

## PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCE OF TEACHERS AND DEVELOPMENT PROSPECTS IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN UZBEKISTAN

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### **Abstract**

This article analyzes the issues of developing teachers' professional competence in the context of inclusive education in Uzbekistan. The research findings indicate that although teachers demonstrate a positive attitude toward inclusive education, their practical and methodological preparedness remains insufficient. The main challenges identified include excessive workload, a lack of adapted educational materials, and weak collaboration with specialized professionals. The article also proposes measures to strengthen the practical training of teachers, develop the tutoring (assistant teacher) system, and improve the effective organization of inclusive education.

### **Keywords**

inclusive education, teachers' professional competence, special educational needs, inclusive education programs in Uzbekistan, SmartED project, professional development of teachers, inclusive and tolerant environment.

**Introduction.** In the modern education system, the formation of an inclusive environment requires not only the creation of appropriate material conditions but also the fundamental improvement of teachers' professional competence. Based on the principles of inclusive education and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, countries around the world are striving to ensure that children with special educational needs have access to education within general education settings. According to global statistics, there are approximately 240 million children with disabilities worldwide, and they are 2.5 times more likely to be out of school [1].

In the Republic of Uzbekistan, inclusive education is being developed with a central focus on enhancing teachers' professional competence. The Resolution of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan No. PQ-4860 dated October 13, 2020, "On measures to further improve the system of education for children with special educational needs," along with the Concept for the Development of Inclusive Education in the Public Education System for 2020–2025 adopted on its basis, introduced key mechanisms such as the position of tutor (assistant teacher), the development of Individual Education Plans (IEPs), and the implementation of differentiated instructional approaches [2].

The national program for the development of school education for 2022–2026 and the "New Uzbekistan" Development Strategy define inclusive education as a priority area, setting a target of achieving at least 51% inclusion in schools by 2025 [3]. In practice, these programs are aimed at enhancing teachers' professional competence: in the 2024–2025 academic year, 5,744 students are studying in inclusive classrooms across 2,055 schools, tutors are being assigned, and in-service teacher training courses are being conducted [4].

The SmartED project launched in 2025 (implemented in cooperation with ISDB, GPE, and UNICEF, with UNICEF's contribution amounting to USD 19.2 million) aims to introduce competency-based education, inclusive learning materials, and support systems for teachers [5]. Furthermore, a USD 6.5 million agreement signed in July 2025 between UNESCO and the Ministry of Preschool and School Education focuses on aligning both pre-service and in-service teacher training with modern standards [6].

Despite the fact that ongoing initiatives for the development of inclusive education in Uzbekistan (including Resolution No. PQ-4860, the 2020–2025 Concept, the SmartED project, and professional development programs implemented in cooperation with UNESCO and UNICEF) place teachers' professional competence at the center, empirical findings indicate that their practical effectiveness remains insufficient [7].

**Research Methodology.** Within the framework of this study, a qualitative research design was selected in order to comprehensively explore the subjective and socio-cultural dimensions of the problem. The study was conducted in a general secondary school in Tashkent. Respondents were selected using purposive and snowball sampling techniques.

The research involved 10 specialists (n=10) and was carried out through individual semi-structured interviews. The participants included a deputy director for academic affairs, a deputy director for spiritual and educational affairs, subject teachers, and a school psychologist. The average age of the experts was 44.6 years;

75% were female and 25% male. The average teaching experience of the participants was 15 years. The study was conducted in full compliance with the principles of anonymity. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, audio recordings were transcribed, and the data were processed using thematic analysis. A structured questionnaire consisting of 20 questions was specifically developed for this research.

**Results.** The study examined the positive impact of inclusive education and teachers' attitudes toward it. The majority of experts confirmed that inclusive education has a positive effect on the socio-emotional development of children with special educational needs. Teachers noted that this process enriches their professional competence and enhances their ability to support students through individualized approaches. These findings are consistent with the objectives outlined in Resolution PQ-4860 [2].

At the same time, when analyzing teachers' professional challenges and the practical effectiveness of existing programs, many experts emphasized that teaching children with special educational needs requires significant time and effort. Teachers reported difficulties in balancing attention during lessons, developing Individual Education Plans (IEPs), and preparing differentiated tasks. Although training courses conducted within the framework of the SmartED and UNESCO projects contribute to increasing theoretical knowledge, there remains a lack of methodological support in practice, particularly in working with children with autism and attention-related difficulties. Respondents noted: "We have studied theory in training courses, but we do not have practical experience of co-teaching with tutors or special education specialists." This highlights the gap between theory and practice in teachers' professional competence [8].

When examining experts' views on collaboration with school administration, specialized professionals, and program frameworks, it was revealed that administrative support is often limited to reporting functions. The mechanism of assigning tutors, as stipulated in PQ-4860, is not sufficiently implemented in practice. Collaboration with psychologists, speech therapists, and special education specialists remains weak. Although the SmartED project proposes collaborative modules for teachers, these have not yet been systematically implemented at the school level. Teachers expressed this concern by stating: "We are left alone in the classroom."

Regarding the adaptation of educational materials and legal-practical challenges, experts expressed the subjective view that adapting and modifying learning materials is one of the most complex and time-consuming aspects of teaching in inclusive education. In practice, preparing materials tailored to

individual educational needs for each lesson requires approximately two to three times more time. This significantly increases teachers' workload. Although new teaching materials developed within the SmartED project have been introduced as methodological support for inclusive classrooms, the findings indicate that they are not yet fully systematized [9].

In particular, the materials are largely limited to general recommendations, while differentiated approaches based on the type of disability (hearing, visual, intellectual differences) remain insufficient. Furthermore, the level of integration with Individual Education Plans (IEPs) is low. From a legal perspective, although IEPs, tutoring systems, and adapted programs have been introduced under the PQ-4860 framework, the practical mechanisms – such as methodological guidelines and monitoring systems – are not yet fully developed. As a result, teachers are often forced to rely on their own experience rather than structured regulatory frameworks.

The analysis of experts' perceptions regarding material and technical resources, as well as teachers' working conditions, revealed that the effectiveness of inclusive education is directly dependent on school infrastructure. Studies indicate that many general secondary schools in Uzbekistan lack adequate ramps and elevators, have limited access to specialized classroom equipment (such as sensory materials and speech therapy tools), and do not fully meet sanitary requirements for an inclusive environment. These shortcomings create additional professional burdens not only for students but also for teachers.

For example, assisting a student with mobility impairments in entering the classroom or ensuring their movement often becomes the responsibility of the teacher. This, in turn, reduces the teacher's ability to focus on their primary task – delivering instruction.

**Class Size and Its Impact on the Quality of Inclusion.** According to practical observations, an increase in class size to 40–45 students significantly reduces the effectiveness of inclusive education. International standards, however, define the optimal number for inclusive classrooms as 20–25 students. Large class sizes lead to several challenges, including a sharp decline in the possibility of individualized instruction, difficulties in the practical implementation of Individual Education Plans (IEPs), and the necessity for teachers to distribute their attention among multiple students with diverse needs simultaneously. As a result, the core principle of inclusive education – “education tailored to each child” – is not fully realized in practice.

**Inclusive Programs and Their Actual Impact on Teachers' Competence.** In Uzbekistan, important steps have been taken toward the development of inclusive

education, particularly through the adoption of Resolution PQ-4860 and the Roadmap for 2020–2025. Based on these documents, specialized pedagogical training courses have been introduced, the tutoring system has been initiated, and Individual Education Plans (IEPs) have been implemented in practice. As a concrete indicator, tutors were assigned to 2,055 schools in the 2024–2025 academic year, representing a significant stage in the institutional support of inclusive education. However, the study revealed that the number of tutors remains insufficient relative to actual needs, their functional responsibilities are not clearly defined, and the model of collaboration between teachers and tutors is not adequately developed. The project launched by UNESCO in 2025 is aimed at establishing a system of continuous professional development for teachers [10]. Within this framework, training programs and methodological platforms are being developed, and a competency model is being formed based on international experience. However, research findings indicate that existing programs predominantly enhance theoretical knowledge, while practical skills remain underdeveloped.

**Conclusion.** In conclusion, it should be emphasized that the research findings empirically confirm the state of teachers’ professional competence in inclusive education: attitudes are generally positive, but practical and methodological preparedness is insufficient. Although PQ-4860, SmartED, and UNESCO programs have created a theoretical foundation for teachers, their practical effectiveness remains limited—skills related to tutor integration, IEP development, and differentiated instruction are still lacking.

This situation leads to teacher burnout, a decline in the quality of education, and limited effectiveness of inclusive practices. Global statistics and national targets (such as achieving 51% inclusive schools by 2025) identify teacher competence as a central factor; however, empirical evidence reveals systemic gaps [11].

**Recommendations.** Based on the research findings, several recommendations have been developed:

**Introduction of a mandatory competency module for teachers:** Within the framework of SmartED and UNESCO projects, a compulsory 72-hour practical module should be introduced for all general education teachers. This module should cover working with autism, attention disorders, IEP development, and integration with tutors. Annual certification and monitoring could increase teachers’ practical skills by 30–40%.

**Development of an integrated collaboration model with tutors and specialists:** Each inclusive classroom should be assigned a permanent tutor (full implementation of PQ-4860), and a weekly “collaboration hour” should be

introduced for teachers. School administration should oversee this process and reduce teachers' workload by 15–20%.

**Creation of a centralized platform for adapted learning materials:** Within the SmartED project, an online resource base should be developed, including ready-made differentiated tasks, visual aids, and instructional videos for each subject. This could reduce lesson preparation time by up to 50%.

**Special training for school administration:** School leaders should receive training through a “teacher support strategy” module, combining moral encouragement and material support (such as reduced teaching loads and provision of specialized classrooms). This would enhance teachers' emotional resilience.

**Alignment of material and technical infrastructure with teachers' needs:** Within the 2022–2026 national program, inclusive schools should be required to have elevators, ramps, and ventilation systems. Additionally, specialized medical and psychological support units should be established for teachers. Class sizes should be limited to 20–25 students to enable effective individualized instruction.

**Continuous monitoring and scientific collaboration:** Annual assessments of teachers' competencies should be conducted and integrated into SmartED and UNESCO frameworks. International internship programs should be expanded to allow teachers to learn from global best practices.

These recommendations are aimed at transforming teachers' professional competence from a theoretical construct into practical application, turning inclusive education from a formal policy into a functioning reality, and ensuring the effective implementation of Uzbekistan's national programs. Achieving the expected outcomes in inclusive education is only possible when teachers' professional development is placed at the center of the reform process.

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