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## ACCOMPANYING A STUDENT WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER IN SCHOOLS IN KAZAKHSTAN: THE ROLE OF A TEACHER ASSISTANT

### Abstract

Worldwide, the development of inclusive education is aimed to achieve the goal of creating safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environment for all children. The goal of our work is to study the current situation of teaching assistants in supporting children with autism spectrum disorder in secondary schools. A questionnaire was developed by the team of experts and is based on the legal acts. It is designed in two main

areas that focused on the experience and needs of teacher assistant and children with autism as well. The results obtained are based on the collection and analysis of data, the study of scientific and methodological literature, normative legal documents on the topic. The research enabled to implement the task of clarifying the role of the teacher assistant in accompanying a student with autism, identifying positive practices, difficulties, satisfaction with their work, as well as to identify factors that impede the effectiveness of psychological and pedagogical support for children with autism at school. It is clear that comprehensive continuous capacity-building trainings are needed in the country to support the work of the teacher assistants and systemic solutions regarding the improvement of professional competencies of teaching assistants in Kazakhstan.

*Keywords:* autism, teacher assistant, inclusive education, educational needs.

**Introduction.** According to the agenda of the UN World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2015, 17 goals were envisaged, one of which is aimed at the field of education. So, goal 4a. reads: “Build and improve educational facilities that are child-, disability- and gender-sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all” (United Nations Goal 4 of Sustainable development “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”).

The task of ensuring equal access to quality education is a priority of the state educational policy of Kazakhstan as well and is included in such main program documents of the country as the National Development Plan of the Republic of Kazakhstan until 2025 (National Development Plan of the Republic of Kazakhstan until 2025 and invalidation of some decrees of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2018) and others. Improving the quality of an inclusive educational environment is the most important area of activity for secondary schools. Consequently, the current tenet of the modern school is the statement “the new school is a school for everyone”.

Thus, in the National Project “Quality Education “Educated Nation”, much attention is paid to the issues of inclusive education, where the most important tasks for the next five years are identified as: “Ensuring the accessibility and quality of preschool education and training”, “Providing schools with a comfortable, safe and modern educational environment” (The national project “Quality Education “Educated Nation”, Resolution of the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2021).

Currently, in accordance with regulatory legal documents, in order to ensure the right of every child to quality education, psychological and

pedagogical support services are being created as a separate structural unit of a comprehensive school. At the same time, important attention must be paid to the formation of an inclusive culture of educational organization, the preparedness of teachers to include and involve all children in the educational environment, taking into account, their special needs and different capabilities. It should be emphasized that the greatest difficulties in creating an inclusive educational environment arise for teachers when including children with behavioral and emotional difficulties into the educational environment, most of whom are children with ASD.

Children with ASD are a polymorphic group with significant differences among themselves in the severity of autistic disorder, level and characteristics of mental development (Morozov S.A. et al., 2016). Accordingly, experts and specialists of the world community in the field of special education have come to the conclusion that there is no single or specific effective technology or methodology for the psychological and pedagogical rehabilitation of children with ASD (Dovbnya S. et al., 2018).

At the same time, the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan “On Education” defines special conditions for obtaining education as “conditions including educational, as well as special, individually developing and correctional-developmental programs and teaching methods, technical, educational and other means, living environment, psychological - pedagogical support, medical, social and other services, without which it is impossible for people (children) with special educational needs, as well as children with disabilities, to master educational programs” (Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan “On Education”, 2007). According to the order of the Minister of Education of the

Republic of Kazakhstan dated as August 31, 2022 No. 385 “On approval of the Standard Rules for the activities of organizations of preschool, secondary, technical and professional, post-secondary education, additional education of relevant types and types”, psychological - medical and pedagogical consultations (PMPC) are carried out assessment of SEN based on the individual needs of the child (the Standard Rules for the activities of organizations of preschool, secondary, technical and vocational, post-secondary education, additional education of relevant types and types, 2022).

Based on an assessment of special educational needs, PMPC specialists recommend for implementation not only such special conditions as changes to the curriculum and training programs, methods of assessing learning outcomes (student achievements), the use of variable, special and alternative teaching methods, but also the help of a teacher assistant.

In Kazakhstan, for the first time, the position and the functionalities of a teacher assistant of a secondary education organization were approved by order of the Minister of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan dated April 30, 2020 No. 169 by introducing amendments and additions to the order of the Minister of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan dated July 13, 2009 No. 338 “On approval of the standard qualification characteristics of positions of teaching staff and persons equivalent to them” (the Standard qualification characteristics of teacher positions, 2009).

Among the main functional responsibilities of a teacher assistant in a secondary education organization, the following are identified: psychological and pedagogical support for a child with SEN based on the recommendation of the PMPC, participation in a team assessment by specialists and teachers of children’s SEN, as well as in the preparation of individual educational and developmental programs, observation and collection of data about a child with special needs in the process of training, education and developmental work, recording the results of mastering the curriculum, the dynamics of the formation of educational, social-adaptive (behavioral) skills and providing information

to educators and specialists for monitoring the process of learning and socialization of the child and others.

This order defines the requirements for the qualifications of a teaching assistant: higher pedagogical education and (or) technical and professional, post-secondary (pedagogical) education or a document confirming pedagogical retraining without presenting requirements for work experience (On approval of the standard qualification characteristics of teacher positions, 2009).

In accordance with the order of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan No. 6 dated as of January 12, 2022 “On approval of the Rules of psychological and pedagogical support in educational organizations,” the services of a teacher assistant are provided to learners with disorders of psychophysical development and behavior based on the recommendations of the PMPC, and to learners with mild behavioral problems and difficulties of adaptation in the classroom - based on the decision of the meeting of the psychological and pedagogical support service for the 1st quarter (further need is determined by the PMPC) (the Rules of psychological and pedagogical support in educational organizations, 2022).

Thus, from the Government side, the position of teacher assistant in educational organizations of the country is provided by the legislation. However, at present, among the current issues of organizing psychological and pedagogical support for learners are still the lack of qualified specialists for its full-time involved activities, including teacher assistants, and also the insufficiency of their professional competencies.

The purpose of the study was to study of teaching assistants experience and challenges they face in working with children with ASD.

**Materials and methods.** As part of the implementation of the above-mentioned project “Integration of children with autism spectrum disorder into the socio-educational environment based on comprehensive support: challenges and advantages”, with the support of the SDU University, a survey was conducted to study the existing experience of teacher assistants

in supporting learners with ASD. The authors of the article were interested in the following research questions as: how do teacher assistants currently working at schools across the country cope with their responsibilities? How does he/she comply with the requirements set in regulatory documents? What difficulties do teacher assistants experience in their work? What decisions are necessary to ensure the productive functioning of the psychological and pedagogical support service in the country's schools and to organize the work of the teacher assistant?

In order to implement the objectives and ensure the validity of the data during the survey, the authors used a method of triangulation of methods, in the form of a complex of qualitative and quantitative methods, including both theoretical and empirical methods. Among the quantitative methods, a questionnaire was used, among the qualitative ones, interviews and analysis of scientific and methodological literature, regulatory legal documents on the research topic were used. To obtain an expert opinion or assess a situation during a joint discussion of problems, the method of individual and group expert assessments was used. In the course of a critical, comprehensive analysis of problems and the development of a collective opinion, the methods of "project method", "brainstorming", and "round table" were used. The above methods were used in the context of the dialectics of the development of educational systems, personality theory, and activity theory.

The questionnaire included 13 open-ended questions and based on the legal act as rules of the Special Pedagogical Psychological Accompaniment in educational institutions dated as of 01/12/2022 No. 6. The questionnaire focused on two parts: the analysis of the experience, methods and techniques uses, satisfaction, needs of the teacher assistants and the questions on identification of the number of the children with ASD in class, their needs, the involvement of the parents of children with ASD were the focus of the second part of the questionnaire.

The survey of teacher assistants was conducted on the basis of the developed tools, both online and offline. 56 teaching assistants

from seven regions of the country took part in the survey-interview: Akmola, East Kazakhstan, Aktobe regions, as well as the cities of Astana, Pavlodar, Semey, Shymkent. When sampling teaching assistants, those who work with children with ASD were selected. 56 teacher assistants were undergone the survey and filled the questionnaire through Google form online. The study was conducted within the framework of the legislation of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Documents that were only in the public domain were studied. Received results were studied by the group of Project team members: specialists in education, public health, psychologists and biostatistics. During the study, the authors followed the principles of ethics in social science research, and the anonymity and confidentiality of participants was maintained. (The research has been approved by the Local Ethical Committee of Institution "SDU University" #6 Minutes dated as of 7 March 2023).

**Results.** Currently, inclusive processes in education and society are defining new directions in the development of fundamental and applied pedagogical research. Representatives of the scientific community are increasingly paying attention to the issues of organizing an inclusive educational process, including the activities of psychological and pedagogical support services, training of teaching staff, the formation of an inclusive culture, designing a comfortable educational space and other problems.

Along with this, an important component of scientific research in the problem area of pedagogy of inclusive education are aspects related to the organization of psychological and pedagogical support for students with special needs, including the activities of a teacher assistant in educational organizations. Since the review of the regulatory framework showed a predominant focus on the secondary education system, teaching assistants working in secondary schools in the country were involved in this study.

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When surveyed, about 90% of them responded that in order to provide quality education, timely identification and assessment of special educational needs in children, especially those with ASD, is very important. Speaking positively on this issue in interviews, there were such opinions as “it has an impact on the learning ability of children with ASD”, “to understand how to work with each child”, “I think yes, the sooner the better”, “no need to lose time, all children are teachable”, “it is very important to work with the child in the future” (hereinafter in the text the vocabulary of the respondents is preserved).

At the same time, there were also such opinions that showed the doubts and uncertainty of respondents, although their share was 10% of the total: “the diagnosis is not always made on time”, “schools do not always understand our work with children with ASD”, “not all parents are ready to accept the diagnosis”, “child”, “no specialists”. When analyzing these answers, it can be judged that the overwhelming majority of teaching assistants are competent in organizing psychological and pedagogical support for students with special education needs, including the important aspect of assessing the special needs and individual capabilities of children and subsequent support from specialists.

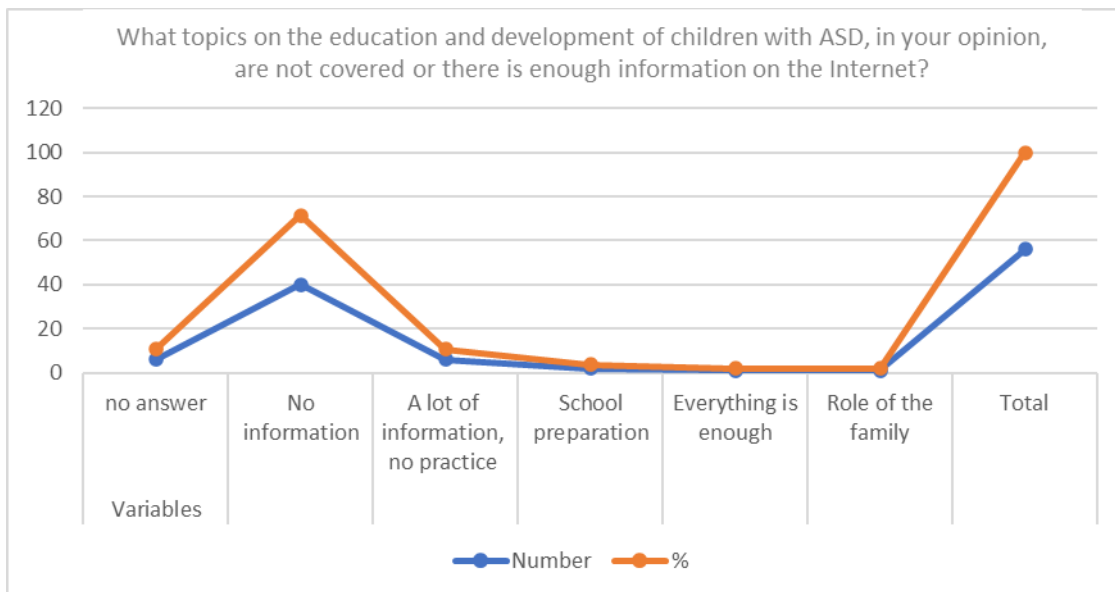
When asked what helps them in the process of practice for the development of the child and improving the condition of children with ASD, 43% of the surveyed teacher assistants answered “methods”, expressing their opinion in the following phrases: “difficulties with behavior, techniques for the development of thinking help”, “working with speech therapists and psychologists”, “the latest techniques”, “sensory integration improves their internal state”, “I use outdoor and didactic games in classes”, “game methods”, “educational games, modeling, board games, singing, creative

workshop (crafts)”, “reward system”. The rest of the respondents answered that adaptation (10.7%), techniques and tools (7.2%) help, and 39% of them found it difficult to answer. It can be assumed that, despite the fact that almost all teacher assistants know the organizational issues of accompanying a child with ASD, only a small part of them know and use special techniques, an individual approach, and technologies for working with children with ASD. This suggests the need for professional training and advanced training for teacher assistants in the country. On the other hand, the reason for this is the lack of systematically organized courses for teacher assistants, as well as university training in this specialty.

This conclusion is confirmed by the answers to another question about what topics related to the learning and development of children with ASD do respondents feel a lack of information and a need for it. According to the overwhelming majority of the surveyed teacher assistants, their share is 71%, “there is no information”, 11% of the total believe that there is information, but there is little practical material, the rest of the respondents, their share is 18%, named the topic “preparing for school”, “the role of the family” and only 1 person out of all respondents answered that “everything is enough” (refer to Figure 1).

Analysis of the answers to these questions makes us think about the level of professional preparedness of current teacher assistants in the country’s schools, the need to develop educational programs in universities and retraining and advanced training programs for teacher assistants, taking into account the growing need for them. In addition, it should also be taken into account that 50% of respondents indicated a lack of teaching materials and information on the state (Kazakh) language.

It should also be emphasized that when asked how satisfied they are with their work supporting children with ASD, 50% of respondents found it difficult to answer, only 44.6% of them showed sufficient satisfaction with their work and 5.4% average satisfaction (refer to Table 1).



**Figure 1: Topics related to the learning and development of children with ASD respondents feel a lack of information and a need for it**

Table 1. *Satisfaction in supporting children with ASD*

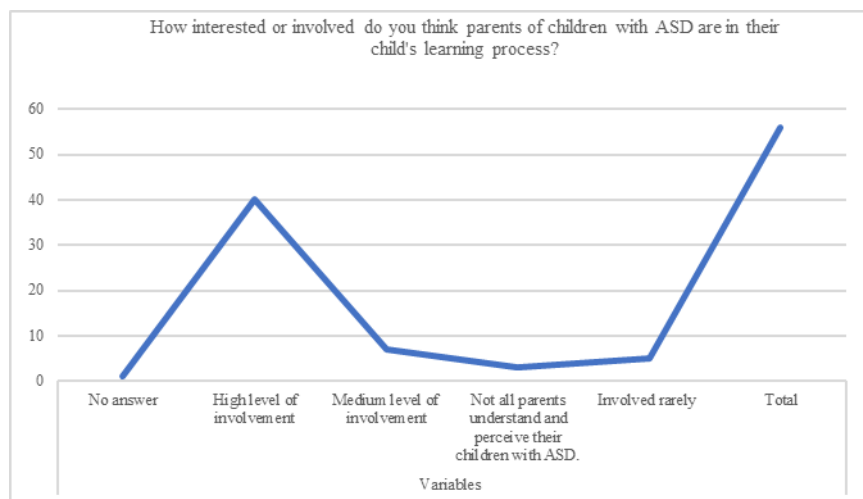
Answer options	N(%)
Difficult to answer	28 (50.0%)
Highly satisfied	25 (44,6%)
Mild satisfaction	3 (5,4%)
Total	56 (100%)

These answers did not become new discovery for the authors of the article, since the answers to the previous questions showed not entirely attractive situation with the training and methodological support of teaching assistants in our schools. At the same time, a positive aspect that causes optimism is the positive opinions of some of the respondents, for example, such as “I am satisfied with my work, despite the difficulties”, “I am satisfied, I love my work, I know how to work with students with ASD”, “Overall satisfied, I would like more results” and others.

Interaction with the parents of a child with ASD is of utmost importance in the work of a teacher assistant; in this regard, a question was asked about the level of interest of parents in their child’s involvement in the learning process. To this question, 71.4% of teacher assistants reported a very high level of parental involvement (refer to Figure 2), 12.5% about an average level, the rest of the respondents

expressed an opinion about insufficient parental involvement in the following terms: “not all parents understand and accept their own children with ASD”, “are not always passionate about the process,” “some parents do not do much with their children, but require more work from the teacher assistant,” “parents consider the tutor to be a magician, completely shifting the responsibility for mastering the material and learning skills to the tutors”.

These answers did not go unnoticed by the authors of the article, since in order to ensure the child’s right to quality education, it is necessary to create a comfortable educational environment, including favorable relationships between all participants of the educational process. At the same time, it is difficult to overestimate the role of parents of children with special needs. Analyzing the opinions of respondents, one can also argue about the need for educational work among the parent community, both parents with children with special needs and without special needs.



**Figure 2: Level of the involvement of parents in ASD child's learning process**

**Discussion.** Any school must ensure the successful socialization of all children, including children with special educational needs (SEN). In this regard, to implement the inclusive policy of the state, the traditional education system requires significant transformations to meet new civilizational challenges. Thus, the results obtained based on the collection and analysis of data, the study of scientific and methodological literature, normative legal documents on the topic of research, made it possible to implement the task of clarifying the role of the teacher assistant in accompanying a learner with ASD, identifying positive practices, difficulties, satisfaction with their work, as well as identifying factors that impede the effectiveness of psychological and pedagogical support for children with ASD at school.

In general, it can be seen that the country is progressively implementing an inclusive policy in accordance with the adopted legislative documents. Processes aimed at developing inclusive practices in the country's schools meet the objectives set in the National Education Project "Comfortable School", approved in November 2022: "Every Kazakh schoolchild should have decent conditions for learning and comprehensive development created by the state and the administration schools, teaching staff with the participation of students and their parents" (On approval of the pilot national project in the field of education "Comfortable School", 2022).

Giangreco, M. F. and co-authors support the statement that effective collaboration with paraprofessionals is an important and growing aspect of providing special education services in inclusive schools (Giangreco M. F. et al, 2010). However, Wendy Symes and Neil Humphrey state that the presence of teaching assistants negatively influences to the effectiveness of children with ASD compared to other two groups of children with dyslexia and no Special Educational Needs. Particularly, children with ASD were showing less performance in self-study and social communication (Symes W. et al, 2012). In their research done in 2011 such factors as inclusive school culture and teacher training have been overlooked, and the factors as access to expertise considered to be as one of the factors to facilitate or hinder the skills of the teacher-assistants to successfully adapt children with ASD into the school life (Symes W. et al, 2011). Consequently, further research could be arranged around the clarifying the management models in different settings in rural and urban areas, identifying the difference in workload of the teacher-assistants comparing the rural and urban areas.

The professional ASD management training is essential in order to equip teachers and teacher-assistants with the knowledge and skills necessary to address the individual needs of students and to create an effective learning environment. It also contributes to the overall development of students, enabling

them to reach their full potential. Mary Fisher and Stacia L. Pleasants state that most paraprofessionals lack training in evidence-based instructional strategies to support children with special educational needs, as well as children with ASD. In their research the use of the training packages (video modelling and coaching components) showed effectiveness and highlighted the importance of providing trainings to paraprofessionals that have become an increasingly integral part of special education services (Fisher M. et al, 2012). Following up the importance of the supporting group in educational process, Martin, T., & Alborz, A. undertook the qualitative studies among learning support assistants or teaching assistants and got into conclusion that without sufficient knowledge to underpin their practice, teaching assistants are impeded in the educational support they can give to pupils, who face significant learning challenges, with a resultant impact on their students' ability to learn and develop new skills (Martin T., 2014). These researches are in line with the results gained throughout the research done in Kazakhstan and the authors came to the conclusion that systemic long-term capacity-building trainings are needed to teacher-assistants in Kazakhstan.

To confirm the relevance of the conclusions of this article, we cite the words of the President of the country K. Tokayev from the last Address to the people of Kazakhstan dated as September 1, 2023: "The mental health of the younger generation is also important. It is necessary to institutionally strengthen the psychological support service in educational institutions... The inalienable right of every child is the right to receive a quality school education. And the word "quality" is key here. Therefore, it is necessary to consistently improve the quality of education and increase the competencies of teachers" (Message from the Head of State Kassym-Jomart Tokayev to the people of Kazakhstan "Economic course of a Fair Kazakhstan", 2023).

In this article, the authors reflect the main results of the project implementation stage, work is also underway to develop educational programs for advanced training of teachers and teacher assistants in psychological and pedagogical support for learners with ASD.

**Conclusion.** Conclusion. In this article, the authors concluded that there is a need for systemic solutions to the training and professional development of teacher assistants, especially those accompanying children with ASD. The results of the study highlight both positive shifts and existing gaps in the support provided by teacher assistants to students with SEN, including with ASD. Despite the growing recognition of the importance of early identification and individual support for these students, the data show significant shortcomings in the training and professional development of teacher assistants and a lack of educational resources, especially in the Kazakh language.

Although most teacher assistants are competent in managing the psychological and pedagogical support, only less than half of the participants felt confident in using specific methods, such as sensory integration or educational games. This highlights the need for improved professional development programs that equip teacher assistants with the tools to intervene effectively. Addressing these gaps through targeted educational programs will not only improve the competencies of teacher assistants, but also ensure that children with ASD receive the individual attention they need to make meaningful progress in their learning. Developing targeted educational programs for teacher assistants, as well as increasing collaboration between educators, professionals, and parents, will be critical to ensuring that children with ASD receive the quality education to which they are entitled. As Kazakhstan continues to advance its inclusive education policy, it is imperative to address these gaps to create equitable and supportive learning environments for all students. Considering the wide variety of learning difficulties associated with manifestations of autism spectrum disorders in children, it is logical to conclude that a serious approach to training, retraining and advanced training of teacher assistants is necessary.

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