

## Research Article

Cite this article: Naeemy, M. I., & Yoneda, H. (2025). Advancing Inclusive Education: A Comparative Analysis of Special Schools and Inclusive Practices in Afghanistan. *Educational Process: International Journal*, 14, e2025043. <https://doi.org/10.22521/edupij.2025.14.43>

Received December 20, 2024

Accepted January 31, 2025

Published Online February 4, 2025

## Keywords:

Persons with disabilities, special education, inclusive education, Afghanistan

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## Advancing Inclusive Education: A Comparative Analysis of Special Schools and Inclusive Practices in Afghanistan

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### Abstract

**Background/purpose.** This study investigates the state of education for Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) in Afghanistan, focusing on the challenges and opportunities within special vocational schools and inclusive education practices. Despite legislative frameworks like the 2004 Constitution and the ratification of the CRPD in 2012, systemic barriers such as resource shortages, geographic disparities, and socio-political instability hinder access to equitable education. This research aims to identify these gaps and propose actionable strategies to enhance educational inclusion.

**Materials/methods.** Using a qualitative approach, the study integrates field data, document reviews, and semi-structured interviews with government officials, NGO representatives, and educators. Data was collected from multiple provinces, including insights from the Ministry of Education and NGOs operating special education and inclusive programs. Analytical emphasis was placed on legislative frameworks, institutional practices, and systemic challenges.

**Results.** Findings reveal critical gaps in infrastructure, teacher training, and assistive technologies, with significant reliance on NGOs for program implementation. Despite incremental progress, geographic and gender disparities persist, and standardized diagnostic tools remain absent. Lessons from global models demonstrate the need for integrated, context-specific policies and sustained investments.

**Conclusion.** Afghanistan requires a multi-stakeholder approach involving government, NGOs, and international partners to address systemic gaps. Investments in teacher training, infrastructure, and culturally relevant policies are crucial to achieving an inclusive and equitable education system for PwDs. This study provides recommendations for future strategies for advancing disability-inclusive education in conflict-affected regions.



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## 1. Introduction

Afghanistan is one of the world's least-developed nations, ranking 180th out of 191 countries on the Human Development Index (UNDP, 2022). Over the years, poverty in Afghanistan has increased alarmingly, rising from 38% in 2011–12 to 55% in 2016–17, according to the Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey (CSO, 2018). By 2020, projections suggested poverty levels might reach 72% due to declining incomes and escalating food prices (Sahibzada et al., 2020). The political crisis of August 2021, coupled with a humanitarian emergency and international sanctions, has significantly worsened the situation. Recent Afghanistan Welfare Monitoring Survey findings indicate that two-thirds of households struggle to meet basic food and non-food needs (World Bank, 2022).

In this challenging context, disability is a critical yet often overlooked aspect of Afghanistan's demographic. The 2005 National Disability Survey of Afghanistan (NDSA) reported that 2.7% of the population (660,000 individuals) experienced severe disabilities and 4.7% (1.2 million individuals) had moderate disabilities (Trani & Bakhshi, 2006). A 2019 follow-up, the Model Disability Survey of Afghanistan (MDSA), found that 13.9% of Afghan adults (2.5 million individuals) have severe disabilities, and nearly one million children (2–17 years) face moderate (7.1%) or severe (3.5%) disabilities, adversely affecting their daily lives and social participation (Shinwari et al., 2020).

Education, from primary to graduate levels, is overseen by three main government bodies: the Ministry of Education (MoE), the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE), and the Technical and Vocational Education and Training Authority (TVETA). As of the 2022–2023 academic year, 10,595,257 students were enrolled in schools and institutes, while 280,895 students (191,439 (64%) males and 89,450 (36%)) were pursuing higher education across 40 public and 127 private institutions (NSIA, 2023). However, statistical records from these bodies, including the National Information and Statistics Authority (NSIA), provide no disaggregated data on the enrollment of students with disabilities (SwDs) in primary, secondary, or higher education.

A particularly pressing issue is the exclusion of girls from education. Since August 2021, Afghanistan's de facto authorities have suspended the education of girls in grades 7–12. This suspension was extended to higher education on December 20, 2022, with a directive ordering public and private universities to cease admitting women indefinitely (Saif, 2023). These bans have denied education to approximately 1.1 million girls, including many with disabilities, further marginalizing an already vulnerable population.

The primary aim of this study is to investigate the current state of education services for PwDs in Afghanistan, focusing on the challenges and opportunities within special vocational schools and inclusive education practices. The research specifically seeks to address the following questions:

- What are the systemic barriers affecting the education of PwDs in Afghanistan?
- How effective are the existing legislative frameworks and institutional practices in supporting inclusive education?
- What strategies can improve the integration of PwDs into mainstream education while addressing the challenges within special vocational schools?

## 2. Literature Review

The development of disability education services has followed diverse trajectories across the globe. High-income countries such as the United States and Sweden experienced significant advancements decades ago, setting global benchmarks in this domain. In the U.S., the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, later revised as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), mandated education for children with disabilities in the least restrictive environments, fostering inclusivity within mainstream classrooms. Similarly, Sweden's normalization principle

emphasized societal integration for students with disabilities, becoming a foundational element of its education policies (Persson, 2003). These legislative and policy frameworks accelerated the establishment of comprehensive education systems for Persons with Disabilities (PwDs), a progress still nascent in Afghanistan (Bakhshi, 2020).

Globally, inclusive education gained momentum during the mid-20th century, especially after the Salamanca Statement of 1994. This landmark agreement advocated for integrating children with special needs into mainstream education systems (UNESCO, 1994). Further reinforced by the 2006 Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), global policies began emphasizing non-discriminatory access to education for PwDs (United Nations, 2006). However, in conflict-affected and low-income nations like Afghanistan, the journey towards inclusive education has been complex and gradual, hindered by protracted instability and resource constraints.

A study conducted in Australia suggested that special schools could serve as centers of expertise to support mainstream schools. Stakeholders recommended that collaboration between special and mainstream schools, guided by leadership from the special schools, could enable the latter to better meet the diverse needs of SwDs (Iacono et al., 2020). In the United States, research comparing academic outcomes for SwDs in inclusive settings versus special education classrooms found that students in inclusive environments generally performed better in reading and math (Cole et al., 2023). These findings suggest that inclusive education, when adequately supported, can lead to improved academic outcomes for SwDs.

In Afghanistan, the status of PwDs' education remains under-researched and insufficiently documented. Existing studies primarily focus on quantitative analyses, such as surveys, rather than addressing the specificities of inclusion within the education system. These studies also tend to emphasize discrimination and violence against PwDs over systemic challenges to their educational inclusion (Grimes et al., 2021).

Historical accounts of Afghanistan's education system, such as those by Samadi (2002), Kamgar (2003), Andishmand (2011), and Khwajamir (2016) provide detailed narratives on the evolution of general education from 1875 to 2010. However, they lack insights into the education of PwDs. Early efforts in documenting disability resources in Afghanistan were made by Miles (1993, 2002), who highlighted key cultural, historical, and community-based approaches. More recent research by Trani et al. (2012) noted slow progress in educational access for children with disabilities, particularly girls. In another study by Trani et al. (2019), utilizing household surveys conducted in 2005 and 2013, found no significant improvement in school attendance or literacy among children and youth with disabilities during this period.

A recent study by Iqtadar and Elder (2022) explored the narratives of members of a non-governmental organization (NGO) involved in developing a pioneering special education school with an inclusive approach in Kabul. This study underscores the importance of culturally responsive and community-based strategies in promoting inclusive education in Afghanistan. It also reflects the broader implications of intersectionality in educational access, aligning with global discussions on the rights of persons with disabilities (Iqtadar & Elder, 2022).

Despite global advances, the education of PwDs in low-income countries remains an area requiring more robust investigation. Afghanistan exemplifies the multifaceted challenges faced by such nations, where systemic barriers, conflict, and resource scarcity inhibit progress. This study seeks to fill this gap by examining the current state of special and inclusive education in Afghanistan, identifying critical shortcomings, and proposing actionable strategies to enhance educational services for PwDs.

### 3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design, utilizing a combination of literature reviews and semi-structured interviews to explore the education services for PwDs in Afghanistan.

The research process began with an extensive review of official government documents, stakeholder reports, books, and academic articles on education and disability in Afghanistan. English-language materials were retrieved from databases such as Google Scholar and ERIC using search terms like “Afghanistan,” “Education,” and “Disability.” To complement these sources, national-language documents were accessed from the Afghanistan Centre at Kabul University (ACKU) Library/Archives (<https://acku.edu.af/library/>) using terms such as “معلولیت” (disability), “معارف” (education), and “تعلیم و تربیه” (education). Non-digitized resources were sourced directly from libraries and bookstores in Kabul.

In 2021, the first author conducted fieldwork in Afghanistan to gather primary data on the current state and practices of education for PwDs. Two government entities, the Special Education Department under the TVETA and the Inclusive and Child-Friendly Education (I&CFE) Directorate under the MoE, served as key information sources. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the heads of the Special Education (SE) and Inclusive Education (IE) departments within the I&CFE Directorate to clarify and expand the available data.

The SE Department of TVETA provided statistical data on government-run special schools and additional information about their activities. This facilitated interviews with four principals of special vocational schools in person and nine principals online. Data from the IE department highlighted the involvement of NGOs in the education of PwDs, prompting further engagement with organizations such as the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan (SCA) and Serving Emergency Relief and Vocational Enterprises (SERVE). Interviews with NGO representatives yielded insights into their programs, including student enrollment figures and teacher training details. Information on the activities of a third NGO, Pro Bambini di Kabul (PBK), was obtained from its official website due to accessibility constraints.

The semi-structured interview items were developed through a rigorous process to ensure their reliability and validity. Expert opinions were sought from researchers specializing in inclusive education and qualitative research methodologies. Feedback was incorporated to refine the questions for clarity and relevance. A pilot study was conducted with two participants—representatives from educational NGOs—to test the interview guides. This process allowed for adjustments to ensure the questions elicited meaningful and relevant responses aligned with the research objectives. Semi-structured interviews have proven effective for collecting exploratory data suitable for descriptive analysis, as emphasized by DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019). Following this methodological approach, this study employed descriptive analysis to synthesize data gathered through semi-structured interviews, document reviews, and field observations. The analysis involved systematically categorizing and summarizing the data to identify key patterns, themes, and

relationships. This process ensured that the findings accurately reflected the systemic barriers, legislative frameworks, and educational practices for PwDs in Afghanistan.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

The findings are organized into three key areas:

- Legislative frameworks and policy documents outlining the provisions for the education of PwDs in Afghanistan.
- The structure, functioning, and challenges of special vocational schools serving PwDs.
- The status, practices, and inclusivity challenges of integrating PwDs into regular schools.

Each section provides an in-depth examination of current practices, highlights systemic gaps, and identifies opportunities for improvement. This multi-dimensional analysis aims to guide future strategies for enhancing educational inclusion for PwDs in both specialized and mainstream education systems across Afghanistan.

##### ***4.1. Legislative Documents Supporting Education Provision for PwDs in Afghanistan***

Afghanistan's legal framework establishes a robust foundation for the educational rights of persons with disabilities (PwDs). Article 43 of the 2004 Constitution asserts that education is a fundamental right for all Afghan citizens, obligating the State to design and implement programs that ensure compulsory education nationwide. Complementing this, Article 22 prohibits all forms of discrimination, ensuring equal treatment for all individuals, including those with disabilities (Afghanistan's Constitution, 2004).

The 2008 Education Law reinforces this commitment through Article 15, which mandates that education must be accessible at various levels for children and adults requiring special education and training due to disabilities or other circumstances that have hindered their educational progress (Education Law of Afghanistan, 2008). Afghanistan's ratification of the CRPD in 2012 further underscores its commitment to upholding the rights of PwDs, particularly in accessing education, employment, assistive devices, and other essential services (United Nations, 2006).

The Inclusive and Child-Friendly Education (I&CFE) policy, developed collaboratively by the Ministry of Education (MoE) and national and international NGOs in 2014, emphasizes equitable access to quality education for all children, regardless of gender, ability, or socio-economic status. It advocates for the integration of children with disabilities into mainstream schools, fostering their academic, social, emotional, and physical development through tailored support mechanisms (I&CFE, 2014).

Under the current administration, referred to as De Facto Authorities, adherence to these legislative provisions has largely continued, albeit with some adjustments attributed to perceived "Islamic concerns." For the 2023 academic year, MoE released a directive titled "Guidelines for School Administrators and Teachers." This document outlines a range of accommodations aimed at facilitating the enrollment of students with disabilities in educational institutions (MoE, 2023).

##### ***4.2. Education of Children with Disabilities in Special Vocational Schools (Special Education)***

The provision of special education services for PwDs in Afghanistan dates back to 1964, when the NGO International Assistance Mission introduced basic educational services for individuals with visual impairments in Kabul. This effort established the Kabul Blind School, the first institution to offer both educational and vocational training. Despite its pioneering role, the school faced funding challenges and eventually closed. In 1978, the Afghan government reestablished the Kabul Blind

School as a state-funded institution under MoE's Professional Education Directorate (Joya et al., 2017).

The education system for children with hearing impairments began in 1995 with the establishment of the Hearing-Impaired Foundation of Afghanistan (HIFA), now known as Family Welfare Focus (FWF), in Kabul. This initiative was followed by the creation of the Herat Deaf School and the Roshandilan School for the Blind in 2008. Subsequently, the network of special vocational schools expanded, with new schools opening in Balkh (2010), Zabul and Khost (2012), and Ghazni (2013) (Forogh et al., 2017).

To better coordinate these efforts, the Special Education Department was established within the framework of the TVETA. In 2015, the department incorporated Nangarhar Special School, originally operated by the NGO SERVE, into its structure and further expanded the network. Between 2020 and 2021, additional schools were established in Logar, Kandahar, Bamiyan, Badakhshan, Farah, Maidan Wardak, and Laghman.

TVETA, which was separated from the MoE and made an independent entity in 2018 through Presidential Decree #11, is tasked with reforming technical and vocational education to support Afghanistan's human capital development. The 2020 draft of the TVETA Law defines special education as education designed for students with special needs, encompassing Grades 1 through 12 and beyond (Technical & Vocational Training and Education Law (Draft), 2020).

Students in these schools receive a dual curriculum comprising general and religious education, including Quranic memorization. Additionally, students with visual impairments are trained in practical skills such as computing, knitting, bead weaving, and handicrafts. Those with hearing impairments receive training in calligraphy, carpet weaving, and tailoring (Personal Communication with TVETA's SE Department, 2021).

According to data from TVETA's Special Education Department, the number of students enrolled in special vocational schools registered with the department increased steadily from 1,299 in 2018 to 1,533 in 2019 and 1,760 in 2020. Of the 1,760 students enrolled in 2020, 1,312 had hearing impairments, and 448 had visual impairments. Gender distribution showed that 69% of the students (1,220) were men, while 31% (540) were women (Personal Communication with TVETA's SE Department, 2021).

Sixteen special schools, managed by TVETA, provide special education services across 14 provinces in Afghanistan. In Kabul and Herat, there are two schools per province—one exclusively for students with visual impairments and one for students with hearing impairments. Six special schools in Balkh, Badakhshan, Ghazni, Zabul, Maidan Wardak, and Laghman accommodate students with both hearing and visual impairments. However, six additional special schools, although designated for students with both types of impairments, currently only enroll students with hearing impairments. Except for the schools in Kabul and Herat, all other schools operate in either rented or temporary government buildings.

In 2021, a total of 2,008 students were enrolled in these special schools supervised by TVETA's Special Education Department. Of these, 504 students were visually impaired, and 1,504 had hearing impairments. Since 2011, five schools (the Deaf and Blind Schools of Kabul and Herat, and Balkh Special School) have seen 244 students graduate from the 12th grade, comprising 83 visually impaired and 141 hearing-impaired students. Table 1 shows details about special vocational schools in Afghanistan.

**Table 1.** Details about Students in special vocational school (SVS) in Afghanistan

No	School Name	Location	Year Established	Number of Students in 2021				
				Hearing Impaired Boys	Hearing Impaired Girls	Visually Impaired Boys	Visually Impaired Girls	Total
1	Kabul Visually Impaired Vocational High School	Kabul	1978	0	0	131	89	220
2	Kabul Deaf Vocational High School	Kabul	1995	253	171	0	0	424
3	Roshandilan Vocational High School Herat	Herat	2008	0	0	120	55	175
4	Herat Deaf Vocational High School	Herat	2008	155	123	0	0	278
5	Balkh SVS	Balkh	2010	55	14	43	15	127
6	Ghazni SVS	Ghazni	2013	99	38	18	8	163
7	Khost SVS	Khost	2012	143	0	0	0	143
8	Nangarhar SVS	Nangarhar	2015	184	80	0	0	264
9	Zabul SVS	Zabul	2020	17	3	0	0	20
10	Logar SVS	Logar	2020	12	6	0	0	18
11	Kandahar SVS	Kandahar	2020	21	0	0	0	21
12	Bamiyan SVS	Bamiyan	2020	21	9	0	0	30
13	Badakhshan SVS	Badakhshan	2020	12	5	8	4	29
14	Farah SVS	Farah	2020	Established in documents but was not functional in 2021				
15	Maidan Wardak SVS	Maidan Wardak	2020	27	4	3	0	34
16	Laghman SVS	Laghman	2020	17	22	10	13	62
<b>Total</b>				1,014	490	321	183	2,008

The investigation also gathered detailed information regarding the teaching staff. A total of 238 teachers work in these special vocational schools, with 144 permanent TVETA employees, and 94 on contract. Notably, 79 teachers have either hearing or visual impairments.

The principals' explanations revealed that Special Schools with longer histories, particularly in more developed cities like Kabul and Herat, conduct hearing and vision assessments themselves or refer students to nearby hospitals for evaluations. In other schools, teachers perform basic assessments for obvious cases such as total blindness or deafness.

In contrast to regular schools, the age for student enrollment is flexible. For instance, in Laghman Special School, there are students aged 17 and older studying in the 7th grade. Students typically learn about the schools through other students or local media announcements. Public awareness campaigns in Herat and Laghman are more organized, engaging stakeholders and key community members to spread information about the schools.

TVETA provides either accommodation or a monthly accommodation allowance for students who live far from the special vocational schools and offers transportation for those living nearby. Currently, only the Roshandilan (blind; literally means bright-hearted) School in Herat has on-site accommodation, housing 30 students, while the Deaf High School in Herat provides accommodation allowance to 100 eligible students. Free transportation is available primarily at special schools serving students with visual impairments, including Kabul Blind School, and those in Balkh, Ghazni, Badakhshan, and Laghman.

Parental support programs, such as regular awareness meetings and sign language instruction, are offered exclusively at the Kabul and Herat Deaf Schools, though parental engagement remains low. Collaborative activities with regular schools are minimal, occurring only occasionally at Kabul Deaf School, Herat Blind School, and Balkh special schools. Sports programs and partnerships with the National Olympic Committee are limited to schools in Herat and Balkh.

Most special schools have both male and female students separated into different classes or shifts (morning or afternoon). Typically, co-education is maintained until Grade 3. After that, if there are more than five students of the same gender, separate classes are formed. For example, in Nangarhar School, the morning shift is allocated for male students, while the afternoon shift is for females. In more culturally conservative areas such as Khost and Kandahar, special schools are exclusively male.

According to TVETA regulations, a maximum of 10 students is permitted in classes for students with hearing or visual impairments. However, due to shortages of classrooms, teachers, and resources, class sizes can reach up to 25 students in some schools. The students generally follow the national curriculum used in regular schools, with some modifications in vocational subjects to meet their specific needs.

Special learning materials for students with visual impairments include braille textbooks, typewriters, printers, paper, audiobooks, slates, and styluses. However, many of these materials are limited and primarily available only in Kabul and Herat Blind Schools. For students with hearing impairments, special materials often focus on sign language, though resources such as the Afghan Sign Language (AFSL) dictionary and grammar book are only available in newly established schools. Advanced services such as lip-reading instruction, speech therapy, audiometry, ear mold formation, and hearing aids are limited to the Kabul Deaf High School.

With the support of the German NGO GIZ, TVETA has developed and implemented a specialized curriculum for some schools, including textbooks for Grades 1–3 for hearing-impaired students, with plans to expand the curriculum to higher grades.



Vocational training begins in Grade 4 at two schools for the blind (Kabul and Herat), two schools for the deaf (Kabul and Herat), and three other special schools (Balkh, Nangarhar, and Ghazni). However, this has not yet been implemented in all schools. Kabul Blind High School offers vocational training in music, brush making, and sweater weaving, while Herat Blind School focuses on beading, macramé, and hand weaving. In Balkh Special School, students with visual impairments are trained in chair and broom weaving. Vocational training for students with hearing impairments typically includes painting, calligraphy, and computer skills.

A structured preschool education program is only available at Kabul Deaf High School, where students are trained in hygiene, social activities, and activities of daily living (ADL).

In addition to the schools operating under TVETA's framework, the Afghan National Association for the Deaf (ANAD) operates a high school in Kabul, established in 2003, along with two annexes in the city. This school, financially supported by foreign donors, was recently registered with MoE as a non-profit, private high school for deaf students. The school currently enrolls 597 students (426 male and 171 female), all of whom have hearing impairments. These students are taught by 31 teachers, of whom 70% are female. As part of the school's vocational training program, female students receive instruction in tailoring, while some male students participate in automobile mechanic workshops.

### ***4.3. Education of PwDs in Regular Schools (Inclusive Education)***

The Ministry of Education (MoE) oversees inclusive education for PwDs through its Inclusive and Child-Friendly Education (I&CFE) Directorate, which operates under the General Directorate of General Education (GED). This initiative, which began in 2007 within the MoE's Educational Affairs Directorate, initially integrated PwDs into two schools in Kabul. By the following years, the program expanded to include 10 schools within the city, demonstrating a commitment to broadening educational opportunities for children with disabilities.

The inclusive education initiative seeks to integrate not only PwDs but also other marginalized groups—such as street workers, homeless children, orphans, and nomadic children—into the general education system. This comprehensive approach emphasizes the creation of an equitable and accessible learning environment for all.

In 2012, the I&CFE Directorate was officially established to consolidate and expand these efforts. Within the Directorate, two key departments operate: the Special Education (SE) department, which focuses on delivering specialized education for children with disabilities, and the Inclusive Education (IE) department, which manages the inclusion of PwDs in regular schools. While the SE department provides preparatory programs tailored to the needs of PwDs, the IE department facilitates their integration into mainstream education by offering ongoing support to students and teachers.

Both the Inclusive Education (IE) and Special Education (SE) departments serve as policymakers and facilitators, tasked with ensuring that all marginalized students, including those with special needs, receive equitable access to quality education. Their collaborative efforts aim to fully integrate these students into the general education system. The I&CFE policy, formulated in partnership with NGOs such as the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), SCA, SERVE, ANAD, and FWF, provides a strategic framework for promoting inclusive education. Despite its potential, the policy remains largely unimplemented, reflecting systemic challenges in execution.

One significant gap in implementation lies in the absence of provincial branches of the I&CFE Directorate. While NGOs involved in implementing inclusive education programs are supervised and monitored by the Directorate's Kabul-based departments, provincial MoE offices bear the responsibility for policy implementation at the local level. However, these provincial offices often lack adequate information, expertise, and training related to SE and IE, leading to inconsistent application of the policy across regions.

In alignment with the I&CFE policy, Special Education (SE) serves as a preparatory phase for children with special needs, offering tailored instruction in various settings, including their homes, specialized classes, or SE centers. This preparatory phase is designed to equip children with the foundational skills necessary for successful integration into regular schools. For instance, children with visual impairments learn braille basics, those with hearing impairments are taught sign language, children with intellectual disabilities receive training in Activities of Daily Living (ADL), and children with physical disabilities are supported with assistive devices or mobility training. At the end of this phase, children undergo an assessment to determine their readiness for enrollment in regular schools.

Without the foundational skills provided through SE programs, integrating children with special needs into mainstream education would be significantly more challenging. Recognizing this, the MoE considers the SE and IE departments to be complementary pillars of its education strategy. The SE department oversees and facilitates the activities of NGOs, ensuring that children with disabilities receive appropriate education to prepare them for integration into Grades 1 through 3 in regular schools. This integration process is contingent upon the child's successful completion of the preparatory program and a readiness examination.

The IE department assumes responsibility once students with special needs transition to regular schools. It provides ongoing supervision and support, ensuring that students have access to both specialized learning materials and general school supplies, such as school bags, notebooks, and pencils. For students with physical or motor impairments, accessibility measures, including ramps, assistive devices, and ground-floor classrooms, are prioritized to facilitate their inclusion. For detailed information about students under the SE and IE departments which are supported by SCA, refer to Table 2.

**Table 2.** Students with disabilities in SE and IE Program of the SCA in 2021

Provinces (four regions) where SE & IE programmes are conducted by SCA	Children with visual, hearing, and learning/intellectual disabilities in the SE programme			Children with visual, hearing, and learning/intellectual disabilities in the IE programme		
	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
Ghazni, Bamiyan, Wardak, Paktika	451	217	668	312	156	468
Nangarhar, Laghman, Kunar	356	213	569	270	183	453
Balkh, Jawzjan, Samangan	502	380	882	776	558	1334
Takhar, Badakhshan, Kunduz, Baghlan	479	290	769	419	343	762
<b>Total</b>	<b>1788</b>	<b>1100</b>	<b>2888</b>	<b>1777</b>	<b>1240</b>	<b>3017</b>

Annually, approximately 300–400 students with disabilities complete the SE preparatory phase and transition to regular schools. However, significant gaps remain in identifying and diagnosing children with special needs. According to the head of the SE department, Afghanistan currently lacks standardized criteria or assessment tools tailored for specific age groups. In the absence of official guidelines, NGOs independently conduct screenings and diagnoses, often relying on the World Health Organization's (WHO) community-based rehabilitation (CBR) manuals and questionnaires.

To address this gap, NGO staff, social workers, and CBR workers collaborate with local community leaders to raise awareness and identify PwDs within their communities. These teams collect relevant data and conduct field visits to diagnose disabilities and determine the required support. Parents of identified children are informed about the benefits of education and encouraged to enroll their children in preparatory programs. Most children identified through this process successfully complete the SE preparatory phase and subsequently join the IE program in regular schools.

After completing their basic education (up to the 9th grade) or graduating from the 12th grade, students with special needs are provided with opportunities to pursue further education. They can enroll in technical and vocational training schools, institutes, or higher education institutions (HEIs), enabling them to enhance their knowledge and skills in alignment with their abilities and aspirations.

#### **4.3.1. Special Education Preparatory Education Programs Operated by International NGOs**

International NGOs play a pivotal role in supporting children with disabilities in Afghanistan, facilitating their transition into regular schools within the framework of the I&CFE Policy established by the MoE. Among the most active and officially collaborating organizations in this regard were the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan (SCA), Serving Emergency Relief and Vocational Enterprises (SERVE), and Pro Bambini di Kabul (PBK).

The SCA operates a comprehensive CBR program across 13 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces. This program integrates special and inclusive education components to address the diverse needs of children with disabilities (SCA: Swedish Committee for Afghanistan, 2021). SERVE delivers targeted educational services to children with visual and hearing impairments, as well as intellectual disabilities, across Kabul (city and districts), Laghman, Nangarhar (Jalalabad and four districts), Parwan (Charikar), and Kandahar provinces (Power, 2014; SERVE, 2021). Meanwhile, PBK runs an education center in the Taimani district of Kabul city, focusing on children with a range of disabilities, including intellectual and physical impairments (PBK: Pro Bambini di Kabul, 2021).

The Swedish Committee for Afghanistan (SCA) begins its Community-Based Rehabilitation (CBR) program in each community with disability awareness campaigns. These campaigns aim to foster understanding and reduce stigma while identifying Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) through house-to-house surveys. The program addresses the needs of individuals with seven types of disabilities, including visual, hearing, motor, and sensory impairments; leprosy; behavioral or psychological challenges; intellectual disabilities; and epilepsy. Diagnoses are conducted using CBR-specific criteria and questionnaires, supplemented by audiometry and specialist referrals. For conditions suspected to be hereditary, the program also evaluates the status of siblings to provide a comprehensive intervention strategy.

SERVE employs a similar approach in impoverished, war-affected regions, collaborating with local leaders, religious figures, and community members to identify children with disabilities. The organization then tailor services to meet the specific needs of these children. Pro Bambini di Kabul (PBK), in contrast, primarily relies on parents of children with intellectual disabilities to initiate contact with its education center in the Taimani district. However, PBK's capacity limitations occasionally prevent it from accommodating all referrals.

The SCA implements SE programs through three primary modalities: Home-Based Education (HBE), Village-Based Preparatory Education Centers (VPECs), and Preparatory Education and Rehabilitation Centers (PERCs).

- **Home-Based Education (HBE):** This approach involves teachers visiting the homes of up to three children within a specific area to deliver personalized instruction tailored to their individual

needs. Early childhood intervention is a critical component of HBE, targeting children as young as one month to four years old. After this initial stage, children transition to a more formalized setting at a center, where they undergo preparatory education for two to three years before enrolling in Inclusive Education (IE) programs in regular schools.

- **Village-Based Preparatory Education Centers (VPECs):** In these centers, students with hearing and visual impairments are educated together. However, intellectual disabilities often pose challenges in mixed settings. If fewer than four students are enrolled at a VPEC, home-based education is offered as an alternative.

- **Preparatory Education and Rehabilitation Centers (PERCs):** Located in central regions, these centers cater to a maximum of five students per class. Each student receives a personalized curriculum through an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP). The centers also provide essential support services, including transportation, specialized learning materials, and refreshments, to ensure students' holistic development.

Upon completing the preparatory phase, students are equipped with essential tools for their transition into regular schools, including slates, styluses, braille paper, and voice recorders. For children with visual impairments, training includes the use of specialized equipment such as Braille and Thermophones. The SCA centers primarily serve children under the age of 14 with visual or hearing impairments or intellectual disabilities. However, limited resources for identifying specific learning disabilities, such as dyslexia, often result in these students being integrated into broader disability categories without tailored interventions.

#### **Duration Preparatory SE Program:**

- **Visual Impairments:** A two-year preparatory program where students learn braille literacy, mobility skills, daily living activities, and hygiene in the first year. The second year focuses on delivering the first-grade curriculum used in regular schools.

- **Hearing Impairments:** A three-year program emphasizing sign language, life skills, hygiene, and basic academic skills during the first year, followed by the regular school curriculum in the subsequent two years.

- **Intellectual Disabilities:** A three-year program designed to teach life skills, behavior management, hygiene, and moral education in the first two years, with the introduction of the first-grade curriculum during the third year.

To ensure family involvement, parents of children with severe intellectual disabilities are trained by CBR workers in Activities of Daily Living (ADL) to support their children's progress at home. While children with mild learning difficulties often go undetected in regular schools, early identification can lead to successful rehabilitation and integration.

Annual assessments are conducted to evaluate student progress, with a minimum score of 50% required for advancement to the next level. Upon successful completion of the SE program and passing the final evaluation, students are enrolled in regular schools at an appropriate grade level.

The SCA also offers vocational training programs for PwDs above school age, focusing on life skills, literacy, and vocational training to enable them to support themselves financially.

SERVE's educational program only offers segregated special education up to the 3rd grade, after which the IE system is implemented. After identifying students with special needs, individualized education plans are formulated, and students with visual impairments receive braille-based education at home. Training for human guides (often classmates or siblings) is also provided. After six months to a year of preparatory training, students are enrolled in regular schools and provided with the necessary learning materials.

For students with hearing impairments, special classes are arranged in their villages if more than five children are identified. Sign language is the primary focus, and children are integrated into regular schools after two years of preparatory training. From the 4th grade, students study with their peers in regular classes.

PBK offers daily classes, play therapy, and meals to children with various special needs, including autism and intellectual and physical disabilities. The center aims to foster intellectual and motor-sensory independence, improve relationships, and prepare children for integration into regular schools.

In 2021, SCA's SE program employed 322 teachers, 11 assistants, 15 resource persons, and four SE officers, educating 2,888 children with disabilities. The program operates in 14 provinces, using HBE, 216 VPECs, and 10 PERCs. PBK's center served 50 children aged 6–12 with special needs.

### **4.3.2. Support in Regular Schools**

Support for PwDs in regular classrooms is a critical component of the inclusive education framework. Interviews revealed that following the completion of the SE preparatory program, the SCA plays a central role in facilitating the enrollment of children with disabilities into regular schools. To ensure their successful integration, each school with enrolled students with special needs is assigned an Inclusive Education Resource Person (IERP). The IERP is matched by gender—male for male students and female for female students—and provides ongoing support to both the student and their teacher until the student completes their education.

Typically, one IERP oversees students in four to five schools within a designated area. IERPs are proficient in both braille and sign language, enabling them to cater to the diverse needs of students. To further assist students with hearing impairments, the program includes sign language training for teachers and classmates. Similarly, students with visual impairments are supported with braille materials, auditory resources, and recording devices. With approval from the MoE, a lower-grade student may also act as a transcriber to assist visually impaired peers.

Efforts are made to ensure that students with disabilities are enrolled in schools located near their homes, reducing transportation and accessibility challenges. To prepare teachers for the inclusion of students with special needs, a 20-day training course is conducted before the students begin their studies. This course encompasses a comprehensive curriculum, including the Inclusive Learning Toolkit, braille literacy, sign language, and total communication methods. These foundational skills enable teachers to address the diverse needs of students effectively.

To maintain and enhance teacher preparedness, annual refresher training sessions are offered as needed. These sessions provide updates on best practices and emerging techniques in inclusive education, ensuring that educators remain capable of supporting students with disabilities throughout their academic journey.

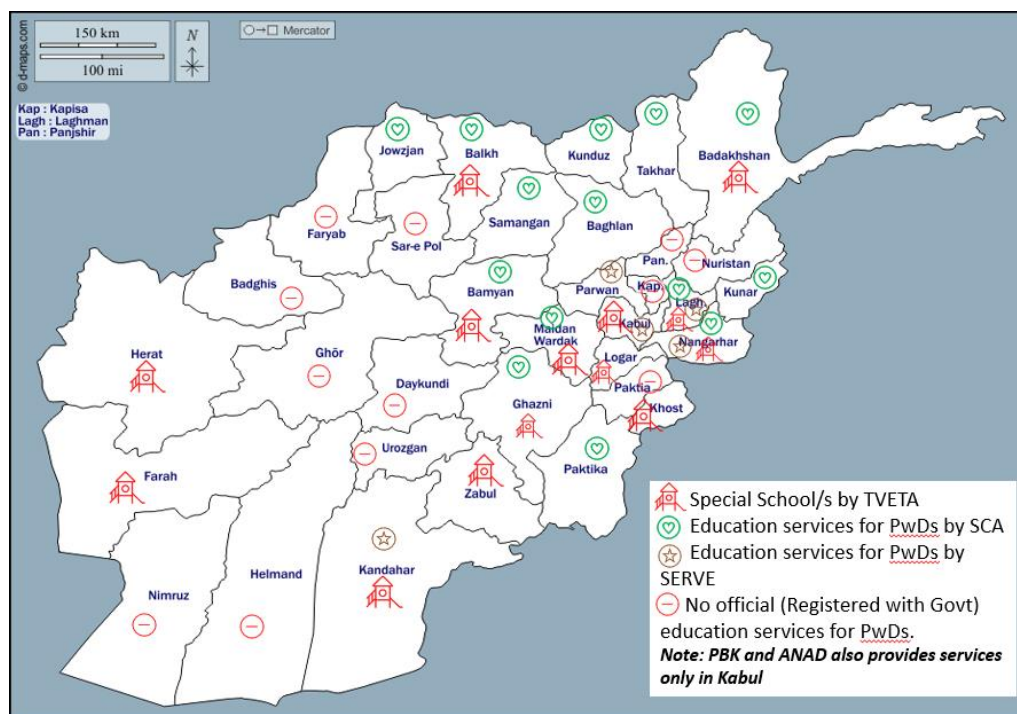
## **5. Discussion**

Globally, countries like the United States and Sweden provide benchmarks for inclusive education. The U.S. Congress introduced the Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975. Later renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), this landmark legislation guaranteed free and appropriate public education (FAPE) for all children with disabilities in the least restrictive environment (LRE) (Edwards, 2004). Sweden, guided by the normalization principle, emphasizes the integration of PwDs into society through mainstream education systems (Persson, 2003). These policies were underpinned by significant resource investments, including teacher training, infrastructure development, and assistive technology, which Afghanistan currently lacks.

Afghanistan's initial efforts to include students with disabilities in mainstream education, such as the Kabul Blind School in the 1970s, were groundbreaking for the region (Joya et al., 2017). These initiatives enabled visually impaired students to study alongside their non-disabled peers at the secondary level, an important milestone in fostering inclusivity. In contrast, Afghanistan's focus on education for students with hearing impairments only began in the 1990s and has largely been driven by international NGOs (Forogh et al., 2017). However, decades of conflict, political instability, and socio-economic challenges have impeded the country's ability to develop a robust, inclusive education system comparable to those in more developed nations.

Despite these efforts, Afghanistan's current disability education system remains insufficient. With approximately one million children with disabilities and a broader student population of 10 million, only around 10,000 students with disabilities are receiving education. This small group is split between special vocational schools and inclusive education settings, with the majority (59%) having hearing impairments, followed by students with intellectual disabilities (27%), and a minority (14%) having visual impairments. Another pressing issue in Afghanistan is the significant underrepresentation of students with visual impairments despite their historical inclusion in early initiatives. Globally, students with visual impairments face common barriers, including the high cost of assistive technologies and a lack of specialized teachers. Countries such as South Africa have attempted to address these challenges by introducing braille literacy programs in rural areas and partnering with NGOs to subsidize assistive devices (Le Fanu et al., 2022). Afghanistan's inability to replicate similar strategies exacerbates the educational inequities faced by this group.

The inadequate provision of inclusive education services in Afghanistan reflects broader patterns observed in low-income and conflict-affected countries. For example, in rural Ethiopia, infrastructure limitations, societal stigma, and untrained teachers hinder the inclusion of PwDs in regular schools (Adugna et al., 2020). Afghanistan shares these challenges but is further constrained by geographical disparities; 12 provinces lack formal educational services for PwDs, leaving over three million people underserved. Figure 1 shows the existence and nonexistence of educational services for PwDs in various parts of Afghanistan.



**Figure 1.** Mapping of current Education Services for PwDs both SE and IE in Afghanistan

This urban-rural divide is a common issue in many developing countries, where educational services for PwDs tend to be concentrated in urban areas with better resources, specialized schools, and trained personnel (Adugna et al., 2020; Bani Odeh & Lach, 2023). In Afghanistan, these disparities are particularly stark, reflecting both infrastructural limitations and a lack of strategic planning for nationwide inclusive education.

Moreover, the inadequacy of the SEN curriculum and the scarcity of essential teaching materials, such as braille books and AFSL resources, further hinder the educational outcomes for students with disabilities in Afghanistan. The curriculum is not aligned with the demands of modern society or the job market, leaving students unprepared for employment. This issue is not unique to Afghanistan; in Belarus, vocational training programs for PwDs are limited by budgetary constraints, rendering students ill-prepared for employment (World Bank, 2022). Addressing these curriculum deficiencies requires collaboration between government bodies, NGOs, and international agencies to ensure that students acquire skills that enhance their employability.

In addition, there is a critical shortage of trained special education teachers, particularly outside major urban centers. This lack of awareness and professional capacity among educators, is also evident in higher education institutions of Afghanistan (Naeemy & Yoneda, 2024). Many educators lack specialized training to support students with disabilities effectively, a challenge mirrored in other developing countries (Ahmed et al., 2021; Cooc, 2019).

Inadequate infrastructure, insufficient teaching materials, and a lack of professional teachers are significant challenges for Afghanistan's disability education system. Special vocational schools suffer from poor infrastructure, including rented buildings that lack administrative and educational facilities. Practical vocational programs, such as tailoring, carpentry, and computing, are severely limited by budgetary constraints, with inadequate access to necessary materials and dedicated spaces. Similar challenges are seen in other low-resource countries like Belarus, where budgetary limitations constrain the delivery of effective vocational training programs (World Bank, 2022).

The lack of accessible public transportation further compounds the barriers to education for PwDs in Afghanistan, particularly for students living in rural areas. This transportation deficit is a significant factor in the exclusion of students with disabilities, as many cannot physically access the schools that serve them. Globally, similar challenges are reported, particularly in rural regions of India and sub-Saharan Africa, where inaccessible transportation and infrastructure prevent students with disabilities from attending school (Singh & Sarkar, 2023; Taneja-Johansson et al., 2023). Addressing these challenges requires targeted investments in both physical infrastructure and professional development for educators.

Furthermore, the study revealed the absence of tailored transition programs for SwDs, especially in special vocational schools. Without adequate preparation during secondary school, SwDs are likely to face significant barriers when transitioning to higher education institutions. Study implied that developing tailored transition plans for students with (intellectual) disabilities, including early exposure to assistive technologies and mentorship programs, can facilitate smoother transitions to post-secondary education (Love et al., 2019; Bueno, 2022). Research also indicates that mentorship programs during secondary education help SwDs adapt more effectively to the higher education environment (de Lugt, 2020). The connection between secondary and higher education is crucial in ensuring the long-term success of inclusive education. Findings align with studies that highlight the challenges SwDs face in HEIs due to inadequate preparation at the secondary level (de Lugt, 2020). Addressing these gaps is essential to ensure SwDs are fully equipped to succeed in higher education and beyond.

The findings of this study indicated that, while special schools provide tailored services for SwDs, they are often underfunded and have limited accessibility. In contrast, inclusive education in regular

schools is still in its early stages in Afghanistan, with many schools lacking the resources necessary to effectively support SwDs.

While Afghanistan has made incremental progress in expanding access to education for PwDs, significant gaps remain. Geographic disparities, infrastructural limitations, and a lack of trained personnel and resources continue to hinder the country's ability to provide quality education for PwDs. Addressing these challenges will require greater investment in both human and material resources, as well as a commitment to developing a more inclusive and equitable education system. Lessons from other countries underscore the importance of integrating culturally appropriate policies, sustained external support, and strategic domestic investments to overcome these challenges. Afghanistan's success in building an inclusive education system will depend on its ability to adapt global best practices to its unique socio-political and economic context.

## 6. Conclusion

Afghanistan's history of conflict and socio-political instability has severely impacted education for Persons with Disabilities (PwDs), exacerbating systemic gaps despite incremental progress. The suspension of female education beyond elementary levels further marginalizes girls with disabilities, underscoring the urgent need for equitable reforms. While NGOs play a pivotal role in inclusive education, reliance on external support highlights deficiencies in government capacity and resource allocation. Drawing on global models, this study emphasizes the need for sustained investments in teacher training, infrastructure, and assistive technologies. A multi-stakeholder approach tailored to Afghanistan's unique context is critical to building a truly inclusive education system and fostering equity for all.

## 6. Implications and Limitations

This study provides insights into the challenges and opportunities of inclusive education for PwDs in Afghanistan, with implications for policy, practice, and further research. By highlighting systemic barriers such as insufficient infrastructure, untrained personnel, and limited resources, the findings emphasize the urgent need for strategic investments in inclusive practices. The study also underscores the critical role of NGOs in filling gaps left by the government, advocating for stronger partnerships between public and private sectors to ensure sustainability and scalability. Furthermore, the study calls for prioritizing gender equity, particularly given the exclusion of girls from educational opportunities, which disproportionately impacts girls with disabilities. Lessons from international models point to the importance of culturally relevant policies, sustainable investments, and multi-stakeholder collaboration as key strategies for advancing equitable education systems in low-income and conflict-affected contexts like Afghanistan.

This study is subject to several limitations. Field visits were limited to four of the sixteen special schools, with the remaining interviews conducted remotely via WhatsApp or phone calls, which may have affected the depth of insights. Additionally, detailed data on students, including gender, disability types, and enrollment numbers, were unavailable for regular schools supported by NGOs and for students with physical disabilities in regular and religious schools. Similarly, no data were obtained regarding the enrollment of students with physical, visual, or intellectual disabilities in religious schools. These gaps constrain the comprehensiveness of the analysis.

Future studies could examine the education of PwDs in Technical and Vocational Education and Training Authority (TVETA) institutions, higher education institutions, and religious schools. Additionally, the role of the Special Education Faculty at Kabul Education University and NGOs in educating PwDs warrants further exploration to develop a more holistic understanding of inclusive education in Afghanistan.



## Declarations

**Author Contributions.** M.I.N: Literature review, data collection and analysis, original manuscript preparation. H.Y.: conceptualization, review-editing and writing. All authors have read and approved the publication of the final version of the article.

**Conflicts of Interest.** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

**Funding.** This work was supported by JSPS Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (B) 22H01031/23K22302; Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (B) 18H01037

**Ethical Approval.** Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee in the Institute of Human Sciences, University of Tsukuba (Issue # Tsukuba2021-171A).

**Data Availability Statement.** Data is available from the corresponding author upon request.

**Acknowledgments.** We extend our sincere gratitude to all the participants in this study, including representatives from various government officials, NGOs, and administrators of special vocational schools in Afghanistan. Their valuable time and cooperation were instrumental in completing this research.

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