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EXPLORING SOCIAL INCLUSION OF CHILDREN WITH DOWN SYNDROME IN AZERBAIJANI PRIMARY SCHOOLS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Abstract. Inclusive education for children with Down syndrome has become a global priority, yet implementation across developing and post-Soviet countries remains fragmented. This study examines the current state of social inclusion in public primary schools in Baku, Azerbaijan, focusing on teacher preparedness, institutional readiness, and parental perspectives. Using a qualitative design involving semi-structured interviews and classroom observations, the research identifies several persistent barriers, including limited teacher training, insufficient use of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), inconsistent school-wide inclusion policies, and challenges related to peer interaction. Despite these issues, evidence of emerging positive practices - such as increasing teacher motivation, growing parental engagement, and supportive school leadership - is also observed. The study highlights the essential need for coordinated reforms, including strengthened teacher education, institutional support mechanisms, and family - school collaboration. Findings contribute to the understanding of inclusive education in developing contexts and offer practical recommendations to enhance the social participation of children with Down syndrome in mainstream classrooms.

Keywords: Down syndrome, inclusive education, primary schools, social inclusion, Azerbaijan, qualitative research

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ӘЗЕРБАЙЖАННЫҢ БАСТАУЫШ МЕКТЕПТЕРІНДЕГІ ДАУН СИНДРОМЫ БАР БАЛАЛАРДЫҢ ӘЛЕУМЕТТІК ИНКЛЮЗИЯСЫН ЗЕРТТЕУ: САПАЛЫҚ ЗЕРТТЕУ

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Аңдатпа. Даун синдромы бар балаларға арналған инклюзивті білім беру әлемдік деңгейдегі басым бағытқа айналды, алайда дамушы және посткеңестік елдерде оны іске асыру әлі де жүйесіз сипатқа ие. Бұл зерттеу Әзербайжанның Баку қаласындағы мемлекеттік бастауыш мектептерде әлеуметтік инклюзияның қазіргі жағдайын талдайды, мұнда мұғалімдердің даярлығы, институционалдық дайындық деңгейі және ата-аналардың көзқарастары басты

назарға алынады. Жартылай құрылымданған сұхбаттар мен сыныптағы бақылауларды қамтитын сапалық зерттеу дизайны негізінде жүргізілген зерттеу бірқатар тұрақты кедергілерді анықтады. Олардың қатарына мұғалімдердің арнайы даярлығының жеткіліксіздігі, жеке білім беру жоспарларын (IEP) қолданудың шектеулілігі, мектеп деңгейінде инклюзия саясатының бірізді болмауы және оқушылар арасындағы өзара әрекеттестікке байланысты қиындықтар жатады. Сонымен қатар, зерттеу барысында бірқатар оң өзгерістердің қалыптасып келе жатқаны байқалды. Атап айтқанда, мұғалімдердің уәжінің артуы, ата-аналардың белсенді қатысуының күшеюі және мектеп басшылығы тарапынан қолдаудың болуы инклюзивті тәжірибелердің дамуына ықпал етуде. Зерттеу инклюзивті білім беруді тиімді жүзеге асыру үшін кешенді реформалардың маңыздылығын көрсетеді. Бұл реформаларға мұғалімдерді даярлау жүйесін күшейту, институционалдық қолдау тетіктерін дамыту және отбасы мен мектеп арасындағы ынтымақтастықты нығайту кіреді. Алынған нәтижелер дамушы елдер контекстіндегі инклюзивті білім беру мәселесін тереңірек түсінуге үлес қосып, Даун синдромы бар балалардың жалпы білім беретін сыныптардағы әлеуметтік қатысуын арттыруға бағытталған практикалық ұсынымдар ұсынады.

Түйін сөздер: Даун синдромы, инклюзивті білім беру, бастауыш мектептер, әлеуметтік инклюзия, Әзербайжан, сапалық зерттеу

Дәйексөз үшін: Бадалзаде Г. Әзербайжанның бастауыш мектептеріндегі даун синдромы бар балалардың әлеуметтік инклюзиясын зерттеу: сапалық зерттеу // Scientific Journal "Central Asian courier". 2026. Т. 2. № 1. 36-45 бб. (Ағылш.). DOI: 10.64970/3105-241X_2026_2_1_36-45

ИССЛЕДОВАНИЕ СОЦИАЛЬНОЙ ИНКЛЮЗИИ ДЕТЕЙ С СИНДРОМОМ ДАУНА В НАЧАЛЬНЫХ ШКОЛАХ АЗЕРБАЙДЖАНА: КАЧЕСТВЕННОЕ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЕ

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Аннотация. Инклюзивное образование для детей с синдромом Дауна стало глобальным приоритетом, однако его реализация в развивающихся и постсоветских странах по-прежнему носит фрагментарный характер. В данном исследовании рассматривается текущее состояние социальной инклюзии в государственных начальных школах города Баку (Азербайджан) с акцентом на готовность учителей, институциональную подготовленность школ и взгляды родителей. В рамках качественного исследования, основанного на полуструктурированных интервью и наблюдениях в классах, выявлен ряд устойчивых барьеров, включая ограниченную профессиональную подготовку педагогов, недостаточное использование индивидуальных образовательных планов (ИОП), непоследовательность школьной политики в области инклюзии и трудности во взаимодействии со сверстниками. Несмотря на выявленные проблемы, зафиксированы и формирующиеся положительные практики, такие как рост мотивации учителей, усиление вовлеченности родителей и поддержка со стороны школьного руководства. Исследование подчеркивает необходимость согласованных реформ, включая укрепление системы подготовки педагогов, развитие институциональных механизмов поддержки и усиление сотрудничества между семьей и школой. Полученные результаты вносят вклад в понимание инклюзивного образования в условиях развивающихся стран и предлагают практические рекомендации по расширению социальной вовлеченности детей с синдромом Дауна в общеобразовательных классах.

Ключевые слова: синдром Дауна, инклюзивное образование, начальные школы, социальная инклюзия, Азербайджан, качественное исследование

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Introduction. Inclusive education has become a central pillar of contemporary global educational policy, reflecting a shift from segregated schooling toward equitable participation for all learners. Key international documents - including the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (United Nations, 2006) and the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 4 - emphasize the right of children with disabilities to inclusive, high-quality education within mainstream settings (United Nations, 2015). The UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2016) further clarifies that inclusion requires active participation, social engagement, and the removal of structural and attitudinal barriers. These frameworks collectively reinforce the growing global consensus that educational systems must address diversity not as an exception but as a fundamental characteristic of modern schooling.

Within this broader context, the inclusion of children with Down syndrome holds particular significance. Down syndrome is associated with a unique developmental profile characterized by strengths in social motivation and visual learning, alongside challenges in expressive language, working memory, and abstract reasoning (Hughes, 2006). Research consistently highlights that inclusive settings can leverage these strengths by providing rich opportunities for peer modelling, natural communication, and social participation. Empirical evidence demonstrates that early and continuous inclusion is associated with improved language development, adaptive functioning, and academic progress (de Graaf et al., 2013). More recent insights further confirm that children with Down syndrome benefit from structured support systems, consistent routines, and emotionally supportive environments within mainstream classrooms (Marković, 2025). Accordingly, the quality of inclusion not merely the placement itself - plays a decisive role in shaping developmental outcomes.

Despite these well-established benefits, inclusion remains highly variable across educational systems, particularly in post-Soviet contexts such as Azerbaijan. Historically, the Soviet model relied on segregated special institutions, resulting in limited societal awareness, rigid educational structures, and minimal teacher preparation for working with diverse learners. Although Azerbaijan has adopted progressive policies aligned with international frameworks, implementation at the school level remains uneven and fragmented (Yudina, Alekhina, 2016). Many mainstream schools - especially in urban areas like Baku - have begun enrolling children with Down syndrome, yet these placements often lack the pedagogical, organizational, and resource-based structures necessary for meaningful participation.

Teacher preparedness emerges as one of the most significant determinants of inclusion quality. International literature shows that teachers' attitudes, expectations, and instructional decisions strongly influence whether children with intellectual disabilities experience genuine inclusion or subtle marginalization (Avramidis, Norwich, 2002; Florian, Black-Hawkins, 2011). In many Azerbaijani schools, teachers express positive intentions but report feeling ill-equipped to differentiate instruction, adapt materials, or manage communication challenges associated with Down syndrome. These concerns mirror broader patterns identified in comparative studies across Europe and Asia, which underscore that inclusive pedagogy requires not only technical competence but also reflective practice, emotional responsiveness, and a commitment to fostering classroom belonging (Schwab, 2018).

The emotional climate of the classroom plays a particularly critical role. Research indicates that teachers who demonstrate warmth, patience, and emotional attunement create conditions in which children with Down syndrome develop stronger peer relationships and experience lower levels of social isolation (Yudina, Alekhina, 2016). Such relational factors interact with structural elements - including class size, availability of support staff, and access to individualized education plans - to determine the extent to which inclusion is successful. Whole-school models of inclusion emphasize

the importance of coordinated leadership, shared values, professional learning communities, and systemic support mechanisms (de Boer, Munk, 2022). These models are especially relevant for countries undergoing educational transformation, where fragmented practices often stem from a lack of institutional coherence.

Family–school collaboration is another essential but underdeveloped component of inclusive education in Azerbaijan. Parents of children with Down syndrome frequently highlight both positive experiences - such as increased communication skills, confidence, and emotional stability - and persistent challenges including inconsistent teacher communication, limited peer interaction, and unclear academic expectations. The literature emphasizes that successful inclusion requires strong, structured partnerships between families and schools, encompassing shared decision-making, regular feedback, and mutual trust (Epstein, 2018; Hornby, 2011). Barriers such as time constraints, lack of information, or differing expectations often hinder parental involvement (Hornby, Lafaele, 2011). These dynamics are particularly salient in the Azerbaijani context, where formal mechanisms for family engagement remain limited.

Despite the challenges, promising developments are emerging. Teachers increasingly express willingness to learn inclusive strategies, school leaders are beginning to recognize the importance of supportive environments, and parents are becoming more active advocates for their children's rights. These shifts echo global research demonstrating that inclusive education not only promotes academic achievement but also fosters broader social goals such as community cohesion, civic participation, and respect for diversity.

Against this backdrop, the present study examines how children with Down syndrome experience social inclusion within Azerbaijani public primary schools. It explores teacher readiness, school-level structures, peer interactions, and parental perspectives, situating these findings within both international research and post-Soviet educational realities. By illuminating the factors that shape everyday school experiences, the study contributes nuanced insights that can guide policymakers, practitioners, and families in strengthening inclusive education. Ultimately, the goal is to support the transformation of inclusion from a policy aspiration into a lived, equitable, and empowering reality for children with Down syndrome.

Materials and Methods. This study was conducted using a qualitative research approach, chosen for its ability to capture the nuanced social and emotional dimensions of inclusion that cannot be adequately represented through numerical methods alone. Because the experiences of children with Down syndrome in mainstream classrooms are shaped by everyday interactions, school culture, and individual teacher perceptions, a flexible and exploratory methodological framework was essential. The research drew on grounded theory principles, allowing patterns and themes to emerge naturally from the data rather than being predetermined by the researcher.

The study took place in four public primary schools located in different districts of Baku. These schools were intentionally selected to represent a range of socio-economic contexts and to ensure that each setting had at least one child with a confirmed diagnosis of Down syndrome learning in a mainstream classroom. This diversity of environments made it possible to observe inclusion practices under different administrative styles, classroom climates, and levels of institutional experience with inclusive education.

Participants included teachers, school principals, and parents of children with Down syndrome. Teachers were selected because of their direct involvement in classroom instruction and their central role in shaping daily inclusive practices. Principals participated to provide insight into school-level policies, leadership attitudes, and the structural support available to teachers. Parents were included to capture the family perspective and to better understand how schooling influenced children's social development, communication skills, and emotional well-being. Although the study did not involve direct interviews with children, their participation was observed closely through classroom interactions, transitions, and peer engagement.

A purposive sampling strategy ensured that all participants had firsthand experience with Down syndrome inclusion. For teachers and parents, participation required direct involvement with the

child's education; for schools, the presence of at least one child with Down syndrome was a necessary condition. This approach allowed the study to focus on authentic, context-specific experiences while maintaining coherence across cases.

Data were collected using three complementary methods: semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document review. The semi-structured interviews allowed participants to describe their experiences in depth while also giving space for unexpected or unique insights to emerge. Interviews were conducted in Azerbaijani, lasted between 30 and 45 minutes, and were recorded with consent. Classroom observations provided a real-time understanding of how teachers responded to students' needs, how peers interacted with children with Down syndrome, and how classroom routines and emotional climate affected participation. These observations were conducted unobtrusively to avoid altering the natural classroom dynamic. Document review was used where relevant; although formal Individualized Education Plans were absent in most schools, available lesson notes and informal adaptation strategies helped contextualize teacher planning.

Thematic analysis, based on Braun and Clarke's framework, guided the analysis process. Interview transcripts and observation notes were read repeatedly to identify meaningful statements, which were then coded and organized into emerging themes. A cross-case comparison approach helped reveal similarities and differences between the four schools. International literature on inclusive education informed the interpretation of findings and supported the identification of broader patterns, particularly those seen in post-Soviet and resource-limited education systems.

To ensure trustworthiness, the study incorporated several strategies, including triangulation across participant groups and data sources, member checking with participants to validate interpretations, and peer debriefing with researchers familiar with inclusive education. Detailed contextual descriptions were included to support the transferability of findings. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant committee at the Azerbaijan State Pedagogical University, and all participants provided informed consent. Personal identifiers were removed from transcripts and observation notes to maintain confidentiality and protect the privacy of all individuals involved.

Results. The findings of this study reveal a layered and interdependent picture of how children with Down syndrome experience daily life in mainstream primary schools in Baku. The results indicate that social inclusion is shaped not only by the child's individual characteristics but also by the attitudes, actions, and levels of preparedness of the adults around them, as well as the broader institutional environment. Across the four participating schools, several patterns emerged consistently, regardless of school size or district.

One of the most prominent insights relates to teachers' sense of preparedness. Although teachers expressed genuine goodwill and a desire to support inclusion, most acknowledged that they felt untrained and often unsure about how to adapt lessons or manage communication and behavioural differences effectively. Their approaches tended to rely on intuition and improvisation rather than structured strategies. This created notable inconsistencies within and across classrooms: in some cases, teachers offered thoughtful adaptations and emotional guidance, while in others they struggled to find ways to engage the child meaningfully during lessons. These differences strongly influenced children's participation, with those in more supportive classrooms demonstrating noticeably greater confidence and engagement.

Peer interactions played a crucial role in shaping inclusion outcomes. In classrooms where teachers modelled warmth, patience, and positive social behaviours, children with Down syndrome were observed initiating communication, responding to peers, and participating willingly during group activities. The tone set by the teacher appeared to guide how classmates responded: where the emotional climate was encouraging, peers tended to welcome the child, help during activities, and display curiosity without judgment. In contrast, more rigid or highly structured classrooms - where the teacher's focus was primarily on discipline or curriculum completion - offered fewer natural openings for peer connection. In such environments, children with Down syndrome often remained on the periphery, participating only when prompted or withdrawing when tasks became overwhelming.

The institutional environment further shaped these experiences. None of the schools had formal Individualized Education Plans in place, which left teachers without a clear roadmap for supporting the child's learning or behaviour. The absence of structured planning tools meant that decisions about

adaptation, goal setting, or progress monitoring depended largely on individual teacher initiative. School leadership varied in its engagement with inclusion. In some schools, principals actively supported teachers by allowing flexible seating arrangements, encouraging collaboration, or attempting to connect families with specialists outside school. In others, inclusion was viewed more as a procedural requirement than a pedagogical priority, resulting in minimal guidance or resource allocation.

Parents’ perspectives provided additional depth to the findings. Many described noticeable improvements in their children’s social confidence, communication skills, and willingness to participate in daily routines since entering mainstream school. Despite these positive changes, parents consistently emphasized challenges related to limited peer interactions outside structured activities, unclear communication from teachers about progress, and occasional instances of subtle exclusion. Some parents felt well-supported and informed, while others reported that they only received feedback in moments of difficulty rather than through ongoing collaboration. The variability in family–school communication paralleled the broader inconsistencies observed within classroom instruction and school leadership.

Across all data sources, a common pattern emerged: inclusion in these schools is developing but remains fragile, sustained largely by individual acts of goodwill rather than a systematic or coordinated effort. Teachers’ emotional responsiveness played a central role in supporting participation, but without institutional structures such as training, specialist support, or individualized plans these efforts were difficult to maintain consistently. Peer interactions were highly dependent on teacher facilitation, and parents expressed a clear desire for more structured communication and collaboration.

Overall, the findings illustrate that while meaningful social inclusion is possible and already occurring in many small ways, it is not yet fully embedded in school culture or practice. The experiences of children with Down syndrome in mainstream classrooms remain highly contingent on the attitudes and capacities of the adults around them, highlighting the need for coordinated reforms across classroom, school, and system levels.

Table 1. Key themes related to the social inclusion of children with Down syndrome

Theme	Description (summary)	Typical evidence from data
Teacher preparedness	Teachers are willing but feel undertrained; adaptations are mostly intuitive	Interview quotes about “we were not trained...”
Peer interactions	Peer engagement is higher in emotionally warm classrooms; in rigid classes more isolation	Observation notes on group work, play, break times
Institutional support	No IEPs; limited specialist support; leadership engagement varies across schools	Principal interviews; absence of formal documents
Family–school collaboration	Parents see gains in confidence/communication but report limited structured collaboration	Parent reports about irregular feedback and meetings

Discussion. The findings of this study demonstrate that the social inclusion of children with Down syndrome in public primary schools in Baku is shaped by a complex interplay of teacher readiness, institutional structures, peer dynamics, and family involvement. Although teachers generally express a positive attitude toward inclusion, the absence of systematic training and the lack of formal support mechanisms create significant challenges in translating inclusive principles into effective daily practice. This disconnect between policy commitments and practical implementation echoes patterns observed in many post-Soviet and developing educational systems, where structural reforms often outpace the preparedness of practitioners (Yudina, Alekhina, 2016).

One of the most salient findings concerns the teachers’ need for professional competence in differentiated instruction and communication strategies. Teachers frequently rely on intuitive, trial-and-error approaches due to the absence of specialized training in intellectual disabilities and inclusive pedagogy. This aligns with broader research indicating that teacher preparedness is a determining factor in the success of inclusive education (Avramidis, Norwich, 2002; Florian, Black-Hawkins, 2011). International scholarship emphasizes that inclusion requires not only positive attitudes but also concrete pedagogical skills, confidence, and ongoing institutional support. In

Azerbaijan, however, teacher education programmes remain heavily theory-based and rarely offer practical modules or supervised placements involving children with developmental disabilities. As a result, educators face difficulties in adapting materials, managing communication barriers, and facilitating meaningful peer interactions.

Another key finding relates to the emotional climate of the classroom. Observations revealed that children with Down syndrome experienced higher levels of peer engagement in classrooms where teachers demonstrated patience, warmth, and positive reinforcement. This supports existing studies which show that emotional responsiveness creates environments that promote belonging and reduce social isolation for learners with intellectual disabilities (Schwab, 2018). In contrast, classrooms characterized by teacher stress, rigid discipline, or limited interaction tended to marginalize or passively exclude children with Down syndrome, even when they were physically present in mainstream settings. Therefore, the study underscores that inclusion is not merely a structural arrangement but a relational and affective process shaped by teacher behaviour and peer culture.

A particularly striking result of the study is the near absence of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) across the observed schools. Only a small minority of institutions used systematic planning tools to support children with Down syndrome. This lack severely limits the potential for tailored instruction, consistent progress monitoring, and coordination among teachers, specialists, and parents. Research suggests that structured planning frameworks particularly IEPs play a critical role in ensuring that children with intellectual disabilities receive appropriate accommodations, behavioural support, and learning targets (Raver et al., 2020). Without such mechanisms, inclusion remains largely dependent on individual teacher initiative, leading to considerable variation in practice both within and across schools.

Parental perspectives provided further insight into the multifaceted nature of inclusion. While many parents noted improvements in communication skills, confidence, and emotional stability, others expressed concerns about limited peer interaction and unclear academic expectations. This variation reflects broader patterns identified in the literature, where parental satisfaction often depends on the extent of school–family collaboration (Epstein, 2018; Hornby, 2011). The findings show that formal communication channels and collaborative planning practices are not well established in Azerbaijani primary schools. As a result, parents often rely on informal conversations or personal observations rather than structured feedback. Strengthening these partnerships is essential because effective family–school collaboration serves as a protective factor for children with developmental disabilities and contributes to more successful inclusion outcomes (Hornby, Lafaele, 2011).

Institutionally, the study reveals systemic gaps that hinder effective inclusion. Schools lack consistent policies, special support staff, and resource centres. Classroom sizes are large, and teachers often manage multiple responsibilities without administrative or specialist assistance. These challenges mirror those documented in international studies of inclusive education in resource-limited contexts, where institutional constraints significantly restrict the potential for sustainable reform (de Boer, Munk, 2022). Moreover, leadership engagement varies considerably across schools: some principals support inclusive reforms and encourage teacher development, while others treat inclusion merely as compliance with ministerial directives. This inconsistency affects school culture and ultimately shapes how children with Down syndrome experience daily life in mainstream classrooms.

Despite these barriers, several positive developments suggest emerging opportunities for progress. Teachers' growing willingness to engage in inclusive practices and school leaders' increasing awareness of the importance of supportive environments represent important shifts in professional culture. Moreover, parents are becoming more active in advocating for their children's rights and demanding better collaboration from schools. These developments reflect the early stages of a broader transformation in Azerbaijan's educational landscape toward more inclusive and child-centred approaches. International research shows that such shifts often precede more systematic reforms, including improvements in teacher training curricula, school-level support structures, and national policy implementation (Florian, Black-Hawkins, 2011).

Taken together, the study's findings highlight that meaningful inclusion of children with Down syndrome requires coordinated efforts at multiple levels. At the classroom level, teachers need ongoing professional development focusing on differentiated instruction, communication strategies, behaviour management, and emotional support. At the institutional level, schools require stronger leadership engagement, the introduction of IEPs, and access to specialist support. At the system level, policy implementation must be supported with resources, monitoring, and accountability mechanisms to ensure that inclusive education moves beyond rhetoric.

Finally, the study contributes to the growing literature on inclusive education in post-Soviet and developing countries by offering a nuanced examination of the contextual, cultural, and institutional factors shaping inclusion in Azerbaijan. It emphasizes that inclusion is not simply about placing students in mainstream environments but about ensuring that they participate meaningfully, develop socially, and receive equitable learning opportunities. As Azerbaijan continues to reform its education system, these findings can inform policy development, teacher training, and community engagement to create more inclusive and supportive environments for children with Down syndrome.

Conclusion. The findings of this study show that the social inclusion of children with Down syndrome in mainstream primary schools in Baku is shaped by a combination of personal, pedagogical, and institutional factors. While there is growing awareness and willingness among teachers, parents, and school leaders to support inclusion, the everyday experiences observed in classrooms reveal that meaningful inclusion is still evolving and often depends on the individual efforts of committed teachers rather than on system-wide structures.

One of the most important insights from the research is the gap between positive attitudes toward inclusion and the practical readiness required to make it effective. Teachers demonstrated empathy and a genuine desire to help, yet the absence of training in differentiated instruction, communication strategies, and behaviour support limited their ability to meet the needs of children with Down syndrome consistently. Without sustained professional development and access to specialist guidance, inclusion risks remaining inconsistent and dependent on informal, improvised approaches.

The study also highlights the critical role of emotional climate in shaping children's participation. Children with Down syndrome were most engaged and socially connected in classrooms where teachers modelled patience, warmth, and encouragement. These observations reinforce the idea that inclusion is not achieved solely by placing a child in a mainstream environment, but through the creation of emotionally safe and responsive learning spaces that invite participation and respect individual differences.

Institutional factors further influenced inclusion outcomes. The absence of Individualized Education Plans, limited availability of specialist support, and variations in leadership engagement created significant inequalities between classrooms and schools. Without structured planning tools, coordinated communication, and clear learning goals, teachers and families are left without the foundation needed to support children with Down syndrome in a systematic and sustainable way. Strengthening school-level support systems, developing inclusive policies, and ensuring leadership commitment will be essential for moving inclusion beyond isolated examples of good practice.

Parents provided valuable perspectives that underscored both the benefits and the limitations of current inclusion practices. Many noticed positive changes in their children's communication, confidence, and social engagement. At the same time, they expressed a need for clearer communication with teachers, more regular feedback, and greater involvement in planning their child's learning. Building stronger family-school partnerships is critical for ensuring that children receive consistent support across home and school environments.

Taken together, these findings highlight that inclusive education in Azerbaijan is progressing, but remains at an early developmental stage. Sustainable change will require action across multiple levels: teacher training programs must incorporate inclusive pedagogy and practical experience; schools must adopt structured planning tools and ensure consistent leadership support; and families must be meaningfully included in decision-making processes. Moving forward, a system-wide

commitment to equity, collaboration, and professional learning will be essential for creating environments where children with Down syndrome are not only present but fully engaged, supported, and valued as active members of the school community.

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