

# Equality as the Foundation of Inclusive Education in Russia: Legislative Framework, Barriers, and Policy Responses

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines how the idea of equality underpins the development of inclusive education in the Russian Federation. Drawing on international human rights documents, Russian legislation, federal programmes and academic studies, it traces the formation of the legal foundations of inclusion. It considers the extent to which they secure equal access to education for children with disabilities. The analysis follows the historical trajectory from specialised and segregated schooling to contemporary efforts to introduce inclusive practices in mainstream classrooms. The article highlights several factors that influence the practical implementation of inclusion: the physical accessibility of school buildings, the level of teacher preparation, approaches to curriculum and assessment, the psychological adjustment of learners, and the complexity of administrative procedures faced by families. At the same time, Russia has developed a substantial legal framework and launched federal initiatives, such as the “Accessible Environment” programme, which aim to support participation and remove barriers. The article concludes with a set of practical suggestions, including further strengthening of teacher education, expanding psychological and pedagogical support, improving coordination among different policy measures, and long-term information and awareness-raising activities to promote equality in education.

**Keywords:** inclusive education, educational equality, children with disabilities, Russia, educational policy, barriers to inclusion

## INTRODUCTION

The central problem for a child with disabilities is not only the impairment itself, but also their relationship with the surrounding world. Many children face limited contact with peers and adults, limited mobility, restricted access to nature and cultural resources, and even limited access to basic schooling. However, children with disabilities, regardless of their physical, intellectual, ethnic, social, or other characteristics, should grow up and learn together with their peers in their local communities. Most importantly, they should be included in the general education system, rather than being educated in isolation (United Nations, 1994).

Inclusive education raises the social status of a child with special educational needs and of their family and can strengthen social cohesion by reducing stigma and isolation (Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, 2017; UNESCO, 2020). It also contributes to the development of tolerance and social equality (UNICEF, 2022). As a leading trend in the current stage of education reform, inclusion is not intended to replace the special education system, but rather to eliminate exclusion and discrimination wherever possible. From this angle, inclusive education is not just a set of teaching methods but a way of giving concrete effect to every child's right to good-quality education on an equal basis with other children. International human rights bodies have increasingly argued that the right to education necessarily includes access to inclusive schooling, and that both segregation and the refusal to provide reasonable accommodation amount to discrimination (Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016; Khoiriyah et al., 2024). In this perspective, ensuring educational equality for children with disabilities is not simply a political choice or a question of priorities, but a concrete legal obligation for states.

The issue of inclusive education began to attract sustained attention in the United Nations system after the Second World War, in the broader context of post-war humanism and efforts to eliminate social inequalities. Before this period, children with disabilities were, if they received schooling at all, most often placed in closed, segregated institutions such as specialised boarding schools. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, only a handful of schools for deaf and blind children were established, and later, a few institutions for children with intellectual disabilities appeared (Winzer, 1993). These initiatives remained sporadic and never grew into a coherent public system. They were usually founded by individual educators and philanthropists – for example, Maria Montessori, John Dewey etc. – who developed their own approaches to working with learners with special needs. The state did not, as a rule, take on systematic responsibility for creating and maintaining such schools. As a result, patterns of inequality and even segregation of persons with disabilities were entrenched in most education systems.

In the middle of the twentieth century, the humanist tendencies mentioned above, and the elimination of social inequalities contributed to the creation of public organisations in Europe and the United States, whose goal was to integrate people with disabilities into modern society and eliminate discrimination in all its forms. The legal basis for these processes consisted of both national regulatory acts and international human rights instruments (*Promoting the Rights of Children with Disabilities*, 2007).

International monitoring shows that inclusive education is now framed explicitly as a question of equality and social justice: laws and policies are expected not only to open the school door, but also to guarantee reasonable accommodation, support services, and non-discriminatory learning conditions for students with disabilities (GEM, 2020). At the same time, global data documents that children with disabilities remain among the most excluded learners worldwide in terms of school attendance and learning outcomes, which underscores the importance of enforceable legal guarantees and effective implementation (*Seen, Counted, Included: Using Data to Shed Light on the Well-Being of Children with Disabilities*, 2021; The World Bank, 2019). Cross-national analyses of disability-inclusive education policies showed that where states specify enforceable rights to attend mainstream schools and to receive support, children with disabilities are more likely to complete primary education. However, even strong legal guarantees do not automatically close gaps in participation and learning outcomes (Bose & Heymann, 2020). At the same time, empirical work tends to zoom in on the micro-level – teacher self-efficacy, classroom practices and school cultures – showing how poorly supported teachers, rigid curricula and weak professional development can undermine the promise of inclusive legislation in very different national contexts (Van Staden-Payne & Nel, 2023).

Some studies (Ainscow, 2020; Deroncele-Acosta et al., 2024; Watkins et al., 2021) show that reforms in inclusive education easily stall at the programme and slogan level when changes in funding rules, teacher education, accountability arrangements, and everyday school routines do not support them. In this context, several authors speak of a risk of “rhetorical inclusion”. Authorities and schools adopt the language of inclusion, while classroom practices and learning outcomes for learners with disabilities remain essentially unchanged. This body of work also argues that policies for equality, inclusion and educational quality need to be designed and monitored together rather than in parallel. In theoretical terms, it reinforces the now-familiar distinction between formal equality – legal access and declared rights – and substantive equality, understood as real opportunities to learn and succeed in school (Nilholm, 2021; Qvortrup & Qvortrup, 2018).

For Russia, existing research describes the historical development of special and inclusive education and documents persistent barriers in access and everyday school life (Alekseevich et al., 2020; Neretina et al., 2018). However, the question of equality itself – as a legal and policy principle – has been explored much less. In particular, we still know relatively little about how constitutional guarantees, fundamental education laws and large federal programmes such as *Accessible Environment* are supposed to secure equal educational opportunities for children with disabilities, and how far these promises are visible in the everyday reality of schools. There is still no study that examines international human rights standards, Russian legislative changes, and empirical evidence on day-to-day barriers in mainstream schools to determine to what extent inclusive education in Russia is, in fact, built on the idea of equality.

Taken together, this suggests that, in any national context, inclusive education needs to be examined at two levels: how equality is formulated in legal and policy texts, and how this formal commitment is (or is not)

reflected in school conditions and in the educational trajectories of children with disabilities. It is on this basis that the present article looks at equality as the foundation of inclusive education in the Russian Federation and addresses three interrelated questions:

1. How is the principle of educational equality for children with disabilities articulated across key international instruments and the Russian legislative framework?
2. How does the legislative framework translate into school-level conditions that support equal educational opportunities in practice?
3. Which structural, relational, and procedural barriers continue to constrain inclusion in mainstream schools, despite the existence of formal guarantees?

By combining legal analysis with a review of policy documents and academic studies, this article aims to show in which areas the existing system really supports equality, where it still falls short, and what kinds of policy steps would be needed to reduce the gap between formal rights and the actual educational paths of children with disabilities in Russia.

## METHODOLOGY

This research is based on a qualitative analysis of legal, policy, and scholarly sources related to inclusive education and educational equality for children with disabilities in the Russian Federation. The primary corpus of documents includes international human rights instruments (such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the Salamanca Statement (1994), the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), key provisions of the Constitution of the Russian Federation (1993), the Federal Law “On Education in the Russian Federation” (2012), federal programs such as “Accessible Environment” (2015; 2019), as well as selected ministerial orders and strategic education initiatives.

In addition, the analysis draws on Russian and international academic work on inclusive education, disability policy, and social justice in education. The sources were chosen for their relevance to three main themes: (1) how equality and non-discrimination are expressed in laws and policy texts; (2) how schooling for children with disabilities is organised and what conditions they face in practice; and (3) which barriers to inclusion arise in architectural, social, pedagogical, psychological, and bureaucratic domains. Preference was given to documents and studies published after the adoption of the CRPD, while earlier materials were used mainly to reconstruct the historical background of the current system.

Analytically, the article combines legal analysis with a thematic reading of research and policy documents. Legal and policy texts are examined for how they define equal educational opportunities and the right to inclusive education. At the same time, empirical and theoretical studies highlight gaps between formal guarantees and everyday school realities. Bringing together international norms, national legislation, and research findings enables a more balanced and critical assessment of how far inclusive education in Russia is grounded in the principle of equality.

## The Concept Of Inclusive Education

In contemporary democratic societies, education systems are expected to respond to the diverse needs of individual learners. This includes supporting their personal development, considering individual interests, motivations, and abilities, and enabling both social and professional success. Social success can be understood as the ability to participate fully and productively in community life. In contrast, professional success refers to the development of transferable skills and readiness to choose and pursue a career path.

Building schools' capacity to respond to diverse learning needs has become a central objective of education reforms worldwide. At the same time, some groups of children have educational needs that are both individual and qualitatively different from those of their peers, due to disabilities, health conditions, or other circumstances. It is in relation to these learners that the principles and practices of inclusive education are most clearly tested.

Since the 1970s, many countries have enacted or revised laws and policies to expand educational opportunities for persons with disabilities. Politicians and representatives of international and federal organisations emphasise the need to ensure access to quality education for vulnerable groups. Oliver's (1990) research emphasises the need for a critical approach to disability policy and the social model of disability (Shea & Bauer, 1993). Today, inclusive education is being implemented and manifested in *the requirement to educate every child in an appropriate local school and class*. In this way, each child is provided with appropriate educational support and reasonable accommodations, rather than being required to adjust to existing school and program conditions. Children with disabilities especially need such conditions to overcome the barriers and problems found in any school.

Special educational needs arise in children when, in the process of their education, difficulties arise due to discrepancies between children's capabilities and generally accepted social expectations, school educational standards for success, and socially established norms of behaviour and communication. These specific educational needs require the school to provide additional or specialised materials, programs, or services.

Including children with special educational needs (children with developmental disabilities) in the educational process in public schools at the residence is a relatively new approach for Russian education. This approach is terminologically related to the concept of inclusion in education, and accordingly, education in line with this approach is inclusive education.

Equality of educational opportunity means that all children can learn, regardless of their abilities or limitations. Russian legislation emphasises the development of educational competences (*Federal'nyy gosudarstvennyy obrazovatel'nyy standart doskol'nogo obrazovaniya [Federal State Educational standard of primary general education] (in Russian)*., 2013; *Federalnyy zakon «Ob obrazovanii v Rossiyskoy Federatsii» ot 29.12.2012 № 273-FZ [Federal Law “On Education in the Russian Federation” of 29.12.2012 No. 273-FZ (latest edition)]*., 2012). Every secondary school should create a specific educational environment to develop students' 21st-century competencies, using technologies suited to each child and considering individual needs and learning styles. Assistive technology can also be helpful for students without health problems.

In Russia, teachers increasingly work in heterogeneous classrooms and are expected to support a wide range of learning needs. Research on inclusive education shows that many classes include students whose reading and learning progress differs substantially, as well as children with special educational needs or other learning difficulties. In such settings, teachers invest considerable time and effort into creating a classroom climate in which every student feels safe, respected and able to participate, relying on differentiation, individual support and collaboration with specialists (Hanssen & Alekseeva, 2024; Kozlova & Ryabichenko, 2024; Kutepova et al., 2021).

Disabilities are among the most common barriers to learning worldwide. Inclusive education is the most effective way to give all children equal opportunities to learn and develop the skills necessary for a successful life. Inclusive education is the education of all children in the same classes and schools. It provides real educational opportunities for students who are usually excluded from the process, not only children with special needs but also representatives of linguistic minorities. Inclusive education values the contribution to school life of all students, from whatever background they come to school. Diversity in a learning community benefits everyone (GEM, 2020).

Researchers (Alekseevich et al., 2020; Silantiev et al., 2020) that more than a decade ago, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights drew attention to the fact that many countries still face difficulties in fully implementing human rights conventions and that, as a result, children with disabilities may encounter additional barriers in accessing education. In Russia, despite more than 20 years of ongoing reforms and modernisation of the education system, children with disabilities can also experience social and psychological difficulties in general education schools. This underlines the importance of further strengthening inclusive approaches in the work of public authorities, school administrations, teachers, and parents.



## Education As a Realisation of Rights

An inclusive approach proposes, through the reorganisation and reform of the educational system, enabling students with special educational needs to study on an equal footing with other students in a general education school. The barriers and difficulties students face in learning stem from the current organisation of the educational process and the use of obsolete teaching methods.

In the past, attempts have been made to adapt pupils with special needs to the requirements of mainstream schools. Still, in inclusive education, the need for the school to seek other pedagogical approaches to learning comes to the fore, enabling the school to consider the special educational needs of all students most fully. Inclusive education is one of the main directions of reform and transformation of the special education system in many countries worldwide, aimed at realising the right to education without discrimination.

At the heart of the transformation of special education and the development of inclusive approaches worldwide lie key international legal instruments. Under the auspices of the United Nations, several declarations and conventions have affirmed the human rights of persons with disabilities and the inadmissibility of discrimination for any reason (e.g. Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948); Declaration on Social Progress and Development (1969); Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989); Declaration on the Rights of Disabled Persons, (1975), Standard Rules on the Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (1993). Complementary instruments adopted within UNESCO have addressed education more specifically, such as the Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960), the World Declaration on Education for All (Degener & Koster-Dreese, 1990), and, later, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) (2006).

The main ideas and principles of inclusive education as an international practice for realising the right to education of persons with special needs were most fully formulated in the Salamanca Declaration "The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education" (1994). More than 92 countries and 25 international organisations declared in the Salamanca Declaration the need to put as a

*«priority to improve their education systems to enable them to include all children regardless of individual differences or difficulties»; "adopt as a matter of law or policy the principle of inclusive education, enrolling all children in regular schools";*

*"to endorse the approach of inclusive schooling and to support the development of special needs education as an integral part of all education programs."*

The Convention stated that every child has the right to education, including those with "*special educational needs who should have access to regular schools.*" In turn, schools must provide education that meets these needs and is child-centred. Moreover, the Convention emphasises that regular schools with an "*inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society, and providing education for all.*"

In Russia, the implementation and integration of inclusive education are fixed in the *Constitution of the Russian Federation* (1993) and the *Federal Law on Education* (2012). The country's legislative acts do not contradict international law on equality or the provisions of the conventions on the rights of the child, and they also serve as the basis for reforming education in Russia to promote inclusive education. *The national educational initiative "Our New School"* (2010) formulates the basic principle of inclusive education: "The new school is a school for all." This document emphasises that each school must ensure the successful socialisation of children with disabilities and children left without parental care. Each educational institution must create a "universal barrier-free environment" that provides the full integration of children with disabilities. In June 2012, a new document, *"On the National Strategy of Action for Children for 2012-2017"* (2012), was introduced, which set the following tasks for Russian schools: Legislative consolidation of the right of children with disabilities to be included in the existing educational environment at all levels of education, i.e., the right to inclusive education; ensuring the provision of high-quality psychological and pedagogical assistance to students in all schools throughout the country. The government of the Russian Federation in 2015 approved the *state program of the Russian Federation "Accessible Environment" for 2011–2020* (2015), and in 2019 the *state program of the Russian*

*Federation "Accessible Environment" for 2011–2025" (2019). The objectives of both state documents are to create conditions for the enlightenment of citizens in matters of disability and the removal of barriers in relationships with other people; assessment of the State of accessibility of priority facilities and services and the formation of a regulatory and methodological framework to ensure the availability of priority facilities and services in priority areas of life for people with disabilities and other people with limited mobility; creation of conditions for unhindered access of disabled people and other people with restricted mobility to priority facilities and services in the field of social protection, healthcare, culture, education, transport, information and communications, physical culture and sports.*

Another important document to which attention should be paid is the Order of the Ministry of Education and Science of Russia "On Approval of the Procedure for Ensuring Accessibility for Disabled Persons of Objects and Services Provided in the Sphere of Education, as well as Providing Them with the Necessary Assistance" (2015), which sets out the requirements for the administration of educational institutions implementing the inclusive education program. These requirements include organising conditions for physical access to the educational institution, organising the educational space, implementing the educational process in accordance with students' physical and psychological needs, and ensuring continuous professional development for teachers.

At the same time, the implementation of these legal guarantees is influenced by the historical development of the education system and by existing governance arrangements. On the one hand, federal documents clearly endorse equality and inclusive schooling as important goals. On the other hand, many practices have been formed within the correctional model of education and within a highly centralised system of management and regulation. These features shape the tempo and specific forms of change and mean that new inclusive approaches must be introduced in a way that takes account of established structures and regional conditions (Göransson & Nilholm, 2014; Iarskaia-Smirnova & Romanov, 2007).

### **Background History Of Education For Children With Disabilities In Russia**

In Russia, schooling for children with disabilities has grown for decades within what is commonly called the correctional model, and this heritage continues to shape the field. Historically, the system was organised around diagnostic categories: children were classified by type of impairment and taught in separate institutions whose declared aim was to "correct" deviations from the norm, rather than to adapt schools to a wide range of abilities (Mihal'chik, 2018). The Soviet state built up an extensive network of such schools for different groups—deaf and hard-of-hearing pupils, blind and visually impaired pupils, and children with intellectual disabilities, among others. This network significantly expanded access to education for children who had previously had very limited opportunities, but did so predominantly in separate settings.

Key pedagogical figures, including Lev Vygotsky, argued that learning is rooted in social interaction and that disability must be understood in both social and medical terms. Nonetheless, these insights were never fully translated into the organisation of the school system. In the turbulent 1990s, economic and social changes, including pressures on education funding, further narrowed the scope for reform: special schools largely preserved their positions, and mainstream schools were rarely equipped—financially or professionally—to include children with disabilities (Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation, 2004).

Policy documents in the 2000s began to speak the language of inclusion, but the deeper institutional pattern proved resistant to change. The continued differentiation of schools into types I–VIII, reflecting specific disability labels, shows how deeply embedded the correctional approach is. Even where children with disabilities attended general education schools, they sometimes did so in formats that were only partially inclusive, with limited support and teaching methods still oriented towards separate provision (2020).

This historical background helps to explain some of the current implementation challenges. In practice, inclusive education is often perceived as an additional element alongside the existing correctional system rather than as its central organising principle. As a result, both forms of provision coexist and continue to evolve. For many families, special schools remain an important and valued option, especially for children with complex impairments, while inclusive education creates new possibilities for learning in mainstream settings.

In legal and policy discourse, the shift towards inclusion has been clear, but everyday practices change more gradually. Many mainstream schools are still improving their physical accessibility, specialised expertise is still concentrated to a considerable degree in special institutions, and professional ideas about the “most appropriate” place of education for different categories of learners are evolving. The move from a predominantly correctional paradigm to a more inclusive one is therefore best described as an ongoing process rather than a completed reform.

### **Inclusive Education as A Basis for Educational Equality in Contemporary Russia**

According to Valeeva L. (2015) around 4.5% of Russian children are officially recognised as persons with disabilities. To meet their special educational needs, they require provision that combines principles of special pedagogy and psychology with those of mainstream education. However, inclusive education in Russia is still at an early stage of development, and the market of educational services for children with disabilities remains limited.

Education for Russian children with special needs is organised through a network of kindergartens for children aged three to six, special schools with ten years of instruction, and vocational schools with three-year programmes. It must be emphasised that the system of special education does not include special institutions for adolescents with severe mental disorders and "psycho-neurological" closed institutions for children and adolescents diagnosed with severe mental disorders, since these institutions belong to the social development system. According to Iarskaia-Smirnova and Romanova's (2007) opinion, 15 years ago, children with disabilities could not receive a decent education and were forced to live in limited conditions at home. With a total number of children with developmental or physical disabilities of more than 650,000, only 30 per cent could attend special schools. Nowadays, the introduction of inclusive education in schools is being actively implemented with the support of the Government of the Russian Federation and the Ministry of Education. As a result, children with disabilities can study alongside other children and have equal rights when applying to educational institutions.

Some researchers (Alekseevich et al., 2020; Oreshkina, 2009) argue that the process of inclusion is endless and involves profound changes in the entire structure of education and educational culture in general, which must constantly review and reassess the values of the teaching organisation.

Inclusion means realising the right to quality education without discrimination and inequality. Education is a public good because it contributes to the development of people and society. In its broadest sense, the right to education goes beyond access to free and compulsory education. To fully enjoy this right, it is necessary to provide a quality education that contributes to the full development of each person's multiple abilities; that is, the right to education is the right to lifelong learning. Understanding education as a right implies that the State is obliged to respect, guarantee, protect, and promote it. Violation of this right also affects the enjoyment of other human rights. The right to quality education must be ensured fairly and equitably, protecting the rights of minorities and groups with the least influence in society. Non-discrimination in education involves ensuring that all individuals and groups can access all levels of education and receive it to the same quality standards, except for separate educational systems and institutions designed for special needs.

A study conducted by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2014) showed that the inclusion of students with special educational needs in regular schools could be seven to nine times cheaper than their education in special schools. In addition, an inclusive education approach is less expensive and more effective, as it improves school performance and outcomes for all children. Many experts (Buchanan, 2015; Hanssen & Alekseeva, 2024; Iarskaia-Smirnova & Romanov, 2007) note that, despite ongoing reforms, ensuring equal access to education remains a significant challenge and can hinder the full social participation of children and young people with disabilities in Russia.

### **Barriers To Inclusion in Contemporary Russia**

For schools that choose to adopt inclusive practices, it is essential to identify the specific sources of obstacles in the education of learners with special educational needs. In this article, five main groups of barriers are

distinguished: (1) architectural and physical barriers; (2) social and relational barriers; (3) barriers embedded in the organisation of the educational process; (4) barriers related to psychological adaptation; and (5) complex bureaucratic barriers.

The significance of the barriers in the “architectural” environment for students lies in the environment's physical inaccessibility (Neretina et al., 2018). For example, the lack of ramps and elevators at home and school, the inaccessibility of transport between home and school, and the absence of good traffic lights at the crossing on the way to school. In addition, a school with standard regulatory funding faces a financial barrier if additional expenses are needed to organise exceptional pedagogical support (Valeeva, 2015). In big cities and other settlements, accessible public transport sometimes is very limited.

However, even more significant are the barriers to social relations that arise from students' relationships and the social contexts of their existence. Otherwise, they are called “relational” or social barriers. Social barriers do not have an external, “architectural” expression, and they are not directly related to material and financial costs. They can be found both directly in the school and in the local community, in regional and national social policies, and in the existing legislative framework (Dvadenko et al., 2015).

The existing contradictions between the theoretical guidelines in inclusive education and their implementation in educational practice are a barrier *to the educational process*. Many teachers are still of the opinion that children with disabilities need specialised conditions and schools of a particular type. Still, at the same time, no one denies the need for the complete socialisation of each student, regardless of developmental features. Another topical barrier in this category is the issue of further development of inclusive education in higher education, given Russia's complex economic and socio-demographic situation. From the perspective of Alekseevich et al. (2020) addressing the diversity of educational needs is also a necessary condition for achieving quality education. This requirement also applies to teachers and represents another major challenge facing schools. This barrier highlights the need for significant changes across the existing curriculum, teaching approaches, teacher training, assessment systems, educational concepts, and educational organisations. Teachers who are ready to take additional professional development courses face the unformed, fragmentary, and unsystematic practical implementation of developments in inclusive education in modern Russia; modern teachers need guidance in building an educational and developmental classroom environment that considers students' diverse individual needs.

Findings from other systems suggest that low teacher self-efficacy and limited preparation for inclusive classrooms are key mechanisms through which ambitious inclusion policies fail to translate into equitable practice (Nilholm, 2021; Van Staden-Payne & Nel, 2023).

Another subcategory of this barrier is the inability of higher education institutions to provide additional services for students with disabilities and their accompaniment. In the Russian education system, specialized year-round children's sanatoriums have been established, where ideal conditions for comprehensive upbringing and education are created through a rational combination of educational and medical processes; nevertheless, from the perspective of Dvadneko et al. (2015) after completing a course of rehabilitation treatment, students with severe illnesses again find themselves in the usual general educational environment, after which the problem of their successful inclusion in the educational process, along with their healthy classmates, becomes relevant again.

Depending on the *barrier of psychological adaptation*, stresses are revealed that manifest themselves in students with disabilities (Hanssen & Alekseeva, 2024). They experience such stress during external influences from their classmates and parents, who do not always perceive them as equal recipients of education in general education schools. As a result, an “alienation zone” is quickly formed between children, which, like a snowball, begins to increase every day and is incredibly oppressive for a student with disabilities. Another stress factor is the need to keep up with the rest of the class in studies since the educational program is the same nationwide. At the same time, long-standing stereotypes, and misconceptions about people with disabilities remain present in society.

Studies on inclusive education in Russia indicate that children and young people with disabilities may face *various administrative and informational barriers* when accessing schooling. Some authors note that children with developmental difficulties are still at risk of being channelled into separate educational tracks and may be



viewed as unlikely to benefit from mainstream instruction, while staff in general education schools do not always have sufficient specialist training and support to make informed decisions in complex cases (Buchanan, 2015; Iarskaia-Smirnova & Romanov, 2007; Oreshkina, 2009). Under these conditions, parents of children with disabilities can be uncertain about the possibilities of mainstream schooling and may feel hesitant to enrol their child in a general education class. These examples illustrate some of the challenges that learners with disabilities and their families can encounter in the everyday process of obtaining education.

## DISCUSSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The analysis presented in this article suggests that equality is formally recognised as a core principle of inclusive education in the Russian Federation, while its implementation in everyday school practice is still developing. In relation to the first research question, international human rights instruments and Russian legislation clearly affirm the right of children with disabilities to education without discrimination and increasingly describe this right in terms of access to inclusive forms of schooling. Constitutional provisions, the Federal Law on Education and federal programmes such as “Accessible Environment” set out commitments to equal educational opportunities, the removal of barriers and the development of support services.

When these formal commitments are examined through the lens of the second and third research questions, it becomes evident that their practical realisation is a gradual and multifaceted process. Special schools continue to play an important role in providing education in specially organised conditions, particularly for children with visual, hearing or other specific impairments, while general education schools are progressively expanding inclusive forms of provision. At the same time, correctional approaches still influence professional thinking, teacher education does not always accord sufficient attention to inclusive pedagogy, and families may face complex administrative procedures when seeking information or support. Under such conditions, inclusive arrangements can sometimes appear as an additional layer into the broader system rather than as a fully integrated approach based on equality. This picture corresponds with international discussions of “rhetorical inclusion,” in which policy texts endorse inclusive principles but are not always matched by the resources, practical guidance and accountability mechanisms required for their full implementation (Ainscow, 2020; Bose & Heymann, 2020; Watkins et al., 2021).

From the perspective of contemporary equality theory, this situation highlights the distinction between formal and substantive equality. In legal terms, Russian legislation grants children with disabilities equal rights to attend general education schools and receive support. In practice, access to high-quality, non-segregated learning environments still depends to a considerable extent on regional circumstances and the resource capacities of individual schools. Comparative work on inclusion and special education shows that similar patterns are present in many other countries: systems may declare inclusive principles while continuing to differentiate between groups of learners through selective placement, pull-out models and differing expectations (Göransson & Nilholm, 2014; Nilholm, 2021; Qvortrup & Qvortrup, 2018). The Russian context reflects some of these tendencies, with legal equality coexisting alongside arrangements in which some children with disabilities continue to study in specially organised educational settings, while others study in mainstream schools where inclusive practices are being developed.

At the same time, the five groups of barriers identified in this article—architectural, social, organisational, psychological and bureaucratic—show that inequality arises not from a single cause but from the interaction of material conditions, institutional routines and social attitudes. International research on parents’ views points to the role of uncertainty and concern in shaping responses to inclusion (Bahdanovich Hanssen & Erina, 2022; De Boer et al., 2010), while studies of teacher self-efficacy underline how limited preparation and support can make it challenging to put inclusive values into practice (Nilholm, 2021; Van Staden-Payne & Nel, 2023). Read together, these findings help explain why changes in legislation and policy do not automatically or immediately lead to uniform classroom practice, and why work with professional communities and the wider public remains essential.

In practical terms, the Russian experience indicates that developing an inclusive educational environment requires steady, step-by-step progress, with equality serving as a reference point for decision-making rather than

merely a declared aim. Preserving and further developing elements of the existing system that demonstrably support learners—such as specialised pedagogical expertise in special schools—can complement inclusive reforms, provided that this expertise is made more accessible to mainstream settings and used to broaden, rather than narrow, the range of educational options available to families. Within this broader framework, several priority directions can be highlighted.

First, teacher education should place greater emphasis on inclusion. General and special pedagogy, as well as aspects of correctional psychology, can be more firmly embedded in core programmes for future teachers, rather than being addressed mainly through short elective courses or isolated in-service modules. Ongoing professional development may be particularly effective when it offers concrete examples of co-teaching, differentiated instruction, and cooperation with support specialists, rather than just information about the regulatory framework.

Second, school-based psychological, medical and pedagogical support needs to be strengthened and made more predictable. The work of psychological, medical, and pedagogical councils should go beyond formal decisions on eligibility or placement to include joint planning of individual educational routes, regular monitoring of progress, and timely assistance during transitions between educational levels.

Third, assessment and curriculum practices could be revisited with a view to substantive equality. When a standard national curriculum and uniform assessment requirements are applied without sufficient flexibility, students with disabilities may be formally included but risk being excluded from meaningful participation in learning. The development and piloting of teaching approaches that allow for variation in content, pace and ways of demonstrating learning is significant at the basic education level, where detailed federal standards for inclusive practice are still emerging.

Fourth, systematic work with families and the wider community should be an integral part of inclusive policy. Regular information activities, parent education on the rights of children with disabilities and open public discussion of different educational options—including both special and inclusive settings—can help to address concerns about inclusion and support more informed decisions about educational trajectories.

Finally, policy design may benefit from a stronger emphasis on monitoring and feedback. If equality is understood not only as formal access but also as participation and outcomes, evaluation tools need to account for these different dimensions. As international research on inclusive education systems suggests, linking federal programmes such as “Accessible Environment” (2015; 2019) to clear, but adaptable, expectations around inclusive enrolment, retention and achievement may help to move from a mainly declarative understanding of inclusion towards more substantive equality of educational opportunity (Ainscow, 2020; Bose & Heymann, 2020; Watkins et al., 2021). In this sense, the Russian case illustrates both the progress made in recognising equality as a guiding principle and the practical challenges involved in implementing it across a large and diverse education system.

## CONCLUSION

Russia now has a substantial legal framework affirming the right to education for children with disabilities and special educational needs. In practice, the way this right is realised can vary considerably between regions and between schools. Teacher qualifications, material resources and local views on disability all shape the educational opportunities that children experience. These variations reflect organisational factors as well as long-standing traditions and expectations regarding “normal” schooling and appropriate forms of provision for different groups of learners.

Historically, the system of special (correctional) schools has played an important role in opening access to education for children who might otherwise have had minimal options, including those with visual, hearing, intellectual or complex impairments. For many families, these schools have offered the opportunity to study in an environment specifically adapted to their child’s needs. In the current situation, the key task is not to contrast special and inclusive education, but to develop a balanced combination of forms and to ensure that educational pathways are chosen with the best interests of the child in mind. One promising direction is the development of

inclusive practices in mainstream schools while, at the same time, using the experience and resources of special institutions as support and resource centres.

Further progress towards educational equality is likely to depend on a series of targeted, system-level steps. Strengthening initial and in-service teacher education is central: teachers need not only general information about inclusion, but also practical tools for working with diverse groups of pupils, including experience in designing and implementing individual learning plans. Psychological, medical and pedagogical support should be available to schools on a regular and predictable basis, with precise coordination between education, health and social services. Approaches to organising inclusive classes and adapting curricula also require methodological support, piloting and subsequent integration into professional development programmes, particularly at primary and lower secondary levels.

An important guiding idea is that the educational environment should be tailored to the child's characteristics and needs. This relates not only to physical accessibility, but also to flexible timetabling, differentiated assessment, cooperation with families and the use of interdisciplinary teams of specialists. Working with parents and local communities is an essential part of this process: information campaigns, consultations, and open discussion of the aims and possibilities of inclusive education can help reduce uncertainty and misconceptions.

In the longer term, the sustainable development of inclusive education will depend on gradual changes in professional and public attitudes, the accumulation and reflection on successful practices, and consistent action at federal, regional, and school levels. From this perspective, the coexistence of mainstream, special and inclusive forms of provision can be viewed not as a contradiction, but as a resource that allows the education system to respond flexibly to the needs of different groups of children while upholding the principle of equal educational opportunities.

### **Limitations Of The Study**

This article is based on desk research. The analysis relies on existing literature and legal and policy documents and does not include original empirical data. It also does not explore regional differences in how inclusive education policies are implemented across Russia. However, such differences are likely substantial and may limit the extent to which the conclusions can be generalised. Further work that combines qualitative and quantitative data from schools and other educational settings would help to test, refine and extend the policy-level arguments developed here.

### **Conflict Of Interest**

The author declares no conflict of interest in relation to the research and authorship of this study.

### **Ethical Approval**

The study relies exclusively on open-source policy documents and published academic literature. No research was carried out with human participants, and no restricted or institutional data were used. Under the author's institutional and national ethics regulations, work of this kind does not fall under procedures requiring prior ethics committee approval.

### **Data Availability**

No new empirical data were created or analysed in this study. Data sharing is therefore not applicable. All sources used are publicly available and fully cited in the reference list.

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