ASSESSING INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENTS IN PRESCHOOL EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS AND MECHANISMS FOR IMPLEMENTING "BARRIER-FREE ENVIRONMENT" STANDARDS

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Annotation: This article examines the mechanisms for implementing "barrier-free environment" standards for children with special educational needs (SEN) in preschool educational organizations and the criteria for assessing an inclusive environment. The paper analyzes the physical accessibility of buildings, specialized sensory-developmental equipment, and ways to create a psychologically safe environment for children. Furthermore, specific indicators for assessing the quality of an inclusive environment have been developed, and practical recommendations are provided.

Keywords: Inclusive education, barrier-free environment, assessment criteria, sensory environment, physical accessibility, preschool education.

Today, the introduction of an inclusive approach in the preschool education system has become not only a social necessity but also a strategic task that ensures every child's right to individual development. However, analysis of current practice shows that in many preschool educational institutions the concept of inclusive education is limited merely to placing children with special educational needs into regular groups. In fact, placing a child into an unprepared environment does not promote socialization; on the contrary, it often leads to psychological isolation and developmental delays.

To create a true "barrier-free environment" in preschool educational institutions, the following practical solutions and mechanisms should be introduced:

The concept of a "barrier-free environment" should not be limited to external ramps only. The entire movement trajectory inside the building must be fully adapted. This requires the elimination of door thresholds, installation of two-level handrails in corridors, and the laying of tactile (raised) guiding lines on floor coverings for children with visual impairments. Sanitary facilities must be expanded to a width that allows free access for children using wheelchairs and their assistants, and must be equipped with special grab bars. Door widths should be at least 90 cm, corridors should measure 1.5–1.8 m, and elevators or platform lifts are essential in multi-storey buildings.

Solution for sensory and object-environment imbalance:

In group rooms, a separate "quiet and relaxation corner" equipped with soft modules and low lighting should be organized for children who become fatigued by excessive noise and bright light (for example, children with autism spectrum disorders). In sensory rooms or sensory corners, light, sound, tactile and olfactory stimuli are adapted to the individual needs of the child. This approach is recognized as effective in international practice, including UNICEF universal design guidelines.

Solution for the absence of assessment mechanisms:

In order to measure the readiness of each preschool educational institution for an inclusive environment objectively and on a scientific basis, a comprehensive system of indicators must be introduced. The assessment criteria proposed below cover physical, sensory, psychological-pedagogical and organizational components:

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1. Physical accessibility indicator. Availability of ramps or elevators at the building entrance, absence or minimal height of door thresholds (not exceeding 2 cm), sufficient width of corridors and group rooms, tactile guiding lines, staircases marked with contrasting colours, and sanitary facilities adapted for wheelchair users with grab bars. These criteria comply with the requirements of Resolution No. 46 of the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan dated 25 January 2024 and with the principles of universal design.

2. Sensory environment indicator. Control of noise levels in group rooms, possibility of soft lighting, availability of a “quiet zone”, and the presence of visual-tactile support tools (picture schedules, pictograms, contrasting colours) for children with visual and hearing impairments. Special attention is paid to conditions that protect children with autism spectrum disorders from sensory overload.

3. Psychological safety and social inclusion indicator. Positive attitudes of teachers toward children, support for mutual assistance and friendly relations among peers, and the absence of discrimination or isolation. The development of children’s self-esteem and sense of belonging to the group is considered an important indicator.

4. Pedagogical readiness and individual approach indicator. Teachers’ training in inclusive education, development and practical use of Individual Education Plans (IEPs), and cooperation with special educators or defectologists. Training materials and assessment tools developed within the JICA project “Strengthening Practice of Inclusive Education in Preschool Education” (SPISE-UZB, 2021–2024) can serve as a practical basis in this area.

5. Organizational and family partnership indicator. Regular communication with families, involvement of parents in the educational process, and cooperation with local authorities and medical-psychological-pedagogical commissions. In accordance with Presidential Decree No. PF-152 of 30 September 2024, from 1 January 2025 experimental inclusive education groups are to be opened in one general-type state preschool educational organization in each district and city. The indicator system proposed above can serve as a practical tool for evaluating the effectiveness of this process.

In practice, the implementation of “barrier-free environment” standards should be carried out in stages. In the first stage, existing buildings are audited and minimal adaptation works (ramps, handrails, door widths) are performed. In the second stage, sensory environments and quiet corners are created, and teachers’ qualifications are upgraded. In the third stage, a comprehensive monitoring system is introduced, and the level of inclusive readiness of each institution is reflected in annual reports. Checklists developed on the basis of international experience (UNICEF universal design guidelines) and national normative documents help to make the assessment process more objective.

In conclusion, the effectiveness of inclusive education in preschool educational institutions is ensured not merely by partial renovation of buildings, but by integrating physical, sensory and psychological conditions into a single coherent system. The practical application of the proposed “barrier-free environment” standards and assessment criteria creates a solid foundation for the faster social adaptation of children with special educational needs, the full realization of their potential, and their development on equal terms with their peers. At the current stage of state policy (2024–2025), the measures aimed at expanding inclusive groups provide a favourable opportunity for introducing these mechanisms.

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