



Article

Building a Common Language for Inclusion: Collaborative School-Based Teacher Professional Development in Kazakhstan

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Abstract

Continued teacher education is one of the levers that support schools in transforming into inclusive educational institutions and in developing a common language for inclusion. The current paper presents a collaborative effort between a mainstream public school in Kazakhstan and a local non-governmental organisation in designing and implementing a professional development programme (PDP) for primary school teachers and special education support personnel to strengthen their inclusive education awareness and preparedness for using individual education plans (IEPs) in teaching students with special educational needs. This study is a practice-oriented case report on a school-NGO partnership that draws on insights from 13 class teachers, nine subject teachers, and 11 special education support staff; 33 participants in total. Data presented in this article were collected



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from the inception of the partnership and through the PDP, drawing on participant reflections and feedback to explore their learning experiences and perceptions of the programme's impact on their professional practices. Results revealed that the programme helped to establish a common understanding of inclusive education principles and their legal underpinning, which participants viewed as crucial for adopting more specialised inclusive teaching strategies. Additionally, participants noted improved cooperation among teachers, support staff, and parents, along with enhanced confidence in conducting assessments and developing IEPs. The programme's school-based, collaborative format facilitated the development of a professional learning community centred on inclusion. However, participants also noted that the programme's intensive schedule limited deeper exploration of certain topics and reduced collaborative project activities. The study indicates that school-based collaborative professional development can effectively build inclusive education capacity and nurture professional communities in mainstream educational settings. These findings add to the scarce research on inclusive education professional development for in-service teachers in Central Asia and emphasise the promising role of partnerships between schools and NGOs in driving inclusive school reforms.

Keywords: in-service teacher training, inclusive education, collaborative school-based professional development, individual education plan, Kazakhstan

Introduction

Schools require both pressure and support to transform their practices and include all students (Boyd, 1999; Fullan, 2007). Continued teacher education is a key lever for supporting such transformation, as in-service professional development is a promising strategy to enhance teachers' knowledge of inclusive education (Donath et al., 2023). Inclusive teaching also depends on teachers developing a common language to discuss the details of their practice (Ainscow, 2020). This paper demonstrates how the collective engagement of primary general education teachers and special education staff in a professional development programme (PDP) at the same school can help educators build this shared language to advance inclusive practice.

This article presents a practice-oriented case report on a PDP partnership between the authors, representing a local non-governmental organisation (NGO), and a mainstream public school in Kazakhstan. This training aimed to strengthen educators' awareness of inclusive education and prepare them to use individualised education plans (IEPs) when teaching students with special educational needs (SEN). The focus on the inclusion of students with SEN was because disability is "the single most serious barrier to education across the globe" (UNICEF, n.d.). Children with disabilities are 2.5 times more likely to never attend school than their peers (World Bank, 2025). In Kazakhstan, children with disabilities are the primary inclusive education target group (Helmer et al., 2023). Once in school, issues of educational equity arise in ensuring meaningful student participation

and achievement shaped by how students are taught, the social relations within the school and with parents and communities, and the availability of support for learning (Ainscow, 2020).

Although advancing inclusive education in Kazakhstan by including children with SEN in mainstream schools has been a national reform priority since 2011, mainstream schoolteachers' average preparedness to work with these students remains a challenge. Pre-service teacher training programmes poorly prepare teachers to implement inclusive education approaches, including developing and applying IEPs (Makoelle & Burmistrova, 2021; Makoelle et al., 2023). Publicly funded PDPs for in-service teachers may or may not address a specific school's needs. A relatively small share of teachers in Kazakhstan surveyed in the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) reported participation in school-based continuing education activities, although this form of teacher professional development is recognised as a more effective one (Chernobay & Tashibaeva, 2020; Desimone, 2009).

Teacher reflection on professional practice and experience is essential for developing inclusive teaching (Korthagen, 2011). In this study, educators at the mainstream school were invited to reflect on the challenges they face and the inclusive practices they already use. These insights informed the design and implementation of the PDP, which was evaluated continuously by both in-service teachers and course instructors. An approach in which PDP participants contribute to training design and evaluation is uncommon. This practice-oriented case report illustrates how this can be done within an NGO-mainstream school collaboration framework.

This article presents a model for similar initiatives that aim to strengthen inclusive teaching practice through school-NGO collaboration. This experience is especially relevant in contexts lacking a comprehensive system for preparing teachers to support students with SEN. The study confirms that content focus, active learning, local relevance, and sufficient time are key criteria for effective PDP (Desimone, 2023) in contexts where inclusive education is still emerging.

Literature Review

Creating a Common Language for Inclusion at Schools in Kazakhstan

Building a shared language among teachers, special education support personnel, school leadership, parents, and the community at large is a core element in advancing inclusive education practice. Starting its journey toward inclusive education in 2011, Kazakhstan emerged with rather low support

for inclusive education (Rouse et al., 2014) and a strongly segregationist vocabulary that perpetuated misconceptions about diversity (Makoelle, 2020a). The medical model of disability dominated the discourse around the education of students with special needs and manifested through terms such as *defectology* rather than special education and *defectologist* rather than special education teacher.

On average, teachers who work in Kazakhstan's schools today are 41 years old (OECD, 2025) and most have received their pre-service training in the era when teaching students with SEN was viewed as corrective, applying deficit-based conceptualisations, shaping the "thinking, attitudes, and beliefs about special education" (Makoelle, 2020a, p. 4). Thus, transforming schools into inclusive learning spaces that welcome children with disabilities require a change in how teachers view disability and in how they teach students with SEN.

At the national and school levels, the change towards inclusive education requires a collective effort, which in Kazakhstan is manifested in top-down government policies and bottom-up civil society pressures (Rollan, 2021; Rollan & Sommerton, 2019). The number of continuing education opportunities in inclusive education for teachers has increased over time and includes programmes offered by public and private providers (Prisiazhniuk et al., 2024; Rollan, 2024). The collaborative PDP initiative between an NGO and a mainstream public school presented in this paper is one such example. According to data reported by Prisiazhniuk and colleagues (2024), seven out of 10 schoolteachers in Kazakhstan have engaged in some professional development on inclusive education. Implementation of other education reforms, such as trilingual education (Karabassova, 2022), criterion-based assessment and the training teachers receive towards this end, may also support goals of inclusive education (Bridges, 2014; Makoelle, 2020a; 2020b).

While there is limited research on the effectiveness of PDP for teachers on inclusive education in Kazakhstan, existing studies continue to indicate gaps in in-service teacher preparedness to support the learning of students with SEN in inclusive education settings. These difficulties concern assessing students (Makoelle, 2020b), teacher collaboration amongst themselves as well as with special education support personnel and parents (Somerton et al., 2020). Teacher knowledge of various special educational needs is often limited. Dyslexia is one such example (Galimzhanova, 2025).

In the segregated education system of Kazakhstan prior to 2011, expertise on various special educational needs was concentrated in special educational institutions where most *defectologists* or special education teachers worked. Now, as these professionals enter mainstream schools, they need to advance their awareness of inclusive education and inclusive teaching (Dyussenbayeva et

al., 2022). Developing a common language for inclusion among all educators is a prerequisite to improving the educational experience for children with SEN in mainstream schools.

In-Service Teacher Training for Inclusive Education

Research on the value of in-service teacher training for inclusive education indicates that continued education contributes to inclusive school practices. Meta-analyses of research on in-service teacher training in group settings about inclusive education have shown that it improves teachers' knowledge, skills, and ability to improve student behaviour (Donath et al., 2023). Systematic literature reviews by Holmquist and Lelling (2021), Wood and colleagues (2025), and Donath et al. (2023) have shown that PDP contributes to more positive teacher attitudes towards inclusive education.

The definition of inclusive education, however, has differed in the studies reviewed (Holmquist & Lelling, 2021), confirming the contested nature of the term "because not everyone agrees that it is possible to educate all children together, and even where there is agreement, there are debates about how this can and should be achieved" (Florian, 2015, p. 6). Linked to this diversity of views, points out Florian (2015), is variation in inclusive education practices, ranging from a focus on special education support for students with SEN in mainstream schools to a broad approach to responding to the diverse needs of learners without categorising students. The conceptualisation of inclusive education at the school and nationally sets the context for approaching teacher continued education on inclusive teaching. In Kazakhstan, inclusive education is generally defined as placing children with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream schools, reflecting a medical rather than a social model of disability. The broader understanding of inclusive education as meeting the diverse needs of all students (Ainscow, 2020) is still developing.

A common tool to support inclusive education for children with SEN, embedded in education policies worldwide, is the IEP, which allows for the accommodation of individual learning needs within the curriculum (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2003; Floranza, 2025). In Kazakhstan, legislation recognises that children with SEN in mainstream schools require reasonable accommodations. To do so, teachers can use an IEP to set learning goals, teaching approaches, and assessments for children with SEN (Mamerkhanova et al., 2025). In practice, however, designing and implementing IEPs can be challenging. Evidence suggests that teachers may approach IEPs as a formality rather than a meaningful way to enhance student learning (Kosmann, 2022). Challenges that teachers have reported regarding IEPs include inadequate knowledge for IEP planning, implementation, and assessment, difficulties using IEPs in large classes, insufficient school supplies,

limited collaboration within the IEP team, insufficient support from school administration, and low parental engagement (King et al., 2018; Kozikoglu & Albayrak, 2022; Ni Bhroin et al., 2016).

Professional development programmes can help teachers gain confidence in developing and implementing IEPs; however, IEP quality depends on collaborative practices in their application (King et al., 2018). Creating a culture of collaboration among teachers, or what Fullan (2007) calls a professional learning community, is essential for meaningful use of IEPs to support learners with SEN. Teachers need the knowledge and skills to collaborate, as teaching, communication, values, and ethics can all challenge effective teamwork (Fullan, 2007; Ni Bhroin & King, 2020). Collective teacher participation from the same school or grade level in the PDP strengthens teacher interaction, which serves as a powerful means of learning (Desimone, 2009; Wood et al., 2025) and enhances positive teacher attitudes toward collaboration (Svendsen, 2016).

In addition to advancing collaborative practice among teachers, characteristics of models for effective teacher professional development include content focus, i.e., what teachers teach and how they teach it; active learning, i.e., teacher action to learn for improving their practice; coherence, i.e., consistency with the school's, local and national education policy context; sufficient duration of the programme (Desimone, 2009), and alignment of the PDP with the school's unique needs and resources (Wood et al., 2025). These criteria call for context-responsive continued teacher training in inclusive education.

Methodology

Becoming Partners for a Collaborative PDP

This study presents a practice-oriented case report of an NGO-school partnership through a collaborative PDP aimed at advancing inclusive primary education in Kazakhstan. The article systematically describes and evaluates this in-service teacher training model, which is unique in its context, to assess its potential scalability to other settings.

In this study, school administrators, general education and special education teachers, tutors, and a school psychologist participated in developing a PDP through a reflective process led by researchers representing the NGO – Association for Development of Inclusive Society. This approach to developing a PDP was chosen to ensure the programme meets the unique learning needs of this school's educators and to promote sustained teacher collaboration by identifying inclusive education issues that need attention (Holmqvist, 2020).

The development and implementation of the PDP was supported through a grant from the Nazarbayev University Impact Foundation (grant no. DF-23/04). The NGO obtained this funding through a grant competition, bidding to support a mainstream school in strengthening the provision of inclusive education through a collaborative design and implementation of a PDP for primary school teachers and special education support personnel. At the time of the grant application, the NGO did not have a partner school.

After receiving the grant, NGO researchers identified four mainstream schools in Astana and approached them with a proposal for a teacher PDP collaboration. These schools were initially identified using public information about the number of students with SEN and the school's commitment to advancing inclusive education. After multiple meetings in which the NGO researchers presented their concept for developing and implementing the PDP, a collaboration agreement was reached with the leadership of one of these schools. This mainstream school in Astana's Esil District opened in 2023. In 2024, it taught 2,600 students. Of approximately 1,200 primary education students, 20 had different special educational needs.

Before reaching a partnership agreement, the NGO researchers gave several presentations to the school's administration, primary school teachers, and support staff to explain the goals, time commitment, and benefits of the proposed collaborative PDP. After these presentations, 33 primary school teachers and special education support staff agreed to engage in this initiative. The group consisted of 13 class teachers, 9 subject teachers (two Russian language teachers, one physical education teacher, four English teachers, one math teacher, and one Kazakh language and literature teacher), and 11 special education support staff (eight tutors, one psychologist, and two special education teachers). These teachers and support staff participated in the programme from its inception to the final evaluation.

As a change-of-practice initiative conducted by an NGO, the design and implementation of the PDP presented in this practice-oriented case report were not subject to formal institutional research ethics review. At the same time, data collection to design and evaluate the PDP followed the principles of nonmaleficence—do no harm to others—and beneficence—act for the benefit of others (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). In meetings with school leadership, teachers, and special education professionals, NGO researchers explained the data-based approach used to design the PDP to ensure it met the school community's needs and informed them that the PDP design and outcomes would be shared with the other audiences, including through publications. During PDP preparation meetings with the school community, researchers emphasised that participation in all activities that informed the PDP design and implementation, as well as this practice-oriented case

report, was voluntary, and that insights shared with third parties would remain anonymous. At each data collection instance, researchers reminded PDP participants that participation was voluntary; if they chose to participate, they could skip any questions they preferred not to answer. When researchers audio-recorded data, they asked all participants whether they agreed to be recorded and explained that the data would be transcribed and used solely for PDP design and evaluation. The NGO core project team, who authored this practice-oriented case report, stored data acquired during PDP design and implementation on a password-protected cloud drive accessible only to them.

Professional Development Programme Design

Guided by Dewey's reflective thought and action (Miettinen, 2000), the NGO researchers engaged primary school teachers and special education staff in developing the PDP's content, beginning with identifying professional development needs. The NGO researchers conducted a focus group discussion (FGD) with educators about their experiences and challenges in teaching students with SEN and using IEPs.

To provide a comfortable space for participants to discuss challenges specific to their professional roles, the NGO researchers grouped participants by expertise: class teachers, subject teachers, and special education staff. The researchers maintained this grouping across two rounds of FGDs. Each FGD was conducted online via Zoom, facilitated by an NGO researcher, and lasted approximately two hours.

During the first FGD, participants were asked to describe their experience in developing and using the IEP, including collaboration with colleagues at school and communication with the child and their parents or guardians. Participants were invited to share the difficulties they encountered in this process and to offer any additional reflections on teaching students with SEN. Prior to the second FGD, the NGO researchers grouped all responses by the type of issues identified: (1) knowledge and experience of the inclusive education process, including developing IEPs; (2) the scheduling of lessons for students with SEN; (3) coordination and collaboration among school staff and parents. In the second FGD, the NGO researchers shared the summary of the identified difficulties in these areas with participants, inviting them to identify potential solutions to address the difficulties. While each FGD used the same main guiding questions, the discussion details varied from one FGD to another, highlighting issues specific to different groups of participants.

Based on the reflections shared during FGDs, the NGO researchers formulated the inclusive education PDP proposal for the school. The NGO shared the draft PDP proposal with educators and

the school administration, and finalised it based on their feedback. The PDP, with jointly agreed-upon objectives, content, and delivery format, commenced in June 2024.

The PDP's total planned time commitment was 80 academic hours. The programme included intensive 36-hour school-based training over two weeks in June, organised with the support of the school administration. From September to November 2024, the remaining time – 44 hours – focused on educators applying what they had learned to enhance their inclusive education practices, and their reflections about the process of introducing changes. The NGO representative facilitated participants' reflections. The next section presents these reflections, along with an overview of professional learning needs, PDP content development, and implementation.

Findings

Professional Training Needs Among Teachers

Two FGDs with PDP participants identified three areas of training needs related to the inclusive education process at school. The first area concerned the concept of inclusive education. The second related to teacher leadership, collaboration and decision-making for inclusive teaching. The third theme concerned the design and implementation of an IEP for students with SEN.

While inclusive education has been a national education policy priority since 2011, teachers have had many questions about the concept. Teachers said they lacked experience with inclusive teaching and would like to learn more about methods for teaching students with SEN. They were not sure how to set learning goals for students with SEN and assess their achievement. They wondered how to deal with a situation where a student with SEN is disengaged and falls behind academically, yet there is no clear guidance on how to support the student within the rigid school programme. They were concerned about how to improve classroom dynamics to support the social inclusion of children with SEN. Teachers were keen to learn how these issues are addressed internationally.

The second theme concerned teacher leadership in adopting routine practices that facilitate inclusive education processes. Participants highlighted the need for better collaboration among teachers, support personnel, and parents to support students with SEN in achieving learning goals. Teachers acknowledged that addressing the diverse learning needs of students with SEN would be easier through collaboration rather than working in isolation. Special education support staff emphasised the value of informal discussions and classroom observations to better understand how children with SEN are learning in the classroom. Teachers highlighted the importance of collaborative relationships with school leadership and leadership support in organising engagement

with parents who are often in denial that their child has SEN. Developing a collaborative relationship between the school and the Psychological, Medical, and Pedagogical Consultation (PMPC) committee (Rollan, 2021) that assesses children with SEN was identified as another direction needing attention, since sometimes PMPC recommendations for organising the child's education would not align with observations of the special education teacher at the school or would be missing altogether.

The collaborative PDP participants had limited experience developing and using an IEP in teaching students with SEN. The dominant pattern among the class and subject teachers was to use an IEP when it was provided. They had not been engaged in developing an IEP for any of their students with SEN. When an IEP was not provided, teachers adjusted their instruction for children with SEN as they saw fit. From FGD, it emerged that developing IEPs at this school was primarily the domain of special education personnel. Two teacher assistants said they had not been involved in creating an IEP but were using one provided by another special education teacher. Two special education teachers, a teacher assistant, and a psychologist who had developed an IEP described different approaches to doing this, although both special education teachers referred to using PMPC's 'diagnostic statements' about the child. The teacher assistant focused on addressing the gaps in a child's learning. Only the psychologist mentioned that, when creating the IEP, she collaborated with colleagues at school. All PDP participants agreed that they needed well-defined guidelines for developing an IEP. These insights from FGDs with PDP participants informed the content of the training presented next.

The Content of the Professional Development Programme

Priority training areas that emerged from discussions with educators, and for which the school leadership expressed strong support, were enhancing teachers' competencies in working with children with SEN, particularly in developing and implementing IEPs, professional collaborative practices, and information on inclusive education and resources for inclusive teaching. The jointly agreed-upon PDP consisted of three thematic modules, each covering distinct yet interrelated components of inclusive education practice (Table 1).

Module 1. Inclusive Education Foundations and IEP Development

The first four-session module, *Inclusive Education Foundations and IEP Development*, introduced key concepts such as equity, diversity, and the rights of persons with disabilities based on the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) (2006). In this module, participants explored the principles of inclusive culture, school policy, and classroom practices. The module

placed the focus on how to plan the educational process for learner diversity, adapt the curriculum, and incorporate digital tools and AI into learning. During this module's sessions, participants practised drafting inclusive school mission statements and analysed policy scenarios related to education accessibility and reasonable accommodation.

Module 2. Leadership, Collaboration, and Emotional Intelligence

The second was a five-session module, *Leadership, Collaboration, and Emotional Intelligence*, focused on soft skills for inclusive school development. Sessions included activities to develop teachers' leadership skills by strengthening coordination and collaboration among educators, support staff, and parents, fostering a well-structured, communicative learning environment. Participants explored emotional intelligence, learning to recognise and utilise the intelligence embedded in emotions to improve interpersonal dynamics. The programme introduced key soft skills—creativity, communication, time management, and critical thinking—along with practical tools for integrating these skills into everyday work. A session on digital solutions for inclusive education reviewed assistive technologies and platforms teachers can use to support students with personalised learning. The final session of the module provided training on collaborative action research strengthening collective efforts to improve pedagogical practices in support of including students with SEN.

Module 3. Practical Tools and IEP Implementation

The third seven-session module, *Practical Tools and IEP Implementation*, covered instructional approaches for students with physical and neurodevelopmental disorders, differentiated and alternative assessment methods, and real-world case analysis. This module aimed to equip participants with practical strategies for inclusive teaching (a sample activity is enclosed in the appendix). As the final activity, PDP participants worked in teams to develop IEPs based on real-life student cases from their school, tailoring support strategies to each student's needs, which they would implement as the new academic year commenced on September 1, 2024. Each group used an outline of an IEP's core elements and devised the specific methods and tools they intended to apply to support individual students with SEN. Each team presented their IEP and received feedback from colleagues and PDP instructors.

Table 1. School-Based Professional Development Programme to Strengthen Inclusive Education Practice

Module	Topics	Learning Outcomes. By the end of the training participants will:
<i>Inclusive Education Foundations and IEP Development</i>	Teaching students with SEN. Planning for diversity (resources, AI, etc.)	Identify effective strategies for working with students with special educational needs (SEN) to promote inclusivity and address diversity in the educational process.
	UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	Describe the rights of children and educators within the framework of the educational system, based on the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.
	Components of inclusive education (culture, policy, practice)	Explain the key components of inclusive education—culture, policy, and practice—and develop a mission and vision for inclusive education in one's own teaching context.
	Inclusive education policy	Design school-level inclusive education policies that align with best practices and equity principles.
<i>Leadership, Collaboration, and Emotional Intelligence</i>	Coordination and cooperation among teachers, support staff, and parents	Demonstrate communication and collaboration skills for working with teachers, support staff, and parents in an inclusive environment.
	Emotional intelligence	Apply emotional intelligence strategies to enhance interpersonal relationships and support student well-being.
	Soft skills	Integrate essential soft skills—creativity, communication, time management, and critical thinking—into pedagogical practice using practical tools.
	Platforms, applications, and AI	Explore and evaluate various digital platforms, applications, and AI tools applicable to inclusive education settings.
	Action research	Explain the principles of action research and formulate a basic research proposal relevant to inclusive education.
<i>Practical Tools and IEP Implementation</i>	Practical recommendations from a rehabilitation specialist for working with children with musculoskeletal disorders (MSD)	Recognise the individual characteristics of children with musculoskeletal disorders (MSD) and apply appropriate strategies to support their adaptation.

Practical recommendations from a neuropsychologist for working with children with psychoneurological features	Identify the characteristics of children with psychoneurological features and implement supportive practices to aid their adaptation.
Assessment of students (Formative and Summative) with SEN: adapted and alternative assessment methods	Adapt academic tasks and assessments to ensure fair and inclusive evaluation of students with SEN.
Practical recommendations from specialists for working with children with SEN	Acquire recommendations from special education teachers, speech therapists, and psychologists
Understanding SEN in children, methods and programmes	Classify different types of special educational needs and analyse appropriate methods and programmes for addressing them.
Tools for working with SEN students	Analyse practical tools and strategies for working with SEN students, using real-world case examples.
Development of IEPs	Create an IEP tailored to the needs of a student with SEN.
IEP project presentation	Present and defend an IEP project, demonstrating understanding of inclusive education principles and practices.

Source: Authors.

Delivery of the Intensive Training Sessions

To strengthen the PDP's effectiveness through active participant learning (Desimone, 2009), all sessions combined lecture-type presentations with group collaboration tasks. Each group included a class teacher, a subject teacher, and a special education support staff member to enable a nuanced discussion of teaching students with SEN and to facilitate the creation of action plans that align inclusive education practices across different pedagogical roles. All PDP intensive training sessions except one were conducted in person at the school. One session was conducted in a hybrid online and offline format because the trainer was abroad.

Another characteristic of the PDP was its multilingual format. A few instructors delivering the training spoke English and were not fluent in Kazakh or Russian. To achieve that, the delivery format and language did not pose barriers to active learning, the NGO representatives with in-depth knowledge of the topic and proficient in English, Kazakh and Russian facilitated the sessions and provided simultaneous translation as necessary. All session materials and handouts for the PDP participants were developed in Kazakh or Russian, the languages the participants spoke.

Evaluation of the Professional Development Programme

A key element of this collaborative PDP design was the evaluation of the training and changes participants implemented in their teaching practice. At the end of each module, participants and instructors shared their personal observations on the module's learning. Participants were asked how the session met their learning needs and what adjustments they would recommend. The same questions were posed to trainers delivering the sessions, aiming to obtain holistic feedback on their perceived PDP's effectiveness in achieving its goals.

Reflections from collaborative PDP participants showed that it would have been better to start the programme with foundational information on a rights-based approach to disability rather than with a more specialised topic on identifying effective teaching strategies to promote inclusivity and address diversity in the educational process. PDP participants emphasised that reviewing international documents such as the *UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (United Nations, 2006), *the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (United Nations, 1948), and *the Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations, 1989) was essential in establishing a shared understanding of inclusive values and responsibilities among educators. Starting the training with a specialised topic on advanced strategies for working with students with SEN proved ineffective for many participants, who lacked foundational knowledge of inclusive education and its legal framework.

Trainers in the programme noted widespread confusion between inclusion and integration, with many participants believing students should adapt to the system rather than the system accommodate student needs. This misconception was evident in the group work approach to case studies and practical tasks. As a result, the NGO project team allocated additional instructional time to develop a more profound understanding of how inclusion differs from integration. Interactive discussions and real-world examples supported this.

While data during the programme preparation process indicated the need to focus on soft skills development, the term ‘soft skills’ itself was another source of confusion for participants. Teachers and special education support staff felt the term was overly abstract, which reduced participant motivation to engage with the topic. This PDP participant feedback confirmed that it is essential to use accessible, descriptive language when presenting the topic in the programme and outline practical and comprehensible goals of the session to enhance participant motivation and engagement.

The third module, *Practical Tools and IEP Implementation*, included sessions delivered by a rehabilitation specialist, a neuropsychologist, a special education teacher, a speech therapist, and a psychologist. The PDP participants assessed these sessions as highly informative but often too advanced and without sufficient scaffolding. Primary education teachers and special education support staff said they needed to understand general methodologies and approaches to working with children with SEN before applying more targeted recommendations from rehabilitation or neuropsychology experts. Thus, sequencing the programme content to start with more general information and move on to specific aspects would be the advised approach.

The most valuable for participants were sessions that focused on practical application of skills and involved collaboration, digital tools for inclusion, and individualised educational planning. These sessions fostered active learning and helped teachers apply new knowledge directly to their professional contexts. However, time constraints did not allow sufficient space for in-depth exploration of tools or strategies.

The programme’s duration was the most frequently critiqued aspect of the PDP. Participants said they needed more time and support to prepare the final project—an IEP—as well as consistent feedback from trainers. They agreed that the limited time for group preparation reduced the quality of the IEP development experience. A more effective approach would provide ample time for both peer and expert feedback throughout the IEP development process.

Participant Reflections on Gains from Professional Development Programme

To evaluate the impact of the PDP, the third author of this paper met with participants five months after the training, i.e., in November 2024, and discussed their experiences with the changes they had

implemented, drawing on their learning from the training. The following three questions guided this discussion. How has the training impacted your work? Which knowledge and skills obtained during the training have been most instrumental in changing your teaching practice? What challenges do you continue to encounter? Using these questions as a starting point, participants reflected on their experiences using IEPs to teach students with SEN.

During a roundtable discussion, each PDP participant shared their experience applying knowledge gained through training on teaching children with SEN. Teachers and special education support personnel said they had become more successful in developing IEPs, using alternative assessments for children with SEN, and collaborating with colleagues and parents.

PDP participants highlighted a shift in their perspectives on inclusive education. Initially focused on supporting children with SEN, they now approach inclusive education more broadly, including students from various marginalised groups. Teachers emphasised that this broader perspective led them to dedicate more attention to children who may face challenges in learning and social adaptation for reasons beyond SEN, such as socio-economic factors, cultural and linguistic barriers, or other vulnerabilities. They said they were aware and tried to apply inclusive practices to create a supportive classroom environment for every student.

In this follow-up FGD, participants emphasised that developing and implementing IEPs had improved their ability to address each child's unique needs, leading to better academic performance and social adaptation for children with SEN. What they had learned during the PDP about the assessment methods helped them to track student progress more effectively and adjust teaching approaches to meet individual educational goals for children with SEN.

Additionally, teachers reported notable improvements through active engagement with parents and colleagues. They felt the PDP training had positively impacted their skills in organising collaboration with parents. Teachers sought to better understand children's needs and build stronger relationships with parents, which they acknowledged was key to supporting children's learning.

The active learning approach during PDP in teams had strengthened the collaborative ethos among primary school educators. They acknowledged that the teamwork experience during the training, as well as the knowledge gained on this topic, helped continue collegial collaboration, fostering knowledge sharing and the development of common approaches to support students with SEN. Although none of the teachers had attempted to alter their practice using the action research approach, several said that exposure to action research during the PDP sparked interest in conducting a systematic study of how their changed practice would impact student learning.

Concluding Discussion: Collaborative PDP as Professional Community Building for Inclusive Education

Policy and Contextual Implications

In contexts where inclusive education is a national education reform priority, in this case, Kazakhstan (Mamerkhanova et al., 2025), and where training available for general education teachers and special education support professionals working in mainstream schools to teach students with SEN does not meet demand (Dyussenbayeva et al., 2022; Galimzhanova, 2025; Makoelle, 2020b), a partnership between an NGO and a school in a school-based PDP can be a practical solution. For NGOs, attracting grant funding to support their mission is routine. When a school's access to funding for training relevant to all staff is limited, collaborating with an NGO invested in inclusive education can provide access to the professional learning needed. At the same time, a partnership with an NGO might not be the most obvious choice for a school, especially when there is no prior experience with such collaboration. This practice-oriented case study shows that initiating an NGO-school partnership can be time- and effort-intensive because partners must build mutual trust that each will take the actions required for the PDP's success.

Collaborative Learning and Community Building

School-based PDPs are more effective at building professional learning communities than individual teachers' attendance at workshops (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone, 2009; 2023) because, in their job-embedded settings, teachers can learn collaboratively, reflect on real student cases, and develop contextually relevant instructional support strategies. To ensure that collaborative learning and community building start with the first steps of the NGO-school partnership described in this paper, the NGO team engaged primary school class and subject teachers and special education support personnel in focus group reflections about the challenges they face in teaching students with SEN and what they do to overcome these difficulties. This bottom-up approach (Korthagen, 2011) revealed shared experiences in teaching students with SEN that might be overlooked amid the daily rush of work and identified the professional learning needs. Through these discussions and PDP activities, primary school teachers and special education staff repeatedly probed their inclusive teaching practice and collaboration within the school and with parents, identifying problem areas that need attention. Constant interaction among primary school teachers during the PDP and tasks requiring reflection on how best to collaborate to serve students with SEN were the main means of strengthening the professional learning community (Fullan, 2007; Wood et al., 2025).

The FGDs were important for building a shared understanding of the issues—not only among educators, but also between educators and NGO partners. NGO researchers initiated the collaboration and led all PDP

development and design activities in close partnership with the school administration. Despite the NGO representatives' humble approach, framing discussions as formative and inviting participants to share both positive experiences and critique, a power asymmetry between researchers and participants remained inherent. School leaders and teachers contributed significantly to the PDP design through multiple feedback loops and participated in evaluating the programme. However, the microdynamics of power (Aryton, 2024) persisted because the NGO, as the primary funding recipient, drove the process and was responsible for reporting project outcomes. Although PDP participants offered critiques of some aspects of the programme, they may have been mild out of respect for the NGO partners, who were outsiders to the school community. Therefore, the findings about the outcomes of the PDP should be understood as participants' subjective, time- and place-related reflections rather than objective evidence of programme effectiveness.

Program Design Insights

In the PDP described in this paper, the school administration, teachers, and special education support personnel were instrumental in determining the training's focus. Based on their input, researchers representing the NGO designed a PDP, which was launched only after participants confirmed the relevance of the proposed focus to their professional learning expectations. The programme content was tailored for primary school teachers, with a particular emphasis on assessment and the design and implementation of IEPs. Participants identified these areas as challenging, highlighting their relevance for professional development programmes in various national and school contexts (King et al., 2018; Kozikoglu & Albayrak, 2022; Ni Bhroin et al., 2016).

Although the educators were engaged in programme design, one insight emerged only after programme implementation: before providing specialised information on teaching students with SEN, it is essential to establish a shared understanding among the PDP participants of the fundamentals of inclusive education and its legal framework. This foundational knowledge was necessary to develop understanding of other, more specific concepts related to inclusive teaching.

Implementation Challenges and Limitations

All PDP sessions required participants' active learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone, 2009) through teamwork, problem- and project-based activities. These activities strengthened the collaborative skills of the primary school teachers and special education support personnel, a known challenge (Sommerton et al., 2020), but central to inclusive education practice (Ni Bhroin & King, 2020). In their fall 2024 feedback about the PDP's impact on their practice, participants highlighted improved collaboration among teachers, special education support personnel, and parents.

Although some responses may have reflected social desirability, the high level of teacher engagement during training and their evaluations of individual sessions suggest that much of this feedback was genuine. Research from other contexts shows that changes in teaching practice are rarely sustained when teachers lack ownership of the process (Holmqvist & Lelinge, 2021). In this PDP, teachers and special education staff were involved from the outset, helping to identify their professional learning needs and shape the content to address them directly. However, some sessions that seemed relevant during program design were later seen as less helpful; participants did not mention techniques from these sessions when reflecting on their practice five months after the PDP. Instead, they highlighted practices and learning topics—such as collaboration—that they found useful during the training. This suggests that the PDP may have contributed to a stronger culture of collaboration at the primary school and increased teachers' awareness that inclusive pedagogy benefits all students, not only those with SEN.

The most challenging criterion for programme effectiveness was the training duration. Desimone (2009) recommends at least 20 hours of contact time for professional development. The current PDP offered 36 hours of intensive training from June 4 to June 15, 2024, with daily sessions lasting from two to five hours. This condensed schedule over a short period of time limited participants' opportunities for teamwork and hindered deeper engagement with certain topics and the development of the final IEP project. An additional 44 hours within the scope of the collaboration were available for teachers to implement changes in their practice drawing on the PDP learning and engage in a guided group reflection on this experience.

The time pressure during the PDP training in June resulted from a mismatch between the funding schedule (linked to the calendar year) and the academic year available for programme design and implementation. Because funding was only available starting in February, the NGO and the school had to establish their partnership, design the PDP collaboratively, and deliver the training during the spring semester—a particularly busy period for schools due to end-of-year assessments and events. To avoid similar time constraints in future collaborative PDPs, it is advisable to secure partnership commitments at the funding application stage. This would allow programme development to begin as soon as funding is received, providing more time for meaningful learning and feedback loops to adjust teaching practice accordingly.

Future Directions

The effectiveness of in-service teacher training for inclusive education in Central Asia, and Kazakhstan in particular, has received little research attention. This practice-oriented case report used Desimone's (2009) criteria to evaluate the effectiveness of a unique NGO-school partnership in a collaborative PDP aimed at strengthening inclusive teaching capacity in a mainstream urban Kazakhstani school. Although the PDP evaluation in this report relies on self-reported participant perceptions of the programme's effectiveness, data suggest that this model holds promise for advancing inclusive teaching in reform contexts. Having said

that, further testing and systematic evaluation of the approach presented here are needed. Replicating this PDP model in rural schools and other Central Asian or developing contexts would help determine its broader applicability, considering funding constraints, available expertise, as well as the school's motivation to engage with external partners.

A limitation of this practice-oriented case study is the absence of clear data on how the teacher training improved primary students' learning experiences, a central question in evaluating any PDP (Desimone, 2023). Since it often takes time to observe the impact of changes in teaching practice, adopting a longitudinal approach would help clarify how the PDP influences inclusive teaching and the learning outcomes of students with SEN.

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Appendix.

Group Activity: Adapting Assessment Tasks for Students with SEN

Module 3. *Practical Tools and IEP Implementation*

Topic. *Assessment of Students (Formative and Summative) with SEN: Adapted and Alternative Assessment Methods*

Purpose

This exercise is designed to equip teachers with the skills to adapt assessment activities to accommodate varied learning styles and needs, all while preserving the original educational goal. Participants will analyse an existing classroom assignment, identify potential barriers for students with SEN, and develop appropriate assessment adaptations.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of the activity, participants will be able to:

- Identify barriers that assessment tasks may present for students with SEN.
- Differentiate between modifying an assessment and changing its learning aims.
- Propose relevant assessment adjustments for a range of student profiles.

Instructions

Transcribe the given words. Circle each vowel in red. Divide the words into syllables. Mark the stress in each word. Words: *hand, sky, table, cat, dog, puddle, roof, face*

Activity Guidance

Form participants into groups of 4 to 5 individuals. Instruct each group to identify the assignment's learning objective and discuss which students with SEN might face challenges. Each group will then modify the task for a specific learner profile (e.g., dyslexia, ADHD, autism spectrum disorder, etc.), ensuring the learning objective remains constant. Groups will present their revised task and articulate the reasoning behind their adjustments.

Debrief

Conclude by emphasising that inclusive assessment provides equitable opportunities for students to demonstrate their learning. Successful adaptations eliminate barriers without diminishing academic standards or altering the intended learning outcome.