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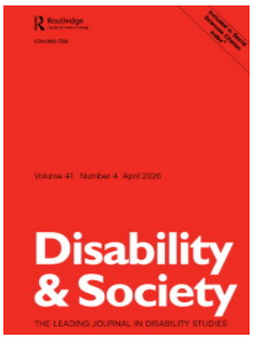
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The mind's decolonisation in post-Soviet country toward inclusive education: Azerbaijan context

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ABSTRACT

The study examines the challenges of viewing the history of post-Soviet education as a cycle of intellectual post-colonisation and decolonisation, raising critical questions about how post-Soviet individuals can develop independent thinking while navigating laws and customs imposed by external influences. It underscores the richness and diversity of the post-Soviet region, emphasising that each nation and environment has unique social dynamics, histories, and cultures. The findings suggest that the implementation of inclusive education could benefit from incorporating global best practices while considering the distinctive features and conditions of each educational system. Grounded in the theories of Edward Said, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Nancy Fraser, the research explores the impact of postsocialist neoliberalisation and the state socialist legacy on disability-related institutions, discourses, and practices in the post-Soviet nation of Azerbaijan.

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Neoliberalism; inclusive education; post-Soviet context; decolonising mind

Points of interest

- This paper looks at how education in post-Soviet countries has changed, focusing on the struggle between outside influences and efforts to think and act independently.
- The study discuss how each post-Soviet country has its own culture, history, and social systems, which shape its education challenges and solutions.
- The research suggests that making education more inclusive can work better if global ideas are adapted to fit the unique needs of each country.
- Inspired by W.E.B. Du Bois, Edward Said, and Nancy Fraser the study connects education to broader social changes like shifting economies and government systems.

Introduction

Azerbaijan, which is located at the crossroads of Eastern Europe and Western Asia, has a complex and rich history that has been shaped by Persian, Turkic, Russian, and Soviet civilisations. More than 90% of the country's 10 million inhabitants are Azerbaijanis, and despite the country's predominantly secular

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society, Islam, mainly Shi'a, is the most widely practiced religion. The nation's cultural identity demonstrates a fusion of traditional practices and modern influences, shaped by its Soviet past and post-independence national renaissance. Azerbaijan, like numerous other nations, participated in international declarations subsequent to its independence in 1991, which resulted in modifications to its policies regarding disabled individuals. There is an increasing political momentum to enhance the quality of life for disabled individuals by incorporating the social model of disability into social policy and service provision (Aliyeva 2023). Today, inclusive education is also receiving growing attention in Azerbaijan. Historically, the education of disabled children was shaped by the Soviet-era medical model of defectology, which promoted segregation and contributed to the stigmatisation of disabled individuals.

Segregation and stigmatisation of disabled individuals were defining features of state socialist policies toward disability (Iarskaia-Smirnova and Rasell 2014). Disability was predominantly understood as the inability to work, with a strong emphasis on medical evaluation. This research highlights two main factors contributing to the persistence of disability-related injustices after 1991 in Azerbaijan, adding to the growing body of literature in this field. First, the post-Soviet period remains unfinished for former Soviet Union member states, as institutional structures, discourses, attitudes, and historical legacies continue to shape contemporary disability experiences and policies (Gevorgianiene, Geniene, and Egl 2021). Second, the process of decolonisation within the educational system has brought about changes to some of the institutions, ideologies, and traditions inherited from the state socialist era of communism, as well as from the capitalist education system. The enduring influence of the state socialist legacy has continued to shape post-socialist neoliberalisation, impacting institutions, discourses, and practices long after the collapse of state socialism (Hemment 2009). This research aims to examine how the interaction between the state socialist heritage and postsocialist neoliberalisation affects disabled individuals in the education sector of postsocialist societies.

The global economic and political ideology of neoliberalism, characterised by its emphasis on deregulation, market-driven policies, privatisation, and minimal government intervention, has profoundly influenced a wide range of societal structures. These include social welfare systems, healthcare provision, and educational frameworks, with its impact felt across both the Global North and Global South (Graham 2018; Sims 2017; Sajaniemi et al. 2018; Sims and Waniganayake 2015; Connell 2013, 2019). Neoliberalism represents the latest phase in capitalism's global expansion, asserting its dominance and hegemonic influence across nations and regions (Ong 2007). This ideology promotes the idea that market mechanisms, rather than state intervention, are the most efficient and equitable means to allocate resources, a perspective that has reshaped societal priorities and institutional policies.

In the post-Soviet sphere, the spread of neoliberalism has been neither uniform nor consistent. The former socialist states, each grappling with the legacies of their state-planned economies, have adopted neoliberal reforms in varied and often contradictory ways (Bohle and Greskovits 2007). This uneven progression reflects differences in historical, cultural, and economic contexts, as well as the degree to which individual nations have embraced or resisted neoliberal principles. Some countries have undergone rapid privatisation and structural adjustments, while others have retained elements of their socialist systems, creating a complex mosaic of economic and social policy frameworks across the region.

The concept of 'transition' in this context has carried significant implications for disability policies and practices (Phillips 2013, 2010, 2005). Under state socialism, disability was often managed within institutional frameworks that prioritised collective solutions over individual empowerment. The shift toward neoliberal governance has disrupted these systems, introducing market-driven approaches that frequently prioritise efficiency and cost-cutting over equity and inclusivity. In many post-socialist states, the transition has resulted in reduced public funding for social services, including those supporting disabled individuals, and an increased reliance on private or non-governmental organizations to fill the gaps (Mladenov 2018).

Furthermore, the intersection of neoliberalism with existing cultural and institutional legacies in post-socialist countries has led to diverse regional outcomes. For some, the transition has opened new opportunities for advocacy and reform, enabling grassroots movements to challenge stigmatisation and demand rights-based policies. For others, it has exacerbated inequalities, leaving disabled individuals and their families struggling to navigate fragmented and underfunded support systems (Mladenov 2015b, 2017a, 2017b; 2018). Understanding neoliberalism's impact on disability policies requires an examination of how global ideologies interact with local histories and practices. The neoliberal emphasis on market efficiency and privatisation poses challenges to achieving inclusivity and equity, particularly in societies still grappling with the remnants of state socialist frameworks (Mladenov 2018). To address these challenges, a critical reevaluation of both neoliberal principles and their implementation in diverse contexts is necessary, with an emphasis on fostering systems that prioritise human dignity, collective responsibility, and equitable access for all.

As a formerly colonised nation, Azerbaijan has faced persistent challenges in addressing postcolonial traits within its education system, particularly under the influence of neoliberal principles (Abdullayeva 2024). For a long time, strongly embedded, fossilised attitudes provided considerable barriers to adopting new philosophies based on inclusive education. This resistance stems not only from personal perspectives but also from historical factors such as Marxist conceptions of equity and the history of cooperation with

imperialist frameworks (Lane 1996). The Marxist ideology continues to have a major impact on the trajectory of inclusive education in Azerbaijan. The Soviet period's universal education ethos and rhetoric of collective solidarity appeared to support inclusion; however, these ideals were implemented through a centralised, medicalised system, rooted in defectology, that segregated disabled children into special schools and home education, uniform educational model (Aliyeva 2023; Kosaretsky, Mikayilova, and Ivanov 2024). As a result, Azerbaijan inherited both the structural infrastructure and the exclusionary ideology long after the Soviet Union had ended. Since 2022, state-supported reforms, including an EU-funded initiative, have dismantled medical-model rehabilitation systems in favour of a social model approach, emphasising accessibility, participation, and agency for disabled people (Aliyeva 2023). This progression highlights the Soviet context's dual legacy, illustrating how its educational underpinnings can support inclusive practices while its entrenched medicalised frameworks and bureaucratic rigidity present considerable challenges to fully realising inclusive education in Azerbaijan today.

Over time, such processes have weakened people's belief in their cultural qualities and abilities. The reliance on pilot projects and training facilitated by NGOs over an extended period has created significant challenges in implementing inclusive education policies (Iarskaia-Smirnova and Rasell 2014). Gordon et al. (2004) have raised concerns regarding the purported adoption of democratic principles in post-Soviet countries, noting that some continue to uphold Soviet educational practices that suppress diversity and resist democratic efforts to establish inclusive schools in the region.

The Soviet educational system, characterised by an emphasis on rote memorisation and teacher-centered instruction, has deeply influenced teacher education programs in Azerbaijan and other post-Soviet nations (Karimova, Kazimzade, and Silova 2014). The legacy of Soviet defectology and Soviet-era educational programs has had a significant impact on Azerbaijan, as it has in other post-Soviet contexts (Florian and Becirevic 2011). Conventional university programs often prioritise academic knowledge over alternative learning styles, interdisciplinary collaboration, and student-centered pedagogy, reflecting the influence of neoliberalism. There is an urgent need to adopt pedagogical practices that integrate all students, including disabled children, by moving away from a charitable/medical model of support and embracing a social model of inclusion (Gesser and Martins 2019). Such practices should encourage educators to adapt to student differences rather than segregate them, fostering meaningful learning experiences for all (Florian and Spratt 2013). Azerbaijan has taken active steps to collaborate with international organizations to align its educational system with modern standards, an essential move toward inclusive education. However, this approach introduces new challenges, such as adapting neoliberal principles and addressing difficulties in integrating global ideas into the local context without significant modifications.

The article investigates Azerbaijan's inclusive education strategy, focusing on its ability to ameliorate social injustices while negotiating the constraints of a post-Soviet society. It advocates for mind decolonisation, building on the theories of W.E.B. Du Bois, Edward Said, and Nancy Fraser to offer two strategies: cultivating critical consciousness and supporting equitable social systems. The intricate relationship between Islam and disability is explored, with an emphasis on an inclusive approach that respects cultural and religious beliefs. The function of education in building Azerbaijani national identity is examined, emphasising curriculum indigenisation to reflect local heritage and values. The function of education in building Azerbaijani national identity is examined, with an emphasis on curriculum indigenisation to reflect local heritage and values. The paper, based on disability and social justice ideas, advocates for structural reforms to promote fairness and inclusion. The conclusion emphasises the need for decolonisation in establishing a fair and culturally sensitive educational environment.

The critical narrative literature review methodology used in this study is especially well-suited to looking at complicated sociocultural and educational issues from an interpretive and reflexive perspective. This method, in contrast to conventional systematic reviews, critically engages with the literature to examine underlying assumptions, contextual influences, and theoretical alignments in order to go beyond just summarising the body of existing research. The review, which is based on three guiding theoretical frameworks, aims to provide complex arguments that take into account the variety of viewpoints and the sociopolitical forces that influence inclusive education discourses. This approach is in line with Rolfe's (2006) work, which highlights the importance of critical and interpretive review techniques in synthesising knowledge contextually and analytically.

I recognise that my positionality is crucial in influencing the research process because I am a researcher positioned inside the sociocultural context under investigation. My experiences, theoretical leanings, and background all affect the questions I pose, the sources I prioritise, and the interpretations I choose. Instead of attempting to take a dispassionate or 'objective' stand, this review welcomes reflexivity, acknowledging that knowledge is situated and co-constructed. According to Finlay (2002), the work is guided by the knowledge that researcher reflexivity is essential to interpretative analysis and significantly enhances the research's rigour and transparency.

Exploring inclusive education policies in Azerbaijan

The social model of education has gradually replaced the longstanding reliance on the medical model established during the Soviet era for educating disabled children (CIE 2009). Following Azerbaijan's independence, the focus shifted toward inclusive education. The Education Law of the Republic of

Azerbaijan (2009) is regarded as a cornerstone in reforming educational practices for disabled children. However, Azerbaijan's initial efforts to promote inclusive education were not grounded in a thorough analysis of the issue (Mikayilova 2019). Additionally, statistics on disabled pupils were unavailable at the outset, with data first released in 2011 revealing that only 15% of disabled pupils participated in education (Mikayilova 2019). As a result, early efforts to implement inclusive education did not directly address the segregation of disabled pupils but instead focused on introducing inclusive education across the national system. Moreover, these initial reforms failed to gain widespread recognition from educational institutions or society at large (Mikayilova 2019).

The second cycle of inclusive education began with the adoption of the National Education Development Strategy in 2013. Although the pilot projects from the first cycle had notable shortcomings, they contributed to fostering positive societal attitudes, which benefited subsequent reforms (Mikayilova 2019). The policy framework for this second cycle was strengthened by significant legislative developments. On May 31, 2018, Azerbaijan enacted the Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which was revised in 2019. This law established the foundations of state policy, prohibiting disability-based discrimination, fostering social skills, ensuring social security, promoting rehabilitation, and addressing other critical aspects in alignment with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

The second state program on inclusive education (2017b) set a strategic approach for overcoming barriers that hinder disabled individuals from fully participating in education. This collaborative effort between the national government and international development organizations focused on transforming the medical model of disability into a social model. The implementation of the 2018 law by presidential decree marked a significant step in this transition (Rustamova 2021).

For a long time, post-Soviet parents believed that the best educational options for disabled individuals were special schools or home-based education (Mikayilova et al. 2009, 112). This approach was perceived as more comfortable and less stressful, as it allowed students to study alongside disabled peers. To address such entrenched beliefs and raise awareness about inclusive education, organizations like MSE, UNICEF, IE, and RDPU have created educational videos in Azerbaijan. These resources emphasise the academic and socio-psychological benefits of inclusive education for both disabled and non-disabled children, promoting diversity in daily interactions within and beyond educational institutions (Inkluziv Təhsil 2021).

In an effort to expand access to preschool education, UNICEF and the European Union launched a pilot program in 2017 focusing on community-based preschool education. Operating in ten Azerbaijani cities through fifty secondary schools, the program supports children aged 3–4 and involves

parents in the curriculum to enhance their role in early education. The initiative also aims to increase parental awareness of their responsibilities in ensuring educational quality and identifying factors that could help disabled children overcome the disability-poverty cycle as they progress through their education (UNICEF 2017).

The Institute of Education (IE) of Azerbaijan, in collaboration with MSE and UNICEF, has implemented numerous projects to increase the number of general education institutions offering inclusive courses. One notable achievement is the establishment of the DOST Inclusive Development and Creativity Center on October 22, 2021, under the leadership of President Ilham Aliyev and First Vice-President Mehriban Aliyeva. The center caters to diverse vulnerable groups, including war-disabled individuals, children without parental care, low-income families, and families of martyrs. It offers training in 14 fields, such as dance, fine arts, tailoring, media, and horticulture, to enhance the creative potential of beneficiaries while providing socio-psychological support. The center employs a multidisciplinary team of psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, and other specialists to support social integration. Its facilities include a library with Braille resources, fostering artistic creativity among disabled individuals. It also features the pioneering 'Inclusive Volunteer' service, engaging 60 volunteers among its 80-plus staff members (DOST Inclusive Development and Creativity Center 2021).

On February 14, 2023, Azerbaijan took another significant step toward inclusive education with an order emphasising the need for educational staff to acquire competencies for planning and delivering educational activities for disabled children. To meet the demands of growing inclusive classrooms, pedagogical universities must equip instructors with the necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes. International organizations, including the United Nations, the World Bank, and UNESCO, remain key advocates for inclusion as a foundational principle of education (Armstrong, Armstrong, and Spandagou 2011). Their contributions, along with those of other civil society groups such as the Global Campaign for Education, play a pivotal role in developing inclusive education practices and policies in Azerbaijan. By merging theory and practice and engaging diverse stakeholders, these initiatives continue to advance the goals of inclusive education in the region.

While Azerbaijan's inclusive education reforms are influenced by global rights frameworks, they also incorporate elements of Western neoliberal policy approaches, including the reliance on international donors, project-based funding, and community-level efforts. These impacts are concretely manifested through experimental initiatives conducted by organisations such as UNICEF and the EU that prioritise parental participation, localised service delivery, and cost-efficiency (UNICEF 2017). The DOST Inclusive Development and Creativity Centre, for example, shows this strategy by integrating state-led programs with individualised, skills-based programming geared towards

employability and social integration. Scholars have remarked that, although promoting inclusion discourse, such reforms frequently use neoliberal service provision logics that emphasise adaptation, volunteerism, and personal responsibility (Rizvi and Lingard 2009; Slee 2011). However, these fragmented, externally financed changes have the potential to produce uneven outcomes in the absence of persistent state-led coordination, long-term teacher training, and inclusive infrastructure. This concern is echoed globally by scholars such as Tomlinson (2005), who critiques market-driven reforms for commodifying education and sidelining structural inequality, and Slee (2011), who warns that neoliberal inclusion often prioritises efficiency over equity, failing to dismantle systemic barriers. Ball (2012) also highlights how policy borrowing under neoliberalism tends to import surface-level reforms without addressing deep-rooted institutional constraints, which can exacerbate marginalisation in low- and middle-income contexts.

Moreover, Azerbaijan implemented the State Programme on Inclusive Education for 2018–2024, which aimed to include more disabled children in mainstream schools. However, progress has been gradual, with only 1.5% of schools being inclusive by 2024, due to inadequate accessible infrastructure and adaptable technologies, a small number of qualified teachers, and a lack of strong child-centered teaching approaches (Abdullayeva 2024; UNICEF 2025). The curriculum is mostly standardised, with little differentiation, and teacher training for inclusive practices is minimal (Kazimzade and Mikayilova 2021). Thus, despite visible progress, inclusive education in Azerbaijan is still uneven, hampered by both Soviet-era legacies and the constraints of neoliberal policy borrowing, necessitating a more coordinated, equity-focused national approach (Kosaretsky, Mikayilova, and Ivanov 2024).

Unpacking the need for decolonising minds in Azerbaijan: historical and cultural perspectives

The political instability surrounding the Karabakh conflict (1988–1994) initially hindered the implementation of educational reforms and severely limited the government's capacity to enact significant changes during the 1990s. The conflict displaced approximately one million refugees, many of whom faced dire conditions, with some regions suffering greater challenges than others. Numerous schools were destroyed or damaged by war. Consequently, the government's efforts were divided among several urgent priorities (Karimova, Kazimzade, and Silova 2014). On one hand, political issues both within and beyond the Republic required resolution. On the other, the newly independent republic had to address pressing internal matters, including cultural, educational, and economic challenges. As in other post-Soviet states, Azerbaijan required substantial time to rebuild its sovereignty (Lynch 2002).

In the early 1990s, like other post-socialist countries, Azerbaijan experienced the resurgence of civil society, accompanied by the emergence of disability movements. However, the academic community remained stagnant, rooted in traditional practices, and resistant to the reforms necessitated by the transition from a totalitarian regime to a democracy, especially concerning the right to inclusive education (Gevorgianiene, Geniene, and Egl 2021). Overcoming conventional approaches to ontological and epistemological issues became particularly challenging in the aftermath of the communist system's collapse. This included understanding disability itself and engaging in related studies.

During this transitional period, the societal upheaval brought about by the dissolution of the Soviet Union created a profound sense of disorientation among the populace. People struggled to make sense of the dramatic shifts in governance, ideology, and social structures that accompanied this era of transformation. The core values promoted during the Soviet era, such as equality, brotherhood, and collective solidarity, all rooted in the ideological framework of Marxism, began to lose their resonance. These ideals, once seen as guiding principles for societal cohesion, now appeared outdated or increasingly disconnected from the emerging realities of a world shaped by rapid globalization, market-driven reforms, and rising individualism (Abberley 1997).

Within this shifting ideological landscape, the concept of 'disability' often carried deeply ingrained stigmas. During the Soviet period, disabled individuals were frequently viewed through a reductive lens that emphasised deficiency, abnormality, and incapacity, rather than recognizing their intrinsic humanity or potential. This perspective marginalized disabled individuals, relegating them to the periphery of society and denying them opportunities for meaningful participation. Social structures and policies, though ostensibly committed to equality, failed to address the unique needs and rights of disabled individuals, perpetuating their exclusion.

Abberley (1997) offered a critical examination of Marxist interpretations of the human condition, expressing skepticism about their capacity to genuinely advance equality and liberation for disabled individuals. He argued that while Marxist ideals of collective welfare and shared labor sought to promote universal equality, they fell short in addressing the specific experiences and challenges faced by marginalized groups, including those with disabilities. These principles often prioritised economic productivity and conformity to societal norms, sidelining those whose differences placed them outside the dominant narrative of usefulness and contribution.

This critique is particularly relevant in the context of post-Soviet societies, where the transition from Marxist collectivism to neoliberalism exposed and, in some cases, exacerbated existing inequalities. The legacy of Soviet-era policies continued to shape attitudes toward disability, reinforcing perceptions of incapacity rather than fostering inclusion (Mladenov 2018). As the newly

independent states, including Azerbaijan, began to redefine their national identities and social priorities, there was an urgent need to reconsider how disability was conceptualised and addressed within educational, institutional, and cultural frameworks.

By centering the lived experiences of disabled individuals and recognising the diversity of human conditions, post-Soviet societies could begin to dismantle the barriers that perpetuated exclusion and marginalisation (Mladenov 2018). This transition required not only a reimagining of social policies but also a cultural shift toward viewing disability as a natural and valuable aspect of human diversity. Despite the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Soviet educational legacy continued to dominate post-Soviet educational practices, including in Azerbaijan. The system prioritised rote memorisation over fostering problem-solving and critical-thinking skills. Educational content was largely theoretical, with limited practical application to daily life. Teaching methods remained teacher-centered, often neglecting individual students' abilities and needs (Baimova 2006). Hamot (1998) described Soviet-era schools, from elementary to higher education, as delivering standardised lessons from uniform textbooks at the same time across all classrooms. Teachers' roles were reduced to conveying this uniform content, with students expected to memorize it (Yakavets 2003). There was no tradition of teacher involvement in curriculum development or localized curriculum control.

While centralised curriculum development had its advantages during the Soviet era, its limitations became apparent during Azerbaijan's transition to independence and a market economy in the 1990s (Crisan 2007). The outdated curriculum failed to meet the country's evolving needs. Post-Soviet educational reforms sought to address these gaps by emphasising advanced skills, creativity, critical thinking, and lifelong learning. Crisan (2006) noted a shift in the teacher's role from being an 'expert' in factual knowledge to serving as a 'coordinator, director, and consultant'. This transformation encouraged collaboration between teachers and students, with teachers guiding and students engaging as researchers, practitioners, and creators, an approach that is closely related to the social constructivist theory of learning created by Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky. Vygotsky's ideas became popular during 1950s and have since become basic in worldwide education, emphasising the social aspect of learning and the significance of supervised interaction within the 'zone of proximal development' (Daniels 2001; Vygotsky 1978). Vygotsky contributed significantly to the field of disability through his pioneering work in defectology, a radical and scientific approach that challenged the dominant medical model by focusing on the social and educational development of disabled children (Gindis 2003; Vygotsky 1987). While this laid the groundwork for more inclusive and developmentally appropriate practices, it was also shaped by the ideological aims of the Soviet state. Thus, Vygotsky's legacy reflects both progressive pedagogical insights and the

complex intersections of science, ideology, and education in the Soviet era. Along with Vygotsky's revolutionary pedagogical theories, the Soviet system established 'defectology', a specialised scientific discipline devoted to the study and rehabilitation of disabled children. This dual legacy lingers on in Azerbaijan's education system, as modern changes aim to implement inclusive, student-centered approaches influenced by social constructivism, yet face obstacles due to ingrained medicalised and centralised structures. The effectiveness of these reforms is heavily reliant on teachers' competencies; nevertheless, higher education teacher training programs frequently remain traditional and teacher-centric, highlighting the critical need for systemic transformation at the university level (Kazimzade and Mikayilova 2021).

Budget cuts, hyperinflation, and economic downturns in the 1990s further hindered education reforms. Although economic recovery began in the mid-1990s, investments in education remained far below pre-independence levels. Education spending as a share of GDP decreased from 7.5% in 1990 to 3.8% in 2000 and 2.8% in 2010 (UNESCO Institute of Statistics 2012). Financial constraints severely impacted the quality and equity of education. International organizations such as the World Bank supported post-Soviet education reforms, which were often shaped by globally 'traveling' education policies. These reforms aimed to modernize post-Soviet education systems in areas such as curriculum, governance, and pedagogy (Steiner-Khamsi et al. 2008). In Azerbaijan, the 2006 national curriculum introduced reforms in teacher preparation, school administration, subject outcomes, teaching strategies, and assessment methods (Karimova, Kazimzade, and Silova 2014). Despite these efforts, classrooms often remained teacher-centered, and teacher training programs failed to incorporate inclusive practices systematically (Abdullayeva 2022; Florian and Becirevic 2011; Rustamova 2021).

In the realm of disability studies and advocacy, the medical model's dominance in post-Soviet countries significantly constrained the growth of disability-focused non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and academic research (Iarskaia-Smirnova and Rasell 2014). This framework tended to view disability primarily through a lens of individual pathology, emphasising treatment and rehabilitation rather than addressing systemic barriers or advocating for rights-based approaches. As a result, NGOs emerged as pivotal agents of change, leading efforts to shift disability discourse away from the medical model and toward more progressive paradigms such as inclusive education (Gevorgianiene, Geniene, and Egl 2021). These organisations often filled the void left by academic institutions, which were slow to adopt alternative models of disability due to entrenched Soviet-era perspectives and limited institutional support for reform.

The concept of inclusive education, which originated in the Global North, was introduced as an approach to transform mainstream educational settings to be inclusive of disabled individuals. It is essential to emphasise that

inclusion goes beyond simply transferring children from special schools into mainstream settings. Inclusion encompasses more than addressing 'special educational needs' related to learning challenges or disabilities. The shift from 'integration' to 'inclusion' is not just a matter of terminology. Originally, 'inclusion' primarily referred to integrating disabled children into regular schools. However, 'special educational needs' traditionally excluded other groups of children from its scope (Thomas and Loxley 2007). The concept that 'inclusive education is a process, not an endpoint' (UNESCO 2018) has helped redirect attention toward the teaching approaches and the potential for creating a more 'democratic' educational experience for students. Key factors identified in fostering inclusion include adaptable curricula, textbooks free from stereotypes or biases, teacher training to recognise special needs, and addressing the design of school buildings. Importantly, these efforts aim to advance from 'integration' to 'inclusion' as the objective, acknowledging that too often, it is the child who is expected to adjust to the system, rather than the system adapting to the child (Robinson-Pant 2020).

However, its application in diverse contexts has sparked significant critique. Scholars have argued that, when implemented without sensitivity to local conditions and cultural nuances, inclusive education risks perpetuating neo-colonial dynamics (Kamenopoulou 2020). This critique stems from the idea that imposing Global North frameworks in the Global South or post-Soviet states can reinforce Northern hegemony, privileging Western epistemologies and marginalizing indigenous knowledge systems (Meekosha and Soldatic 2011). For inclusive education to be genuinely transformative, it must not merely replicate models from the North but instead be adapted to address regional sociocultural realities and the lived experiences of marginalized communities.

A decolonial perspective offers a critical lens for rethinking these issues. Decolonial theory challenges the dominance of Global North epistemologies and calls for approaches that are rooted in local contexts and histories (Tuck and Yang 2012). In the field of disability studies, this perspective is invaluable for dismantling neoliberal and ableist frameworks that perpetuate forms of colonial violence and exclusion (Bulhan 1985). Decoloniality emphasizes the importance of self-reflection, encouraging stakeholders to critically examine how imported models may unintentionally reproduce power imbalances and suppress indigenous ways of knowing.

Miles (2000) further highlighted the limitations of rights-based approaches to disability in many Asian contexts, where the concept of rights is often framed as a moral obligation rather than an enforceable entitlement. This distinction underscores the need to rethink how disability rights are articulated and implemented in societies with varying legal, cultural, and philosophical traditions. Effective advocacy in such contexts requires reconciling universal principles of equity and justice with locally resonant understandings of rights and responsibilities.

Despite its neo-colonial implications, inclusive education holds potential to serve as a vehicle for critical and emancipatory change if reoriented thoughtfully. Walton (2018) argued that inclusive education, when adapted to prioritise equity, empowerment, and contextual relevance, can transcend its origins and become a tool for fostering transformative education. This requires moving beyond superficial integration to address deeper systemic issues, such as societal attitudes, resource distribution, and structural inequalities.

Ultimately, the intersection of decolonial theory and disability studies provides a robust framework for navigating these challenges. By centering local voices, recognizing diverse epistemologies, and confronting historical injustices, inclusive education can evolve into a practice that not only integrates disabled individuals but also challenges broader systems of exclusion and inequity. Education systems, as primary tools for cultural decolonisation, reflect the political struggle for independence and self-determination (Freire and Macedo 2010). In post-Soviet Azerbaijan, the colonial mindset within education systems hindered intellectual independence. Neo-colonial governance models perpetuated these challenges (Rothermund 2000). Tlostanova and Mignolo (2012) noted efforts by post-Soviet nations to achieve academic parity with Western institutions.

Decolonising inclusive education requires culturally sensitive research to address understudied regions and incorporate diverse perspectives (Kamenopoulou 2020). Acknowledging the role of sociocultural contexts in shaping inclusive education is vital, as 'knowledge without context is indeed no knowledge at all' (Denning 2001, 135). Decolonising inclusive education involves fostering critical methodologies that capture regional nuances and realities. Scholars like Fraser, Said, and DuBois highlight the importance of resisting colonial ideologies, emphasizing that decolonisation of the mind is essential for fostering global perspectives.

In the following sections, I will examine how the socialist legacy and post-Soviet neoliberalism have influenced the decolonisation of inclusive education for disabled individuals (Mladenov 2017a).

Three key strategies for decolonising minds in post-Soviet Azerbaijan

The renowned academic and activist W. E. B. Du Bois (1989) described double consciousness as a coping mechanism in response to racism at the turn of the twentieth century. This concept, the sense of always viewing oneself through the eyes of others, the weighing of one's soul by the yardstick of a world that observes with mock scorn and sympathy, captures a profound and strange emotion. For many Black Americans, this dual identity manifests as being both an American and a Black person: two selves, two minds, two conflicting desires, two opposing ideals within one body, held together by a

tenacious will. When race, class, gender, and other differences are used to separate, marginalize, or oppress people, this duality of perspectives rooted in power and discrimination, what Du Bois termed double consciousness, has been employed in the U.S. and beyond to explain the complexity of identity (Gilroy 1993).

While Du Bois's concept sheds light on the struggles of the oppressed, its universal applicability is limited (Gordon 2007). Focusing exclusively on the African American experience during a specific historical period risks oversimplifying the diverse experiences of various racial and ethnic groups. In today's complex identity landscape, not every person of color relates to double consciousness in the same way (Hudecki 2020). This concept may need to be reinterpreted, particularly in disability studies and inclusive education. Although it offers valuable insights into multiple perspectives, it may not fully address the unique challenges faced by disabled individuals. A more nuanced approach that goes beyond the binary framework of dual awareness is necessary to tackle the obstacles encountered by disabled people. Customized, all-encompassing strategies are required.

In the Azerbaijani education system, there is a notable emphasis on adapting educational strategies to suit local cultural and societal contexts. While this approach is crucial for maintaining cultural relevance and fostering a sense of national identity, it also carries the risk of unintentionally neglecting valuable international perspectives that are essential in an increasingly interconnected world. Contextual modifications are undoubtedly necessary, but the integration of global strategies, customized to align with local needs and realities, can provide a more holistic approach (Smith 2021). This balance is vital as it allows for the preservation of cultural heritage while simultaneously embracing global innovations that enhance educational outcomes.

One key aspect of this dynamic is the distinction between different forms of consciousness in navigating cultural and societal differences. Perspective consciousness involves an intellectual effort to understand and appreciate the perspectives of others across diverse cultural boundaries. This form of consciousness encourages critical thinking and empathy, equipping individuals with the tools to engage meaningfully in global dialogue (Merryfield 1998). In contrast, there is the survival-driven double consciousness often experienced by marginalized groups, where individuals must navigate conflicting identities or societal expectations. Understanding these nuances is crucial in creating educational environments that are inclusive, equitable, and globally aware.

Global educators have increasingly recognized the importance of considering the unique contexts in which children develop their worldviews. These contexts shape how students perceive themselves and their place in the world, influencing their ability to interact with and contribute to a global society. As Merryfield (1998) notes, cultivating such understanding is

fundamental for educators striving to prepare students for the complexities of the twenty first century. By integrating local adaptations with global insights, the Azerbaijani education system can prepare its learners not only to thrive within their own cultural frameworks but also to engage effectively with the broader global community.

In the context of disability studies, Islam offers a framework rooted in respect for human nature, encompassing both external impairments like physical impairments and internal conditions such as beliefs and mental states. Islam's principles promote compassion and support for disabled people, consistent with fundamental human rights (Risnawati 2019). However, the oversimplified notion that Islam universally accepts disabled individuals fails to account for the diversity of interpretations within the Muslim community. Historical events, such as the suppression of Islamic traditions during the Soviet era, and cultural variations, influence attitudes toward disability.

Sheikha Hessa Al Thani (2009), former UN Special Rapporteur on Disabilities, highlights persistent challenges faced by disabled individuals in Arabic-speaking societies, including stigmatization and derogatory language. Al Thani underscores that these views contradict Islamic teachings, which treat disability neutrally and demand appropriate societal responses. Islamic teachings can serve as a foundation for inclusive education, but their application requires a nuanced understanding of cultural and historical contexts.

In the context of Azerbaijan, it is indeed challenging to find research that integrates disability studies with Islamic perspectives. However, focusing on research conducted in Uzbekistan could provide valuable insights. This is because, hypothetically, the findings from Uzbekistan could be applicable to Azerbaijan, given the shared historical, cultural, and religious contexts. Both countries are post-Soviet, Turkish Muslim communities, and their populations share significant similarities in mindset, traditions, and societal structures. This common ground makes the exploration of Uzbek research relevant and potentially transferable to understanding disability studies within Azerbaijan's context. Drawing parallels to Yusupov's (2023) study on disability in post-Soviet Uzbekistan, this article explores how religious conceptualizations of disability intersect with national identity and education in Azerbaijan. Like the groups Yusupov noted, disabled Muslims in Azerbaijan may interpret their impairment as a blessing that strengthens their relationship with Allah or as a test from God. This viewpoint emphasises a positive religious identity similar to the affirmation model of disability, which is in contrast to medical deficit models or functional views of disability from the Soviet era. These views support a type of 'spiritual citizenship,' where identity and belonging are based on a relationship with God rather than on social or political constructions, in both Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan. But as Yusupov (2023) pointed out for Uzbekistan, the formation of these identities may also be impacted by state initiatives and religious bureaucracy. Through an examination of the

Azerbaijani setting, this essay examines how these factors influence the rights, lives, eudcation and contributions to society of disabled people in the country, illuminating their varied experiences and the relationship between religion, disability, and post-Soviet national reconstruction.

In Azerbaijan, national identity has been a cornerstone of educational reform since the 1990s. The fall of the Soviet Union necessitated a shift from a Soviet-imposed identity to an authentic Azerbaijani identity, grounded in the nation's unique ethno-linguistic, cultural, and religious heritage. This identity, which began taking shape as early as the eleventh century, culminated in the establishment of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic in 1918 (Huseynov 2010). Despite significant reforms, Azerbaijan's education system faces challenges. Structural changes have not been accompanied by shifts in pedagogical attitudes, which remain authoritarian. Teachers often prioritise fostering a national identity over embracing global perspectives. While preserving cultural heritage is vital, education must also cultivate critical thinking, creativity, and respect for diversity to prepare students for participation in a globalized world.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1998) explores how colonialism and imperialism persist in people's thinking long after colonial rule ends. Decolonising the mind involves recognising how oppressors impose worldviews on the oppressed, shaping ideas and decisions across generations (Banks 1995). Edward Said's Orientalism (1978) critiques Eurocentric perspectives that govern and reshape perceptions of the East. Said's work and Foucault's theories on discourse highlight the need to challenge Western-centric knowledge systems while respecting and integrating traditional knowledge from diverse cultures (Simonds and Christopher 2013). However, critics argue that the focus on decolonisation oversimplifies historical dynamics and risks selective memory, overlooking instances where colonial influences were constructive or where indigenous practices were problematic (Kebede 2017). Instead of rejecting colonial influences outright, fostering dialogue and collaboration between cultures offers a more inclusive approach (Herbjørnsrud 2021). In Azerbaijan, decolonising the education system involves eradicating remnants of Soviet educational philosophy while incorporating locally relevant curricula. Indigenisation themes include reclaiming indigenous culture, language, and traditions while resisting economic and cultural dependency (Ismailova 2004).

Nancy Fraser's (2013) concept of 'parity of participation' offers a robust framework for justice by advocating for social arrangements that enable all individuals to engage as equals in societal interactions. While Fraser originally applied her framework to issues of gender, class, and race, its principles are equally relevant in addressing challenges within disability studies. In this context, it emphasises the interconnected dimensions of maldistribution, misrecognition, and misrepresentation, which must be tackled collectively to achieve meaningful inclusion (Mladenov 2017b). This framework takes on

particular significance in Azerbaijan, where addressing injustices against disabled individuals requires grappling with the dual legacies of neoliberal reform and Soviet-era social policies.

In Azerbaijan, the post-Soviet transition has created a complex backdrop for disability rights. The remnants of Soviet collectivism, which often prioritised state-centric solutions over individual empowerment, coexist with neoliberal policies that emphasise privatisation and self-reliance, sometimes at the expense of vulnerable populations (Mladenov 2017a). These legacies have contributed to persistent inequalities that affect disabled individuals, including limited access to resources, inadequate representation in decision-making processes, and social stigmatisation. Tackling these multifaceted issues requires a nuanced approach that addresses both historical and contemporary challenges.

Education emerges as a transformative tool in this process, playing a pivotal role in empowering disabled individuals to assert their rights and contribute to society. Through inclusive education policies, Azerbaijan has the opportunity to create a system that not only equips disabled individuals with knowledge and skills but also fosters their ability to articulate their needs, participate actively in societal decision-making, and advocate for equitable treatment. Inclusive education in the Azerbaijani context must prioritise equity by addressing systemic barriers and ensuring representation of disabled individuals in all facets of education and governance.

To achieve this, policies must focus on creating accessible learning environments, providing teacher training to address diverse needs, and challenging societal stereotypes that perpetuate misrecognition and marginalisation. This approach aligns with Fraser's (1996) vision of justice by enabling disabled individuals to move beyond passive recipients of charity or aid and instead become active participants in shaping their futures. By embedding principles of parity of participation into its educational framework, Azerbaijan can make significant strides toward creating a society where all individuals, regardless of ability, can contribute meaningfully and thrive within an equitable and inclusive environment.

Conclusion

Azerbaijan's path toward inclusive education is shaped by a complex interplay of historical, cultural, and political transformations. The country's post-Soviet transition, marked by the simultaneous influence of neoliberal reforms and enduring colonial legacies, has created a challenging yet fertile environment for rethinking disability, human rights, and education. Soviet-era frameworks, which often marginalised disabled individuals and prioritised conformity over diversity, continue to shape institutional practices and public attitudes. As Azerbaijan undertakes educational reform, aligning with contemporary principles of equity and inclusion requires confronting and dismantling these residual ideologies.

W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of double consciousness offers a powerful framework for understanding the internal tensions experienced by disabled individuals as they navigate societal norms and the pursuit of personal or cultural authenticity. In the Azerbaijani context, this duality is reflected in the friction between inherited Soviet paradigms, emerging neoliberal influences, and efforts to reclaim indigenous values and religious traditions. These tensions underscore the importance of an inclusive education model that affirms multiple identities and resists the imposition of external frameworks that may fail to account for local specificities.

Today, education in Azerbaijan functions not only as a site of knowledge transmission but also as an instrument of national reconstruction, where spirituality, patriotism, and cultural heritage are being woven into curriculum reform. These developments call for a decolonising approach to education, one that moves beyond superficial or symbolic inclusion and critically engages with the historical, theological, and cultural forces shaping public perceptions of disability.

This paper argues that establishing a truly inclusive education system in Azerbaijan, and in other postcolonial, culturally distinct societies, requires an intentional and informed synthesis of global best practices with contextually rooted knowledge systems. An approach that honors both universal human rights and local realities can yield more meaningful and enduring outcomes.

To that end, the study calls for sustained and informed cross-cultural engagement, one that moves beyond the mere transfer of international norms and instead fosters mutual learning between diverse societies. Recognising perspectives from historically underrepresented contexts like Azerbaijan is essential not only for equitable knowledge exchange but also for reshaping global discourses on disability and inclusion. Only through such dialogue can we develop education systems that are both globally responsive and locally resonant.

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