SEN child] needs specialists. He needs defectologists, a speech therapist, physical therapy after the surgery. And all this is provided by a resource center. They find specialists, because there is a shortage of specialists. People [specialists] don’t come here because it’s [the school is located] on the outskirts of the city.

As beneficiaries from the work of a resource center, the parents of SEN children shared their positive impressions of the help received from the school-based resource center as well. One parent said [Int#20]: “We need qualified help from a speech therapist, a defectologist so that our [i.e., the child’s] speech is developed, and sounds are uttered. And for me, it is a powerful help.” Another parent [Int#12], while evaluating the resource center, was drawing a comparison with Pedagogical, Medical, Psychological Committee (PMPC) which is a body that assesses the special needs of the child and makes recommendations about education placement:

What assistance do we get form PMPC? Mostly consultations, directions. We go there once a year, and they look at my child; they check how well she’s learned to write, how well she’s learned to read. We went there after our first year in school and they sent us here [the name of the school] to a correctional class. We didn’t go there [to PMPC] after that. Before we started going to school, we used to go there [to PMPC] every year. They gave us referrals to the correction room [for rehabilitation], where there are speech therapists, defectologists, and psychologists. … We certainly get more help here [for education]. Because in PMPC we just go there once a year and they look at my child, take notes and that’s it. And here she receives new knowledge and new interactions every day.

This evidence further demonstrates the fact that the availability of support to students with special needs is more effective in supporting learning if it is school-based as they can access services on a daily basis.

Engagement of parents

The resource centers at the schools studied have facilitated the building of relationships between parents of SEN children and the school. Interaction organized through resource centers has helped parents to become more involved in the school community. A DARA representative says that the intention was to build the work of resource centers in a way that “parents [of SEN children], coming to a resource center understand that they are in the focus, they receive help from the whole
team [at the resource center]; [the help] is all well organized, thought through, and they [parents] feel welcome in this space.”

The data shows that the purpose of the resource center is being met. One of the parents [Int#20] interviewed said: “In general, everyone interacts with each other. This school is somehow better because they take more part in the life of my child than at the previous school.” The experience of parents feeling welcome was also outlined by the principal [Int#4] of one of the schools who emphasized the work that the resource center is doing:

First of all, it is informing parents [about inclusion]. After all, the child will treat others exactly as they see it in their family. [Children need to see] that there are no obstacles, no bias or prejudice towards those people who cannot walk or speak correctly or see well. … Those parents who were invited after [DARA] Foundation had opened the resource center [at school] were really glad, I must say. They thanked us wholeheartedly.

A parent interviewed from another school [Int#12] agreed to the statement:

I think it [the resource center] is a very big plus. Because it is very necessary for our children. Let’s say the speech therapist, defectologist, psychologist [needed to support the child’s learning]. Here such services are available additionally. And it is a huge benefit for the child. She needs it very much. In addition to the main diagnosis, which is cerebral palsy, we have a delay in psycho-speech development. And these additional activities are like air to us [very necessary].

This parent also shared information regarding the good communication she had with a teacher:

I usually see the teacher every day. We talk two or three times a week over the phone. And she always answers my questions. I ask her about my child’s engagement during the lessons, she always tells me if something was bad and she [the child] was not in the right mood. She [my daughter] has this thing, if she [my daughter] does not want then she will not write. The teacher tells me about this so that I can talk with her. [There is] constant communication.

A parent [Int#20] from another school said there was communication as well. Answering the question of whether the defectologist discusses issues about her child together with the teacher, the parent answered: “Yes, they discuss these things. They [the defectologist and the teacher] ask me something together sometimes.” This parent also said: “We have a WhatsApp group chat with our class. If the child hasn’t written down the homework, then we ask to text it directly to us. If we have questions, we ask the teacher and she always helps us. She constantly interacts with us. She is a very good teacher.”

Positive school engagement experience for parents contributes to raising aspirations about the child, confirms one of the parents [Int#20]:

I think everything will be fine [with the child]. I do not hope that tomorrow he’ll become a “superstar”. But before the age of 18, I think that [the child] will reach the [developmental and learning] norm. Well, I will try [to help], we are moving towards it.
The importance of parental engagement with their child’s education in ensuring their children with special needs have access to the education and services they need, is also demonstrated by the experience of psychologists [Int#10] at one of the school-based resource centers:

Parents are the most active participants of inclusive education. … Parents often ask me how to help their children, and they want to attend our [resource] center with their children. Parents ask me how to learn the subjects, how to include the child in the mainstream classroom, or how to engage the child with other children.

The staff of school-based resource centers recognize the importance of working with parents for the child to receive a better education and achieve a higher level of development. “We hold meetings with parents, conduct psychological training. We address the questions they ask,” shared the representative of one center [Int#10]. A research participant from another school [Int#13] discussed the approach employed at their school:

Every October we hold training sessions for parents and guardians of children with a psychologist. And this year we can do something interesting here [at the resource center], for example, a roundtable or training. They [parents] will attend with their children. There are children from the correctional classes and children from regular classes [who will come].

Schools hosting the resource centers do not practice full inclusion. They have some children included in mainstream classes, but there are also special or correctional classes, and children in home education. Thus, the interaction with parents that is hosted by resource centers, at least in two schools, is more oriented towards remedial aspects rather than towards inclusive education of a child in a mainstream class. Nevertheless, it is important that there is communication with parents as the first step. The resource center strengthens the potential for a further move towards better developed and more extensive inclusive education practices.

The importance of a comfortable space at school

All three schools in the study were built at different periods of Nur-Sultan City’s history. A common characteristic of all these buildings and their classrooms is the absence of an area of relaxation for children. Classrooms do not have carpeted corners for younger learners to play and relax in, and there are no couches or puffy seats in the corridors for older students. Resource centers are a different universe in this respect. Each resource center has areas designated for different activities and areas where children work with specialists such as speech therapists, or psychologists. One of these areas is a corner for relaxation where students can sit or lean on pouffes and feel free to rest from their studies. The principal [Int#3] of one of the schools observed:
Children really like it [the resource center]. They rest and relax here. They rest in the sense that here, they are all by themselves. The way they are. And they are free; they feel at ease. And there is no feeling of pressure over them. And we wanted them to feel that they are not disadvantaged by anything. This reveals such qualities in them. … because children have a very active life outside, at home, at school. And indeed, when a child needs to go somewhere so that he can simply put himself in order, to make up his mind and think - they need this resource center. … For example, now a child with Down syndrome is in the 5th grade. We made a system [for studying all subjects in the same classroom] especially for him, so that he does not need to go anywhere and has the same classroom. And he comes here [to the resource center] to have a little fun.

Children like the accommodating environment, confirms one of the teachers [Int#13] of SEN students:

Of course, it’s beneficial. Because it has got some kind of warm atmosphere. Many children do not have that in their homes. Many live in rented apartments and have only small corners to themselves, if any at all. They can come here [to the resource center] to feel that warmth. … They approach and touch everything with such tenderness. … It's great that we have this center.

While the latter observation seems to emphasize social aspects of the educational space, there is an agreement (OECD, 2019) that the physical design of an educational space is important for a child’s engagement in learning. The principal [Int#4] of another school has also noticed that “teachers conduct their correctional classes with their children in there [a resource center] because it has a very convenient and nice interior.”

The fact that teachers find this space appealing is just as important as students liking it because one of the goals of a resource center is to bring teachers and support specialists together. A teacher explains [Int#13]:

When you enter the room, starting from the sign [by the door], it has nice atmosphere. And we can see that children are curious; they want to come in. This is great. It’s even nice to just come here by yourself. For example, when I work with this child here, I feel and work really well. It has a special atmosphere. But I haven’t explored this office yet so I still need to see how it works – what can I do in this office. I need to explore it. This year we are all happy that we have this [resource] room. We proudly tell others that we have such a room. But now we just need to learn how to use this room.

One way the resource center is used, is to ease the transition of home education students to the school environment. A teacher [Int13] says:

I have a child that is on homeschooling and we study here [in the resource center], and for example, during a break, he can sit down to rest, or we can play a ball so that he feels free and comfortable because this is a child who needs to rest from time to time. And this room is very convenient for both studying and resting.
This data suggests that a comfortable physical classroom space is not a trivial issue for creating conditions for inclusive education. It is also true that a single comfortable space in a school accessible to SEN students can enhance their learning. However, educators need to be cautious not to turn using this space into a practice which maintains the segregation of SEN students. One can agree with a teacher who said in this research “we need to learn how to use this room”. It takes the discovery, on the part of the school community of how to best use the resource center so that it does support the larger goal of creating conditions for inclusive education at the school.

A platform for advancing knowledge in the school community

The mission of DARA is to support the inclusion of children with special needs into the broader society. Education is one of the main mechanisms for achieving this goal. Competent teachers supported by a community are the key to good education for all children. There are attempts to engage educators, support professionals and parents in acquiring knowledge relevant for inclusive education process. Although data in this research has not demonstrated that school-based resource centers have fundamentally changed the way school personnel receive professional development training, some participants pointed out that DARA supported resource centers have had some impact on advancing knowledge in the school community.

The inclusive education coordinator [Int#22] at one of the resource centers shared the following:

The [resource] center facilitates seminars of an informative nature. We discuss various diagnoses and how to recognize them as early as possible. We need that because we need to integrate them [SEN children] into society. For example, if we diagnose the child with mental disabilities and deafness as well, then we can support such a child in our [resource] center. We will discuss their disease with teachers and parents. That is important although we do not have special books for them [to read] and to raise the capacity of teachers.

As this coordinator [Int#22] points out, the first step in teacher professional development is often convincing teachers that it is possible: “First of all, teachers do not believe that inclusion can happen [at their school] and it takes time to convince them that it is possible, to educate them. Then, teachers ask for special teaching approaches to educate children with special needs in mainstream classes.”

DARA tries to provide PDP opportunities as described by a speech therapist [Int#6] at another school’s resource center: “Then they [DARA representatives] invited us to a conference and organized an online teleconference with Carol [an expert from the US]. It was a three-day training session.” After this training session, the staff of the resource center better understood how the resource center at school should be organized and equipped.
Another training session provided by experts from the US was focused on explaining the role of a teaching assistant, referred to as a “tutor” in Kazakhstan. It is a relatively new position in Kazakhstan’s schools. Data in this research indicated that the role of this education support professional is often misunderstood. The inclusive education coordinator [Int#11] at the resource center of the same school explained that such training clarified questions about the role of the teaching assistant: “They [US experts] explained that the tutor should not only sit with this child [with special needs] and isolate the child from the others [children and teachers], but he [the teaching assistant] should be somewhere there [in the classroom with others].”

Data in this research showed that school staff also acquire resources themselves [Int#22]: “I think we have had a special training session or just a lecture about working with children who have hearing and vision impairments in particular. But in general, we have online courses, and everyone uses the Internet resources.”

Interviews with staff affiliated with inclusive education resource centers at three schools in Nur-Sultan City show that there is much need for professional development and guidance for schools to be more effective at creating conditions for inclusive education. At the same time, the data also reveals that publicly funded opportunities for professional development available to school staff are limited. The demand for this type of training exceeds the opportunities provided. Therefore, schools and their resource centers need to seek new ways to advance the knowledge in the community. One approach is to look closely into the expertise available among schools themselves and share this expertise on a collaborative basis. Some of the leading inclusive education experts in world, Ainscow and Miles (2009) write – education systems know more than they use. Thus, it would be beneficial for schools in Nur-Sultan City to reflect on what resources are actually available in their own institution and in other similar organizations interested in sharing their expertise on creating conditions for inclusive education.

Socialization of students with special needs

Another way that participants believed the resource centers positively contribute to the development of inclusive education is by providing extracurricular activities. The activities described by the participants were not of an academic nature and typically involved the whole school. These activities provided opportunities to support the socialization of students with special needs with their same aged peers and were an informal way for students to build new understandings of differences and diversity.

One of parents [Int#12] shared this experience:

The resource center, they gather us for some events...Last year, [children with special needs] and children from [a mainstream] class participated in the exhibition. They painted something; then they went horse riding. It is not only for our children [with special needs] but it’s a school-wide event where everyone participates.
Such activities help children with special needs to become “more open and sociable”. But the parent also thinks that there is the contribution of the work of psychologist as well: “She [my child] has made friends. That is, before she had no friends. But here, I think that this is probably because of a psychologist that she now is able to communicate with other children without any difficulties.” The socialization aspect is important for the child to integrate in the school community and feel the sense of belonging to the school. The parent continues:

Because when she [the child] has friends, she comes home [from school] in such a good mood. For example, she says - I played with Camila today, or I played with Yana today. When her friends miss the classes, she comes in with "Camila is sick," or "Yana was not in the class today." She is in a completely different mood. That is why it [having friends] is important.

Extracurricular activities organized by resource centers offer a way for children with special needs to diversify their experiences. The principal [Int#3] of one of the schools reported: “They [children from correctional classes] go to other schools, they also observe how they work, and behave themselves in a new environment. Kids like it too.” A psychologist from another school’s resource center shared their approach at developing the acceptance of diversity among all children at school:

We go to the classrooms during the class hours. We get permission from the subject teachers, class advisors and the school administration, and, then we conduct the training [for all children]. We have different trainings, with balls and other things. And we include those children [with special needs], we don’t separate them, the inclusive children. And [other] children’s attitudes become better.

These interactions between children work and help to develop empathy among the school community, observed one of the principals [Int#4]:

I told you that even 10 years ago I could not imagine those typical children would help a child with cerebral palsy, or even befriend the child, who has an intellectual disability - that those children [without special needs] would care for children with special needs.

Extracurricular activities for children with special needs provide the opportunity for general members of the society to be exposed to interactions with these children and become more welcoming of diversity. The speech therapist [Int#6] at one of the centers says:

… we always go somewhere with the children ... it always brings me pleasure when we go to different centers. These are entertainment centers, theaters, sports clubs. And when we say that we have arrived, we are always greeted with pleasure.
These examples demonstrate that school-based resource centers are having an influence on the development of more positive attitudes, values, and beliefs towards inclusive education within the school community and beyond.

Flexibility in collaboration at school

Collaboration in inclusive education is a constant work in progress, involving the setting of achievable goals for a student and following up on how these goals are achieved. School-based resource centers enable flexibility in how various professionals work together for the benefit of children with special needs. The concept of DARA resource centers calls for a discussion between teachers, the staff of a resource center, and the school administration every time a question emerges. This process needs to be flexible. The flexibility and specific goal orientation differentiate it from a Concilium, which is a formal and infrequent process that is documented in the protocol of the meeting [Int#1]. In the format of school-based resource centers, it is expected that inclusive education coordinators and teachers meet to discuss the progress of children in focus every week or as questions appear.

This model of flexible collaboration was revealed in an interview with one of inclusive education coordinators [Int#17]:

I see the vice principals, the deputy directors of primary education almost every other day. We have a very good relationship. I can call [them] at any time to ask for something, and they will support it. That is, they help me as much as they can. They are also interested [in having a resource center]. They are happy to welcome children with special needs [at the school]. For example, children with cochlear implants, children with cerebral palsy, children who are intellectually able, but with some minor delays… the vice principals of primary grades, they are very open and have a very welcoming aura so that any parent can freely come to them for advice, without any “oh, you are a head teacher or administration” kind of attitude. There is no such thing. They are all on the same level, they accept everyone…. Even if there are some problems, for example, problems at school, then the vice principals will immediately know about this. They contact me immediately. And we create this commission [for psychological pedagogical consultation], that is, a psychologist, me, the teachers of those children, we call the parents and discuss…. Teachers approach me with their questions, but not so often. And sometimes when the parents have a certain child [with specific characteristics], they are already specialists themselves. And, sometimes they [teachers] communicate with parents, and parents can sometimes prompt, say something, what is best [for the child], what problems the child has, what is a better way to solve them. But I [the coordinator] also assist. Sometimes the vice principal asks me to approach a certain teacher or parent and talk to them … sometimes I sit in the classroom [and observe the class]. For example, last year I sat and identified children [who need additional assistance], I observed the behavior [of these children]. Then they [teachers] can come to me and ask [to come and conduct an observation] … Also, vice principals ask teachers to write a list of some problematic children, and last year we examined those children together with
psychologists… [Teachers] they understand when this or that child has some problems and if it is difficult to reach out to parents, because this also happens sometimes, then we take measures [at school]. Our [psychological pedagogical consultation] commission here, including the school administration and us, a defectologist, psychologist, and the teachers try to come up with a solution by ourselves.

This school collaboration approach, as described by an inclusive education coordinator who is developing a school-based resource center in a mainstream school of Nur-Sultan City, is seen as a successful way to strengthen inclusive education processes and is an example for others to learn from.
Challenges for the work of school-based resource centers and inclusive education development

Despite the strengths described in the previous section, this research has revealed several challenges for the work of school-based inclusive education resource centers in neighborhood schools of Nur-Sultan City. The challenges include: understanding of the concept of inclusive education; understanding of the concept of a school-based resource center; the management, operation and monitoring of the resource center’s impact; the collaboration between teachers, parents and support specialists; practices by the school leadership, teachers, support specialists, and parents; the availability of resources; and insufficient national policy guidance. The following section will discuss these areas for improvement in more detail.

Understanding inclusive education

Interviews with many participants in this research revealed that their understanding of the concept of inclusive education is still being formed. In the view of many participants, inclusive education is associated with the socialization of SEN children as the quote from one the resource center’s psychologists [Int#10] illustrates: “Generally, we say that inclusive [education] is when all children are together, that is why the children socialize; they need to adapt to the environment and socialize.”

An overarching vision of inclusive education that the school should be aiming to achieve was generally absent. Elements of some acceptance of SEN students in the school environment were treated as if they were part inclusive education as this fragment from the interview with one of the school principal’s [Int#4] shows:

Q: Children who are homeschooled, how often do they come into the regular school?
A: When they want, parents only have to write a statement. Our three students [who are on home education] attend when they want.
Q: When they want to? So, there is no regular schedule?
A: No, the teachers go to them [at home] according to a schedule, which is agreed with the parents. … And they [homeschooled children] attend school whenever they want. They can attend any lesson, they can participate even without a notebook and just sit, listen, look at their friends.

This quote reveals that there was no genuine inclusion of homeschooled SEN students into the education process at this school. These students are allowed to visit the school, but without any goals for what the child needs to achieve during their school attendance. They are not part of the school community, but merely visitors with an open invitation. This is not inclusive education.
The approach, as illustrated in the quote, is a formalistic approach with no effective result towards inclusion or improving outcomes for children.

Data in this research revealed that inclusive education for many schools is experiential learning as this quote from an interview with one of the principals [Int#4] shows:

Officially, we started to introduce inclusive education three years ago. But we had a lot of correctional classes before that, and sometimes there were no such classes in a grade parallel. Even children with a delay in psychological development were put in mainstream classes, and the teacher tried to find individual approaches towards them.

This quote also reveals some mis-conceptualization of what inclusive education is. Inclusive education should be a systematic approach to include SEN children in mainstream classes in a way that they are on an equal footing with other students. It cannot be a once in a while event when there are not enough SEN students to create a correction class. For inclusive education to develop in mainstream schools, there needs to be a shared understanding of the purpose and process of inclusive education.

Understanding the concept of school-based resource center

Evidence in this research shows that similarly to the concept of inclusive education; the notion of what a resource center is continues to be in the process of being formed. As one of the research participants aptly stated – it is necessary to learn how to use this facility at school. The usage of resource centers will depend on how the concept is understood.

The vision of DARA, when supporting the establishment of resources centers at neighborhood schools, was to provide a venue for a dialogue between teachers and support specialists about how to better include SEN students in mainstream classrooms. Interviews with school staff, however, suggest that this purpose of resource centers is not completely understood in that way. For example, a psychologist [Int#10] shared:

We explain [to others] that inclusive education is added to the school according to an order [a reference to some document] and that such a resource center was opened because of the increase in the number of inclusive children [children with special needs].

This explanation emphasizes the formal justification for opening the resource center but does not focus on the goals that a school-based resource center needs to achieve.

The lack of a clear message about the mission of a school-based resource center leads to distortions of the vision for resource centers, as initially intended by DARA, to serve as a platform for a goal-oriented dialogue between teachers, support specialists, and parents. Some parents interviewed [Int#14] had little to no awareness about the resource center and its work at the school:
I don’t even know what to say about the resource center…. Well, of course, it’s good that they are doing something, but everything works badly. Still, a lot of work needs to be done…. Probably not everyone in the school is aware that we have such a center. And that is why we need that teacher [with us], and to go to the resource center and ask [for information] in there.

Another parent [Int#12] at the same school provided similar feedback:

I cannot answer this question [about whether the child uses the resource center on regular basis], because I do not know. I know that additional classes are being conducted with a speech therapist, a psychologist, a defectologist, but to be honest, I do not know where and how it is done…. You asked about some meetings, seminars [conducted for parents] but it was not the case [that such events have been conducted].

The fact that there is little communication between stakeholders about the pedagogical significance of the resource center is indicative that at least two resource centers are being used not as much for pedagogical support but rather for remediation. Such evidence is exemplified in this statement by the coordinator [Int#22] of one of the resource centers: “We do have two working hours three days a week. During this period teachers sometimes bring such children [with special needs] and use this room. Children usually play here, and teachers usually try to support them.”

The use of a school-based resource center as a place of socialization that is often oriented towards homeschooled children with special educational needs is another more prevalent function described by research participants. A psychologist [Int#10] stated the following:

I invite them [homeschooled SEN children] to the resource center once a week. I know that they have a certificate which says that they have to study at home. But, despite that, I invite them to this place to make them see, learn, motivate and interest them.

While the advantage of this approach is that homeschooled children are welcomed to the school, this approach does not foster inclusive education if there is no clear plan for eventually transitioning these students to full inclusion at school.

A school-based resource center can have multiple uses, but there needs to be a clear main goal and strategy for how the center works to create conditions favorable for inclusive education at schools. In the three schools researched, the clarity of a mission and vision for the resource center was absent. Thus, the impact of the resource center on advancing inclusive education at these schools is limited.

Management, operations and monitoring of the resource center

This study has uncovered an absence of a coherent and articulate vision of how a school-based resource center should be managed, operated, and monitored. To achieve such a vision, there needs
to a greater strategic engagement of school administration, which has the authority to drive the inclusive education strategy at the school.

At the time of writing of this report, the administration at each of the three schools seemed to engage with the resource center more as another classroom with a schedule rather than a resource hub for implementing the school’s inclusive education strategy. This statement by one of the principals [Int#3] illustrates the situation:

We constantly work with them [the resource center]…. Well, you know, somehow, it’s impossible to separate this work [from other work at school] because it all comes together. When you come to work in the morning all the rooms are open, and these children are studying there. It’s all observed, and everything is according to the schedule. And it’s the same whether I go to the resource center or to a physics classroom. I begin my work day and everything is near.

When asked what has changed after the resource center was opened at their school, the principal of another school [Int#4] said: “First of all, there is additional need for planning that appeared, yes, of inclusion. But otherwise I cannot say that something has fundamentally changed.”

One reason for the absence of strategic engagement could be that these schools did not have a clear inclusive education strategy at the time of the study. Another reason for the limited engagement of the school administration with the resource center might be the fact that a resource center was not created by the initiative of the school. The school administration in all three schools accepted the resource center after it was proposed by DARA. Therefore, it might be that the school administration views the resource center at their school as a somewhat external structure. A representative [Int#5] of one of the resource centers recalled: “There were a lot of problems. Firstly, the [school] administration is reluctant to cooperate. They do not fully understand that first of all it is being done [the resource center] for them [the school].”

Not having a full sense of ownership of the resource center, the school administration is limiting the impact it could have on advancing inclusive education conditions at the school. If the school administration views the resource center as a hub of expertise provided in a systematic manner, its impact could be more substantial. At the time of this study, the interaction between the resource center and the school appeared to resemble the interaction between the guest and the host.

An answer of a research participant [Int#6] of how the work of the resource center is organized revealed lack of clarity about who is responsible for managing the resource center: “… that's hard to tell. Because this center functions due to DARA.” Asked further about who organized and monitored the work of the center, this participant also referred to the scheduling: “The vice-principal for the educational process [makes a schedule]. She is responsible for the schedule, and we [psychologist and speech therapist] follow this schedule.” This data indicates that not only the school administration, but the staff of the resource center do not have a clear concept of how the center is positioned within the school.

Interviews with teachers at the three schools showed somewhat similar experiences of using the resource center when there was some help needed or activities provided in relation to the
SEN children they teach. One of the teachers interviewed [Int#13] admitted to not having any contact with the coordinator of the resource center because she was just “starting to explore all the opportunities this room [the resource center] can provide in terms of working with children, so that I could prepare better lessons.” This teacher was open to engaging with the resource center, but she did not have any information as to how that would happen:

Well, I guess we need to have more meetings. We somehow have not had such a meeting yet…. Maybe they will organize some events where we [teachers] can participate with children. Or they may come to our lessons, observe and give some advice.

This lack of information about the possibilities the resource center offers was indicative of the center not being clearly positioned in the context of activities at the school and a lack of communication around it.

It is advised to address the question about the management, operations, and monitoring of the resource center among the school administration, the staff of the resource center, and DARA. Once there is full clarity with each party about their role in relation to the management, work and results of the resource center, it will be possible to communicate more effectively with the teachers and parents about how the center can support an inclusive education process at their school.

Collaboration between teachers, parents and support specialists

The study has shown that while there is willingness on the part of teachers, parents, and support specialists to collaborate, the process of collaboration needs to be better coordinated and facilitated. Each of the three resource centers seemed to not have a clear and consistently implemented strategy of communication with teachers and parents. Interviews with research participants showed that there is no clear approach as to who initiates such collaboration, the frequency of collaboration and on what basis. It was also evident from the data that the concept of collaboration is understood to mean different things to different stakeholders.

In some instances, participants equated collaboration to simple communication, as this quote from a parent (Int#20) interview shows:

We have a WhatsApp group chat with our class. If the child hasn’t written down the homework, then we ask it to be texted directly to us. If we have questions, we ask the teacher and she always helps. She constantly interacts with us. She is a very good teacher.

In another instance collaboration was understood as holding workshops, this statement by the resource center’s coordinator (Int#22) indicated:

At the beginning I used to conduct workshops for teachers almost every Saturday. On Saturdays the school has no classes, and the teachers can focus on seminars or they can learn. I have developed some modules for them. They include the description of diseases
and disabilities as they are defined here in Kazakhstan. We draw heavily on the medical approach.

Sharing literature and knowledge on some specific topics with teachers was also viewed as collaboration:

We [the resource center] have two working hours three days a week. During this period teachers sometimes bring such [SEN] children and use this room [the resource center]…. They [teachers] ask me for some adapted literature specially designed for handicapped children, for them to learn more easily.

While communication and small group learning are aspects of collaboration, for it to bring benefits there needs to be a joint task with a shared goal for all people involved in this collaboration. An example of collaboration in the context of inclusive education would be weekly co-working-type meetings with teachers, support specialists, and parents assessing the progress of a student towards some learning and development goals and developing an individual education plan with detailed goals to enable the student to achieve a particular task. This is not exactly a Concilium approach as practiced in Kazakhstan. Concilium refers to a formalized infrequent meeting to assess the progress of a SEN student and to suggest the way forward. The collaboration of teachers, support specialists and parents to develop an individual education plan (IEP) is different because an IEP is a working document to be modified and adjusted as frequently as needed to support a student’s learning on an ongoing basis. For collaboration to be effective, there needs to be a team effort to achieve specific goals. The fragmented and individualistic interactions of stakeholders are not enough to achieve goals that are aimed to achieve the best student learning. School based resource centers have the capacity to support collaboration for the development and learning of SEN students. Evidence in this research suggests that this capacity is underutilized. There was only one example of a highly goal-oriented collaboration in this research, which is described in the section “Flexibility in collaboration” in this report.

The need for collaboration between teachers, support specialists, and parents is massive. The capacity of these three parties to engage in student learning goal-oriented collaboration, however, needs to be advanced. A major challenge to achieve this goal is the readiness of teachers to accept students with special needs. As the inclusive education coordinator [Int#11] at one of the resource centers explained:

Many are opposed [to inclusive education] because they don’t know much about this child [a child with SEN] and how to work with him. And they all have a fear in their eyes. They are against it at the beginning, but then we explain to the teacher. There are no such problems in primary school. But in middle school, teachers differ from primary school teachers. Because primary school teachers have been working with these [SEN] children for four years, and they are already used to working with them, they know their psychology and emotions as if they were their own children. And their approach is better [to SEN children]. But middle and high school teachers treat children as students. They don’t have similar
relations as in the case of primary school teachers. They conduct their classes like robots, according to plan, and that’s it.

This quote illustrates the need for inclusive education training across all grade levels even though there are only a few SEN students in the first grade. As children grow, they move up the grade levels, and teachers need to be prepared to receive and teach them as effectively as possible. Collaboration is a way to advance this competence among teachers. For example, a student-oriented collaboration between teachers who will teach a SEN student in Grade 5 needs to start while the student is in Grade 4. This collaboration team needs to involve the student’s current primary school teachers and their support specialists, so that teachers who will take over teaching the student in Grade 5 are already familiar with the characteristics of the student and know what goals have been stated for the student and what approaches can be used to achieve these goals. School based resource centers can facilitate such collaboration to ensure successful transitions between the grade levels for SEN students. The data in this research did not reveal that such collaboration practices were widely practiced. Thus, it is an area for improvement.

Another concept requiring consideration is teacher collaboration with parents. Consistency in teaching and learning approaches applied at school and followed up at home facilitate the development and learning of every child, including children with special needs. Therefore, it is very important that parents are part of a collaborative team that plans the path of student learning. This gives parents the opportunity to better understand the education process, and parents can follow-up with school practices in the home environment as well. Such consistency facilitates the success of inclusive education.

Although this section did not emphasize the role of the school administration within school collaboration for student learning, the engagement and support of the school’s leadership is a prerequisite for effective collaboration process between teachers, support staff and parents.

Practices by the school leadership, teachers, support specialists, and parents

Role of the school leadership

The responsibility for developing the school as an inclusive educational institution rests on the principal and the school’s leadership team. If the school’s leadership does not develop and implement strategies for achieving this goal, the movement towards inclusive education will be problematic.

The data in this study has shown that there is a need to advance the awareness among the school leadership about inclusive education overall. Because this understanding is still developing, the potential of school-based resource centers is underutilized in the three schools studied in this research.
Even though the data in this research indicates a lack of understanding of inclusive education benefits among some members of the school leadership, it also shows that these leaders are asking questions about it “how to make children with special needs educated; how is it possible? What is the reason to educate and include them? Why not provide education to them separately like during Soviet Union” [Int#22]. It could be important to seize even this limited opportunity of dialogue to educate the school leadership in Nur-Sultan City about inclusive education, its benefits and processes. This, however, cannot be achieved by the school-based resource centers’ inclusive education professionals alone.

It is important that the Education Authority of Nur-Sultan City prioritizes the professional development of school administration on matters of inclusive education. It is especially relevant in the context of per-capita school funding. Data in this research [Int#1] shows that the leadership of schools may not use per-capita resources allocated for SEN children to include them in education processes in schools. This question requires a special focus on the question of providing goal oriented professional development on the process and benefits of inclusive education to the school leadership. Research on mainstream schools which successfully practice inclusive education in Kazakhstan confirms the central role of the school’s principal (Rouse & Lapham, 2013) and vice-principal (IAC, 2017) in developing the school as an inclusive education institution.

Role of teachers

Interviews conducted for this research show that many teachers grapple with questions similar to those posed by members of the school leadership – “why do we need to include such children [with special needs] into mainstream classes? We do not know how to teach to them and what to teach [them]” [Int#5].

Teachers “still lack knowledge in this field [of inclusive education]” [Int#10]. A representative of one of the resource centers [Int#5] at the school says: “Teachers do not believe that inclusion can happen, and it takes time to convince them that it is possible, to educate them.” This situation is understandable because just like the school administration, an average teacher in Nur-Sultan City has not received any or has received only limited training on how to approach diversity in the classroom. It is only recently that pre-service teachers’ education programs in Kazakhstan have started providing content about inclusive education. Like the case of the school leadership, teachers of mainstream schools need professional development opportunities to become more competent and knowledgeable about the inclusive education process.

As this quote shows, parents also recognize the reluctance of teachers [Int#14]:

I think that they simply do not know how to work with such special children. I think this is the problem, that he [the student] really has some special needs and they [teachers] need to accommodate that. For example, physical education. He [the child] went to physical education for two years. Now the teacher says – no, I don’t want him in my class for
physically education because I don’t want to be responsible if anything happens. What if something or someone hit him, or he gets injured …. I don't want to take the responsibility for you [the child].

This quote shows that beyond skills, the issue lies in the attitude of teachers of not wanting the responsibility. The conversation, however, should not go this way, and a parent should not be put in a position that requires them to beg the teacher to include their child. It is the obligation of a teacher to teach all students in the class. It is an obligation of the school administration to make sure that all teachers are professional and refrain from having a discriminatory attitude towards diverse students.

If the school leadership is interested in addressing this issue, there are various models that have been developed for school-based teacher training, and the implementation of these new pedagogical practices can be further supported through the collaboration of all relevant parties at school, including the resource center. Teachers who know how to teach and interact with diverse students are the key to the success of inclusive education at any school and should be encouraged to share their knowledge.

Role of support specialists

The first years of school-based resource centers’ operations revealed that support specialists who are staff at these centers also need to advance their knowledge and skills to work with a diverse SEN student population in inclusive education environments.

When creating school-based resource centers, it was witnessed that specialists’ such as special education teachers and psychologists do not know how to work with children who have complex functional impairments such as a cochlear implant, cerebral palsy, or autism [Int#1]. Support specialists were facing similar challenges to teachers to better understand how to engage with SEN students, as this statement of a speech therapist [Int#6] illustrates:

I graduated from our common university, which did not even anticipate the idea that there could be anything like inclusion at all. And for me, it was a problem that there was a child who is completely different from other children in the class. At first, I could not understand this, even visually. … It was very important for me to get special education in order to understand this whole process and help our children [at school]. And [then] it became easier for me to work with them [SEN children].

One of the psychologists interviewed shared a similar experience and said that there is a need to further develop the knowledge of how to work with children who have autism. An inclusive education coordinator [Int#18] at another school echoed this view: “… probably, we need more courses. Additional courses for everyone where practitioners can share their practical experience. We need more training on various diagnoses.”
Similarly, there were observations about the need for the specific training of teaching assistants, who, in this context, are called tutors. A representative of a resource center shared the following [Int#10]:

We have tutors who help a lot. But sometimes tutors are not that well qualified (…) For example, our tutors are our schoolteachers. They don’t have special education or training. We work according to what we have [and know], and we search the internet for additional information.

In many ways, support specialists are in a similar position to school administration and teachers, as, until recently, most of them had not been exposed to inclusive educational approaches. Thus, for resource centers to increase the impact of inclusive education, staff affiliated with the resource centers, along with the school administration and teachers, need to be provided with opportunities for professional development.

Role of parents

The school community consists of all children and all parents. Thus, the task for the school’s administration and teachers is to educate the community of parents about the value and the process of inclusive education.

In 2015, Kazakhstan ratified the UN Conventions on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Kazinform, 2015). By this act, Kazakhstan is committed to policies of the non-discrimination of people with special needs, thus, constituting it as a national law. Public schools are expected to uphold the laws of Kazakhstan and this is now one of the laws. Education diminishes prejudice; hence schools need to educate parents about the nature of inclusive education.

Parents of children with special needs also need education on how to support their children in the educational process. Representatives of one of the resource centers [Int#10; Int#11] expressed that parents of SEN children need counseling on how to deal with the psychological and emotional pressures they are experiencing. There are models for parent support groups which can be implemented with the support of both the school and the resource center.

Availability of resources

The data in this study revealed that school-based resource centers were created in circumstances of austerity. There was limited availability of professionals, time for working with SEN students, funding, and material resources.

One of the most significant constraints for inclusive education development is the limited availability of qualified support specialists to work at mainstream schools. Specialists such as speech therapists and psychologists who work at the three resource centers in Nur-Sultan City
often share a workload, each working part-time. They also work in at least two schools at the same time. This type of work arrangement is conditioned by the laws of employment in schools in Kazakhstan as well as the available funding at the time of this study.

Insufficient access to support specialists is felt by parents of SEN children. One parent said: [Int#14]: “There is a lack of specialists like speech therapists, psychologists, even ordinary teachers. And we don’t even have a speech therapist at this school. There’s no such position. There was one, but [the specialist] left.” A parent [Int#12] at another school shared a similar impression of needing more developmental support: “We [the parent and the child] would like more direct classes with a psychologist, with a speech therapist, with a defectologist. These sessions serve as a foundation for us.” At the moment these interactions take place only once a week.

Some of the teachers who were interviewed acknowledged that the excessive paperwork that they sometimes need to complete, takes away the time they would have to spend with students. One of the teachers [Int#13] shared the following:

I just started working with [the name of the student]. We literally had two or three lessons. And I had practically no time with all these reports that I have to prepare... Now that I have completed all those duties [of reporting], I will look for ways I can use this room [resource center].

Another reported issue was the availability of teaching assistants or tutors. This position is very modestly compensated and, thus, these vacancies are not attractive: “…no one wants to work in that position because the salary is low” [Int#10]. However, teachers would benefit from this support because in inclusive classrooms with many students “it's becoming more difficult to work” [Int#13].

The first year after the school-based resource centers had been set up, the risk of high resource center staff turn-over, including that of the inclusive education coordinator position was evident [Int#1]. Since the inclusive education coordinator is the main person organizing the work of the resource center, the existence of this structure becomes at risk if the coordinator leaves, and there is no one to take over the work. The school leadership may decide not to fill the vacancy and discontinue the resource center’s operations.

According to regulations in Kazakhstan, there is no special “inclusive education coordinator” position in schools [Int#1; Int#2]. Therefore, in the resource centers studied, coordinators were either a speech therapist, a special education teacher, or some other support specialist. The Ministry of Education and Science has no plans to create a special position called “inclusive education coordinator” in mainstream schools [Int#2]. In successful inclusive education schools in Kazakhstan, vice-principals coordinate this process [Int#21]. The ministry’s intention was to require that the role of inclusive education coordinator at all schools is taken on by one of the vice-principals. Even though there was an agreement among various participants that the inclusive education coordinator position does not need to be a separate one and the school’s vice-principal can fulfill this task, there were concerns that this may not happen because the school leadership may not support or believe in inclusive education [Int#1].
In addition to issues related to the availability of resources as described above, the participants of this research also talked about the need for better material supplies. In the words of one of the coordinators of inclusive education [Int#22]:

The support [to children] could be better if we purchased more equipment. Currently we have only very few toys, one instrument such as tool for stretching, and one mat to play on. We need more tools for children and special methodologies to teach to parents.

It also surfaced that although there is a concerted effort to support students, the support for teachers in the classroom was very low. Teachers were not adequately provided with the necessary support and resources. This was confirmed by this quote from an interview with a parent [Int#14] who said:

Kids like him [the SEN student] require a lot of additional support. But there’s no supplementary support from the teachers or the school to do so. But then again that [resource] room has only recently been opened. Maybe it will work. I hope that it will start working.

Indeed, at the time of this study, the resource centers at the three schools had been operational for only one to two years. At the same time, issues identified in this early phase of these resource centers’ work need to be addressed to enable an ongoing systematic movement towards inclusive education.

Need for clearer national policy guidance

Even though several national policy documents such as the Law on Education (2007) and the state program for educational development (Ministry of Education and Science, 2016) stipulate characteristics and goals for inclusive education in Kazakhstan, schools have a different understanding of this policy.

Policy implementation requires interpreting the letter of law in order to apply it. Since it is not possible to stipulate all the implementation details in laws and regulations, easily comprehensible national guidelines for implementing inclusive education can be of help to schools. Such guidelines may clarify the processes schools need to follow in order to succeed in implementing inclusive education. Schools need guidance on how to allocate per-capita funding in order to foster the inclusion of the children and decrease the number of those still being educated at home [Int#1].

Currently the Center of Inclusive Education at the National Academy of Education named after Y. Altynsarin is designated to provide guidance to schools on questions of inclusive education. This includes the task of providing guidance for the development of inclusive education resource centers [Int#2]. The data in this research shows that the guidance for mainstream schools
on how to become inclusive education organizations should be intensified. Ideally, this guidance could be combined with the sufficient availability of professional development courses for school administration who then can work on systematic inclusive education-oriented changes at their schools.
Recommendations for strengthening the impact of school-based resource centers

The data in this research shows that the DARA supported school-based inclusive education centers have contributed to advancing conditions for inclusive education in schools. However, this impact is more comparable to planting the seed or the idea of inclusion. There are many areas needing improvement. This section in the report offers conceptual recommendations for how to heighten the impact of school-based resource centers on creating inclusive education conditions at mainstream schools.

Schools

- The administration of a mainstream school needs to be proactive in learning about inclusive education processes at other schools in Kazakhstan that have already accumulated substantial experience educating children with special needs in mainstream classrooms.
- When learning from the experience of other schools, the school leadership needs to reflect on what changes are needed to start or improve the inclusive education process at their organization.
- The leadership of schools needs to approach inclusive education development as organizational learning in a collaborative manner, engaging the entire school community. A strategy of how to best organize this organizational learning needs to be developed. The message about inclusive education should build on the strengths to be gained from implementing inclusive education at the school.
- The leadership of the schools where resource centers have been created based on the school’s initiative or with a support of an NGO needs to re-think, together with teachers and the staff of these resource centers, how these centers can be used more strategically to enhance the inclusive education process.
- The school leadership needs to reflect on the management structure and the process for achieving the goals of inclusive education. Ideas for reorganizing the structure and process need to be discussed with partners within and outside the school. These partners can be teachers, inclusive education support professionals, parents, and representatives of NGOs, or other organizations working to support inclusive education in Kazakhstan.
- The school administration needs to create a systematic and goal-oriented process to enable teachers and other school staff to advance their competence in working with students with special needs.
- The school administration needs to make an effort to develop a culture of ongoing collaboration at the school. At the heart of this process, there should be goal-oriented
collaboration between teachers, staff of the resource center, the school administration, and parents. The goal of this collaboration should be the improvement of student development and learning.

- The school administration needs to build relationships with parents of SEN students as equal partners in the inclusive education process. The school administration needs to educate all parents in the school community about the benefits and processes of inclusive education.

Municipality

- The local government needs to prioritize inclusive educational development at the mainstream schools. As a priority, the development of inclusive education needs to be reflected in the municipality funding of relevant professional development programs for educators and support professionals who work at mainstream schools.
- There needs to be PDP opportunities for the leadership of all schools to advance the awareness about inclusive education process and outcomes. The school leadership drives the change at the school. If the school leadership is not knowledgeable or educated on the subject, they will not be as successful at creating conditions for inclusive education at their school.
- There needs to be PDP opportunities for inclusive education support professionals who work at mainstream schools which implement inclusive education processes. The focus of this PDP should be decided in consultation with school representatives and support specialists who have expert knowledge about the needs of an improved inclusive education process in schools.
- Each municipality needs to have an effective communication process with mainstream schools about any other support needed or available to enhance inclusive education at the schools in that municipality.

National level policies

- There needs to be proper inclusive education implementation guidance at the national level. This policy guidance should provide brief and helpful explanations and recommendations to schools on how to implement different national policies pertaining to inclusive education.
- There needs to be national policy guidance on how school administration needs to allocate per-capita education funding to achieve the goals of inclusive education.
- The Ministry of Education and Science must earmark funding specifically for the PDP of educators and support specialists who work with mainstream schools implementing
inclusive education to educate students with special needs in mainstream classrooms. At the moment, quotas for PDP are allocated to all support specialists and educators in the country, without distinguishing whether an educator or a support professional works at a mainstream school practicing inclusive education or not.
Conclusions

This report presents the findings of a study focused on how school-based inclusive education resource centers established with the support from the DARA Foundation in three mainstream schools of Nur-Sultan City have facilitated the creation of conditions for inclusive education. At the time of this study, the resource centers had only recently been established and had been operating in the study locations for about one year.

The data in this research demonstrates the positive impact of school-based inclusive education resource centers in creating conditions for inclusive education in neighborhood mainstream schools in Nur-Sultan City. At the same time, the magnitude of this impact can be compared to planting a seed for inclusive education. Resource centers have supported the emergence and development of an understanding and implementation of inclusive education. At the same time, this understanding and practice needs further development.

This research has shown that school administration plays a crucial role in enabling a more effective way to work and a more positive impact of such a resource center on developing inclusive education in schools. If the administration of the school has a clear understanding and vision for inclusive education, it can better promote this vision to the teachers and the broader school community, and work with the staff of the resource center in more productive ways. The effectiveness of the resource center depends on how engaged it is in supporting the inclusion of children with special needs in mainstream classes.

In many instances, this research has shown that school-based resource centers are used as a point of entry to schools for homeschooled children with special needs. While this can be a good start, there needs to be further goals for bringing SEN students into the mainstream classes. The inclusion of children with special needs in mainstream classes is also a way to cultivate an acceptance of diversity within society as other students learn to work with peers with diverse needs.

At the time of this research, the resource centers at the three schools studied seemed to have a predominantly remedial function. The aspect of supporting an ongoing collaboration between support professionals, teachers, parents and school administration for the benefit of a student’s learning was less obvious. However, this collaboration is central to the impact of a resource center on inclusive education development in schools.

The understanding of the concept of collaboration itself was somewhat problematic. It seemed to be limited to communication and some educational activities conducted by professionals at the resource center. This does not capture all the possibilities of true collaboration. For inclusive education to be effective in supporting SEN student learning, there needs to be goal oriented and practical day-to-day collaboration between all the parties mentioned above.

Despite the different areas for improvement in the work towards and context for the way DARA supported school-based resource centers work, this research shows that resource centers have, in many ways, been instrumental in encouraging mainstream schools in Nur-Sultan City to engage in inclusive education practices. The work of these centers has prompted questions about working with SEN children in mainstream educational settings. The work of these centers has
provided the basis for a discussion about how these schools are succeeding with the implementation of inclusive education. Thus, it is a good start – the seed of inclusive education has been planted. Now it is the task of schools to make sure that it grows.

References


e-\-learning\-environments/

Appendix 1. Anonymized list of research participants

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Appendix 2. Literature review

Introduction

Despite a well-developed body of international research on inclusive education, most of this literature review primarily reflects the Western experience. There remain many countries where inclusive education is a relatively new term and not clearly defined. When it comes to the reform and development of educational practices such as inclusion, the experiences of western contexts are useful to some degree in understanding many of the challenges. Objectives such as creating a shared vision across all dimensions of a school context (Avramidis, Bayliss, & Burden, 2000; Giangreco, 1997), ongoing monitoring and appraisal of school systems and structures (Ainscow, 1999), and the involvement of teaching staff in the process of change (Jelas & Ali, 2014; Koay, 2014; Janney, Snell, Beers, & Raynes, 1995) are some of the primary challenges that have emerged from the literature. It is also understood that school leadership plays a key role in facilitating many of these objectives (Ainscow, 1995; Dorczak, 2011). This literature review will discuss some of the key challenges that have emerged from research across a number of contexts as they relate to reforms and the implementation of ways to support the development of inclusive education.

Culture and inclusion

There are a number of educational approaches described in the literature as “inclusive”, however, often, these models or practices that are understood as being “inclusive” in one context will be described as integrated, segregated, or even excluded in another (Shelvin, Winter, & Flynn, 2013). As the manner in which inclusive education is understood and enacted is dependent on context, culture has an important influence on these understandings. Kazakhstan’s position between Asia and Europe has resulted in competing paradigms of understanding and defining inclusive education. Additionally, inclusive education in Kazakhstan has emerged from the Soviet educational approach of “defectology”. This approach can be best described as a medicalized and segregated version of what many western countries understand as “special education”. As a result, there is some confusion between historical and contemporary definitions of inclusive education, leading to the fragmentation of recent educational reforms and a limited understanding of the concept. Such a limited understanding of the concept of inclusive education has been described by UNESCO (2005) as one of the major challenges towards its effective implementation. UNESCO views inclusion more broadly as “a dynamic approach of responding positively to pupil diversity and of seeing individual differences not as problems, but as opportunities for enriching learning” (UNESCO, 2005, p.12). When attempting to successfully implement inclusive school practices, it is important to understand the fundamental model most citizens are operating from – a medical, a social, or a rights-based view (Hodkinson, 2007). For many decades, the people of
Kazakhstan have been taught to view disability through the lens of a medical model. Those who hold this view see individuals who are disabled as “those individuals with physical, sensory and cognitive impairments”, (Dartington, Miller, & Gwynne, 1981) and individuals that are perceived as less capable and not as deserving of the same opportunities as able-bodied citizens (Gaad, 2004). Like most reforms, educational change involves moving the general populace towards a different way of thinking and is, inherently, a slow process as it is changing the current culture. For example, in Kazakhstan the language that continues to be used in terms of the education of students with additional needs is a barrier. Terms such as “correctional classes” or children with SEN needing to be educated by “Defectologists” support a mode of thinking that is a cultural barrier unto itself. This medical model of disability embodies the overarching idea that children with additional educational needs need to be corrected in order to participate in a regular classroom with their peers, or at worse, they are viewed as defective. Attitudes towards any group of people are formulated inside the home and are further entrenched in one’s belief system through the “norming” process of school systems (Bourdieu, 1998).

The resource model as a support service

In other Asian contexts like Hong Kong, inclusive education is understood as the acceptance of placing children with “mild” special education needs into mainstream schools, but who are routinely “pulled-out” for specialized assistance (Pun Wong, Pearson, & Lo, 2004). Typically, support is provided by a special education teacher or learning support assistant. The Education Bureau in Hong Kong supports mainstream schools through a School Partnership Scheme. The School Partnership Scheme was intended to be a whole school approach where mainstream schools are supported by resource schools offering on-site consultation and training for teachers (Yeo, Chong, Neihart, & Huan, 2016). However, these resource schools are predominantly special education centers catering for students with intellectual and behavioral difficulties placed in mainstream education programs (Education Bureau, 2011). Under western definitions of inclusive education, this would not be considered inclusion. Even though there is no one fixed definition of inclusive education, it is broadly understood across many contexts as not being limited to students with physical or cognitive disabilities and recognizes the barriers that many children face in accessing education such as age, gender, religion, ethnicity, socio-economic circumstances, and sexuality.

Recently in Kazakhstan, resource centers have been proposed and introduced as a cost-effective means to support the development of inclusive educational environments. The underpinning philosophy behind resource centers is to foster collaboration between parents and schools, and to provide the necessary support and expertise for students with SEN while accessing other community resources as well (UNESCO, 2005). It must be highlighted that resource centers differ from traditional resource rooms designed as “pull-out” programs for SEN (Vaughn & Klingner, 1998). Resource rooms effectively segregate students requiring additional supports from
their mainstream peers, therefore, by some definitions, they are not inherently “inclusive”. Alternatively, resource centers provide specialist services and guidance for teachers and parents that are not normally available in mainstream schools. Resource centers are designed to provide teachers with the appropriate resources and additional teaching or material support for ensuring students are not removed from their classes. Thus, students with SEN benefit from these support services as they remain in in their mainstream classroom environment with their peers. Also, resource centers can support a number of neighboring schools with larger resource centers that provide support to schools on a regional or national basis. An example of this service is seen in the South African context, which is similar, but not the same as the system in Hong Kong (Yeo et al., 2016).

South African educational support services were historically based on the medical model of disability where students were placed in special schools or special education centers (Hay, 2003). After political and educational reforms almost two decades ago, these special schools have been re-purposed as resource centers (SSRCs) that work in conjunction with District Based Support Teams (DBSTs). The aim of this framework is to provide specialized learner and teacher support, curricular and institutional development, and administrative support (Makhalemele & Nel, 2016). This transdisciplinary approach is designed for all stakeholders such as psychologists, speech therapists, specialized teachers and regular teachers, the school community, parents and government departments to engage in an internationally recommended collaborative approach to support all learners. Even though this model has been in operation for more than a decade, it is not without its challenges in providing the educational support needed for creating inclusive school environments (Nel, Engelbrecht, & Tlale, 2014). As only a limited number of SSRCs are available, many schools continue to be unable to accommodate all the learners that require support, with many students reported to have dropped out of the education system and remain at home (Makhalemele & Nel, 2016). Additionally, this situation is compounded by long waiting lists for placement into special schools (Dekeza-Tsomo, 2012).

Leadership and collaboration

Beside the benefits that inclusive practices promote (Boyle, Scriven, Durning, & Downes, 2011b), many schools worldwide are faced with challenges in implementing inclusive programs; some such challenges include there being little or no support from leadership, negative teacher attitudes, a lack of resources, and limited teacher training and specialized support. It is widely accepted that a “collective engagement” of key stakeholders is necessary to ensure effective inclusive practices (Boyle, Topping, Jindal-Snape, & Norwich, 2011a; Sharma, Loreman, & Forlin, 2012). In fact, researchers have stated for some time now that the success of inclusive programs is less about the characteristics of the students and more about the collaborative practices engaged in by the key stakeholders (Lieber et al., 1997).
School leadership, as one of a range of key stakeholders, is a fundamental part of the development of inclusive schools and the achievement of positive outcomes. In order to develop an individual approach to learning, support and guidance from the school leadership team and the necessary adjustments required to support a student with specific needs, as well as input from parents and other additional personnel is considered critical (Evans, 2015.) In Kazakhstan, the decision of the student placement is based on the recommendation of pedagogical psychologists and often against the wishes of parents who would prefer their child to attend mainstream classes. The burden of mediating this process is often placed on the shoulders of school principals, and the resulting decisions are dependent on their understanding and beliefs of inclusive education. Research has shown (Cook, Semmel, & Gerber, 1999; Praisner, 2003, Sharma & Desai, 2008) that the attitudes of school principals towards inclusive education play a crucial part in the successful development of inclusive schools. Making major changes in the day-to-day workings of teachers can lead to teacher anxiety and resistance (Hargreaves, 2004). Leaders must have the knowledge and the commitment to change with the understanding that it is an ongoing process that in the initial stages will be challenging (Fullan, 2001). Other key stakeholders typically include learning support teachers (LST) and resource teachers (RT) to ensure that students can routinely receive the necessary levels of support (Mullholand & O’Connor, 2016). For the continued success of long-term school initiatives, leaders must continuously articulate this philosophy and its benefits to the greater school community. This includes the school administration who should also be involved in planning, training, support, and policy development (Poon-McBrayer, 2012; Scruggs, Mastropieri, & McDuffie, 2007). Inclusive education cannot be practised in isolation as it is part of the “wider socio-political” context that must be addressed (Miskolci, Armstrong, & Spandagou, 2016).

According to a research synthesis study on collaborative teaching practices (Solis, Vaughn, Swanson, & McCulley, 2012), the most common collaborative teaching arrangement consists of a special education teacher working alongside the general education teacher to provide the necessary learning supports. In this co-teaching model, it is not necessary for a student with SEN to be taken out of the classroom for specialized support. Most often, the general education teacher takes responsibility for the whole class with the special education teacher moving around providing support to students as required (Scruggs et al., 2007). Alternatively, both teachers can work with smaller groups of students in the same classroom. Some of the challenges that teachers have reported when working within collaborative teaching models consists of the availability of appropriate support services (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). Providing the necessary resources, equipment, and trained personnel for inclusive classrooms is important for teacher confidence and has been shown to mitigate some of the concerns that teachers have in supporting students with diverse learning needs (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). Often, while teachers may say they are in favor of the idea of inclusion, many actually feel that students with special education needs are best served in their own special schools/classrooms (Campbell, Gilmore, & Cuskelly, 2003), especially those students with greater needs (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996).
Collaborative frameworks

Traditional models of collaboration and consultation mostly involve a parallel model of support with the teacher and a specialist acting as a counselor. This often excludes parents or caregivers, who are under-utilized as valuable resources or contributors to their child’s education or needs, from participating in support processes (Wilkinson, 2006). Cloninger (2017) described the varied approaches to collaborative practices (Figure 1). These range from the professional autonomy and minimal collaboration of the uni-disciplinary approach, to increased communication, consultation, and collaboration across multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary models.

![Collaborative models diagram](image)

Figure 1. Collaborative models adapted from Cloninger (2017).

Collaborative team models are the most comprehensive collaborative partnerships, as they involve a multi-stakeholder approach where members share strategies, a vision, and are working under a shared framework (Cloninger, 2017). Each member of a collaborative team shares their expertise and knowledge from their own discipline, and work together with students and their...
families to achieve shared goals. Parents and, often, students are a central part of this cross-disciplinary approach, which values the information and experiences that parents can offer. The benefits of parental involvement in educational processes has a history, which has been empirically supported (Sheridan & Gutkin, 2000).

Research has consistently documented the effectiveness of collaborative models in supporting interventions to benefit students who have a range of learning or behavioral challenges (Wilkinson, 2006). Therefore, an expansion of the traditional model of consultative support to a collaborative model of consultation that involves school leadership, teachers, specialists, and parents or caregivers provides a greater opportunity for mitigating learning or behavioral challenges, as all parties share this responsibility (Sheridan & Kratochwill, 1992; Sheridan, Kratochwill, & Bergan, 1996). Collaborative approaches feature the reciprocal and inter-relational influences of a child’s environment and consider the child as part of a system or network of systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1992; Sheridan et al., 1996). However, research has shown that in Kazakhstan, the building of a “culture of collaboration” is not easy, straightforward, or part of the everyday working culture for teachers (Ayubayeva, 2018). This, however, should be one of the priority areas for change in the move towards inclusive education.

Conclusion

The review of this literature offers some food for thought about culture and inclusion, the resource model as a support service, leadership and collaboration, and collaborative frameworks. It is advised to consider the information presented in this literature review for reflecting on the practices occurring at specific schools considering implementing a more inclusive educational model in Kazakhstan.

References


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