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# Practices of Play Adaptation of Children with Special Educational Needs in Preschool Organizations in Kazakhstan: Results of a Qualitative Study

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**ABSTRACT**
This study examines game-based adaptation practices for children with special educational needs in preschool organizations in Kazakhstan, focusing on organizational conditions, teachers' professional readiness, and play-based methods employed, from the perspectives of administrators, preschool teachers, and specialized professionals. A qualitative study was conducted in the second half of 2025 across three preschool organizations in Taraz, Kazakhstan, differing by institution type (public/private) and level of resource provision. The following methods were employed: (1) interviews with administrators, (2) focus groups with preschool teachers and specialized professionals, and (3) a research diary. Purposive sampling included 29 participants: 3 administrators, 20 preschool teachers, and 6 specialized professionals. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Significant differences in inclusive education implementation practices were identified across organizations, attributed to staffing resources, material and technical infrastructure, and availability of specialized professionals. Teachers demonstrated high motivation to work with children with special educational needs; however, they reported a shortage of methodological materials, limited specialized training, and unequal access to specialist support. The central role of play activities — cognitive games, physical games, and pretend play — was established as a tool for adaptation and social integration between children with special educational needs and their peers. The findings highlight the need to strengthen teachers' professional development in inclusive education, develop methodological guidelines for game-based adaptation, and ensure equitable conditions for implementing inclusive education across preschool organizations of varying types.

**KEYWORDS**
Preschool education; inclusive preschool education; children with special educational needs; play-based practices, playful Learning; qualitative research.

## INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education (Dignath et al., 2022; Kartiko et al., 2025) represents an approach aimed at ensuring equal access to quality education for all children, regardless of individual developmental characteristics. The relevance of this approach is underscored by the substantial number of children with special educational needs (SEN): according to UNICEF estimates, more than 240 million children worldwide require specialized pedagogical support (UNICEF, n.d.). At the preschool level, inclusion involves educating children with diverse developmental disabilities — including speech, hearing, and vision impairments, autism spectrum disorder, developmental delays, and others — alongside typically developing peers (Lundqvist, 2023), necessitating conditions that support each child's psychological and social-emotional well-being and full integration into the group. The primary responsibility for successful inclusion falls on teachers, whose professional attitudes and readiness to work with children of varying abilities directly determine the effectiveness of their education and socialization (Sanches-Ferreira et al., 2022). An inclusive environment fosters the development of communication skills, collaboration, and emotional resilience, while simultaneously creating conditions for each child to experience success (Ytterhus & Åmot, 2025).Play activities hold a particularly important role in the adaptation of children with SEN. Contemporary children demonstrate high receptivity to visual, interactive, and game-based formats (Danniels & Pyle, 2023), necessitating the use of practice-oriented approaches, including playful learning (Zosh et al., 2022). Play creates a safe and motivating environment for developing interaction, empathy, and collaborative skills — qualities that are especially critical for children with SEN (Ollonen & Kangas, 2025). Through play, a child with SEN participates in activities naturally — via playful interaction, role modeling, and joint engagement with peers. However, despite growing international attention to inclusive approaches and play-based methods, several questions remain underexplored in the Kazakhstani context: 1) what organizational conditions exist across different types of preschool organizations for working with children with SEN; 2) how professionally prepared are teachers to implement inclusive practices, and what forms of support do they receive; 3) what play-based methods are used during children's adaptation and how effective are they for promoting social inclusion. This issue is particularly important within the context of Kazakhstan's state policy. The Republic prioritizes the advancement of the Sustainable Development Goals, specifically SDG 4 "Quality Education," which seeks to ensure equal access to education for all children (United Nations, n.d.). Establishing conditions for inclusive education will enable children with SEN to develop essential skills and support their successful adaptation to preschool settings. Accordingly, this study aims to address a gap in the psychological and pedagogical literature by examining game-based adaptation practices for children with SEN in preschool organizations in Kazakhstan. The study focuses on three interrelated aspects: organizational conditions for implementing inclusion, teachers' professional readiness, and play-based adaptation methods employed — from the perspectives of administrators, preschool teachers, and specialized professionals.

***Research questions:***

1. What organizational conditions (material and technical resources, availability of specialized professionals, and team collaboration) have been established across different types of preschool organizations for implementing inclusive education?
2. What is the level of teachers' professional readiness to work with children with SEN, and what methodological support needs do they report during children's adaptation period?

3) What play-based methods do teachers employ in the adaptation of children with SEN, and how do these methods facilitate social interaction with peers?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

*Inclusive Preschool Education System in Kazakhstan: Current State and Prospects*

According to the Bureau of National Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan (Bureau of National Statistics, n.d.), the number of children with developmental disabilities (aged 0–18) reached 235,148 in 2024, reflecting a 15.4% increase from 2023 (203,717 children). The highest concentrations were recorded in major cities and densely populated regions: Almaty (27,502), Astana (22,389), Turkestan region (20,791), and Karaganda region (20,381). This consistent annual growth underscores the urgency of improving the inclusive preschool education system in Kazakhstan. Ensuring quality education for children with special educational needs is a priority area of state policy in Kazakhstan (Abdizhamalova et al., 2023). Every child's right to receive education corresponding to their individual capabilities (Makoelle & Burmistrova, 2025) is enshrined in the country's strategic legal framework (Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2002a, 2002b, 2005, 2007, 2021) and is regarded as an integral component of demographic and socioeconomic development. The educational success of children with SEN is largely determined by their socialization within preschool settings, integration into group life, and the formation of a foundation for subsequent self-actualization. In response to these challenges, Kazakhstan adopted the Concept of Inclusive Policy for 2025–2030 (approved December 30, 2024, No. 1143) (Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2024), aimed at eliminating barriers and ensuring equal opportunities for all citizens. An analysis of this document reveals several critical issues in inclusive preschool education. Children with SEN face limited access to quality education due to insufficient methodological support for teachers and the absence of adequate conditions for psychological and pedagogical assistance. A significant proportion of the teaching community lacks the professional readiness required to work with this population, necessitating staff retraining and the adoption of innovative methods. A further barrier is the prevailing medical model of understanding special educational needs, whereas contemporary approaches advocate for a shift toward a social-pedagogical model that recognizes each child as an individual with unique capabilities and needs. The Concept (Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2024) establishes specific target indicators for inclusive education development. While only 20% of preschool organizations had created adequate conditions for educating children with SEN by 2025, this figure is projected to reach 80% by 2030. To achieve these

objectives, a comprehensive set of measures has been outlined, including the establishment of early psychological and pedagogical support services at specialized educational organizations, the introduction of a social-pedagogical model for supporting children with SEN, training teachers in contemporary methodologies, and organizing support services for families raising children with special educational needs. These measures are grounded in the principles of respect for children's rights and dignity, non-discrimination, equality of opportunity, and accessibility — all directed toward creating conditions for the full realization of every child's potential.

*Preschool Teachers' Perceptions of Inclusive Education Organization*

Teachers' perceptions of inclusion represent a foundational dimension of successful inclusive practice, as educators serve as the direct agents of educational policy at the institutional level. Contemporary research allows for the systematization of these perceptions across several key dimensions: understanding the essence and principles of inclusive education, self-assessment of professional readiness, and perception of the barriers and resources involved in implementing inclusion. Analysis of preschool teachers' perceptions of inclusive education reveals an important trend in how they conceptualize the balance between individual and group approaches. A study of Swedish educators, conducted using an ecosystemic model of inclusive preschool education, demonstrated that teachers tend to understand inclusion primarily through the lens of group processes. Through analysis of documentation from 70 educators across 27 teams (Ginner Hau et al., 2022), it was established that teachers' professional reflection centers on creating an inclusive environment for the group as a whole, while individually oriented processes remain insufficiently articulated. This imbalance presents a significant challenge, as inclusive education — per the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, n.d.) — requires ensuring quality education for every child in accordance with their individual characteristics and needs. Teachers, while acknowledging the value of inclusion at a declarative level, encounter difficulties in operationalizing the principle of individualization in daily practice. Teachers' perceptions of the professional competencies required for inclusive settings are reflected in their recognition of the value of specialized programs and working methods. Preschool teachers in inclusive contexts acknowledge the importance of structured developmental programs — particularly motor skills development programs — and recognize their benefits for children with SEN (Cheung et al., 2023). Nevertheless, their perceptions reveal clear concerns regarding their own capacity to meet the demands of such programs and effectively manage children's behavioral characteristics. Inclusive education is perceived by teachers as a professionally more complex and demanding activity requiring knowledge and skills that extend beyond traditional pedagogical training. Rather than rejecting the necessity of such programs, teachers identify their own professional deficits, indicating well-developed reflective capacity and awareness of the boundaries of their competence. A particularly important dimension of teachers' perceptions concerns their understanding of organizational and systemic barriers to

implementing inclusion. A large-scale study of 344 preschool educators across six regions of Thailand (Klibthong & Agbenyega, 2022) identified systematic concerns that can be extrapolated to a broader international context. Teachers identify several critical obstacles: limited administrative support, insufficient time for designing individual educational trajectories, and inadequate specialized therapeutic assistance — each varying in relation to contextual factors such as institutional location, teachers' professional experience, and organization type (public or private). A significant finding of the study is the established link between these concerns and teachers' professional stress, allowing teachers' perceptions of inclusion to be understood not only as cognitive constructs but also as a source of emotional tension with potential implications for the quality of pedagogical practice. Cross-cultural analysis reveals the influence of sociocultural context on the formation of teachers' perceptions of inclusive education. A comparative study of Chinese and German preschool educators (Tan et al., 2022) demonstrated that despite an overall positive orientation, significant differences exist in the structure of these attitudes. German educators exhibit more pronounced positive attitudes overall, likely attributable to the longer institutional history of inclusive practice in the European context. However, the most revealing difference lies in the affective component: while the behavioral dimension (readiness for specific actions) is rated highly by educators from both countries, emotional acceptance of inclusion is least developed among Chinese teachers. In collectivist cultures, teachers' professional identity is more strongly shaped by conformity to social norms and expectations than by personal emotional preferences. Teachers declare readiness for inclusive practices in alignment with educational policy, while harboring internal doubts or discomfort that they tend not to articulate in professional discourse. An important dimension of teachers' perceptions concerns their understanding of organizational support in ensuring the quality of inclusive education. A study of Chinese educators (Jiao et al., 2022) demonstrated that perceived organizational support exerts both direct and indirect influence on teachers' professional engagement. Educators who feel supported by administration and colleagues exhibit higher levels of professional self-efficacy, which in turn contributes to greater engagement in pedagogical activity. This relationship suggests that teachers perceive inclusive education not as an isolated individual practice but as a collective institutional effort requiring systemic support. Self-efficacy plays a mediating role between organizational support and engagement, reflecting the complex mechanism underlying the formation of teachers' professional stance: external organizational factors shape teachers' internal beliefs in their own competence, which are subsequently translated into practical activity. Thus, teachers' perceptions of inclusive education are characterized by a tension between declared readiness for inclusion and the identification of multiple barriers to its implementation. Educators tend to prioritize group processes at the expense of individualization, acknowledge deficits in their own professional preparation, and regard organizational support as a key determinant of successful inclusive practice. The relationship between teachers' perceptions of inclusive education and their use of play-based methods is not unidirectional but mutually reinforcing. Teachers who

hold positive attitudes toward inclusion and demonstrate higher professional self-efficacy are more likely to employ play-based approaches purposefully and systematically as tools for children's adaptation and social integration (Jiao et al., 2022; Klibthong & Agbenyega, 2022). Conversely, when teachers perceive their competencies as insufficient or experience a lack of organizational support, play activities (Aslan, 2024) tend to be implemented episodically rather than as a structured pedagogical strategy, thereby reducing their effectiveness for children with SEN. At the same time, the observed effectiveness of play-based methods — particularly their capacity to facilitate peer interaction, emotional self-regulation, and communicative development — can itself reinforce teachers' confidence in inclusive practice and strengthen their belief in its feasibility (Cheung et al., 2023; Danniels & Pyle, 2023). Thus, teachers' perceptions and play-based practices do not constitute two separate dimensions of inclusive education but form an integrated pedagogical dynamic in which attitudes shape practice, and successful practice, in turn, transforms attitudes.

*Promoting Playful Learning in Preschool Organizations*

A study examining educators' perspectives on facilitating inclusion through playful learning for children with SEN (Danniels & Pyle, 2023) notes that preschool curricula across various regions increasingly incorporate play-based approaches through which both academic domains (literacy, mathematics) and developmental aspects (social development, self-regulation) are addressed through children's play (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). Existing definitions of play (Wallerstedt & Pramling, 2012) broadly characterize it as an enjoyable activity of a creative and dynamic nature, more closely associated with process than with final educational outcomes. Classifications of play activities have been developed based on the nature of children's interactions with objects and with one another (Barton, 2016). Play-based learning represents play activity oriented toward facilitating the educational process and is conceptualized as a continuum with varying degrees of adult involvement (Pyle & Danniels, 2017), ranging from child-initiated play to teacher-structured activities. Attention is given to play jointly organized by children and adults, which is considered an optimal context for educating children with SEN (Weisberg et al., 2013). Despite generally positive attitudes toward playful learning (Wu, 2014), educators hold divergent views on the relationship between play and learning and implement this approach differently (Pyle & Danniels, 2017): some prefer child-initiated play, while others favor more structured formats. Several studies indicate that while educators declare support for active participation in play, they subsequently encounter difficulties in its practical implementation — including in work with children with special educational needs (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). Despite the confirmed effectiveness of play-based programs (Nicolopoulou et al., 2015), research conducted with children with special educational needs has predominantly focused on difficulties arising during play. Children with autism spectrum disorder demonstrate less diversity in play and more frequently prefer solitary play over peer interaction (Barton, 2016). Children with speech impairments may exhibit greater social withdrawal and encounter difficulties engaging in social play (Dennis & Stockall, 2015). Children with severe multiple

developmental disabilities often face challenges stemming from dependence on others' assistance when accessing pre-planned play activities (Hui & Dimitropoulou, 2020). Children with SEN constitute a heterogeneous group with individual strengths and needs; however, despite this diversity, they share similar difficulties in positive social interaction with peers — including a tendency toward solitary play, being perceived as less desirable play partners, and a reduced likelihood of forming friendships (Chen et al., 2019). The findings of the study (Danniels & Pyle, 2023) illuminate key perspectives on inclusivity in preschool education. When discussing inclusion, educators considered multiple factors and articulated varied views on teaching and disability. The ideas expressed in interviews addressed both academic and social inclusion, encompassing the adaptation of instruction and group activities to ensure the participation of all children. From an academic standpoint, learning should be accessible at varying levels of complexity, implying that every child must have access to the curriculum and its activities. Educators expressed the need to cultivate an accepting community in a broader sense — extending beyond differences in ability — so that children could develop not only tolerance and acceptance but also openness to engaging with people of varying capabilities. Opinions diverged when discussing playful learning: some educators emphasized that play is a beneficial activity for children with SEN and represents an ideal environment for addressing their needs, while others expressed concern regarding the educational value of play formats preferred by this population. When addressing inclusion within play, educators highlighted the benefits of peer interaction for children with SEN, noting that play promotes the development of positive social relationships and social-emotional skills, while also creating opportunities for academic learning. Based on the data obtained, educators conceptualized inclusion as a broad construct encompassing the physical and social environment as well as educators' direct actions during play. The environment was perceived as an opportunity to structure play spaces and specific activities enabling every child's participation regardless of ability, using strategies consistent with the principles of Universal Design for Learning (Katz, 2013). Play thus assumes critical importance in achieving educators' inclusive goals, as they utilized play opportunities to ensure social inclusion, establish optimal balance, and address the communication difficulties faced by children with SEN and their peers. The literature review demonstrates that the successful adaptation of children with special educational needs is largely determined by teachers' professional readiness — their ability to build trusting relationships, create an emotionally supportive environment, and apply flexible support strategies. At the same time, how teachers implement these approaches in daily practice remains insufficiently studied and warrants further investigation. Accordingly, interviews with administrators and focus groups with preschool teachers and specialized professionals were planned. This qualitative approach was intended to yield deeper insight into the methods educators select, the difficulties they encounter, and the forms of support they consider most effective when working with children with SEN. It was anticipated that the findings from interviews and focus group discussions would

help identify promising directions for developing pedagogical practice and reveal resources requiring further strengthening.

## METHODS

*Research Design*

The qualitative study was conducted across three preschool organizations in Taraz, Republic of Kazakhstan, during the second half of 2025. A case study methodology was employed, aimed at examining the professional practices of inclusive group teachers during the adaptation period of children with special educational needs. A qualitative approach based on abductive coding was employed for data processing and interpretation, enabling the integration of theoretically grounded categories with emergent meanings identified during the research. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis in accordance with the methodology of Braun and Clarke (2025). Ethical requirements were strictly observed throughout all stages of the research. Participation was voluntary, and prior to interviews, all participants were informed of the research objectives and provided written informed consent. Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of M.Kh. Dulaty Taraz University, ensuring full compliance with research ethics standards.

*Research Participants*

**Table 1.**

*Characteristics of Preschool Organizations in the City of Taraz*

| Location | Organization Type | Inclusive Status | Categories of Children with SEN | Inclusion Conditions | Language Environment |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Preschool Organization "A" Aulie-Ata District | Public | Correctional Groups | Autism, Developmental Delay, Speech Delay | Speech therapist, special education teacher, tutor, material resources, specialized equipment, developmental environment | Kazakh |
| Preschool Organization "B" Zhibek Zholy District | Private | Inclusive and Correctional Groups | Developmental Delay, Speech Delay, ASD | Psychologist, special education teacher, speech therapist, specialized equipment, PMPC support | Kazakh, Russian |
| Preschool Organization "C" Baizak District | Private | Integrated Education | Mild Forms of Disabilities | Teaching assistant, adapted programs | Russian |

Purposive sampling was employed as the sampling strategy, enabling in-depth investigation of inclusive preschool education practices within a specific social and educational context. The study was conducted in preschool organizations in Taraz where inclusive

approaches and game-based adaptation methods for children with SEN are actively implemented. To ensure diversity of experience, the sample included organizations varying in organizational and legal form (public and private), socioeconomic neighborhood conditions, and level of resource provision. Additional selection criteria included the presence of inclusive groups, the number of children with SEN enrolled, and teachers' practical experience in inclusive settings (Table 1).

Additional sampling considerations included the professional reputation of preschool organizations, the degree of parental trust, the presence of established experience working with children with SEN, and the use of contemporary pedagogical technologies, including game-based adaptation methods. The study included 29 respondents: Three administrators, 20 preschool teachers, and six specialized professionals from preschool organizations "A," "B," and "C." Focus groups were conducted with teachers from organization "A" (n=7), "B" (n=6), and "C" (n=7), and with specialized professionals from "A" (n=2), "B" (n=3), and "C" (n=1). Individual interviews of 30–50 minutes were conducted with each administrator. Teacher focus group participants had a minimum of two years of experience and held qualification categories of "Teacher-Moderator" (n=9), "Teacher-Expert" (n=6), and "Teacher-Researcher" (n=5). Specialized professionals included 2 speech therapists, 2 special education teachers, 1 psychologist, and 1 teaching assistant (Table 2).

**Table 2.**

*Research Participants*

| Characteristic | Category | Quantity *n*=29 |
|---|---|---|
| Position | Administrator | 3 |
| | Preschool Teacher | 20 |
| | Speech Therapist | 2 |
| | Special Education Teacher | 2 |
| | Psychologist | 1 |
| | Teaching Assistant | 1 |
| Preschool Organization | Preschool Organization «A» | 7 |
| | Preschool Organization «B» | 6 |
| | Preschool Organization «C» | 7 |
| Qualification category | «Teacher-moderator» | 9 |
| | «Teacher-expert» | 6 |
| | «Teacher-researcher» | 5 |
| Teachers' Work Experience | 2 years | 4 |
| | 3 years | 5 |
| | 4-5 years | 6 |
| | 6-10 years | 5 |

*Data Collection Tools*

Empirical data were collected through a set of complementary methods: (1) interviews with preschool organization administrators, (2) focus groups with preschool teachers and specialized professionals, and (3) a research diary.

*Interviews.* Interviews (Hussein, 2022) with preschool organization administrators were designed to obtain in-depth information about organizational conditions, characteristics of the educational process, and the specifics of inclusive education provision. The data obtained through interviews enabled the identification of factors that facilitate or impede the effective organization of inclusive groups during the adaptation period. The interview content covered the following thematic areas: administrators' professional experience in inclusive education; the quality of conditions established for implementing inclusive practice; the nature of collaboration with specialists and teachers; characteristics of the adaptation of children with SEN, including emerging difficulties and their consequences; and the organization of parental engagement. In the context of teachers' professional preparedness for inclusive settings, effective play-based methods promoting the successful adaptation of children with SEN were also examined with administrators. Participants were additionally invited to propose recommendations for improving the current inclusive education system. Interview findings were supplemented by focus group materials from teachers and specialized professionals, ensuring triangulation and verification of the data obtained.

*Focus Groups*. Focus groups (Fusch et al., 2022) were organized to engage preschool teachers and specialized professionals in open professional discussion. Given that some participants might have trouble addressing sensitive issues in an individual interview format, focus groups provided a collaborative and comfortable platform for the free exchange of perspectives. The first part of each focus group examined teachers' views on implementing inclusive practice in preschool organizations, including analysis of positive aspects, development prospects, and potential difficulties in organizing the educational process during the adaptation period. The second part addressed the practical implementation of inclusive education and the pedagogical support provided by specialized professionals. Attention was given to the integration of organized activities with the Standard Curriculum, as well as practical experience in implementing playful learning during the adaptation of children with SEN to preschool settings.

*Research Diary.* The research diary was used to document and reflect upon the researchers' experience, record the current state of the research process, and identify its prospects and limitations, thereby promoting self-awareness and deepening understanding of the phenomena under study. The research diary is a valuable tool for developing researcher reflexivity, enabling critical evaluation of one's own experience and enhancing understanding of the research process (Olorunfemi, 2024). The diary served as an analytical platform for making sense of events, formulating new research ideas, clarifying concepts, and identifying emergent patterns. Recorded entries included the location and time of observations, participant composition, the nature of activities conducted, and questions for subsequent reflection. The information recorded was subsequently compared and refined through other data collection methods.

*Data Analysis Techniques*

A qualitative approach using abductive coding was applied to process and interpret the collected data, allowing the integration of theoretically grounded categories with emerging meanings identified during the study. Data were analyzed through thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2025) methodology, which involved: familiarization with interview transcripts; generation of initial codes; searching for and grouping codes into potential themes; reviewing and refining themes; defining and naming themes; and interpreting results through analytical description. All interviews were transcribed verbatim prior to analysis. During initial coding, 89 codes were generated from discrete meaning units across interview and focus group transcripts, capturing inclusive practices, adaptation strategies, professional competence, and resource provision. These codes were then systematically reviewed and grouped by conceptual similarity and relevance to the research questions. For example, codes such as "teacher feels unprepared," "lack of specialized resources," and "need for methodological support" were clustered into a candidate theme reflecting gaps in professional competence, later forming part of the second overarching theme. Similarly, codes such as "team collaboration among specialists," "individual educational pathways," and "play-based inclusion methods" were grouped into a candidate theme concerning the organization of the inclusive educational process.

Following critical review for internal coherence, overlap, and empirical grounding, the analysis resulted in two overarching themes: (1) Professional Experience in Organizing the Inclusive Educational Process in Preschool Organizations, identified across 55 responses and supported by 62 codes within three sub-themes (specifics of inclusive groups, team collaboration among specialists, and application of play-based methods); and (2) Professional Competence of Teachers and Specialists during the Adaptation Period, identified in 18 responses and supported by 27 codes addressing teacher readiness, adaptation strategies, and the need for methodological and psychological support. Inductive and deductive coding were applied sequentially to ensure both the emergence of new empirical insights and alignment with the study's theoretical framework. To enhance trustworthiness and reliability, multiple verification strategies were implemented. Data triangulation was achieved through interviews, focus groups, and a research diary to cross-validate findings. Although member checking was not conducted due to participant anonymity, researcher reflexivity was maintained through systematic diary documentation of analytical decisions and interpretive assumptions. The purposive selection of organizations differing in type, resources, and participant composition further strengthened the transferability of the findings.

## FINDINGS

Two main themes were identified during data analysis. The first concerns the organization of the inclusive educational process in preschool organizations; the second addresses the professional competence of teachers and specialized professionals working with children with

SEN, as well as the characteristics of such children's adaptation. The first theme encompasses several dimensions: the specifics of inclusive groups, team collaboration among specialists (psychologists, speech therapists, special education teachers, tutors, and teaching assistants), the use of individual educational pathways, and the application of play-based methods for the gradual inclusion of children in group activities. The second theme reveals the level of readiness of teachers and specialists to work with children with special needs, their understanding of adaptation tasks, the methods employed, and the need for methodological and psychological support. This theme also foregrounds the problem of insufficient specialized resources and the necessity for professional development in the field of inclusive education.

***Professional Experience in Organizing the Inclusive Educational Process in Preschool Organizations***

All surveyed educators have between two and ten years of experience and regularly work with children with special educational needs. This section included 15 detailed responses, from which 22 codes were identified, reflecting the following conceptual areas: duration and continuity of experience working with children with SEN; diversity of diagnoses encountered (autism, developmental delay, speech delay, visual impairment); strategies for creating individualized developmental environments; and teachers' perceived sense of professional responsibility toward children with special needs. One teacher describes her experience as follows: "In four years of working at a preschool organization, there have always been children with SEN in my group. For example, when I worked with the younger group, I had a visually impaired child. The boy was in our group for a year, then his family moved to another district. Currently, my group includes children with developmental delays and speech delays. We continue to create special conditions for them" (teacher, preschool organization "A"). This example illustrates that educators recognize the importance of a systematic approach: they establish safe developmental environments and maintain individualized work with each child. The second set of questions examined what conditions have been established in preschool organizations for implementing inclusive education. Based on 20 responses, 30 codes were generated, capturing three conceptual clusters: (1) the availability and quality of material and technical resources (specialized equipment, developmental environments, correctional groups); (2) disparities in resource provision between public and private organizations; and (3) institutional constraints limiting the full implementation of inclusive education, including insufficient staffing, inadequate equipment, and underdeveloped organizational infrastructure. A teacher from organization "A" notes: "We have created special conditions for children with SEN. There are correctional groups, good material and technical resources, and a developmental environment." However, conditions are not uniformly adequate across institutions. A teacher from organization "B" shares: "Our kindergarten is not fully equipped with everything necessary for inclusive education. We are a relatively new institution, so the work on equipping is still ongoing." Responses in this section were thus mixed: insufficient material and technical resources in several institutions continue to constrain the full implementation of inclusive

education. The third set of questions addressed specialist collaboration within preschool organizations. From 20 responses, 10 codes were identified. The relatively low number of codes reflects the convergence of responses around three main concepts: the roles and contributions of individual specialists (speech therapists, psychologists, special education teachers, tutors); the mechanisms of interprofessional collaboration within teaching teams; and the differentiation of support models across organizations — from a full specialist team in organization "A" to teaching assistant-based support in organization "C," where no specialist staff are employed. A teacher from organization "A" states: "We have offices for a vision specialist, speech therapist, psychologist, and special education teacher. Conditions for children's development have been created in the groups. The participation of each specialist is very important — they all contribute to the child's development." A teacher from organization "B" adds: "Over two years of work, we consistently received psychological support, and meetings with medical staff were held. Each specialist views the problem from their professional perspective, and we can advise parents on raising children with SEN." The situation differs in organization "C": as children with mild forms of special educational needs are educated there, no specialized professionals are employed on staff, and teaching assistants-tutors provide the primary support to teachers.

***Professional Competence of Teachers***

The second theme, identified in 18 responses and supported by 27 codes, concerns the professional competence of teachers during the adaptation period of children with special educational needs. These codes encompassed the following conceptual areas: teachers' self-assessed professional readiness for working with children with SEN; awareness of the behavioral and developmental characteristics of children with autism, developmental delay, and speech delay; mastery of play-based and adaptive pedagogical methods; access to and adequacy of methodological support and professional development opportunities; and psychological readiness to manage challenging adaptation scenarios, including behavioral difficulties and parental concerns. Both teachers and administrators consistently emphasized the necessity of professional development, methodological support, and mastery of specialized methods and practices for supporting children's adaptation through play. The administrator of preschool organization "A" notes: "We strive to create conditions in which every child, including those with special educational needs, can adapt at a pace comfortable for them. Particular attention is given to teachers' professional preparation, the use of play-based methods during the adaptation period, as well as collaboration with specialized professionals and parents." This statement reflects an understanding of inclusive education as a structured process requiring the methodological and staffing readiness of the teaching team as a whole.

A teacher from preschool organization "B" describes specific difficulties: "The adaptation process for newly arrived children involves certain challenges. Recently, a child with autism joined our group. His behavior differed from the others — he performed basic activities together with the children, but during independent work, he did not engage in any actions. Adaptation

occurred in several stages: first, he simply observed, then aggression appeared, followed by a phase of its release. All this manifested only two months after joining the group. The child began throwing toys and would throw any object at other children. Of course, this caused problems with parents: 'Why should he be in our group? Why isn't he transferred?' We spoke with the parents, then the psychologist conducted an initial assessment. Based on the examination results, we referred him to a correctional group. But since I had not encountered such situations before, at first I thought it was simply a manifestation of character during adaptation — there were no obvious symptoms initially." This case illustrates that insufficient professional awareness of the signs of special educational needs and the behavioral characteristics of such children can result in erroneous pedagogical decisions and delays in the provision of timely support. The administrator of preschool organization "B" elaborates: "For a teacher working with children with special educational needs, basic pedagogical education alone is insufficient. Additional knowledge is necessary, along with an understanding of the developmental characteristics of such children and mastery of play-based methods that help gently and gradually include the child in the educational process. We try to send teachers to professional development courses; however, methodological support is still insufficient." This statement points to systemic challenges in teachers' professional preparation and limited methodological support, which create objective obstacles to ensuring quality support for children with special needs during the adaptation period. Teachers from preschool organization "C," in responses to the fifth and sixth sets of questions (7 responses, 12 codes), report the following difficulties: "Despite the fact that children with mild forms of SEN are educated in the kindergarten, there are still challenges. First and foremost, there is a shortage of specialized professionals, and some parents do not give their child adequate attention. Children experience difficulties during adaptation — they cannot quickly adjust to the new environment, people, and surroundings. To address these issues, we regularly hold meetings with parents: special councils, conversations with invited specialists, and question-and-answer sessions. During adaptation, parents participate partially and try to provide mutual help and support to one another."

***Play-Based Methods for Adapting Children with Special Educational Needs***

This set of questions aimed to identify what play-based methods and forms of work teachers employ during the adaptation of children with SEN, what strategies help reduce anxiety and establish contact, and how teachers adapt games to meet each child's individual needs. A teacher from preschool organization "A" explains: "In the process of play-based adaptation of children with SEN who have intact intellect, we pay particular attention to cognitive games. They have an especially positive effect on children with autism. In my work, I have noticed that such children often demonstrate a high level of intelligence: some are skilled at counting and color recognition; others have developed constructive abilities — they love Lego. Construction brings them joy, as these children typically show focused interest in specific activities."

A teacher from preschool organization "B" shares her experience: "In the adaptation process of children with speech delays, autism spectrum disorders, and developmental delays,

we actively employ various types of games, most often physical games. We play music, use musical instruments, and special materials. Musical movement gives children the opportunity to express their emotional state, feel the rhythm, or conversely, calm down." A teacher from preschool organization "C," where children with mild forms of SEN are educated, states: "We try to combine cognitive and pretend play games. They help children develop communication and social interaction skills. For example, in the 'Shop' or 'My Family' games, children learn to ask, negotiate, take turns, and share toys, promoting not only speech development but also the formation of positive behavioral patterns in the group. We actively use play-based exercises for developing emotional intelligence — we demonstrate emotions using cards, facial expressions, and gestures." Thus, teachers employ diverse forms of play activity depending on children's developmental characteristics. Some prioritize cognitive and constructive games, others focus on physical and musical activities, and others emphasize pretend play and communication games. All teachers note that it is through play that children with SEN find it easier to adapt, show initiative, and regulate their behavior and emotional state.

***Social Interaction Among Children***

The following section aimed to examine how relationships develop between children with SEN and their peers, what difficulties arise in this process, and how they are resolved. A teacher from preschool organization "B" notes: "In our group, interaction among children is established quite well. Children always help and support each other. To maintain friendly relationships, I apply an individual approach, simple and accessible language for explanations, visual support tools, and interaction through play. Here it is important to show patience and compassion, ensure repetition and consistency, and build relationships based on love and trust. Achieving positive results is only possible through close collaboration with parents. To date, we have established contact with both parents and the children in the group." This response reflects a clear institutional vision of how to support the adaptation and inclusion of all participants in the educational process. In preschool organization "A," where children with more complex forms of SEN are educated, the situation unfolded differently. A teacher recounts: "In our group, we educate children with developmental delays, speech delays, and autism. Teaching and educating children with different needs is not easy. Children diagnosed with autism experience difficulties in interaction — they do not seek communication. Accordingly, other children do not pay much attention to them and do not initiate contact. Sometimes a child behaves aggressively toward others, which leads to conflicts. Children would say: 'I'm afraid of him, I don't want to sit next to him' or 'It would be good if he doesn't come today.' At the beginning of the year, this caused me certain difficulties. But after six months of work, we established friendly contact, and the children began to treat each other significantly better. This was facilitated by an individual approach, simple and clear explanations, organizing communication through play, alternative communication methods, and collaborative work with parents. And one of the most important things in the adaptation process is the attitude toward the child: showing trust, care, and patience." This situation demonstrates that when working with a group that includes children

with pronounced developmental characteristics, the teacher faces not only the individual child's difficulties but also peers' reactions. The children's initial wariness, their reluctance to engage, and the conflicts that arose stemmed from the fact that the behavioral characteristics of the child with autism remained incomprehensible to them. The situation gradually improved through the teacher's consistent efforts: she selected accessible forms of explanation, used play as the primary means of communication, and actively collaborated with parents. A climate of goodwill played a significant role, sustained through the teacher's patient and respectful treatment of all children. As a result, tension in the group diminished and the children became more open and accepting. With thoughtful pedagogical support and a well-organized environment, an inclusive group is capable of fostering children's skills in cooperation, mutual understanding, and tolerant attitudes.

***Professional Needs and Support. Reflection***

This section sought to identify what professional needs teachers experience when working in inclusive groups and what forms of pedagogical support they consider most significant. A teacher from preschool organization "A" responds: "Yes, it can be challenging. Especially when the group has children with different characteristics and needs — sometimes it can be very difficult. But it's easier because we work as a team: the speech therapist, special education teacher, tutor — everyone contributes. That's why even difficult moments are resolved more quickly. When you have a team and a good foundation, working is truly easier. But even so, situations arise that are hard to prepare for in advance. That's why it's important for us to continuously learn and update our knowledge, especially regarding work with children with severe forms of disabilities. I see that with specialists' support, we can accomplish a great deal, but developing professional competence is an ongoing process." Teachers from preschool organization "B" note: "There are difficulties because we are still in the process of development. We are at the beginning of our journey, and it shows. There are specialists, but the infrastructure is not yet fully established. Because of this, we sometimes feel a lack of confidence and practical tools. Support from methodologists, training, and experience exchange with other preschool organizations are especially needed right now. I think that over time, when our foundation strengthens, working will become calmer." Teachers from preschool organization "C" share: "We manage because our children mainly have mild forms of special educational needs. But we still feel that professional support is lacking. The assistant helps, but consultations with specialists are still needed. We would like to have access to methodological resources and periodic support from a speech therapist or special education teacher. Then we could work with more confidence and peace of mind." Analysis of responses revealed that teachers recognize the specific demands of working with children who have diverse forms of special educational needs and report a need for additional knowledge and practical tools. Teachers emphasize that the complexity of this work relates not only to children's varying needs but also to the necessity of adapting their own methods, distributing attention, and maintaining a positive group climate. Effective support is perceived by teachers in the form of specialized courses, methodological

guidelines, and consultations with specialized professionals — resources they view as capable of improving work quality, reducing professional stress, and ensuring children's successful adaptation.

The data suggest that inclusive practice becomes more sustainable when teachers have regular opportunities to update their knowledge, exchange professional experience, and receive methodological guidance. Each of these factors directly influences the quality of interaction with children and teachers' confidence in their own professional competence.

## DISCUSSION

The findings confirm that successful adaptation of children with special educational needs in preschool settings is determined by a complex of interrelated factors: organizational, professional, and social-psychological. Comparison of the empirical data with theoretical propositions from contemporary research reveals several consistent patterns. The empirical findings of this study speak directly to the implementation gap between Kazakhstan's stated inclusive education policy and actual institutional practice. The Concept of Inclusive Policy for 2025–2030 (Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2024), discussed in the Introduction, identifies insufficient methodological support and inadequate teacher preparation as the primary barriers to inclusion. The present study provides concrete empirical evidence that these barriers are not merely systemic abstractions but are experienced daily by practitioners: teachers across all three organizations reported feeling professionally underprepared, lacking access to specialist consultations, and working under conditions of uneven resource provision. Furthermore, the pronounced differences observed between organizations "A," "B," and "C" — in staffing, specialist availability, and material infrastructure — illustrate that achieving the national target of 80% inclusive readiness among preschool organizations by 2030 will require not only legislative commitment but targeted, differentiated support at the institutional level. In this regard, the study's findings offer grounded, practice-based evidence capable of informing the specific measures outlined in the Concept, particularly those related to teacher training, interprofessional collaboration, and the development of play-based methodological resources. The findings indicate a significant dependence of adaptation effectiveness on the resource provision of preschool organizations, with considerable variability across institutions in access to specialized professionals and adapted materials. A synthesis of research spanning a quarter century demonstrates that critical outcomes for children with special needs are shaped by the role of specialized instruction, interprofessional collaboration, and adequate organizational support. In the Kazakhstani context, this pattern is particularly pronounced: preschool organizations with well-developed specialist teams demonstrate consistently higher indicators of children's adaptation. The findings also confirm the central role of the teacher in the socialization and adaptation process. Identified gaps in professional competence lead to erroneous interpretation of children's behavioral characteristics, impeding the timely provision of support. This corresponds to the conclusions of Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011), who

established that teachers' practical knowledge about their work in inclusion determines what they do, why, and how. Their analysis identified practical examples of inclusive pedagogy aligned with the principle of extending what is ordinarily available to all, rather than providing for all through differentiation for some. The teacher's professional stance and preparation thus determine the overall success of inclusive practice. The significance of interdisciplinary collaboration among specialists is particularly evident in the research findings. In kindergartens where teachers receive systematic support from specialized professionals, adaptation proceeds more smoothly and children's engagement in group activities is substantially higher. Research synthesis consistently highlights the centrality of interprofessional collaboration and adequate organizational support to critical outcomes for children with special needs. In the absence of team collaboration, the burden on individual teachers increases, thereby reducing the quality of adaptation activities. The findings related to children's social interaction deserve particular attention. The data demonstrate that the adaptation of a child with special educational needs simultaneously constitutes an adaptation process for the entire group. In the initial stages, wariness, avoidance of contact, and difficulties joining collaborative play are frequently observed. Research indicates that while many children with special needs placed in inclusive settings develop peer friendships, those who experience social rejection rarely form such relationships. This underscores the necessity of purposeful, systematic work on developing tolerance and social competence among all participants in the educational process. The findings related to children's social interaction patterns align with those of Kuutti et al. (2022), conducted in Finnish early childhood education settings with 145 children with special educational needs. The authors found that children with self-regulation difficulties and severe disabilities spent significantly less time engaged in joint activities with peers compared to children without SEN, reflecting the underdevelopment of inclusive practices even in well-resourced systems. A similar pattern was observed in the present study: children with autism spectrum disorder tended to avoid peer contact during the initial stages of adaptation, and positive, friendly group relationships were established only through purposeful and consistent pedagogical work.

Regarding the teacher's role in organizing inclusive play-based learning, the findings of the present study resonate with those of Danniels and Pyle (2023), who, based on a qualitative study involving kindergarten teachers in Canada, demonstrated that teachers conceptualize inclusion as a broad construct encompassing the physical and social environment as well as the direct involvement of adults in play. In both studies, educators emphasized the importance of indirect strategies — structuring play spaces and adapting activities — alongside proactive participation in collaborative play as a primary means of supporting the inclusion of children with SEN. However, in contrast to the Canadian context, teachers in Kazakhstani preschool organizations reported a considerable shortage of methodological support, which constrains the systematic application of play-based practices. Play activity holds fundamental importance in the context of adaptation. Within a play-based learning program, teachers and children create an inclusive and supportive space where children with and without special needs can play and

learn together. The findings demonstrate that teachers actively employ diverse types of games — cognitive, physical, and pretend play — in accordance with children's individual characteristics. It is through play that a differentiated approach is implemented most naturally and effectively.

As noted in the UNESCO report (UNESCO, 2020), education makes a substantial contribution to building inclusive and democratic societies where differences of opinion can be freely expressed and diverse voices can be heard in the pursuit of social cohesion and the celebration of diversity. The findings demonstrate that creating an accessible and safe environment, strengthening pedagogical competence and systematically employing play-based approaches are key conditions for the successful adaptation of children with special educational needs in Kazakhstani preschool organizations.

**Practical Implications of the Study**

The research findings enable the formulation of several recommendations for organizing the successful adaptation of children with special educational needs in Kazakhstani preschool organizations. Teachers' professional preparation and stance play a determining role in the success of inclusive practice. Focus group data indicate that teachers with experience working with children with SEN or who have completed relevant training demonstrate greater confidence and employ more effective approaches. Accordingly, it is necessary to incorporate modules on inclusive pedagogy into training and professional development programs for preschool teachers.

Play activity serves as a crucial tool for adaptation. Teachers noted that organized games help children master social rules, develop emotional self-regulation and interaction skills, and facilitate integration into the group. In practice, play-based methods should be applied systematically and purposefully rather than episodically. Working conditions in preschool organizations significantly influence adaptation outcomes. Interviews revealed that access to methodological materials, support from specialized professionals, and adequate staffing of teachers and assistants for individualized work are critically important factors. The findings point to the necessity of a comprehensive approach encompassing teacher preparation, organization of the play environment, and consideration of the specific conditions within each group. These conclusions can serve as a foundation for developing recommendations to improve the adaptation system for children with SEN in Kazakhstani preschool organizations.

**Limitations**

The study has several limitations that must be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the geographical scope is limited to the city of Taraz in Zhambyl Region, which does not permit full extrapolation of the conclusions to the broader preschool education system of Kazakhstan, characterized by regional specificity and heterogeneous conditions for implementing inclusive practice. Second, the sample included a limited number of preschool organizations, which restricts the generalizability of findings to a wider population of educational institutions.

## CONCLUSION

This study examined game-based adaptation practices for children with special educational needs in preschool organizations of the Republic of Kazakhstan. The empirical foundation consisted of materials from semi-structured interviews with teachers and administrators of three preschool institutions in Taraz, Zhambyl Region, differing in the degree of inclusive infrastructure development and student population composition. The results of thematic analysis indicate that play activity occupies a central place in the system of adaptation measures and serves as a universal pedagogical means for including children with special educational needs in the preschool educational environment. Teaching staff implement varied play forms — cognitive, constructive, physical, and pretend play — selecting them based on children's individual psychophysiological characteristics. The play space represents a natural environment for developing social-communicative skills, forming mechanisms of emotional self-regulation, and establishing productive interaction with peers. The study identified several problematic aspects. Uneven resource provision across preschool organizations leads to substantial differentiation in the quality of adaptation work. The shortage of specialized professionals and methodological tools limits teachers' professional capabilities, which is particularly pronounced in institutions at the initial stage of institutionalizing inclusive practice. Insufficient teacher competence in special pedagogy and psychology contributes to difficulties in the timely identification of children's developmental characteristics and the selection of appropriate pedagogical strategies. The empirical data confirmed the significance of an interdisciplinary team approach in organizing inclusive preschool education. Coordinated interaction among the teacher, educational psychologist, speech therapist, special education teacher, and teaching assistant ensures comprehensive psychological and pedagogical support for the child and contributes to optimizing the professional workload of teaching staff. The involvement of parents and legal guardians as full participants in the adaptation process also assumes considerable importance. The theoretical significance of the study lies in expanding scientific understanding of play-based adaptation methods within the Kazakhstani preschool education system. The practical significance is determined by the applicability of the findings to developing professional development programs for teaching staff, formulating methodological recommendations for preschool organizations implementing inclusive practice, and improving regulatory frameworks in the field of inclusive education at the national level.

Promising directions for further research include expanding geographical coverage through the inclusion of preschool organizations from diverse regions of Kazakhstan, applying a mixed-methods design integrating quantitative measures for evaluating the effectiveness of play-based practices, and conducting longitudinal studies of the educational trajectories of children with special educational needs.

**Declarations**

***Authors' Declarations***

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