

## AZƏRBAYCANDA İNKLÜZİV TƏHSİL: XÜSUSİ TƏHSİL EHTİYAQLARI OLAN ŞAĞIRDLƏRİN İNKLÜZİV TƏHSİL MÜƏSSİSƏLƏRİNDƏKİ TƏCRÜBƏLƏRİ

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### ANNOTASIYA

Tədqiqat Azərbaycanda inklüziv təhsil kontekstində xüsusi təhsil ehtiyacları olan şagirdlərin məktəb təcrübəsini öyrənmək məqsədi daşıyır. Məqalədə həmyaşdalarının münasibətlərinə, təhsil ehtiyacları olan şagirdlərdə məktəbə mənsubiyyət hissəsinə, inklüziv təhsilin imkanlarına və qarşılaşdıqları maneələrə aydınlıq gətirilir. Qeyd olunur ki, bu tədqiqatın aparılmasına zərurət Azərbaycanda inklüziv təhsil haqqında kifayət qədər elmi araşdırmaların olmaması səbəbindən yaranıb. Tədqiqat xüsusi təhsilə ehtiyacı olan şagirdlərlə aparılan işin nəticəsinə uyğun olaraq yazılıb. Əlilliyin sosial modeli və mənsubiyyət nəzəriyyəsi xüsusi təhsilə ehtiyacı olan şagirdlərin məktəb təcrübəsini araşdırmaq üçün uyğunlaşdırılıb. Tədqiqatın metodları: etnoqrafik dizayn, müşahidə, şagird və müəllimlərlə müsahibə, uşaqlara aid sənədlərin təhlili, inklüziv təhsillə bağlı normativ-hüquqi sənədlərin araşdırılması, ümumiləşdirmə, şagirdlərin fəaliyyət məhsullarının təhlili.

**Açar sözlər:** Inklüziv təhsil, xüsusi təhsil ehtiyacları olan şagirdlər, Azərbaycan, məktəb təcrübələri, təşviq və maneələr.

## SCHOOL EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION SETTINGS IN AZERBAIJAN

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### ABSTRACT

The study aims to examine school experiences of students with special educational needs (SEN) in inclusive education settings in Azerbaijan. The study sheds light on the peer relationship, a sense of school belonging of students with SEN, and enablers and barriers they face in practicing inclusive education. The current study was necessitated due to the lack of sufficient knowledge and limited research on inclusive education in Azerbaijan. In addition, the research paper addresses students' perspectives, and student participants were involved in the study. The belongingness and social model of disability theories were adapted to investigate school experiences of students with SEN. The qualitative ethnographic design approach was used as a method to uncover the research topic. Participant observation, informal interviews were employed to investigate, explore and explain school experience of students with SEN and explore. As a significant source of data, participant observation and informal interviews were utilized. In addition, casual conversations were held with class teachers to learn students' medical and educational backgrounds. The analyzed and discussed study findings show that students with SEN experience positive peer relationships; they interact and develop social relationships with their peers. The results emerged from the findings indicating that students with SEN feel they belong and accepted in inclusive education settings. Although national legislation and the supportive environment somehow accommodate students with SEN in inclusive education, educational establishment, national legislation, education context and teachers were not found to be in favorable to successfully implement inclusive education.

**Keywords:** inclusive education, students with special educational needs (SEN), Azerbaijan, school experiences, enablers and barriers.

### Article history

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## INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education is not yet extensively accessible for all students in Azerbaijan. The studies conducted on Inclusive education in Azerbaijan revealed that isolated models of education provisions are still dominant for students with SEN (Florian & Becirevic, 2011; Lesko, Ziegler, Mikailova, & Roels, 2010; Mikailova et al., 2009; Mikayilova, 2019). Further, a study conducted on the knowledge, attitudes, and practices towards students with SEN in Azerbaijan reported that while several educational institutions have a few sufficient facilities for inclusive education in the capital city, the majority of educational institutions, especially in regions, do not have them at all (Grimes, 2018). However, students with SEN who do not attend inclusive education is not excluded from education completely. In these cases, according to the Legislation on Education (special education) of Persons with Disabilities (2001), there are three forms of education (special education) for them:

- Education in special educational institutions (boarding schools);
- Study at home (homeschooling);
- Special education in general educational institutions (attending special classes with special teachers).

Similarly, educational institutions lacking physical accessibility for students with SEN, and teachers' lack of experience working with them cause challenges in advancing inclusive education. Besides, the curriculum is inflexible and unreachable for students with SEN in mainstream settings. Moreover, society's insufficient information on understanding inclusive education and attitude in society toward those students based upon bias and stereotypes and consequently, these factors prevent those students from fully participating in education. Attitude towards students with SEN generally positive, however, those attitudes do not necessarily transform into inclusive practice (Mikayilova, 2019).

Understanding disability as a concept is very low at the level of society as a whole. Laws and policies define disability on based on the medical

model of disability. Disability is often defined by focusing on the limitations or differences of persons. According to enacted laws, disability is defined as a physically disabled person who needs help.

Nevertheless, the government of Azerbaijan is undertaking to support the rights of students through inclusive education; launching state programs to improve inclusive education and to ensure that students with SEN have access to education on an equal basis as others and eliminate any obstacles to full inclusion. Despite those attempts, there are still challenges that drag inclusive education back from the development as due to lacking legislative acts and policies (Lesko et al., 2010; Mikayilova, 2019).

Although legislation guarantees that, in general, persons with disabilities can be enrolled in regular schools, there are still many obstacles in carrying out inclusive education. In practice, many students with disabilities do not attend school or are enrolled in special schools (Mikayilova, 2019; Tasch, 2010).

Families of students (SEN) are not well aware of their children's rights and available benefits and support services. 71 % of the families of students with SEN do not have information about the rights of disabled persons, while 85 % of families of students do not know about assistance provided to students with SEN and available support services (Mikayilova, 2019). In that case, the demand for inclusive education is low.

Unfortunately, not all students with SEN are registered. It is a serious concern not to have accurate and reliable information about them. The statistics of 2016-2017 provided by the Ministry of Education depict that most of the school-aged students with SEN fell behind education. Thus, while 21% of students study at home, respectively 6% in special education, 6% in boarding schools, 67 % of them do not study at all. This may be explained as unawareness or limited understanding of medical workers on the legislation and policy on inclusive education.

Teachers' knowledge of inclusive education is limited. There are significant gaps in the training of teachers on inclusive education. It

is a strong sense that many teachers are not sure what to do how they should be doing it, which raises questions on the effectiveness of teacher training in inclusive education. Most teachers either do not know about inclusive education or have not attended trainings or are insufficiently trained to educate students. At the same time, there is an issue with assistant teachers in which they are not recruited to help the class teachers. Existed legislation does not mention assistant teachers and their presence in schools, so their absence in the classroom is very difficult for teachers in many cases.

### **Purpose and relevance of the study**

Schools are a central social and learning environment for students to have social relationships (Cemalcilar, 2010; Sam, Odom, Tomaszewski, Perkins, & Cox, 2020). According to Macarthur, Gaffney, Sharp & Kelly (2007), the rights of students with SEN at school were at risk. Even so, students with SEN wanted themselves to be viewed as members of the whole classroom; they felt being treated differently. Some of those students had to confront daily challenges of defending themselves against being bullied and discriminatory attitudes. Macarthur et al. (2007) acknowledge negative experiences of differentiation of students with SEN at school as being bullied, excluded from the peer group, invisible in the classroom, and an absence of engaging in classroom experiences. One of the aspects of inclusive education is teaching students without SEN the diversity of society and improving their caring attitude and gaining their academic skills (Micheletta, 2013). Nevertheless, bullying still plays a common role in the school life of disabled students (Davis & Garfield, 2021; Macarthur, Gaffney, Sharp, & Kelly, 2007).

Most of the research papers concerning inclusive education have been conducted mainly from teachers' or parents' perspectives, there is a limited number of research studies based on students' perspectives. The current study will make contribute to existed literature by adding students' perspectives and promote crucial information on inclusive education and a better understanding of students with SEN by

focusing on their school experiences.

Inclusive education is a new concept and not widely known to all members of the society of Azerbaijan. One of the main contributions of this research paper to existing literature will be to raise awareness on children's rights, inclusive education, remove an existing stigma and bias for disabled people, especially to disabled students, and educate unaware readers.

Another significance of the current study is that there are not many available articles concerning inclusive education in Azerbaijan. Meanwhile, articles written are either out of date or don't show any changes or improvements have been made so far.

Additionally, the current research project aims to gather the most current situation of inclusive education in Azerbaijani schools and find out how students with SEN experience inclusive education in education settings.

### **Research questions of the study**

The title of the topic that has been chosen to be researched is School experience of students with special educational needs (SEN) in inclusive education settings in Azerbaijan and students' perspective. Since the school experience is a broad concept, school experience term was broken down into two specific areas: peer relations and sense of school belonging to have a clear and wide enough scope of the research. This research aims to see the latest situation of inclusive education in the Republic of Azerbaijan and figure out how students with SEN experience inclusive education in educational settings from students' perspectives. This study will provide an insight into understanding students with SEN's school experiences by investigating their peer relationship and sense of school belonging. The research questions guiding this research are as followed below:

**RQ 1:** How do students with SEN experience peer relationships and a sense of school belonging in inclusive education settings (schools) in Azerbaijan?

**RQ 2:** What enablers or barriers do these students with SEN experience in inclusive education?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Inclusive education

Inclusive education is defined as students with learning difficulties or disabilities have access to mainstream education on an equal basis with others for progression (Barow & Berhanu, 2021; Slee, 2018; Wallace, 2015). Thus, learners participate in education to improve the quality of life and integrate into broader society, regardless of their learning difficulties, or disabilities.

### Peer relationships

According to Broomhead (2019) children between the age of two and five tend to spend more time with their peers than their parents which significantly impacts a children's development. Having a successful relationship with peers is not simply prominent but also essential for students' social and emotional growth (Berndt & Ladd, 1989; Brock, Biggs, Carter, Cattey, & Raley, 2016), as well as intellectual development and personal growths (Cemalcilar, 2010; Palikara, Castro-Kemp, Gaona, & Eirinaki, 2021). Several studies report that this is essential for a student to be socially accepted by their peers (Koster et al., 2009; Prince & Hadwin, 2013). Students who have friends do not experience loneliness and depression, alternatively to those who do not have friends (Brock et al., 2016; Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003; Jiang & Wang, 2020). There is no need for student to have several friends; even having only one friend can still be beneficial for student's successful development. It is believed that social participation in regular education settings will be a motive for students with SEN to become socially active, however attending a regular school does not always cause many contacts and friendships with their peers (Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003; Pijl, 2005).

### Sense of school belonging

Schools are a central social and learning environment for children and adolescents to have social relationships (Cemalcilar, 2010; Li & Jiang, 2018). Students with less sense of school

belongings tend to suffer from simple anxiety and loneliness to serious mental health problems like depression and associated as well with low academic achievement, adverse school-related behaviors, and low school attendance rate, and dropping out of school, however having a great sense of school belonging, on the other hand, connected with being more successful in class, successful participation in-class and out-of-class activities, high school attendance rate and especially, having life satisfaction (Cemalcilar, 2010; Krischler, Powell, & Pit-Ten Cate, 2019; Li & Jiang, 2018; Prince & Hadwin, 2013).

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### Belongingness theory

A sense of belonging is a basic human need and an essential component of establishing and maintaining relatedness to the system and environment (Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusky, Bouwsema, & Collier, 1992). While a child grows up, he/she develops a sense of belonging to family and the nation, the society, and the cultural group. According to Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusky, Bouwsema, & Collier (1992), a sense of belongingness has been defined as an experience of personal commitment in a system and environment in which individuals feel themselves be an integral part of the system and environment.

### Social model of disability

The social model of disability sees disability, not as a person's impairment but caused by the way society shaped. There is a distinction between "impairment" and "disability." Impairment refers to the functional limitation of a person, and disability refers to restrictions created socially (Harris & White, 2018). Furthermore, people with disabilities have a limited opportunity to participate and live a regular life in society equally with others due to social, physical, and psychological barriers (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2013). While the disability causes social barriers, impairment happens within an individual, which is caused by mental, physical, or sensory impairment (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2013).

## METHODOLOGY

### Research design

A qualitative approach was used as a study method to discover the school experience of students with SEN involved in inclusive education in primary schools in Baku. The schools chosen to have data to be collected were regular public schools in which classroom teachers were participants of state program project of ensuring teacher readiness in inclusive education for years 2018-2020.

The research study employed an ethnography design that was optimal and suitable for students to participate in the research process. Informal interviews and participant observations were employed to identify school experience of students with SEN. In addition, document analysis was employed in the present study to search for existed national legislation and policy framework on children's rights, education, inclusive education, and implementation of UN Conventions and other international agreements into national legislation, and changes and developments over the years. The Constitution of Republic of Azerbaijan, Education Law, Law on Rights of Child, Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Education (Special Education) of Persons with Disabilities, UN convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (articles 9 and 24) and implemented state programs on Inclusive Education; the 3 governmental pilot projects (2005-2009), the National Program on the Development of Inclusive Education (2006-2015), Inclusive Education Implementation in Primary Education project (2015-2016), the State Program on the Development of Inclusive Education in the Republic of Azerbaijan (2018-2024), Ensure Teacher Readiness for Inclusive Education project (2018-2020) were examined for document analysis.

### Sample

The present study was conducted in Baku, involving two primary public schools where students with SEN were engaged in the education process. Baku is the capital and largest city of Azerbaijan and chosen as a study area.

Participant observation, casual conversations/informal interviews were conducted with 9 students with SEN, 6-10 years of age in 2 public schools (1st and 3rd grades). The study mainly focused on observing child participants in the classrooms, their behavior, academic performance, interactions with their peers and teachers. The intense observation was conducted over one month period considering the writing timeframe. Researcher assumed a teaching role in a few cases and substituted class teachers in drawing lessons. These occasions were used to have group discussions with students to discuss friendships and peer relations. Besides, researcher collaborated with class teachers to organize school events, decorating classrooms, staying after class to practice the event's content with students to observe students. Furthermore, researcher did spend time with participant students during break time and lesson time and helped them with their assignments. Taking field notes allowed researcher to offer critical insights and reflect on the events observed during or immediately following observations.

Furthermore, researcher did have casual conversations with class teachers to learn about students' educational, medical backgrounds, and children's involvement in the classroom. It was ethical to have teacher give information on student's medical background considering participants being minors. Informal interviews with participant students focused on students' interactions with their teachers and their peers. During the interview process, information was planned to be obtained from child participants was whether they like school, they are willing to come to school every day, if they have at least one friend at school, and participate in after school activities. Questions were formed in the easiest way and were answered as "yes" or "no", considering the ages of child participants. Follow-up questions were employed where it was possible.

### Ethical issues

The first stage of the research process was to send mail to Baku City Education Department to obtain permission to access schools where inclusive education was applied. Planning the first stage of research is always practical and

has ethical benefits. Thereby, teachers were informed of the stages of the data collection process, how the data will be collected without interfering with the whole lesson process, objectives, and benefits of conducting this research. Since children who were engaged in the research were minors, informed consent was acquired from their parents. Parents of child participants received a copy of consent forms and signed it who confirmed their child to participate in the research process. On the informed consents, the purpose and consequences of the research, benefits, and risks of the study, and protection of child participants' confidentiality and privacy were outlined. Signed consent forms were stored safely.

### Data processing and analysis

Thematic analysis is one of the most used qualitative data analysis approaches (Bryman, 2012). Thematic analysis was applied to analyze the collected data of this study. As a first phase, the gathered data was read over to familiarize with the collected data. While reading the data collected, salient points were identified and highlighted. The highlighted points were generated into codes, which were accompanied by identifying potential themes. The next phase was to review the identified themes and check if the themes correspond to the gathered data and accurately represent the data. After having a list of themes, the name and the meaning of the themes were defined. The last phase was finalized by reporting the emerged findings from the current study.

## RESULTS

Results of the research are presented below within the framework of research questions.

**RQ1:** How do students with SEN experience peer relationship and a sense of school belonging in inclusive education settings (schools) in Azerbaijan?

Research findings achieved from the first research question were mainly focused informal interviews with student participants, casual chats with class teachers, observation and presented below:

**Table 1.** Peer relationship

- a. Friendship/peer acceptance
- b. Relationship between the class teachers and participants
- c. Participants' self-perception of acceptance
- d. Participants' relationships with others

**Table 2.** School belonging

- a. Student participation in extracurricular activities
- b. Relationships between class teachers and student participants
- c. Academic achievement

**RQ2:** What enablers or barriers do these students with SEN experience in inclusive education?

The findings obtained from second research question were mainly based on observation and document analysis.

**Table3.** Enablers detected

- a. Parent-teacher collaboration
- b. Teachers' attitude

**Table 4.** Challenges encountered

- Theme 1.1. Challenges in study venue
  - a. Unbalanced replacement of students
  - b. Structure of school buildings
  - c. Size of classrooms
- Theme 1.2. Challenges in educational context
  - a. Curriculum
  - b. Insufficient teaching and learning materials
- Theme 1.3. Challenges encountered with teachers
  - a. Absence of assistant teachers

## DISCUSSION

The first research question was intended to answer how students with SEN experience peer relationship and a sense of school belonging in inclusive education settings. The findings regarding the first research question indicated that students with SEN positively experience peer relationships and feel themselves belong to school. The result of study found out that students with SEN had a positive relationship with their peers. The observation and informal interviews with students with SEN showed that involving in inclusive education gave opportunities for them to interact with their peers, improve their social skills and develop their social relationships in school, and each of the students with SEN had at least one friend studying in the same class and also interacted with the rest of the classmates and formed social relationships. According to the belongingness theory, being stable and strong connection is enough to satisfy people's need for belonging. In other words, students with SEN established a sense of school belonging by forming and developing positive social relationship with their peers, class teachers and other school staff. The results showed that students with SEN had a higher participation in school activities. The informal chats with the class teachers revealed that they ensured the participation of students with SEN in extracurricular activities. Extracurricular activities made opportunities for students with SEN to connect with their peers and make friends. The findings showed that students with disabilities experienced being accepted by their peers. The observations revealed that students with SEN' social relationships with their peers contributed positively to their self-perception of acceptance. It was observed birthday parties to be organized for student with SEN and peers decorating classrooms, preparing gifts. The research results indicated that students with disabilities benefited socially in inclusive schools, and their learning disabilities did not cause difficulties for them in peer acceptance. Observation depicted that teachers and students with SEN had close, positive relationships, negativizes and conflicts between them were not observed. The study findings showed that not only class teachers but the other school staff also developed

positive relationships with students with SEN in inclusive schools. The class teachers created a safe, supportive, and welcoming environment, which served as an essential attachment between teachers and students with SEN. However, the observation and informal chats with teachers exposed that students with SEN had a low academic achievement in which exercises and assignments were not modified for students with SEN which followed to low academic achievement.

The second research question aimed to cover enablers or barriers students with SEN experience in inclusive education. The first part address to the enablers students with SEN experience practicing inclusive education.

### Enabler in legislation

Azerbaijan has been signed a number of international documents which affirm education as a basic human right. The Salamanca Statement and several further international treaties, Convention on the Right of Children and Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities stipulates a commitment to providing education to all children within regular classrooms. Beside joint agreements, the national legislation, Education law, Education (Special education) law, Rights of Persons with disabilities ensures rights of students with disabilities to education, and implement inclusive education one way or another to students with disabilities in general educational institutions. Besides, in recent years, several initiatives have been implemented to support inclusive education in Azerbaijan. One of the current initiatives is the state program of Developing inclusive education for persons with disabilities. The program was designed in line with the general principles of UN convention Article 24. The state program supports inclusive education in Azerbaijan and aims to eliminate any obstacles in the education environment for persons with disabilities.

### Enabler in teacher's attitude

Students experienced another enabler was a positive attitude of class teachers toward them. The observation demonstrated that the class teachers in all 3 classes showed a positive



attitude toward students with SEN and often expressed how much they care about students with SEN and their academic achievements in informal chats.

### **Enabler between parent teacher collaboration**

The observation revealed that parents of the research participants were in solid communication and collaboration with the class teachers. The informal chats with teachers disclosed that parents and teachers held constant conversations about students with SEN academic and behavioral difficulties. Teachers guided parents to facilitate students' education at home.

The research results showed that there is number of impediments students with SEN practice in inclusive education. A lack of clarification or not a direct reference to inclusive education in national legislation, the failure of the education context to adjust to the educational needs of all categories of students in the school, the unsuitable and inaccessible educational establishments, happened to be consequence for students with SEN's limited and ineffective participation in education the process.

### **Barriers in legislation**

Education law, Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, General education law, and Education (special education) law ensures children's rights with disabilities to education and specifically exposes intolerance to the discrimination of children with limited health conditions. Even though Azerbaijan ensures students' rights with SEN have access to inclusive education, the legislation fails to guarantee full inclusion and effective participation of them in inclusive education. The general legislation prevails the usage of the medical model of disability in Azerbaijan and still defines persons with disabilities to education (special education) by examination of the psychological-medical-pedagogical commission. Yet, Education (special education) law and Education law indicates that persons with disabilities could be enrolled in inclusive education in mainstream schools if the schools have appropriate conditions. Placing students with SEN in regular schools without

any changes to standardized requirement does not constitute to inclusive education rather to integration. The common legislation defines students who enrolled in special and inclusive education as a person with physical disabilities, mental and psychological retardation, and cannot study without special conditions. The legislation ensures that students with disabilities have full access to special education, which causes barriers to the equal inclusion of students with SEN in regular schools.

### **Barriers in education context**

Analysis of the national curriculum outlined that the national curriculum emphasizes the importance of creating an accessible learning environment for all students considering their general development level, aspirations, and interests. However, the study findings concluded that the curriculum is not flexible, and teaching and learning methods are not adjusted to students' capacities, requirements, and learning styles. Moreover, the curriculum still accommodates all learners to the standardized content and teaching methods in general educational institutions. The curriculum hasn't been adapted and modified in contents, assessment, and pedagogy. Regarding article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Azerbaijan must apply the Universal Design for Learning approach to adapt the learning environment to meet diverse needs of students. However, the findings obtained from the study showed that learning environment, specifically educational materials were not adjusted to the requirement of students with SEN which caused another barrier for students in inclusive education.

### **Barriers encountered with teachers**

According to article 24 of the Convention, State Parties must ensure that teachers are trained in inclusive education. Following the article, State program on the development of inclusive education in Azerbaijan was adopted, and so that teachers were supported with continuous trainings in inclusive education. However, the study revealed that class teachers, who were observed had inclusive teacher training, did not meet the educational needs of students

in the classroom. As a result, teachers' lack of understanding and incompetency in inclusive education remained a significant barrier for students with SEN to practice inclusive education. Moreover, in accordance with curriculum, teachers were not able to accommodate teaching materials, activities, assignments and their instructions in an accessible format for students with SEN which was another learning barriers for students with SEN experience in inclusive education. Additionally, it was apparent from the observation and document analysis that assistant teachers were not involved in the teaching process who normally shares the class teacher's workload and have the main responsibility for students with SEN, provide adequate information on completing assignments and homework corrections for students (Doležalová, 2018; Nwoko, Crowe, Malau-Aduli, & Malau-Aduli, 2019; Viktorin, 2018).

### Barriers in study venue

The school buildings the data collected at were not designed to accommodate inclusion. In accordance with article 9 of the Convention, State Parties should prohibit inaccessible education infrastructures and guarantee safe and accessible educational buildings in line with Universal Design to everyone, including students with disabilities. However, with regard to articles 9 and 24 of the Convention, Azerbaijan does not fulfill its obligation to design and implement educational institutions to be inclusive. So, the school buildings the data collected at were not designed to accommodate physical accessibility. The observed classrooms were small; students' desks and other furniture, especially a piano in one of the observed classrooms, narrowed the classroom's space and formed obstacles for students to move easily. The collected data found out that the general condition was good in two out of three classes observed. However, 6 students with SEN were placed in the third class. The class was already crowded with 30 students, and 6 students out of 30 had educational needs. The observation showed that the class teacher struggled to provide necessary services to students with SEN. The national legislation prohibits students' exclusion from education due to their disabilities and makes it

clear that everyone, despite their disabilities, has access to education. However, the legislation does not provide information on how and how many students with disabilities should be placed in inclusive classrooms. From the findings of the present study, it was observed and confirmed by document analysis that inadequate school building, crowded classrooms, and unbalanced replacement of students with SEN in inclusive classroom and classroom sizes which narrowed by a number of desks and furniture caused social barriers students with SEN faced in practicing inclusive education.

### CONCLUSION

The present study investigated and explained school experiences of students with special educational needs (SEN) in Azerbaijan. The study was conducted in two government primary inclusive schools in the capital city of Azerbaijan by utilizing qualitative ethnographic design, and collected data using participant observation, informal interview, and document analysis. The research was conducted based on two research questions, and all the findings obtained enabled the research to answer the research questions.

The study provided insight into the peer relationship, a sense of school belonging to students with SEN and facilitators, and barriers they confront in implementing inclusive education. The findings of this study for the first research question highlighted inclusion of students with SEN in inclusive schools, which led to positive students peer relationships. The study's findings depicted that the participant students had at least one friend from the class, which was in stable relationships and they were in constant contact and interaction with their other classroom peers too. It was observed that students being in the need of special education did not experience social exclusion by their peers, they were accepted by their peers, participated in extracurricular activities and school projects and collaborated with their peers.

The second research question was to assess existed enablers and barriers students with SEN confront in inclusive education settings. The study outcomes exhibited participant students' parents were in strong collaboration

with the class teachers which indicated a supportive environment for students with SEN fostering inclusive education. The study's findings reported that while teachers and students with SEN had a positive relationships with each other, teachers had a negative attitude regarding practicing inclusive education which can be explained teachers having limited knowledge in inclusive teaching. Hence, it was understandable that teachers showed negative attitudes as they struggled with a lack of required skills to accommodate students with SEN and needed additional assistance and modified teaching strategies.

However, while the legislation has presented multiple articles and sub-articles on the implementation of inclusive education, a lack of clarification in the regulation and legislation still ensuring access to special education are significant barriers to the successful implementation of inclusive education. The curriculum in the Azerbaijan education system does not adjust to all categories of students in schools. As a result, teaching and learning materials were not adapted to students' development and learning styles with SEN which caused major impediment for students with SEN to practice inclusive education. Thus, the context of school subjects are not accessible for students with SEN. Furthermore, students with SEN were challenged by high number of student enrollment, unsuitable school facilities and inaccessible school infrastructure.

### Recommendations

According to the findings of the study, the following recommendations are suggested for future actions.

It is recommended that government allocates a budget to employ assistant teachers to assist class teachers in inclusive classrooms at government inclusive schools. It is also recommended that the national legislation be reviewed and develop provisions related to assistant teachers according with international legislation.

The school buildings and educational materials need to be sufficient for the implementation of inclusive education. Therefore, the government should reconsider sketch of the school infra-

structure and prohibit the construction of inaccessible and insufficient school buildings. Moreover, there should be a revision of educational materials, make adjustments considering students involved in inclusive classrooms.

### For further studies

The present study only covered the schools applied inclusive education in Baku city which is the capital city and represents an urban area. It is necessary to conduct other studies in other cities and regions to compare inclusive education conditions in urban and rural areas of Azerbaijan.

In addition, the research findings were gathered from primary education, and further studies should be conducted, including at all educational levels.

Further studies could be conducted by utilizing teachers' perspectives on the implementing inclusive education and the challenges or barriers educators face in practicing inclusive education at general education institutions.

### Limitation of the study

Limitation of the study are due to limited time and financial restraints, and the study focused on only two governmental and inclusive primary schools (1st and 3rd grades) in Baku city, Azerbaijan. Since the current research study is based on a qualitative approach, the results obtained from samples cannot be used to generalize all-inclusive schools in Baku. Therefore, the obtained data may not be transferable to other settings or larger populations.

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