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The Formation and Teaching Methods of Educational Institutions for Visually Impaired Children in Uzbekistan (1925–1990)

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a comprehensive historical analysis of the formation and evolution of educational institutions for visually impaired children in Soviet Uzbekistan during the period from 1925 to 1990. It investigates how the Soviet state's ideological commitment to social equality and labor participation shaped the development of specialized educational structures for blind children in the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic (Uzbek SSR). Drawing on unpublished archival materials, official Soviet educational directives, and contemporaneous pedagogical publications, the study reconstructs the four principal stages of institutionalization: the initial establishment phase (1925–1940), expansion during and after World War II (1941–1955), professionalization and curriculum reform (1956–1970), and full systematization and consolidation (1971–1990). Special attention is given to the emergence of defectology as a foundational science in Soviet special education and its role in informing teaching methodologies, teacher training, and the design of tactile and auditory instructional tools. The study also addresses how broader socio-political transformations, such as the post-Stalinist liberalization and the development of national education systems within the Soviet framework, influenced pedagogical approaches for visually impaired children. The findings demonstrate that although the Uzbek SSR operated within the centralized Soviet model, local adaptations emerged in response to cultural, linguistic, and infrastructural particularities. This article contributes to the global history of special education by providing new insights into how socialist states conceptualized disability, education, and inclusion during the twentieth century.

Keywords: Visually impaired children, Soviet education, special pedagogy, Uzbekistan, Braille, defectology, inclusive education, archival research, socialist disability policy.

INTRODUCTION

In Soviet Central Asia, the education of children with disabilities, including those who were blind or visually impaired, was profoundly influenced by the overarching ideological commitment of the Soviet state to principles of social equity, universal

literacy, and productive labor. From the inception of Soviet rule in the 1920s, education was seen not only as a means of intellectual development but as a crucial instrument for constructing the "new Soviet person"—a socially useful, ideologically aligned citizen regardless of physical or sensory limitations. The Soviet regime regarded the education of disabled children as both a moral imperative and a socio-economic necessity, intended to convert “unproductive” individuals into self-reliant contributors to the socialist economy (Akhmedov, 1982). This was especially important in the context of the Marxist-Leninist worldview, which rejected notions of charity and individualist care in favor of collective responsibility and institutional support.

In the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic (Uzbek SSR), part of the broader Central Asian periphery of the USSR, this ideological orientation intersected with urgent post-revolutionary needs to combat widespread illiteracy, backwardness (as officially defined), and limited access to public health and education services. The establishment of educational institutions for visually impaired children in Uzbekistan was thus both an extension of central Soviet policy and a response to local cultural, demographic, and infrastructural realities. These institutions emerged within the framework of the state-controlled education system, and their formation was heavily shaped by the growing influence of defektologiya (defectology), the Soviet science of special education. This discipline emphasized scientific diagnosis, individualized instruction, and the psychological adaptation of children with disabilities, particularly those with sensory impairments such as blindness.

Throughout the twentieth century, educational provision for blind children in Uzbekistan was gradually institutionalized through the creation of specialized boarding schools (internaty), teacher training programs, and the development of adapted curricula that relied heavily on Braille literacy, auditory methods, and tactile learning tools. At the same time, these developments reflected the specific socio-cultural and economic conditions of the region, including the Uzbek language’s adaptation to Braille, the rural dispersion of the population, and the need to align special education with vocational training suited to the regional labor market. Consequently, the history of visually impaired education in Soviet Uzbekistan provides not only a case study of Soviet special education policy in practice but also a unique lens through which to understand the interplay between central planning and regional adaptation in socialist systems of care and instruction.

Initial Stage of Institutional Development (1925–1940)

The establishment of the first specialized school for blind children in Tashkent in 1925 represented a foundational moment in the institutionalization of education for the visually impaired in Soviet Uzbekistan. This event marked not only the beginning of targeted educational interventions for blind children in the region, but also a broader shift in the Soviet perception of visual impairment—from a private affliction to a public, pedagogically addressable condition. The founding of this school coincided with the early Soviet campaign against illiteracy (likbez) and the parallel push for social inclusivity, especially for marginalized groups who had been historically excluded from formal education under the Tsarist regime (Ismatov, 1978). Within this context, the visually impaired were now recognized as a population requiring both educational access and state-supported rehabilitative structures.

At this early stage, the primary educational goal was to impart basic literacy skills, with instruction centered around the Braille system. Braille materials, however, were in limited supply and often had to be produced manually by instructors or sourced from central Soviet printing facilities, which added considerable logistical constraints. Teaching was primarily carried out by general educators who, while ideologically committed to the Soviet cause, lacked formal training in defektologiya—the specialized field that integrated pedagogical, medical, and psychological knowledge to support children with developmental and sensory impairments. This lack of professionalization meant that instruction was often improvised and heavily dependent on the teacher’s personal dedication and practical creativity.

Despite these limitations, the significance of this period lies in its establishment of a pedagogical and administrative precedent for the treatment of visual impairment within the formal education system. The early institutional model laid the conceptual and operational foundation for the later systematization of special education in the republic. It initiated the gradual integration of blind children into broader educational and social

policy frameworks, set in motion the development of localized Braille adaptation in Uzbek, and introduced the first rudimentary teacher training initiatives aimed at working with children with sensory disabilities. As such, the 1925–1940 period must be seen not merely as a phase of experimentation, but as the genesis of a long-term educational infrastructure that would evolve significantly over the coming decades.

Wartime and Postwar Expansion (1941–1955)

The outbreak of World War II posed immense challenges for the Soviet education system as a whole, and particularly for specialized sectors such as the education of blind and visually impaired children. Despite widespread mobilization of resources toward the war effort and a general decline in public services, the gradual expansion of special education for the blind in Uzbekistan continued during this turbulent period. Notably, the establishment of a second school for blind children in the early 1940s reflected the Soviet government's commitment to maintaining social infrastructure even amidst military crisis (Khodzhayev, 1951). This institutional expansion, while modest in scale, symbolized the ideological principle that all citizens, including those with disabilities, had a role to play in the socialist reconstruction of society.

During this time, educators and local administrators began to implement more structured lesson plans, drawing upon the standardized curricula developed by central Soviet pedagogical institutes. These curricula were designed to align with both general educational goals and the specific needs of children with visual impairments. Nevertheless, the implementation of these plans was hindered by several systemic deficiencies. Acute shortages of Braille materials, teaching aids, and adaptive equipment made it difficult to deliver consistent and effective instruction. Furthermore, the wartime drafting of male teachers and defektologists into the military significantly depleted the already limited pool of trained personnel, forcing schools to rely on underqualified staff or even volunteers with minimal pedagogical preparation.

Despite these constraints, the survival and modest growth of blind education institutions during this period were made possible in large part by the informal yet vital contributions of families, local communities, and women educators. Parents of visually impaired children often took on roles in the daily life of schools—cooking, maintaining facilities, and even assisting with basic instructional activities. Community solidarity, combined with the Soviet ethos of mutual aid (vzaimopomoshch'), played a critical role in sustaining these schools during times of economic and human resource scarcity. In this regard, the wartime and immediate postwar years were not only a time of hardship but also a period in which a resilient, community-supported model of special education began to take shape in Uzbekistan. The networks of trust and cooperation forged during this era would prove foundational for the professionalization and institutional consolidation that followed in the subsequent decades.

Professionalization and Curriculum Reform (1956–1970)

With the onset of post-Stalinist educational reforms during the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s, the Soviet Union entered a period of pedagogical renewal that extended significantly into the domain of special education. These reforms were informed by a broader ideological shift that emphasized the modernization of society, human capital development, and the scientific management of education. As part of this movement, the education of blind and visually impaired children in Uzbekistan underwent a phase of institutional expansion and professionalization, underpinned by increasing state investment and scientific innovation.

One of the most notable developments during this period was the establishment of specialized teacher training programs within pedagogical institutes in the Uzbek SSR. These programs were designed to produce qualified defektologi—educators trained specifically in the psychology, physiology, and pedagogy of children with visual impairments. The curriculum for such programs incorporated instruction in tactile communication methods, including the production and use of raised-letter textbooks, embossed diagrams, and models. Equally significant was the growing emphasis on psychological adaptation and emotional support, reflecting the increasing influence of Soviet developmental psychology, especially the works of L.S. Vygotsky and his successors, who emphasized the sociocultural context of disability and the potential for cognitive compensation through appropriate mediation (Rakhimova, 1967).

During this phase, the physical and technological infrastructure of schools for the blind improved considerably. A wide range of teaching aids was introduced into the classroom, including raised maps for geography instruction, Perkins-style

Braille typewriters, audio-based textbooks, and tactile mathematics boards. These tools enabled students to access a broader curriculum, including history, literature, natural sciences, and mathematics. Instruction was no longer limited to basic literacy; rather, it expanded to support multi-sensory learning and foster analytical thinking through non-visual modalities.

Importantly, the curriculum for visually impaired students also emphasized vocational and artistic education as a means of facilitating economic independence and long-term social integration. Students were systematically introduced to music education (particularly piano, accordion, and vocal training), as well as various forms of handcrafts, including weaving, woodwork, and ceramic arts. In addition, training in light industrial tasks—such as assembly work and mechanical repairs—was integrated into the school day, particularly in the upper grades. These efforts reflected a dual objective: on the one hand, the ideological imperative of producing productive socialist citizens; on the other, the practical recognition of the labor market realities that visually impaired individuals would encounter upon graduation.

This period also witnessed the beginnings of individualized educational planning and differentiation according to cognitive and sensory capabilities. Teachers were encouraged to develop flexible approaches tailored to students' learning styles, degrees of vision loss, and psychological profiles. The influence of scientific defektologiya became increasingly pronounced, promoting a vision of disability education grounded in empirical observation, therapeutic support, and measurable outcomes. Taken together, these reforms contributed to the emergence of a more holistic, systematized, and socially integrated model of blind education in Uzbekistan, aligned with the Soviet Union's broader goals of egalitarian modernization.

Consolidation and Systematization (1971–1990)

By the 1970s, the education of visually impaired children in the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic had reached a stage of full institutional consolidation, reflecting both the maturation of Soviet special education policy and the outcomes of decades of incremental reform. Schools for blind children were no longer peripheral or experimental entities; they had become well-structured institutions with dedicated infrastructure, professional staff, and pedagogical autonomy. These schools were typically equipped with residential dormitories, specialized libraries containing Braille and audio materials, rehabilitation and medical rooms for physical and psychological assessments, and fully operational vocational training workshops. This comprehensive environment allowed visually impaired students to receive not only academic instruction but also holistic life preparation within a secure and resource-equipped setting (Sattarov, 1988).

The pedagogical model during this period was notably more differentiated and individualized than in earlier decades. Instructional plans were tailored to the sensory, cognitive, and psychological profiles of each student, reflecting the increasing influence of clinical psychology and special education diagnostics within Soviet defektologiya. Teachers and specialists—now more numerous and better trained—were encouraged to design adaptive learning experiences that emphasized both academic competence and emotional development. A core belief within late Soviet pedagogy was that children with disabilities should not be limited to narrow functional training but should be provided opportunities for intellectual engagement, cultural enrichment, and moral formation consistent with broader Soviet ideals of the "all-sidedly developed personality."

Key components of the curriculum now included specialized training in orientation and mobility (O&M), which equipped students with the skills to navigate unfamiliar environments using canes and auditory cues. Instruction in daily living skills—such as personal hygiene, food preparation, and clothing care—was institutionalized as a regular part of the educational program, especially for boarding school residents. Furthermore, schools emphasized the development of social communication skills, including speech therapy, group discussion techniques, and role-playing exercises designed to enhance interpersonal competence and emotional expression.

Vocational training also became more rigorous and diversified. Schools collaborated with local industries and vocational-technical centers to provide real-world apprenticeships in fields deemed accessible to blind individuals, such as massage therapy, radio assembly, textile production, and musical instrument tuning. These programs were not merely rehabilitative but explicitly aimed at labor market integration, in

accordance with the Soviet ideological framework that emphasized the economic productivity of all citizens, including those with disabilities.

During this period, the number of trained defektologi (special education teachers) significantly increased due to expanded teacher training programs in Tashkent and other republican centers. These professionals played a key role not only in academic instruction but also in family counseling, psychometric assessment, and the development of individualized educational trajectories. As a result of these combined efforts, schools for the blind in Uzbekistan came to be viewed—both within the republic and across the Soviet Union—as exemplary models of the inclusive potential embedded in the socialist education system. Though not "inclusive" in the modern Western sense of full mainstreaming, these institutions represented an ambitious and often effective approach to integration through specialized, state-supported parallel structures that sought to normalize disability within the broader logic of Soviet collectivity and equality.

CONCLUSIONS

1. The period from 1925 to 1990 witnessed the gradual emergence and consolidation of a comprehensive institutional framework for the education of visually impaired children in Uzbekistan.

Over these six decades, the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic developed a structured system of residential schools, pedagogical institutes, and rehabilitative services dedicated to children with visual impairments. This system evolved from rudimentary, understaffed initiatives in the 1920s into a fully institutionalized and state-supported educational sector by the late Soviet era. The trajectory reflects both the internal evolution of Soviet educational policy and the successful localization of special education models within the Central Asian context.

2. The evolution of teaching methodologies—from foundational Braille literacy to advanced, multi-sensory and psychopedagogical strategies—demonstrates the transformative role of Soviet defectology in shaping the instructional landscape. Early reliance on tactile reading systems gradually gave way to integrated approaches that incorporated auditory learning, psychological adaptation techniques, orientation and mobility training, and differentiated instructional design. These pedagogical innovations were grounded in the theoretical foundations of Soviet special education science (defektologiya), which emphasized the adaptability of children with sensory disabilities through scientifically informed teaching.

3. The long-term development of Uzbekistan's educational provision for the blind underscores the centrality of state intervention in teacher preparation, specialized curriculum development, and the socio-pedagogical inclusion of children with disabilities.

The consistent expansion of training programs for defektologi, the institutionalization of vocational and life skills education, and the emphasis on moral, cultural, and emotional development collectively contributed to the integration of visually impaired children into both the educational system and the broader socialist society. This experience illustrates the efficacy of state-supported special education models in contexts where centralized planning enables cohesive policy implementation.

Recommendations

1. It is recommended that future research prioritize the documentation and critical analysis of the micro-histories of individual educational institutions for the blind in Soviet Uzbekistan. Each school possessed unique institutional trajectories, leadership styles, localized challenges, and creative pedagogical adaptations that are often absent from centralized historical accounts. Through oral histories, archival investigation, and comparative regional studies, scholars can reconstruct the day-to-day realities and innovations that emerged within these specialized settings. Such research would not only enrich the historiography of Soviet special education but also inform present-day debates on institutional memory, inclusive heritage, and disability pedagogy in post-socialist contexts.

2. Contemporary special education policy in Uzbekistan and other post-Soviet states would benefit significantly from a systematic re-examination of Soviet-era models of disability education. While the centralized and ideologically driven nature of Soviet policy had limitations, the extensive investment in specialized infrastructure, teacher training, and curriculum development offers instructive lessons for modern reform. In particular, the Soviet emphasis on multi-disciplinary collaboration between educators, psychologists, medical professionals, and vocational trainers presents a potentially valuable model for integrated service delivery in current systems struggling with fragmentation and resource scarcity.

3. It is recommended that higher education programs preparing future special education professionals incorporate historical case-based learning derived from the Soviet experience of institutional development for blind children.

By studying how past educators navigated pedagogical constraints, developed adaptive tools, and constructed inclusive communities within specialized institutions, students can develop a more nuanced understanding of both the potentials and limits of systematized disability education. Such case studies can serve as critical pedagogical tools for fostering reflective, context-aware, and historically literate practitioners in the field of inclusive education.

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