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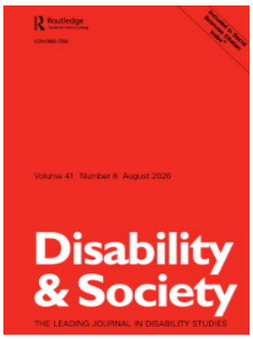
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Dominant disability discourses in post-Soviet Azerbaijani higher education: an empirical analysis

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ABSTRACT

This study, grounded in Critical Disability Studies and informed by postcolonial and decolonial perspectives, investigates how lecturers and pre-service teachers in Azerbaijan's higher education system conceptualise disability. Drawing on semi-structured interviews conducted at a local university, it explores how post-Soviet educational legacies and broader colonial frameworks continue to shape understandings of disability. Although participants increasingly referred to the social model, their interpretations remained strongly influenced by deficit-oriented and medical traditions, reflecting the country's transitional context in which inclusive rhetoric coexists with hierarchical and medicalised practices. Participants expressed empathy toward disabled students, yet their approaches often resulted in symbolic rather than substantive inclusion. Persistent discomfort with disability-related terminology further revealed cultural and linguistic uncertainty. The study argues that meaningful inclusion in Azerbaijani teacher education necessitates critical professional development, increased reflexivity, and justice-oriented pedagogical approaches that challenge ingrained assumptions about normalcy, ability, and difference.

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Lecturer; pre-service teacher; disability conceptualisation; critical disability studies; decolonisation

Points of interest

- This study explores how university lecturers and pre-service teachers in Azerbaijan think about disability and what shapes their views.
- Many participants talked about disability as being caused by barriers in society, but they also continued to describe disability as a problem within the individual.
- These mixed views reflect the lasting influence of Soviet-era ideas, which often treated disabled people as needing care, treatment, or separation from others.
- Participants generally wanted to support disabled students, but their language and assumptions sometimes limited how they understood inclusion, equality, and participation.
- The findings suggest that teacher education should include more opportunities to learn from disabled people's experiences and perspectives.

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Introduction

Azerbaijan, a post-Soviet nation with a population of approximately ten million, has demonstrated progress in disability policy since ratifying the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2006 (United Nations 2006). Official statistics indicate that 5.6 to 6.4% of the population is classified as disabled (Report.az 2022), although these figures likely underestimate the lived experiences of many individuals. Recent reforms, such as the 2022 revision of disability assessment procedures, illustrate governmental efforts to implement a more socially oriented model of disability (Today.az 2022). Nevertheless, substantial challenges persist, including inaccessible infrastructure, limited access to inclusive education, and enduring stigma rooted in Soviet-era medicalised traditions (Mikayilova, Orujova, and Babayeva 2023). The global movement for inclusive education, articulated in the Salamanca Statement (1994), positioned schools as environments for participation, diversity, and social justice. This vision is reinforced by the CRPD's recognition of education as a fundamental human right. Article 24 of the CRPD obliges states, including Azerbaijan, to provide equitable, quality, and inclusive education by transforming schools to accommodate all learners. Within this framework, disability in Azerbaijan is influenced by historical legacies, evolving human rights obligations, and persistent socio-cultural barriers.

The collapse of Soviet institutions, armed conflict, economic uncertainty, and subsequent nation-building efforts reshaped access to educational opportunities (Alasgarova & Abdullayeva 2026). These broader transformations also influenced the organisation of educational provision for disabled children. Historically, the education of disabled children in Azerbaijan was shaped by a segregated Soviet-era system, whereby children identified through the Medical-Psychological-Pedagogical Commission (MPPC) were commonly placed in special schools, boarding institutions, or home-based education. Although these arrangements continue to exist, Azerbaijan has increasingly adopted inclusive education policies following its ratification of the UNCRPD and the implementation of the State Programme on the Development of Inclusive Education for Persons with Disabilities (2018–2024). However, the transition towards inclusion remains uneven, with special and inclusive provisions operating alongside one another (Mikayilova, Orujova, and Babayeva 2023; UNESCO 2021). This transitional context is also reflected in teacher education, where inclusive education has gained greater prominence, yet medical and deficit-oriented understandings of disability often coexist with emerging social and rights-based perspectives. As a result, lecturers and pre-service teachers are frequently exposed to competing understandings of disability and inclusion, making their conceptualisations particularly important to examine.

While educators play an important role in shaping opportunities for disabled students, CDS emphasises that understandings of disability should not be derived solely from professional, institutional, or policy perspectives. Disabled people themselves have long challenged medicalised and paternalistic representations of disability and have advocated for rights-based, socially just understandings grounded in lived experience (Goodley 2013; Oliver 1990). Examining how educators conceptualise disability is therefore important because these understandings influence whether disabled people are recognised as active participants in educational life or positioned as passive recipients of support. This study investigates educators' conceptualisations of disability while acknowledging the central importance of disabled people's own knowledge and experiences in shaping inclusive educational futures.

Despite strong global policies, implementation remains inconsistent. Many nations struggle to match ambitious commitments with limited institutional capacity. Persistent deficit views of disability, along with underfunding, rigid curricula, and insufficient teacher training, continue to hinder inclusion, particularly in settings influenced by colonial histories, post-socialist transitions, and Global North frameworks (Walton 2018). Teachers are key to realizing inclusive education, as their knowledge, skills, and attitudes shape its success (Forlin and Chambers 2011; Slee 2011; United Nations 2016). Yet, teacher education research remains largely shaped by Global North perspectives, with little attention to Global South contexts (Abdullayeva 2024; 2025a; 2025b; Herrera-Seda and Walton 2025).

This research examines how disability is constructed within Azerbaijani higher education by lecturers and pre-service teachers, and critically analyses the extent to which these constructions align with or diverge from disability-rights and disability-studies perspectives that centre the lived experiences and agency of disabled people. It analyses lecturers' and pre-service teachers' understandings of disability, the factors influencing these perspectives, and the extent to which global discourses, particularly those originating in Global North frameworks, inform or constrain local interpretations. Although international conventions such as the Salamanca Statement (1994) and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) establish inclusion as a global norm, the implementation of these ideals in teacher education practice remains inconsistent.

This research, informed by constructivist and interpretivist paradigms, aims to examine how lecturers in teacher education departments and pre-service teachers in Azerbaijan construct and interpret the meaning of disability within the context of inclusive education. Participants are regarded as active agents who draw on personal experiences, professional training, and sociocultural influences to shape their understandings. The study is contextualised within Azerbaijan's post-Soviet educational

landscape, where historical legacies, policy reforms, and international collaborations influence teacher education and inclusive practices (Abdullayeva 2024; 2025a; 2025b).

The objectives of this research are to investigate how teacher educators and pre-service teachers conceptualise disability within higher education settings, to analyse the influence of historical, sociopolitical, and institutional narratives on participants' perceptions and interpretations of disability, and to reveal the tensions, challenges, and spaces for transformation within current approaches to preparing teachers for inclusive education.

In line with these aims, the study addresses the following research questions:

- How do lecturers and pre-service teachers in Azerbaijan understand and construct the concept of disability when engaging with the social model of inclusion?
- How do historical, sociopolitical, and educational reforms shape participants' meanings and interpretations of disability in the Azerbaijani context?

The study seeks to elucidate the intersections of historical legacies, institutional traditions, and global influences in shaping narratives of inclusive education. The structure of the article is as follows. The Literature Review examines disability models, CDS, and the historical and educational context of disability in Azerbaijan. The Methodology section outlines the qualitative research design, participant selection, and data collection procedures. The Findings and Results section presents three key themes: participants' understandings of disability, the influence of Soviet legacies, and the language used to describe disability. The Discussion and Conclusion interpret these findings through the lens of CDS and disability models, considering their implications for teacher education, inclusion, and the recognition of disabled individuals' voices and knowledge within higher education.

Literature review

There are two primary goals for this section. In order to investigate the postcolonial dynamics impacting disability conceptualisation in Azerbaijan, a post-Soviet setting, it first describes the theoretical frameworks supporting the research, drawing on CDS and a decolonial perspective (Goodley 2013; Grech 2011; Meekosha and Shuttleworth 2009; Meekosha and Soldatic 2011). By interacting with viewpoints from the Global North and South, disability is conceptualised *via* this lens. Second, the section critically examines the body of research on disability and teacher education, examining how these concepts have been developed and implemented both internationally and domestically in Azerbaijan.

Even though a number of well-known models, such as the medical, societal, moral, or religious, and individual (personal tragedy) models, have historically influenced perceptions of disability, each one only offers a limited and frequently biased viewpoint. The medical model restricts impairment to bodily deficit and pathology requiring professional attention (Barnes and Mercer 2010; Shakespeare 2013), whereas the moral and individual models position it as a result of sin, sympathy, or personal tragedy (Oliver 1996; Retief and Letšosa 2018). Even the social model is rooted in Eurocentric and Marxist traditions that exclude postcolonial and non-Western realities, despite its revolutionary reframing of disability as social oppression (Barnes 1992; Oliver 1990). These theories frequently universalise Western historical experiences while ignoring the ways in which local histories, power dynamics, and epistemologies influence disability (Grech 2011; Meekosha and Shuttleworth 2009). Therefore, even while they offer a useful conceptual framework, they are inadequate for examining how culture, colonialism, and social policy interact in post-Soviet settings like Azerbaijan.

This study uses a decolonial viewpoint and CDS as its theoretical framework in order to overcome these constraints. By examining the cultural, political, and epistemological aspects of disability and emphasising its connections to gender, race, class, and international power structures, CDS goes beyond the social model (Goodley 2013; Goodley et al. 2019). Examining how Western policy transfers, local belief systems, and colonial and Soviet legacies continue to influence ideas of inclusion and normalcy is made possible by incorporating a decolonial perspective (Meekosha and Soldatic 2011; Mladenov 2016; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2020; Santos 2015). This integrated framework focuses on locally localised knowledge and lived experiences while challenging the epistemic domination of Northern paradigms. In line with the larger goals of decolonising disability research and inclusive education, it thus offers a more culturally grounded and epistemically just framework for understanding data within the Azerbaijani educational landscape (Connell 2020; Grech 2017).

This section also examines prevalent conceptions of disability in international discourse and in the context of Azerbaijan. Given that Azerbaijan's most recent national decree explicitly defines inclusive education for disabled people, this conversation is particularly important (E-Qanun, 2013). These definitions reinforce particular narratives about the goal and application of inclusion, influencing educators' perceptions of their roles, responsibilities, and approaches to inclusive practices. According to Oliver (2009), the social model of disability makes a distinction between impairment, which is a biological state, and disability, which is a socially and culturally generated reality. This distinction remains hazy in Azerbaijan due to measures from the Soviet era. Oliver (1990, 2009) asserts that structural inequalities and societal discrimination are the root causes of disability rather than

physical characteristics. Thomas (2007) expands on this idea by defining "psycho-emotional disablism," which refers to the diminished self-worth and emotional damage brought on by social interactions and attitudes. The term "disablism" has been fundamental to CDS, which highlights the interconnections of disability with other identities and cultural frameworks. It is comparable to other forms of prejudice, such as sexism (Davis 2002; 2006b; McRuer 2003).

The social model of disability did not emerge solely as an academic framework but from the activism of disabled people who challenged professional and medical authority over the meaning of disability (Barnes 1992; Oliver 1990). Disability Studies scholars have argued that disabled people's lived experiences and knowledge must remain central to research, policy, and educational reform. From this perspective, examining educators' understandings of disability is important because such understandings may either support or marginalise disabled people's own claims to self-determination, participation, and epistemic authority.

Disability is sometimes confused with health problems, making it a personal rather than a societal issue (Harris and White 2018). As a holdover from the Soviet disability evaluation system, the Medical-Psychological-Pedagogical Commission (MPPC) in Azerbaijan classifies and names disabled children (Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Azerbaijan 2002). Similar organisations assess children's developmental potential and establish special education eligibility in post-Soviet republics (UNESCO 2020). Scholars contend that by highlighting individual deficiencies, these tests promote the medical model even though their goal is to support students (Makoelle 2016; Mladenov 2021; Symeonidou 2025). MPPC practices have been associated with marginalisation and segregation in Kazakhstan and Russia (Anderson, Silver, and Velkoff 1987). Recent changes to Azerbaijan's Disability Law, which came into effect on July 1, 2022, indicate a trend towards a social model by redefining disability in terms of environmental limitations rather than medical impairments (Aliyeva 2023).

Disability Studies advocate for inclusive education as an issue of equality and civil rights, challenging the social injustice associated with labeling individuals as "disabled" (Ashby 2012; Baglieri et al. 2011; Connor et al. 2008). Research consistently demonstrates that teacher preparation programs often fail to adequately prepare educators to address diversity and disability in the classroom (Futrell, Gomez, and Bedden 2003; Ryndak and Kennedy 2000). Educators who understand disability beyond medical models are more likely to foster empathy, social awareness, and inclusive classroom environments (Avramidis and Norwich 2002). Furthermore, teachers report increased competence and confidence in inclusive settings after receiving disability awareness training. Extending this perspective, Disability Studies assert that transforming educators' mindsets is equally as important as imparting

technical skills. When teachers are encouraged to perceive disability as a natural aspect of human diversity rather than a deficit, their pedagogical approaches become more collaborative, flexible, and responsive to student needs (Ashby 2012; Baglieri et al. 2011). This philosophical shift challenges entrenched practices that segregate or marginalise students based on perceived limitations, instead emphasizing the development of learning environments that recognise and value diverse ways of being and learning. Moreover, research indicates that when teacher preparation programs integrate disability-related coursework and experiential learning, educators develop stronger capacities to adapt instruction, communicate effectively with diverse learners, and engage families in meaningful partnerships (Futrell, Gomez, and Bedden 2003; Ryndak and Kennedy 2000). Such preparation not only enhances teachers' practical skills but also influences their willingness to participate actively in inclusive schooling initiatives.

A comprehensive understanding of disability enables teachers to create classroom communities in which students feel respected and supported, thereby promoting both academic and social outcomes for all learners (Avramidis and Norwich 2002). This approach aligns with the broader objectives of inclusive education, which prioritise belonging, participation, and equitable access to learning opportunities. As teachers gain confidence through targeted disability awareness training, they report an increased ability to collaborate with colleagues, implement differentiated instruction, and advocate for inclusive policies within their schools (Friend & Cook 1992).

Collectively, these findings underscore the necessity of integrating Disability Studies principles into educator preparation and professional development, reinforcing the view that inclusive education constitutes a transformative practice rooted in justice, dignity, and human rights. Teachers who only consider disability from a medical perspective frequently believe that disabled pupils are unique and should be segregated (Florian & Rouse 2009). The social model, on the other hand, promotes equality and civil rights by placing disability within social and structural constraints (Oliver 2013; Thomas 2008). However, both models have drawbacks: the social model may ignore the lived realities of disability, while the medical model ignores societal variables (Thomas 2008; UNICEF 2013). By viewing disability as the interplay between an individual and their surroundings, CDS can close this gap by pushing educators to challenge expectations of the "normal" child and acknowledge inclusion as a social and political process (Goodley 2013; Watson 2017).

In conclusion, medicalised viewpoints continue to shape Azerbaijan's inclusive education strategy, despite recent changes suggesting a shift towards social and critical models. Incorporating these viewpoints into teacher preparation programmes can improve comprehension, lessen stigma, and aid in the creation of truly inclusive learning environments.

Research methodology

In order to investigate how lecturers and pre-service teachers in Azerbaijan conceptualise and experience disability, this study used a qualitative research design. The study's interpretivist and constructivist theories, which see social reality as co-constructed through participants' daily experiences and interactions, led to the use of a qualitative technique (Crotty 2003; Johnson and Christensen 2024). This method allowed for a thorough analysis of the institutional settings, behaviours, and beliefs influencing disability in higher education in Azerbaijan. The main technique for gathering data was semi-structured interviews, which provided both framework and freedom to record participants' complex viewpoints. This approach enables the researcher to explore developing themes while allowing participants to describe their experiences in their own words. To guarantee methodological rigour and respect for participants' circumstances, practical factors like as participant recruitment, ethical processes, and accessibility were carefully taken into account.

Given the study's focus on disability conceptualisation in a post-Soviet context, several interview questions invited participants to reflect on Soviet-era educational practices and their perceived influence on contemporary understandings of disability and inclusion. This decision was informed by previous research documenting the lasting impact of Soviet defectology and medicalised approaches to disability across former Soviet states (Mladenov 2016; 2017; Rasell and Iarskaia-Smirnova 2013). Particular attention was given to lecturers who had lived experience of the Soviet period, allowing exploration of how historical educational narratives may continue to shape contemporary perspectives.

The study's philosophical framework incorporates ideas from CDS with postcolonial and decolonising viewpoints. These frameworks guided the study process towards inclusivity, reflexivity, and power awareness. The research strategy aimed to question established hierarchies in knowledge creation by using CDS principles to view disability as a social and political construct rather than an individual shortcoming (Goodley 2013; Meekosha and Shuttleworth 2009). Google Meet was used to conduct semi-structured interviews online in order to respect participants' schedules and guarantee accessibility. Through these interviews, the study sought to illustrate how larger cultural, institutional, and historical factors, especially Soviet legacies, continue to impact educational discourse and practice in Azerbaijan in addition to documenting perspectives of inclusive education.

In compliance with the University of Sheffield's Ethical Research Code of Conduct, I received official ethical permission before starting fieldwork. By obtaining this approval, the study was guaranteed to comply with institutional requirements for informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and harm minimisation (Halse and Honey 2007; BERA 2024). Since there is no governmental

ethical research framework in Azerbaijan, conducting research there posed unique hurdles. To get access, I had to speak directly with institutional gatekeepers. My dual positionality as an insider and an outsider was brought to light by this process, which necessitated careful consideration of power relations, cultural sensitivity, and participant trust. Each participant got comprehensive information sheets in easily readable language that described the objectives, methods, and data use of the study. These sheets were specifically designed for lecturers and pre-service teachers. Participants were informed of their options to withdraw or skip questions prior to each interview, and consent was viewed as a continuous process rather than a one-time decision. Translated consent forms and safe data management practices ensured confidentiality and anonymity. Throughout the research process, participant privacy and data integrity were guaranteed because all information was kept on a password-protected personal device that was only accessible by me (Walford 2005).

Participants were selected because of their direct engagement with inclusive education. All lecturer participants were involved in teaching inclusive education courses, delivering inclusive education seminars, or acting as trainers in inclusive education initiatives. Pre-service teacher participants had completed the university's inclusive education course and had successfully passed the associated assessment prior to the interviews. These groups were therefore considered particularly relevant for exploring how disability is conceptualised within teacher education, as they are directly involved in shaping and applying inclusive education knowledge and practices. Teacher educators play a central role in shaping future teachers' understandings of disability and inclusion, while pre-service teachers provide insight into how these perspectives are received, negotiated, and reproduced during professional preparation. In the Azerbaijani context, pre-service teachers are defined as university students in the final year of undergraduate teacher education programmes prior to qualification. The participants in this study were fourth-year students in a four-year teacher education program, completing the final phase of their professional preparation before entering the teaching profession. Focusing on these participants enabled the study to examine the understandings of those who contribute to the preparation of future teachers and the implementation of inclusive education within higher education settings.

Findings and results

The section presents key findings from both groups, focusing on their conceptual understandings of disability. Analysis identified three interconnected themes: (a) the dominance of medical and individual models in disability perception; (b) the continuing influence of Soviet legacies on contemporary understandings of disability; and (c) challenges and tensions in disability-related language.

The dominance of medical and individual models in disability perception

A person's understanding of "disability" reflects broader societal definitions and representations (Cosier and Pearson 2016). As Groce (1999) notes, cultures interpret disability differently, shaped by their beliefs and practices. In Azerbaijan's academic context, interview data revealed that participants primarily conceptualised disability through medical and individual lenses. Lecturer 5 explained that disability includes both physical and mental limitations:

> Lecturer 5: Physical limitations, and also mental limitations should not be forgotten here, I mean physical and mental limitations altogether. […] When we say physical limitation, we mean sight, hearing pathologies, and movement pathologies, and when we say mental limitations, we mean intellectual retardation, violation of emotional and voluntary qualities, and behavior disorder. I mean all of them. […] Disability is the presence of certain limitations that distinguish a person.
>
> Researcher: So what do you see as these limitations?
>
> Lecturer 5: Of course, physical limitations, that is, mental limitations should not be forgotten here, that is, physical and mental.

Similarly, Pre-service teacher 3 equated disability with special needs:

> Pre-service teacher 3: By disability I mean people with special needs. This is how we discussed it in the inclusive subject class, people with special educational needs, these needs can be mental and physical […] Yes, people who have lost their abilities, people with physical and mental problems.

Her view reflects a medicalised understanding in which disability is visible and individualised (Mallett and Runswick-Cole 2014). Pre-service teacher 2 reinforced this view, stating:

> Pre-service teacher 2: I can identify disability when looking at a person, it can be known from their appearance, or their mind during a conversation.

This interpretation frames disability as a condition that can be diagnosed or observed, aligning with the medical model's focus on impairment (Marks 1997). Likewise, Pre-service teacher 1 viewed disability as weakness or limitation:

> Pre-service teacher 1: I think disability means any person who has a limitation, they show more weakness than other people when they do something. […] In terms of limitations, for example, we can walk and go somewhere comfortably, but for people with disabilities, these conditions are not always comfortable, they need additional help.[…] We learned something, those who need special care. These children (she means here disabled children) need more care than their peers. […] People with disabilities should be given more attention than other people.

Such views align with the individual model of disability (Oliver 1990, 2013), which locates the "problem" within the person rather than in societal barriers.

These models reinforce dependency and normalisation, positioning medical professionals as authorities on disability (Humpage 2007).

Some lecturers, however, linked disability to moral and humanistic ideas. Lecturer 1 reflected:

> Lecturer 1: No one is insured against anything for tomorrow, we can also face this issue, your child or a loved one may face such a situation. That's why you should always be ready for anything. This topic is considered very important from the point of view of humanism and humanity. […] Today we understand that neither our religion allows such discrimination, nor the national values of our people accept it. Regardless of health, every child has the right to live, study and socialise.

Lecturer 3 extended this idea, noting that:

> Lecturer 3: We are talking about inclusive values, here, of course, religious and national moral values come together and bring out inclusive values.

Both emphasised inclusion as a moral and cultural duty grounded in national and religious values (Pardeck et al. 2012). In contrast, Lecturer 4 introduced a more social interpretation:

> Lecturer 4: It is a product of mind, it is in our thoughts, it is in our attitude towards people. It's in our approach. That is how I think about disability.

Her perspective aligns with the social model (Shakespeare 2013), which sees disability as shaped by attitudes, environments, and systemic barriers (Harris and White 2018). Overall, the dominance of medical and individual models in Azerbaijan can be traced to Soviet influences that equated disability with personal deficit (Mladenov 2017). This legacy continues to shape public and educational discourse, where disability is often medicalised and stigmatised. As Grech and Soldatic (2014) argue, critically re-examining such inherited models is essential to develop inclusive frameworks that recognise the social and environmental dimensions of disability. From a CDS perspective, such constructions risk marginalising disabled people's own understandings of their lives by positioning disability primarily as deficit, dependency, or individual limitation. These perspectives may constrain opportunities for disabled students to be recognised as knowledgeable agents capable of defining their own educational experiences.

The continuing influence of Soviet legacies on contemporary understandings of disability

Azerbaijan, once part of the Soviet Union (1920–1991), continues to navigate the legacy of Soviet disability policy (Mikayilova, Orujova, and Babayeva 2023). Throughout the Soviet era, disability was framed through the medical model, rooted in defectology, which prioritised clinical treatment and

isolation over social inclusion (Rasell & Iarskaia-Smirnova 2014). The prevailing discourse viewed segregation as protection, fostering stigma and marginalisation. Lecturer 1 recalled the deep stigma surrounding disability during the Soviet period:

> Lecturer 1: During the Soviet period, parents often tried to hide children with disabilities from society, keeping them out of sight. Caring for and educating 'such' children was seen as a burden, a difficult task that required both psychological and pedagogical readiness, which not every parent possessed. Many were simply trying to fulfill their parental duties as best they could under the circumstances. Today, modern Azerbaijani society is more educated and open-minded. However, parents of children with disabilities still need support and assistance to navigate the challenges they face.

She contrasted past concealment with gradual modern openness, noting the continued need for family support. Similarly, Lecturer 2 described how exclusion was institutionalised:

> Lecturer 2: At that time (Soviet Period), individuals with physical disabilities, cognitive impairments, or developmental limitations were placed in special schools or received home education. Depending on the severity of their condition, some were educated entirely at home and never attended even special schools. I never saw children with disabilities sitting in the same classroom as their peers in general education schools, it simply wasn't possible then. As you've likely researched, inclusive education has only emerged in recent years. In the Soviet era, it did not exist, but I believe inclusive education is essential for the adaptation and socialization of individuals with disabilities and physical limitations. […] I would also like to add that during the Soviet period, I participated in the university admissions process. At that time, a special interview commission assessed applicants. If a candidate had any health-related impairments, such as difficulties with speech, vision, or hearing, they were not admitted to the teaching profession. I cannot speak for other fields, but for teaching, these individuals were categorically excluded. The prevailing belief was that a teacher should have clear speech, unimpaired vision and hearing, and even a flawless physical appearance. That was the standard in the Soviet era. Of course, today, attitudes have changed, and different approaches are now in place.

This illustrates how disability was treated as a barrier to participation in both education and employment. The Soviet disability assessment system, through "invalidity groups", sought to categorise and rehabilitate individuals for labour, reinforcing utilitarian and exclusionary notions of ability (Antov 1950; Mladenov 2017). Lecturer 4 emphasised how this ideology still lingers:

> Lecturer 4: The influence of Soviet ideology is undeniable. While it may seem more exaggerated now, it was very much present at the time.[…]. In Soviet society, everything was supposed to be ideal, everyone was expected to live and share equally. But was this the reality? Of course not. For instance, the existence of children with autism, Down syndrome, or other disabilities was largely hidden. Although autism was not as widely recognized then as it is today, it certainly existed. The Soviet

> system sought to conceal this reality by isolating these children, through homeschooling or special schools designed specifically for this purpose. […] This Soviet-era ideology has, unfortunately, been passed down through generations. It still lingers in the minds of some middle-aged individuals today. Since parents are the first educators of their children, their beliefs inevitably shape the next generation. As a result, it is unfortunate that outdated perspectives on disability and inclusion persist, even among some young people.

Her reflections highlight how the Soviet ideal of uniformity continues to influence social attitudes, perpetuating exclusion across generations (Dunn and Dunn 1989). In contrast, Lecturer 5 pointed to recent positive change:

> Lecturer 5: Considering that my youth coincided with the 1990s, the situation today is completely different, especially in the field of education. […] Today, the government tries to change the policy and launch many projects based on the international agreement to improve inclusive education.

Since independence, Azerbaijan has reformed disability policy, aligning with international frameworks such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (United Nations 2021). While this marks progress toward inclusion, implementation gaps persist across the post-socialist region (Baar, Mladenov, and Titterton 2025). As Elder (2020) notes, meaningful change requires not only policy adoption but also decolonising practices that acknowledge Global South perspectives. Overall, Soviet-era ideologies have left a lasting imprint on disability discourse in Azerbaijan, privileging medicalised and exclusionary views while sidelining social and human rights-based approaches. Although the country is moving toward inclusive and rights-oriented frameworks, this transition demands continued critical reflection to dismantle entrenched narratives and promote genuine equality.

Challenges and tensions in disability-related language

As Paulo Freire (1985, p.18) reminds us, "language is never neutral". The words we use to describe disability are not merely descriptive, they carry ideological and political weight. Within the Azerbaijani context, participants' use of language reflects the ongoing tension between medical and social understandings of disability. Pre-service teacher 2 reflects this linguistic divide, noting:

> "Limitation is something that does not occur in normal people but is observed in disabled people".

Her description implicitly separates "normal" individuals from those with disabilities, suggesting that difference is a deviation rather than part of human diversity. Similarly, pre-service teacher 5 differentiates between physical and mental impairments but adopts a more inclusive tone:

> Pre-service teacher 5: I think disability can be physical or mental. There are more physical disabilities, but I see them not as disabled, but more as a normal person. […] Sometimes we can accept them as normal, but others still find normal children strange. They cannot be accepted as normal. Mostly I observe on social networks, sometimes there are such requests, and people's answers are not encouraging at all.

While her comments suggest an effort toward normalization, her language, particularly the repeated reference to "normal", reveals how entrenched binary distinctions between ability and disability remain in everyday discourse. The same terminology appeared among lecturers. Lecturer 1 defined disability primarily in medical terms:

> Lecturer 1: Unfortunately, certain people are born with certain limitations. In other words, when we say disabled people, we understand them as people who have certain limitations, both mentally and physically, which are slightly different from normal people.
>
> Researcher: So, does defining disability refer to health issues?
>
> Lecturer 1: Yes, both psychological and physical health issues.

Her perspective reflects a biomedical view in which disability is understood as a deviation from health norms. Such definitions centre on individual impairment rather than structural barriers. In contrast, pre-service teacher 4 offered a socially grounded interpretation:

> Pre-service teacher 4: Disability is a temporary obstacle created from the outside, but it is temporary because I think that there is a certain, if not complete, solution. Within every society some elements create obstacles to a certain extent. In Azerbaijan, they treat this issue with the concept of a pitiful human being. In other words, they treat people with disabilities as pitiful people. It is a society's problem, not something belong to human. […] I think there should be sensitivity and attention should be shown to them. We feel sorry for this, not in a humiliating way, but I think we should show our sensitivity. […] People with disabilities should not be treated as pitiful or as people who need help but should see them as equal members of society and accept them as such. This should be instilled in children from a very young age. Therefore, I think education is one of the main factors here and the first one for me.

She challenges pity-based perceptions, arguing that disability stems largely from societal barriers rather than inherent deficits. For her, equality must be taught from early education to dismantle discriminatory attitudes. Lecturer 3 similarly highlights how social structures and prejudice can create disability:

> Lecturer 3: Disability is a limitation that appears over time, it is a limitation that arises. This can be created artificially, this can be created without knowing, and sometimes, unfortunately, it can also be created with prejudice. […] There are certain degrees of disability, and the diagnoses are different. […] Disability is any kind of limitations that arise later, or have since from birth, and if we talk about these limitations in reality, of course, they create difficulties.

Her reflections combine both medical and social elements, recognising that disability can be innate or socially constructed through exclusion and bias. Viewed through a postcolonial lens, such attitudes can be traced back to the Soviet period, when a person's value was determined by their productive capacity. The Soviet state adopted a functional model of disability, assessing individuals by their usefulness to society, a stark contrast to the Western "individual-tragedy" model (Phillips 2009).

In summary, participants' language reveals how deeply ingrained notions of "normality" continue to shape perceptions of disability in Azerbaijan. While some pre-service teachers and lecturers still employ medicalised and deficit-oriented terms, others are beginning to embrace a social perspective that emphasises equality, respect, and structural reform. Education emerges as a crucial mechanism for challenging stigmatizing discourse and promoting inclusive attitudes. Ultimately, as Freire reminds us, changing language is not a superficial task, it is a political act that can either reinforce marginalisation or pave the way for empowerment and social justice.

Discussion

Due to enduring Soviet legacies that pathologised difference and idealised physiological normalcy, disability in Azerbaijan's academic context is predominantly interpreted through medical and individual models (Mladenov 2017). Lecturers and pre-service teachers frequently presented disability as a personal constraint requiring diagnosis, treatment, or rehabilitation (Marks 1997; Oliver 1990; Shakespeare 2013). This perspective aligns with a deficit-based logic that positions disabled persons as "less than" and in need of rehabilitation (Brandon and Pritchard 2011; Finkelstein 1993). Such framings perpetuate a historical tradition in which disability is constructed as a deviation from an assumed norm, positioning educational institutions as mechanisms for normalising bodies rather than supporting diverse learners.

The findings also indicate that social and moral framings are becoming increasingly prevalent. Some participants linked inclusion to humanistic and ethical principles, while also recognising the impact of stigma, discrimination, and environmental barriers. This reflects a gradual cognitive shift, with disability being understood not only as an individual "impairment" but also as a consequence of societal structures and cultural values. These hybrid understandings, which Baglieri (2022) describes as "conflicting epistemologies," demonstrate the coexistence of medical, social, and moral discourses within Azerbaijani teacher education. Although such perspectives remain uncommon in a system still grounded in medicalised pedagogical traditions, the acknowledgment of social barriers by some lecturers signals an emerging discursive tension between established professional norms and newer, rights-based philosophies of inclusion.

This persistence can be linked to Azerbaijan's Soviet past, when segregation was justified by defectology that viewed disability as pathology (Rasell & Iarskaia-Smirnova 2011). These themes were not only raised spontaneously by participants but were also explored through interview questions that invited reflection on Soviet-era educational experiences and their contemporary influence. The endurance of defectological thinking continues to shape institutional practices, from the categorisation of students to the structure of teacher education curricula. Although the UNCRPD has been ratified and inclusive education policies have been introduced, their implementation often resembles Western models applied without contextual modification, leading to what Thomas and Loxley (2022) refer to as "helicopter inclusion". As a result, inclusion often appears as a policy borrowed from abroad rather than a locally grounded social movement, thereby limiting its transformative potential. Medicalised definitions are further ingrained in policy and practice by the ongoing use of legal words like "children with limited health capabilities" (Cabinet of Ministers 2023), which reproduce "impairment-focused categories" and reinforce the notion that disability is synonymous with "incapacity".

Although Soviet-era educational practices clearly influenced participants' understandings of disability, the findings suggest that these perspectives are also shaped by broader cultural values. The lecturers discussed disability through the language of humanity, care, religion, and national values, framing inclusion as a moral responsibility rather than solely a rights-based issue. This suggests that disability conceptualisations in Azerbaijan cannot be explained exclusively through the legacy of Soviet defectology. Participants drew upon multiple and sometimes competing sources of understanding, including historical educational traditions, contemporary inclusive education policies, and local cultural beliefs. Similar tensions between medicalised and social understandings of disability have been identified in other post-Soviet contexts, indicating that policy reform alone may be insufficient to transform deeply embedded assumptions about disability and inclusion (Baar, Mladenov, and Titterton 2025; Mladenov 2017).

Language has become an important medium for the propagation of various beliefs. Participants' frequent use of "normal" versus "disabled" reflects what Campbell (2009) refers to as internalised ableism and echoes Davis's (2016) idea of the "norm" as a mechanism of exclusion. Such linguistic binaries sustain hierarchical distinctions that privilege able-bodiedness while marginalising those who fall outside prescribed standards. While some, such as Pre-service Teacher 4 and Lecturer 3, acknowledged that disability was socially manufactured through discrimination and inaccessible settings, their focus on sympathy and empathy betrays lingering paternalism. These affective responses, though seemingly benign, continue to frame disabled people as passive recipients of care rather than as agents with rights. These conflicts highlight the unfinished shift in rhetoric and education from charity-based to

rights-based approaches. They also reveal how deeply embedded cultural narratives can coexist with emerging frameworks, creating a complex interplay between progressive ideals and historically conditioned assumptions.

These findings have important implications for teacher education. Although many participants expressed a commitment to inclusion and equality, their continued reliance on deficit-oriented and ableist language suggests that inclusive values may not yet be fully integrated into their understanding of disability. This creates a risk that future teachers may support the physical placement of disabled students in mainstream classrooms while continuing to hold assumptions that position disability as a limitation, deficit, or individual problem. As a result, inclusion may remain largely symbolic rather than transformative. Teacher education programmes therefore need to move beyond introducing inclusive education as a policy requirement and instead provide critical opportunities for students to examine assumptions about normality, ability, and difference. Symeonidou (2025), also argues that educators need opportunities to question dominant assumptions about disability and normality through engagement with disability studies perspectives and the experiences of disabled people themselves. Recent Critical Disability Studies scholarship has emphasised the need for reflexive and politicised approaches to disability that foreground disabled people's knowledge and question whose perspectives are privileged in discussions of inclusion (Goodley et al. 2019). From this perspective, disability is not simply an object of professional expertise but a field in which disabled people are recognised as active producers of knowledge.

A key implication of these findings is the need to create greater space for disabled people's voices within teacher education programmes. Although participants frequently expressed sympathy and support for disabled students, discussions rarely drew upon the perspectives, experiences, or knowledge produced by disabled people themselves. This finding echoes Symeonidou's (2025) argument that meaningful teacher education for inclusion requires engagement with disabled people's voices, experiences, and knowledge rather than relying solely on professional expertise. Teacher education programmes in Azerbaijan should therefore engage directly with disabled people's narratives, activism, and scholarship to challenge paternalistic assumptions and support more transformative approaches to inclusion.

While this study provides insight into how lecturers and pre-service teachers conceptualise disability, it does not capture the perspectives of disabled students themselves. Future research should prioritise disabled students' experiences, perspectives, and knowledge in order to examine how educational understandings of disability are negotiated, resisted, or reproduced within higher education settings. Such work would further contribute to CDS by centring disabled people's voices and epistemic contributions to educational change.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the confluence of modern policy reform, imported inclusive education methods, and Soviet-era beliefs shapes perceptions of disability in Azerbaijan's academic setting. Although the social model of disability has become more prevalent in discourse, institutional inertia, linguistic conventions, and cultural attitudes continue to limit its practical use. The findings illustrate that ideological change occurs unevenly, with newer interpretations of disability competing against entrenched modes of thought embedded in teacher education, policy language, and broader social consciousness.

Disability discourse needs to shift from the language of limitation and normalcy to one that acknowledges disability as a social, political, and cultural identity. Importantly, such transformation cannot occur through policy reform or teacher training alone. Consistent with the principles of CDS, meaningful change requires greater engagement with disabled people's own perspectives, experiences, activism, and forms of knowledge. One way forward is to create opportunities for disabled students, academics, and disability advocates to contribute directly to teacher education, curriculum development, and institutional decision-making. Such involvement can help challenge paternalistic assumptions, strengthen understandings of disability as a matter of rights and participation, and ensure that inclusion is shaped with disabled people rather than for them. While barriers associated with medicalised understandings of disability and entrenched institutional practices remain, these can be challenged through sustained dialogue with disabled communities, critical reflection on disability-related language and assumptions, and greater representation of disabled people within higher education. In the Azerbaijani context, creating opportunities for disabled students and disability advocates to participate in educational decision-making may help bridge the gap between inclusive education policies and everyday institutional practices. By foregrounding disabled people's voices alongside educator development, higher education institutions can move beyond symbolic inclusion towards more socially just and rights-affirming educational environments.

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