


# INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN CENTRAL ASIA: THE CASE OF UZBEKISTAN: RIGHTS VS OPPORTUNITIES

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**Abstract:** In the course of this study, using the theoretical method of comparative analysis and the empirical method of questioning, the level of adaptation of students with different types of disabilities in the educational process is revealed. The discrepancy between the rights of disabled people as declared by the state and the lack of implementation in practice is revealed. Conclusions are made about the main barriers to the adaptation of students with disabilities, consisting in their marginalization and stigmatization by, firstly, their peers; second, on the part of the teaching staff (unpreparedness of teachers to work with disabled people); third, on the part of relatives and friends. Conclusions are formulated and a set of recommendations proposed.

**Keywords:** Disabled people, equality, inclusive education, adaptation, teaching staff

## 1. Introduction and hypothesis

Before starting to study the level of inclusion of disabled people in the educational process in Uzbekistan, it is necessary to determine the terminology and the very concept of «disability», as an analog of which the term «persons with disabilities» is used in many works.

For the first time in modern history, the term «persons with disabilities» is used in the text of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in 1948. Article 25 of the Declaration states that «everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and his family, including food, clothing, housing, medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, illness, disability, widowhood, old age or other loss of livelihood due to circumstances beyond his control» (Universal, 1948).

Subsequently, the international community clarified and improved the wording of the concept of «disability». Thus, Article 1 «Purpose» of the text of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) gives the following definition: «Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term

DOI:  
[https://doi.org/10.62499/  
ijmcc.vi6.70](https://doi.org/10.62499/ijmcc.vi6.70)

**Citation:**  
Rasmukhamedova, Firuz;  
Yusupova, Yulduz; Muratova;  
Nozima, Antonov-Ovseenko,  
Anton. 2024.  
Inclusive education in Central  
Asia: the case of Uzbekistan:  
rights vs opportunities  
International Journal of Media and  
Communications in Central Asia.  
6: 23-37.

physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others» (Convention, 2006).

At the same time, the technical (literal) translation of the term «disability» often provokes the authors of various studies to use the phrase «persons with disabilities»: the authors of this work are inclined to use the term «person with disabilities» or «persons with disabilities».

But what is the meaning of the terminology and the purpose of discussing the problems of people with disabilities? Extensive research experience shows that it is primarily about achieving equality between persons with disabilities and citizens with typical development in accessing public services in general and in the field of inclusive education in particular. People with special educational needs, i.e., those with disabilities, as «a marginalized group whose educational rights are significantly less satisfied than those of their peers» (O'Connor & McNabb, 2020).

At the same time, researchers note a quantitative increase in the number of students with disabilities around the world: «Students with disabilities are the fastest growing equity cohort represented in Australian higher education (NCSEHE, 2020), with similar rising participation rates recorded across the world from Malaysia (Yusof et al., 2020) to the United States (Carroll et al., 2020). Yet with the growing diversity of the student cohort (e.g. first in family and mature age), so too have grown the calls from scholars for the urgent need to address how universities provide equitable and inclusive education for diverse learners, including students with disabilities (Edwards, 2022; Zacharias & Brett, 2018). Shifts to online delivery due to the COVID-19 pandemic have further exacerbated concerns of equity (e.g. Meleo-Erwin et al., 2021; Scott & Aquino, 2020) and stressed the need to consider how students with disabilities can feel included, and catered for, in a range of learning environments» (Dollinger & Hanna, 2023).

The above allows us to formulate the task (and at the same time the hypothesis) of this work, which is to confirm (or refute) the statement about the inconsistency of the rights and opportunities of students with disabilities in obtaining education. Of course, the level of this disparity should also manifest itself differently in different countries, and we will focus here on the situation of students with disabilities in Uzbekistan.

But what is the confirmation of the compliance (or non-compliance) of the rights and opportunities of disabled people in obtaining education? How and in what way should it be measured? Researchers suggest that the measure of equality of students with disabilities with students with typical development should be

an examination grade. At the same time, such an assessment is influenced by a whole range of factors. First, exam results can be influenced by students with disabilities themselves, who avoid taking exams in which they are known to be hindered by a disability, and, conversely, choose exams in which they can perform best. Secondly, these may be factors of an objective nature, such as the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic: «As a form of assessment, examinations are designed to determine whether students have met learning outcomes. However, students with disabilities report avoiding examinations and selection units of study where the assessments align with their strengths. To ensure examinations do not contribute to the systematic exclusion of students with disabilities, it is important to explore their experiences. <...> Interviews with 40 students were conducted across two universities. Inclusion or exclusion was variably constituted for students through emergent combinations of social and material arrangements. COVID-19 pandemic-related social distancing changes such as shifting examinations online, using technology, increasing time limits and moving to open-book examinations contributed to increased inclusion for most students, who were able to use familiar equipment in spaces they had adapted to their own needs» (Tai & ot., 2022). Considering these variables, exams remain an adequate unit of measurement of the level of adaptation of students with disabilities to the educational process.

## 2. Sources and methods of research

The sources for the authors' orientation in the issues under discussion were the texts of international and national norms in the field of ensuring the rights of persons with disabilities: the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Optional Protocol thereto (A/RES/61/106), adopted on December 13, 2006 at the United Nations headquarters in New York (Convention, 2006); Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan «On measures to radically improve the system of state support for persons with disabilities» (On measures, 2017); the Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan «On the Rights of Persons with Disabilities» (On the Rights, 2020), other legal acts.

As a tool of this study, the method of questioning through a survey was used, the results of which are presented in the corresponding section (Rasmukhamedova, 2024).

In the course of the study, the method of comparative analysis of the results of various studies on the topic under study was also used. Thus, the diversification of education in the field of accessibility of all educational resources, especially digital ones, is discussed in the works of Kang & ot. (2021), Branig & ot. (2022); The Technology Accessibility Plan for Students with Disabilities

(TAPSD), developed based on the analysis and identification of the technological equipment needs of 212 children and adolescents with disabilities (CHAWD) from 5 educational institutions (regular and specialized) in Ecuador, consisting of six methodologies to be used according to the different types of disabilities, is presented in a study by Valdivieso & Jadán-Guerrero (2023).

The need to overcome barriers to the realization of the rights of persons with disabilities to participate in public life, work and learning is highlighted by many authors: Tanure & Carneiro (2024); Alshemari, Stansberry & Albagshi (2023); Dollinger & Hanna (2023) and other authors.

### 3. Results and discussion

#### 3.1. Typification of approaches to ensuring the adaptation of disabled people to the educational environment

A study conducted by empirical interview among students struggling with deafness, blindness, physical disabilities, autism, quadriplegia and cerebral palsy in Indonesia's Universitas Negeri Surabaya (UNESA) found that the promotion of inclusive education here «continues to face significant challenges for students with special needs related to physical accessibility, socio-cultural barriers and stigma» (Rrofiah & ot., 2023). During their work, the researchers identified three main problematic themes: the need for suitable conditions, opportunities for social inclusion, and the availability of university resources (Rrofiah & ot., 2023). It would not be an exaggeration to say that everything that turned out to be characteristic of the needs in Indonesia is equally important for students with disabilities in other countries.

We talked about the existing needs of students with disabilities above when we noted the quantitative growth of this social category around the world. However the possibilities of integration become a separate specific problem: when disabled people appear among students, social distance often arises, which causes moral inconvenience (if not suffering) for the first category and creates tangible obstacles to their full inclusion in the educational process. Moreover, such a social distance is sometimes formed at an early stage. Various authors, such as J. Kovačević & V. Radovanovic (2020), report a difference in the relationship between students with typical development of younger age groups and students with disabilities: «The results of the study showed <in the Republic of Serbia> that students with typical development do not generally reject social contacts with their peers with disabilities, as shown by the overall lower social distance, but social distance grew in areas of emotional and physical closeness. Students expressed the highest social distance

toward peers with autism, while the lowest social distance was manifested towards peers with sensory impairments» (Kovačević & Radovanovic, 2020).

Another important factor in the adaptation of students with disabilities to the educational environment, especially students of younger age categories, is the attitude of parents of other students with typical development to their peers with disabilities. The study, which examined parents' attitudes (i.e., beliefs, feelings, and behavioral intentions) regarding the provision of inclusive education to students with intellectual disabilities (EI) in mainstream classrooms (one hundred and seventy-seven parents from six governorates in Kuwait), concluded that "parents who had contact with or had children with EI had the most positive attitudes toward providing inclusive education to students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms" (Alshemari; Stansberry & Albagshi, 2023).

Other researchers drew attention to such an important factor for the success of the adaptation of students with disabilities is the readiness of teachers: M. Dollinger & L. Hanna presented a scalable model for individual dialogue between staff and students, which "positions students with disabilities as mentors for university staff" (2023).

As for the accessibility of educational resources for students with disabilities, especially digital resources, researchers also draw attention to the need to start this work with teachers, to the timely need to train teachers in digital technologies, to increase their competence in this area (Bong & Chen, 2021). Only in this case will teachers be able to provide appropriate assistance to students with disabilities.

Of course, approaches to ensuring the adaptation of disabled people to the educational environment differ depending on the type of disability. For example, the provision of inclusive education for students with intellectual disabilities in recent years has been considered by researchers to be a new separate problem: «Providing an inclusive education to students with intellectual disability in higher education is an emerging challenge» (Rodríguez; Izuzquiza & Cabrera, 2020).

Research on physical education for people with disabilities shows that: «Children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) are identified as a marginalized group whose educational rights are considerably less fulfilled than their peers. This can be more conspicuous in Physical Education (PE) classes, where they often experience a narrower sphere of participatory options comparing their non-disabled peers. The findings suggest that while teachers broadly recognize educational participation as an entitlement for all students, its fulfillment is

still largely aspirational» (O'Connor & McNabb, 2020) – that is, it is necessary to clarify whether the rights available do not coincide with the possibilities of their implementation for persons with disabilities.

One of the studies in the implementation of the rights of persons with disabilities to physical education classes was also aimed at introducing a 5-week Paralympic sports block into the physical education curriculum. As a result, it was concluded that «Paralympic sports have allowed students with disabilities to understand and express their identity by critically questioning the normative practices of physical education. In addition, Paralympic sports in the physical education curriculum were presented as a strategy to raise awareness of disability among students without disabilities, rather than as an educational right for students with disabilities»; the authors also concluded that «Paralympic sports represent a critical aspect of the path to inclusive education based on the values of equality and recognition of the identity of disability» (Tanure & Carvalheiro, 2024).

Of course, we have not listed all the approaches to ensuring the adaptation of students with atypical development to the educational environment, since there are many more types of disabilities: the purpose of this section is to demonstrate how wide the range of such approaches is in general. But what is being done at the international and national levels to ensure that the rights of students with disabilities are equal to those of students with typical development? We will learn about this in the next section.

### *3.2. International and national legal norms for the adaptation of disabled people*

On 13 December 2006, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and its Optional Protocol (A/RES/61/106) (Convention, 2006) were adopted by a resolution of the General Assembly at the United Nations Headquarters in New York. We have already cited the wording of the concept of «disability» from Article 1 of the Convention, here we will pay attention to Article 24 «Education», which, in particular, says: «Education 1. States recognize the right of persons with disabilities to education. To realize this right without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunities, participating States shall ensure inclusive education at all levels and lifelong learning. <...> 2. In exercising this right, States Parties shall ensure that: (a) Persons with disabilities were not excluded from the general education system on the basis of disability, and children with disabilities were not excluded from free and compulsory primary or secondary education; (b) Persons with disabilities have equal access to inclusive, high-quality and free primary and secondary education in their places of residence;

(c) Reasonable accommodation was provided, taking into account individual needs; (d) Persons with disabilities received the necessary support within the general education system to facilitate their effective learning» (Convention, 2006).

Uzbekistan joined the Convention in 2009, but a significant amount of time sometimes passes between the signature on behalf of the state and ratification at the national level. This is what happened in this case: the ratification of the Convention at the national level of the Republic of Uzbekistan took place only in 2021, when, after passing in the Legislative Chamber and the Senate, the law «On the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities» (New York, December 13, 2006) was signed by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev (On the ratification, 2021). At the same time, the ratification was accompanied by a declaration and a reservation to Article 12 of the Convention: «The Republic of Uzbekistan recognizes that persons with disabilities have legal capacity on an equal basis with others in all aspects of their lives. The Republic of Uzbekistan expresses its understanding that the Convention allows for the adoption of appropriate measures to ensure that persons with disabilities have access to support and to replace decision-making mechanisms, including the limitation of the legal capacity of persons with disabilities, in appropriate circumstances and the law. The Republic of Uzbekistan reserves the right to continue to use substitute decision-making mechanisms for persons with disabilities in appropriate circumstances and subject to appropriate and effective safeguards if Article 12 of the Convention can be interpreted as requiring their abrogation».

Potential concerns about the rights of people with disabilities in Uzbekistan in connection with the reservation on Article 12 of the Convention were dispelled by the chairman of the Association of Disabled People of Uzbekistan, Oybek Isakov, who explained that this reservation concerns the implementation of the rights of people with mental disabilities: «The state does not refuse to comply with this article, it requires a time frame, a certain period for the implementation of this article. The state is not yet ready to provide them (mentally disabled people) with legal capacity, so that they, for example, can file lawsuits in court on their own» (Uzbekistan ratifies, 2021).

However, until the ratification of the Convention, the implementation of the rights of persons with disabilities in Uzbekistan deserves a critical assessment. Such an assessment was given by the disabled people of Uzbekistan themselves in the person of the above-mentioned chairman of the Association of Disabled People of Uzbekistan, Oybek Isakov, who asked the question: «Do all citizens have equal opportunities in exercising the rights and freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution, in

particular, citizens with disabilities?» and answered: «Lack of an accessible physical environment, lack of employment, low living and educational standards, lack of integration into social and political life indicate the lack of equal opportunities for people with disabilities in the exercise of their rights and freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution» (Equal Rights, 2018).

Nevertheless, it cannot be said that the state of Uzbekistan did not make any effort to improve the situation in the field of ensuring the rights of persons with disabilities. One of the first acts of Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who took office as president in 2016, was the decree «On measures to radically improve the system of state support for persons with disabilities» (On measures, 2017). In preparation for the ratification of the Convention, the Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (On the Rights, 2020) was adopted. As a result, the ratification of the Convention at the national level that followed the adoption of these measures gave a powerful impetus to the realization of the rights of persons with disabilities in the Republic. But were these measures sufficient to ensure the necessary level of respect for the rights of persons with disabilities in the Republic?

### *3.3. The practice of adaptation of students with disabilities to the educational environment at the national level: a survey*

In the survey entitled «Inclusive Education in Uzbekistan» for a short period of the summer of 2024, 58 respondents (29 men and women each) took part, differentiated by the following types of disabilities: 29.3% are visually impaired; 13.8% have a disability related to the musculoskeletal system; about 9% have a mental disability; about 7% have a hearing disability and 43.1% have other disabilities (Rasmuhamedova, 2024).

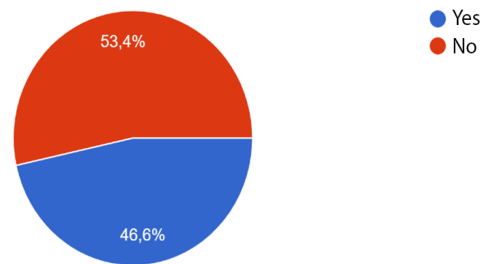
Respondents were divided into the following age categories: 27.6% under 18 years old; 19% aged 18-25 years; 29.3% are 26-35 years old; 17.2% are 36-45 years old; 6.9% are 45+ years old. Of these, 51.7% of respondents had secondary education (it would not be superfluous to assume that in the future some of them will enter higher educational institutions); 29.3% had higher education, and 19% were students at the time of the survey.

As the goal of the survey, the authors chose to find out how inclusive education in the Republic of Uzbekistan is, whether people with disabilities are satisfied with the conditions in which they study, and how satisfied they are with their relationships with peers and teachers.

The authors find the figure of 53.4% of respondents who claim to have faced discrimination on the basis of disability in educational institutions (Fig. 1) to be alarming.

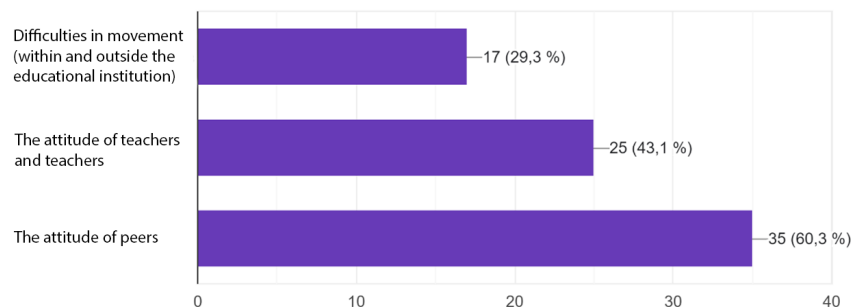


Fig. 1. Have you experienced discrimination based on disability in educational institutions?



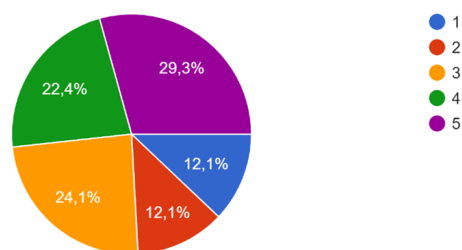
The overwhelming majority of respondents faced mainly problems in relationships with peers - 60.3%; An alarmingly large number of 43.1% faced obstacles in communicating with teachers, and 29.3% experienced difficulties in moving around the territory of the educational institution and outside its walls (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2. What difficulties/obstacles have you encountered in educational institutions?



To assess the accessibility of the educational environment for students with disabilities, the authors also used a characteristic derived from the concept of «bullying», that is, bullying by others of one of the team members, in this case, on the basis of disability: 51.7% of respondents, that is, every second of the respondents, claimed that they had faced bullying in educational institutions. Respondents were also asked to rate the conditions in the educational institution where they study or work on a five-point scale, where 1 point is the lowest grade, and 5 points is the highest. The majority, namely 29.3%, rated their educational institution at 5 points, 22.4% - 4 points, 24.1% - 3 points, and 12.1% - 2 and 1 point, respectively (Fig. 3).

Fig. 3. Evaluate the accessible environment in the educational institution where you study/teach on a five-point scale (1 – bad, 5 - excellent)



It is important to understand the general living conditions and social adaptation of disabled people from the point of view of their marital status. In the course of the survey, it turned out that 72.4% of the respondents are not married, 5.2% are divorced and 22.4% are married. Of course, it should be taken into account that 27.6% of respondents under the age of 18 took part in the survey, before the usual age of marital relations. Nevertheless, these statistics confirm that stigmatization and social labeling have a purely negative impact on the adaptation of people with disabilities: Most relatives and friends are afraid or do not want to marry their child to a person with a disability, referring to various domestic problems, but in fact being under the influence of bad stereotypes.

#### 4. Conclusions and recommendations

The use of the method of comparative analysis of the results of various works in the area under discussion showed that the rights that people with disabilities in different countries (including Uzbekistan) have to receive including and up to inclusive education do not always correspond to the possibilities of their implementation.

This discrepancy between rights and opportunities for people with disabilities of all types is observed in different parts of the world and in different countries, not only in Uzbekistan, as we have shown in the course of this work. For example, the study «Protecting the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Saudi Arabia's Policy and Legal Framework: A Critical Analysis» notes that «The Kingdom has guidelines and a legal framework dealing with education as it concerns people with disabilities, welfare, transportation, job, health care etc. However, having law and regulations that support people with disabilities does not amount to protecting their rights». (Ahmad, 2022).

To an even greater extent, this discrepancy was manifested during the survey: entitled «Inclusive Education in Uzbekistan» which showed the following.

Firstly, more than half of the respondents (53.4%) faced discrimination on the basis of disability in educational institutions.

Secondly, the main threat of being in a marginalized group for people with disabilities comes from their peers (60.3%).

Thirdly, many (43.1%) faced difficulties in communicating with teachers.

Fourthly, about a third of the respondents (29.3%) recorded physical obstacles when moving around the territory of the educational institution and outside its walls.

Of particular concern in this list of challenges is the level of training of teaching staff – the unpreparedness of teachers to work with persons with disabilities in general and, in particular, the professional training of teachers in the field of digital technologies (Bong & Chen, 2021).

In addition, although teachers agree on the need to adapt to people with disabilities, they are not always ready to participate in this in practice. As a result, coupled with peer rejection, students with disabilities, both children and young people in higher education, sometimes turn into a marginalized group (O'Connor & McNabb, 2020).

Thus, in the course of this study, we have identified a set of problems related to the implementation of the right of persons with disabilities to inclusive education:

- the relationship of students with disabilities and students with typical development;
- the relationship of students with disabilities with the teaching staff;
- the relationship of students with disabilities with parents of students and students with typical development (stigmatization);
- provision of educational institutions with equipment designed for the unhindered movement of disabled people on the territory.

Our recommendation in this case is the development and implementation by government agencies:

- firstly, a special lecture program for teachers (at the stage of school education) and faculty (for university education);
- secondly, a set of educational materials aimed at overcoming the entire complex of these barriers: the meaning of such materials, produced on various media, from paper to video media, which should be about the idea of equal treatment of pupils and students with disabilities, all-round assistance in overcoming any barriers in communication;
- thirdly, the state program for equipping public places and educational institutions with equipment designed for the full inclusion of disabled people in public life, work and education.
- fourthly, the strengthening of structures and mechanisms

for the promotion, protection and monitoring of the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, in accordance with paragraph 2 of Article 33 of the Convention (Convention, 2006).

According to the chairman of the Association of Disabled People of Uzbekistan, Oybek Isakov, «the implementation of the provisions laid down in the convention will allow Uzbekistan to switch to international standards for the protection of the rights of persons with disabilities, i.e., the right to protect the rights of persons with disabilities. to move from a medical model of disability issues to a social model, as well as to create an environment in which persons with disabilities do not feel limited in their capabilities» (Equal Rights, 2018).

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#### ИНКЛЮЗИВНОЕ ОБРАЗОВАНИЕ В ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ НА ПРИМЕРЕ УЗБЕКИСТАНА: ПРАВА VS ВОЗМОЖНОСТИ

**Аннотация:** В ходе настоящего исследования с помощью теоретического метода сравнительного анализа и эмпирического метода анкетирования выявлен уровень адаптации учащихся с различными типами инвалидности к образовательному процессу. Выявлено несоответствие декларируемых государством прав инвалидов с возможностями их реализации на практике. Сформулированы выводы об основных барьерах для адаптации учащихся инвалидов, заключающихся в их маргинализации и стигматизации со стороны, во-первых, их сверстников; во-вто-

рых, со стороны преподавательского состава (неготовность преподавателей к работе с инвалидами); в-третьих, со стороны родных и близких. Сформулированы выводы, предложен комплекс рекомендаций.

**Ключевые слова:** инвалиды, равноправие, инклюзивное образование, адаптация, преподавательский состав.

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O'ZBEKISTON MISOLIDA MARKAZIY OSIYODA INKLYUZIV  
TA'LIM: HUQUQLAR VA IMKONIYATLAR

**Xulosa:** Ushbu tadqiqot davomida qiyosiy tahlilning nazariy usuli va so'rovning empirik usuli yordamida turli xil nogironligi bo'lgan talabalarning o'quv jarayoniga moslashish darajasi aniqlandi. Davlat tomonidan e'lon qilingan nogironlarning huquqlari va ularni amalda qo'llash imkoniyatlari o'rtasidagi tafovut aniqlandi. Nogiron talabalarning moslashishidagi asosiy to'siqlar to'g'risida xulosalar ishlab chiqilgan bo'lib, ular, birinchi navbatda, tengdoshlarining marginallashuvi va stigmatizatsiyasidan iborat; ikkinchidan, o'qituvchilar tomonidan (o'qituvchilarning nogironlar bilan ishlashga tayyor emasligi); uchinchidan, qarindoshlar va do'stlar tomonidan. Xulosalar shakllantirildi, tavsiyalar to'plami taklif qilindi.

**Kalit so'zlar:** nogironlar, tenglik, inklyuziv ta'lim, moslashish, o'qituvchilar tarkibi.

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