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Early Stages of the Formation of Inclusive Education and Non-Governmental Educational Institutions for Persons with Disabilities in Uzbekistan

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Abstract: This article examines the early stages of the formation of inclusive education and non-governmental educational initiatives for persons with disabilities in Uzbekistan from a historical and institutional perspective. It analyzes the Soviet legacy of special education, the post-independence transition, and the shift in educational thinking from segregation to inclusion. It also considers the relationship between state and non-state actors, the role of civil society organizations, and the indirect influence of international comparative models. The findings suggest that Uzbekistan's move toward inclusion was neither linear nor purely policy-driven, but shaped by the interaction of inherited institutional structures, limited resources, and emerging rights-based discourse. In the earliest phase, non-governmental and community-based actors played mostly supportive and compensatory roles rather than replacing state provision, yet their presence helped widen the practical horizon of reform. The article argues that the formative period of inclusive education in Uzbekistan should be understood as a hybrid transition in which state-led change and non-state initiatives developed unevenly but became increasingly interconnected.

Keywords: inclusive education, disability, Uzbekistan, non-governmental education, civil society, special education, Central Asia, education policy.

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Introduction

The early formation of inclusive education in Uzbekistan cannot be understood without reference to the Soviet structure of special education. Across the post-Soviet space, disability-related schooling developed through a segregated institutional model in which diagnosis, correction, and separation were prioritized over participation in common educational environments [1]. This model was not unique to Uzbekistan, but it shaped the region's educational culture deeply enough that post-1991 reforms had to confront not only administrative inertia but also long-standing assumptions about disability, normality, and pedagogical order [2].

The conceptual shift from special education to inclusive education was therefore not merely terminological. It involved a movement away from the medicalized and corrective framing of disability toward a rights-based understanding of access, participation, and accommodation [3]. Studies from Central Asia and comparable post-Soviet settings show that this transition was slow because inherited systems continued to treat specialized provision as the natural organizational norm, even when formal policy language began to

endorse inclusion [4]. In this respect, Uzbekistan shares a structural pattern with neighboring states, although the empirical literature specific to Uzbekistan remains unusually thin.

The emergence of non-governmental educational initiatives for persons with disabilities also needs to be situated historically. In the immediate post-Soviet period, state withdrawal, institutional restructuring, and partial marketization did not automatically produce a robust non-state educational sphere. Instead, civil society organizations, parents' groups, disability associations, and donor-linked actors entered the field unevenly and often in supportive rather than fully institutionalized educational roles [5]. Comparative research from Kazakhstan suggests that bottom-up activism and civil-society mobilization could influence inclusive reform, even when the state remained the main allocator of legitimacy and resources [6]. This comparative lens is useful for Uzbekistan, where the scholarly record indicates civil-society development, but only fragmented peer-reviewed evidence on the earliest disability-specific non-state educational institutions.

Early childhood and preschool education are central to this discussion. Inclusive education research consistently shows that the foundations of later participation are laid in the earliest years, when teacher beliefs, curricular flexibility, family involvement, and support services are decisive [7]. Yet in many transitional systems, early childhood settings are also the least prepared for disability inclusion because they have weaker specialist support, fewer trained staff, and lower institutional visibility than school-level provision [8].

This article addresses the following question: how did the early stages of inclusive education and non-governmental educational initiatives for persons with disabilities emerge in Uzbekistan, and what institutional dynamics shaped that emergence? The argument advanced here is that early inclusive education in Uzbekistan developed as a hybrid transition. The state remained structurally dominant, but non-governmental actors gradually created new spaces of advocacy, service support, and educational experimentation. The pace of change, however, was constrained by the Soviet legacy, the limited capacity of civil society, and the scarcity of infrastructural and pedagogical resources [9].

Methods

This study is a qualitative, literature-based historical-institutional analysis. It does not claim to reconstruct every individual institution founded in Uzbekistan in the 1990s or early 2000s. Instead, it examines the early formation of inclusive education and non-governmental educational activity for persons with disabilities through a layered reading of peer-reviewed literature on Uzbekistan, Central Asia, and relevant comparative cases.

The method combines three approaches. First, a historical reading was used to identify the legacy of Soviet special education and its afterlife in post-Soviet educational governance [10]. Second, an institutional analysis was applied to trace the interaction between state-led schooling, rights discourse, and the gradual presence of civil-society organizations and non-state actors [11]. Third, a comparative education framework was used to interpret Uzbekistan through parallels with Kazakhstan and broader inclusive early childhood research [12].

The source base includes peer-reviewed journal articles on disability, inclusive education, post-Soviet transformation, and civil-society participation. The literature was selected according to four criteria: relevance to disability and education, traceability of publication metadata, analytical usefulness for the Uzbek and Central Asian context, and availability of verified bibliographic details. Where the Uzbekistan-specific evidence was sparse, the article used comparative post-Soviet literature transparently rather than filling the gap with unsupported detail [13].

The main limitation of the method is the unevenness of the available literature. The peer-reviewed record contains significantly more work on Kazakhstan and on broader post-Soviet disability governance than on Uzbekistan's earliest disability-focused non-state educational institutions. This is itself an important finding, because it reveals a gap in the regional research archive.

Results

The analysis yielded five principal results:

First, the early formation of inclusive education in Uzbekistan was constrained by a strong Soviet institutional legacy. The prevailing model assumed that disability should be managed through differentiated structures rather than inclusive participation. In post-Soviet discourse on disability rights, this legacy is often described as a durable architecture of segregation and institutionalization rather than merely an outdated administrative form. Comparative evidence from Central Asia suggests that schools and other educational actors often continued to interpret disability through earlier special-education logics even after inclusion entered policy vocabulary [14].

Second, the transition after independence did not immediately produce an inclusive system. Instead, the 1990s and early 2000s represented an intermediate phase in which state structures remained dominant while institutional uncertainty increased. Post-Soviet transformation involved decentralization, resource scarcity, and administrative reconfiguration, but not a clean break with inherited educational categories. In such settings, the language of inclusion emerged before the infrastructure of inclusion.

Third, non-governmental and civil-society actors entered the field gradually, and usually in an auxiliary role. The comparative literature shows that NGOs in transitional systems often begin as service-support organizations, intermediaries, or advocates rather than full educational providers. In post-Soviet Central Asia, bottom-up activism has been shown to matter for inclusive reform, especially where state systems remain bureaucratically rigid. This pattern appears relevant to Uzbekistan as well: the likely historical sequence was not state replacement by NGOs, but state dominance accompanied by the gradual appearance of non-state organizations that helped identify unmet needs, widen discussion, and normalize alternative educational practices.

Fourth, the earliest stage of inclusive reform was strongly conditioned by teacher preparation, early childhood capacity, and institutional culture. Inclusive early childhood studies repeatedly show that successful inclusion depends on trained staff, flexible curricula, support services, and positive teacher attitudes. This matters for Uzbekistan because early-stage inclusion could not develop simply through policy declaration. Without professional preparation, preschool and school-level institutions remained structurally attached to exclusionary habits [15].

Fifth, the comparative evidence indicates that the rise of non-state educational activity for persons with disabilities is typically linked to broader changes in civil society and welfare governance. The role of service-delivery NGOs in policy reform has been documented in other fields of child and welfare policy, where non-governmental organizations often become channels for innovation, monitoring, and public pressure. In post-Soviet settings, civil society activism around disability and education similarly creates pressure for the transition from a segregated service model toward a participation-based model. For Uzbekistan, the evidence suggests that non-governmental disability-related educational initiatives were less a parallel education system than an early reform ecology surrounding the state sector.

Discussion

The results indicate that the phrase "early stages" should not be understood chronologically alone. In Uzbekistan, the early stage of inclusive education was a formative institutional condition in which old and new models coexisted. Segregated

structures retained practical authority, while inclusion emerged first as discourse, then as partial policy orientation, and only gradually as institutional practice.

This hybrid formation helps explain why non-governmental educational initiatives mattered even when they remained small in scale. In transitional systems, NGOs and related civil-society actors often perform three functions. They render neglected groups visible, provide supplementary services, and reframe policy debates around rights and access. The Kazakhstan literature shows that such activism can contribute to reform from below even where the state retains control over educational legitimacy and funding. There is good reason to interpret Uzbekistan's development through a similar logic, while also recognizing that the literature specific to Uzbekistan remains fragmentary.

The non-governmental dimension should also be interpreted carefully. The historical evidence does not support a simple narrative in which private or NGO institutions rapidly filled the gap left by the state. In early post-Soviet settings, civil-society capacity was itself uneven, legally constrained, and dependent on donor partnerships or narrow social networks. Therefore, the formative importance of non-state actors lay less in scale than in function. They helped create an alternative pedagogical and moral horizon in which disability could be discussed in terms other than defect correction and institutional separation.

A further point concerns preschool and early childhood education. The literature is remarkably consistent in showing that inclusion becomes more difficult when introduced late and more sustainable when built early. Early childhood settings are the place where teacher attitudes, peer interaction, and family-school relationships first institutionalize either inclusion or exclusion. This means that the development of non-governmental initiatives in the Uzbek context should not be reduced to school-age disability services alone. Even modest community-based or parent-supported forms of preschool inclusion may have had disproportionate significance during the formative period because they challenged the assumption that specialized separation was the only workable model.

At the same time, one must not romanticize early reform. Comparative studies warn that inclusion rhetoric can coexist with weak implementation, insufficient funding, and poorly prepared personnel. In fact, one reason non-governmental initiatives become visible is that state systems are not yet institutionally capable of delivering the promised shift. The formative stage therefore contained both promise and limitation. Initial successes included greater visibility of disability, emerging rights-based language, and the gradual involvement of civil society. Initial limitations included fragmented provision, low teacher preparedness, infrastructural inadequacy, and continuing social stigma.

For Uzbekistan, the most defensible interpretation is that the earliest formation of inclusive education and non-governmental disability-focused educational activity was relational, not separate. State and non-state sectors did not develop as two cleanly distinct spheres. Rather, they interacted within a constrained reform environment where non-governmental actors often supported, pressured, interpreted, or supplemented the still-dominant state framework. This interpretation fits both the post-Soviet disability literature and the broader scholarship on service NGOs and policy change.

Conclusion

The early stages of the formation of inclusive education and non-governmental educational initiatives for persons with disabilities in Uzbekistan were shaped by a dual process: the slow erosion of the Soviet segregated model and the gradual expansion of rights-oriented, non-state, and community-linked forms of educational support. The transition was not linear. It unfolded under conditions of institutional continuity, limited resources, and uneven civil-society capacity.

Three conclusions follow. First, the Soviet legacy remained foundational well into the post-independence period, structuring how disability, special schooling, and

educational difference were understood. Second, inclusive education emerged first as a conceptual and comparative framework before it became a fully institutionalized practice. Third, non-governmental actors were significant from the beginning not because they replaced the state, but because they widened the space of reform, introduced advocacy and support functions, and helped shift the discourse toward access and participation.

The main challenge for future research is evidentiary. The peer-reviewed archive on Uzbekistan's earliest disability-focused non-state educational institutions remains strikingly underdeveloped. That absence should itself be treated as a research finding. More archival, oral-history, and policy-tracing work is needed to recover the institutional histories of parents' organizations, disability associations, pilot educational initiatives, and donor-linked partnerships that contributed to the early ecology of inclusion.

In substantive terms, the formative period in Uzbekistan should be understood as a hybrid stage in which inclusive education and non-governmental educational activity for persons with disabilities emerged together, unevenly, and under strong structural constraints. Their historical significance lies not in immediate systemic transformation, but in making such transformation imaginable and institutionally possible.

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