

# ATTITUDES ABOUT INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN HIGH SCHOOLS: DIFFERENCES IN STUDENT, PARENT AND TEACHER OPINIONS

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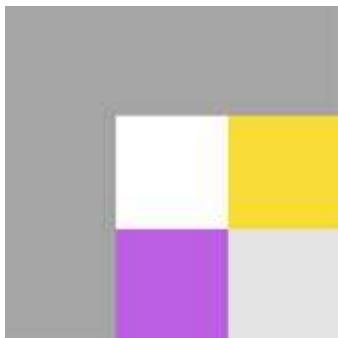
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## 5. ATTITUDES ABOUT INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN HIGH SCHOOLS: DIFFERENCES IN STUDENT, PARENT AND TEACHER OPINIONS

### *Abstract*

*In recent years, the Croatian government has put a major effort into integration of children with developmental disabilities in regular schools. However, this has mainly been done for primary school students, and little is known about what happens with those children in high schools. The aim of this study was to examine attitudes about persons with physical disabilities and to compare them between high school students, their parents and their teachers. In addition, teachers' attitudes toward integration of children with developmental disabilities in high schools were investigated. The participants were 740 high school students, 192 parents and 196 teachers. All participants gave some general data and filled out the Attitudes towards People with Physical Disabilities Scale. Teachers also filled out the Teachers' Attitudes toward Integration of Children with Disabilities Scale. The results have shown that all participants had only mildly positive attitudes toward persons with physical disabilities, but teachers and parents, in comparison with students, showed more positive cognitive and affective aspects of attitudes. Furthermore, teachers showed mildly positive attitudes towards the integration of all students into regular high schools (regardless of their developmental disabilities), although they had the most positive attitudes toward regular school integration of students with physical disabilities, followed by those with learning disabilities. The results are discussed in connection to a new educational program, which the Faculty of Education can offer to teachers and experts working in high schools with children with disabilities.*

**Key words:** attitudes, inclusive education, students, teachers, parents, disabilities

## 5.1. INTRODUCTION

It has been estimated that 10% to 20% of children in Croatia have some form of developmental disabilities. However, only 3% of children with disabilities are being included in the regular educational institutions. This means that approximately 40,000 to 80,000 children are not successfully included in the regular education system without the active involvement of their families and support of schools. The Croatian Register of Persons with Disabilities recorded 32,101 children with developmental disabilities, which is 6.2% of the total number of persons with disabilities (data state at 01/26/2017).

Having accepted the Council of Europe Action Plan to promote the rights and full participation of people with disabilities in society: improving the quality of life of people with disabilities in Europe 2006-2015, in 2007 the Croatian Government developed the National Strategy for Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities 2007-2015. In the Strategy, the Republic of Croatia highlighted the protective role of society and stated that "there is a need for taking care and protecting vulnerable social groups, such as persons with disabilities and children with developmental disabilities" (The Croatian Government, 2007, 1). The legal regulation of the right to protect personal integrity indicates low social sensitivity, which requires implementation of timely and appropriate action aimed at improving the general inclusion of people with disabilities in the local community's everyday life. Despite the strengthening of the idea of inclusion, people with disabilities continue to depend on the help of family members and assorted volunteers, i.e. there is a lack of systematic social support for this population. In the new National Strategy for Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities 2017-2020 (The Croatian Government, 2017), the Government highlights the strategic goal of education programs for teachers and educators in the field of inclusive education.

Many of the obstacles that people with disabilities deal with every day arise from the attitudes of society (Findler, Vilchinsky and Werner, 2007). When societal attitudes are positive, they can facilitate inclusion, enhancing disability acceptance by family, friends, and potential employers, but when attitudes are negative, then they can seriously counteract inclusion. Negative attitudes are related to behaviors such as social rejection and maintenance of higher levels of social distance from persons with disabilities (Hannon, 2011). Despite the progress in participation of people with disabilities in the society, negative public attitudes and awkwardness still remain. British research has shown that about two thirds of people felt uncomfortable talking to disabled people, about one third of them

thought that persons with disabilities were not productive as everyone else and about 20% of them admitted they avoided talking with persons with disabilities because they were not sure how to communicate with them (Hardeep & McCarthy, 2014). Generally, people have more positive attitudes toward people with physical disabilities than individuals with mental disabilities (Chan, Livneh, Pruett, Wang & Zheng, 2009). Study results on Croatian primary school teachers have shown that teachers mostly had slightly positive attitudes towards the inclusion of children with learning disabilities into regular primary schools (Kapetanović, 2013). Also, they had more positive attitudes towards the inclusion of students with a milder degree of developmental disabilities than those with more serious needs. The most positive attitude was found for the inclusion of students with physical disabilities, and the most negative for mentally retarded students. Most teachers believe there is no available support for the inclusion of students with disabilities in regular schools. Research on Croatian students of psychology and nursing has shown relatively positive explicit attitudes towards people with disabilities, whereas psychology students expressed statistically significantly more positive explicit attitudes toward people with disabilities than nursing students. Explicit attitudes measure cognitive and attentional dimension of thoughts and person can control their answers. Implicit attitudes for both groups of participants towards persons with disabilities were mostly slightly negative, meaning that this type of automatic attitudes may affect judgments and behaviors that are apparently unrelated and that a person is unaware of their influence (Mikić, 2016). As there is a growing awareness of the negative influence of prejudice and discrimination, fewer people openly express negative attitudes, although they may exist. For this reason, and also the provision of socially desirable answers that are almost always present in self-assessment questionnaires, attitudes obtained with explicit measures are often unrealistically positive. With respect to participant age, research has generally found that elementary school students mostly had neutral attitudes toward people with physical disabilities, while students had mostly positive attitudes towards the physically handicapped (Leutar & Štambuk, 2006). Another study in Croatia pointed out the trend and desire of citizens for the integration of people with disabilities when it came to removing spatial barriers and general inclusion in society (Najman Hižman, Leutar & Kancijan, 2008). Although attitudes of citizens in Croatia towards people with disabilities are mostly positive, it should be pointed out that still 34% of citizens think that people with intellectual disabilities should be separated from the community and 80% of citizens pity children with disabilities and have a tragic view of their life.

Given the fact that the Republic of Croatia adopted the National plan for deinstitutionalization and transformation of social welfare homes and other legal entities performing social welfare activities in the Republic of Croatia 2011-2018 (Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2010), it is expected that there will be an increase in the total number of children with developmental disabilities and children exposed to risk factors who will be included in the regular educational system. Taking into consideration the new Croatian legislative about the inclusion of children with developmental disabilities in regular schools as well as the increased number of adolescents with developmental disabilities in high school, the aim of this study was to examine attitudes about persons with physical disabilities and to compare them between high school students, their parents and their teachers. Physical disability is the most visible form of disability and the Government in the last 10 years has mostly worked on the inclusion of people with this type of disability in the society. Because of above mentioned reasons, attitudes about persons with physical disabilities are expected to be in a close relationship with peoples' behavior, which is why those attitudes are the first step in examining peoples' willingness to actually accept social inclusion. In addition, teachers' attitudes toward integration of children with different types of developmental disabilities in high schools have been investigated.

## 5.2. METHOD

### 5.2.1. PARTICIPANTS

The participants were 740 high school students, from first (37.2%), second (35.7%) and third grades (27.2%). 59.3% of them were male, 32.6% female, and 8.1% did not check the gender. Most of the students attended vocational schools (e.g. Economics School, Crafts School, Technical School, etc.). The average age of students was  $M=16.08$  years ( $SD=0.92$ ), ranging from 14 to 18. The students also estimated that they came from families of a slightly higher socioeconomic status ( $M=2.99$ ,  $SD=0.82$ ). In addition, 192 parents of high school students (25% fathers and 75% mothers) participated. The average age of parents was  $M=45.28$  years ( $SD=6.03$ ), ranging between 33 and 65. Parents estimated that their families were mostly of a higher socioeconomic status ( $M=3.09$ ,  $SD=0.45$ , where 1 was the maximum low SES and 4 maximum high SES). 196 teachers of high school students participated as well (26.5% male gender, 60.7% female gender, and 12.8% did not check the gender). The average age of teachers was  $M=42$

years ( $SD=10.54$ ) and ranged from 25 to 64 years of age. The average teachers' work experience at school was  $M=14.63$  years ( $SD=10.23$ ), ranging from several months to 37 years of service.

## 5.2.2. INSTRUMENTS

### 5.2.2.1. *General data*

All participants gave data about age and gender. Teachers also gave data about years of service in schools. Parents and students gave additional data about the socioeconomic status of their families. Three aspects related to socioeconomic status (employment and education of both parents and family income) were estimated by parents. The parent who filled out the questionnaire gave details for the other parent (child's father/mother). Parents' responses for each aspect of SES were rated from 1 (lowest SES) to 4 (highest SES). The overall result was obtained on the basis of the arithmetic mean of all 5 items and theoretically ranged from 1 to 4. Furthermore, students were asked to estimate the socioeconomic status of their families (only family income), where 1 meant lowest SES and 4 highest SES.

### 5.2.2.2. *Attitudes towards People with Physical Disabilities Scale* (*Pedisić & Vulić-Prtorić, 2002*)

All participants filled out the Attitudes towards People with Physical Disabilities Scale. The scale consisted of 25 items which measured attitudes towards people with physical disabilities and could be divided into 3 subscales which measured different aspects of attitudes. The first subscale measured the affective aspect of attitude ( $k=6$ ), e.g. feeling of discomfort in interaction with people with physical disabilities. The second subscale measured the cognitive aspect of attitude ( $k=9$ ), referring to experience of the implications of deviant characteristics and segregation of persons with physical disabilities. The third subscale also measured the cognitive aspect of attitude ( $k=10$ ), e.g. tragic perception of people with physical disabilities. The participants were asked to check their agreement with each single statement on a five-degree Likert type scale, where 1 meant "completely disagree" and 5 meant "fully agree". The result was obtained on the basis of the arithmetic mean of the corresponding items and theoretically ranged from 1 to 5. The higher score indicated a more negative attitude towards persons with physical disabilities. The reliability of the subscales in the conducted study ranged as

follows: Cronbach  $\alpha=0.79-0.89$  for the subscale of the affective aspect of attitude, Cronbach  $\alpha=0.64-0.86$  for the first subscale of the cognitive aspect of attitude, and Cronbach  $\alpha=0.71-0.88$  for the second subscale of the cognitive aspect of attitude.

### *5.2.2.3. Teachers' Attitudes toward Integration of Children with Disabilities Scale (Mihic & Vulić-Prtoric, 2002)*

Teachers also filled out the Teachers' Attitudes toward Integration of Children with Disabilities Scale, which measured teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of children with disabilities in regular schools. The scale consisted of 52 items which estimated teachers' attitudes toward different student disabilities: physical disabilities (k=8), multiple disabilities (k=8), intellectual disabilities (k=8), behavioral disorders (k=8), learning disabilities (k=8) and other disabilities (k=8). Teachers were asked to check their agreement with each single statement on a four-degree Likert type scale, where 1 meant "completely disagree" and 4 "completely agree". The overall result was obtained on the basis of the arithmetic mean of the corresponding items and theoretically ranged from 1 to 4. The reliability of the whole scale in the conducted research was Cronbach  $\alpha=0.95$ , while the reliability for each subscale was as follows: physical disabilities  $\alpha=0.73$ , multiple disabilities  $\alpha=0.81$ , intellectual disabilities  $\alpha=0.79$ , behavioral disorders  $\alpha=0.79$ , learning disabilities  $\alpha=0.79$ , and other disabilities  $\alpha=0.81$ .

### 5.2.3. PROCEDURE

The research was conducted in high schools during the school year. A total of 10 high schools from the Slavonia region participated. Firstly, the co-operation was agreed with the principals and expert staff of each school. Teachers were asked to complete the Teachers' Attitudes toward Integration of Children with Disabilities Scale and the Attitudes towards People with Physical Disabilities Scale and gave some general information. During the regular parent-teacher meetings, homeroom teachers explained the purpose of the research and asked the parents to complete the Attitudes towards People with Physical Disabilities Scale and give information about family socioeconomic status and some general data. During regular classes, homeroom teachers explained the purpose of the research and asked the students to give demographic data and complete the Attitudes towards People with Physical Disabilities Scale. The survey lasted 30 to 45 mi-

notes on average. The research for all groups of participants was completely voluntary and anonymous.

### 5.3. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The tests of normality distribution showed that the distributions of the major research variables did not deviate significantly from the normal distribution. Indexes of asymmetry (Table 1 and 2) did not exceed values greater than 2.00, and since the distribution was asymmetric on the same side, we opted for parametric statistics (Field, 2008).

People with physical disabilities, because of the nature of their difficulties, are often the most visible in society. Given the specificity of physical disabilities in comparison to other disabilities (e.g. intellectual, learning, etc.), on the state-level the Government has been mostly concerned about their equal involvement in the society and public awareness, such as the installation of lifts, custom sidewalks, organization of sport events, increased number of parking places for people with disabilities, etc. According to the Croatian National Strategy for Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities 2007-2015, the Croatian Government has emphasized the protective role of the society, stating the necessity of protecting vulnerable social groups, such as people with disabilities and children with developmental disabilities (Government of the Republic of Croatia, 2007, 1).

#### 5.3.1. ATTITUDES OF TEACHERS, STUDENTS AND PARENTS TOWARDS PEOPLE WITH PHYSICAL DISABILITIES

In order to check the attitudes of teachers, students and parents towards people with physical disabilities, we asked them to complete a questionnaire that measured three aspects of attitudes: if they felt discomfort in interaction with people with physical disabilities (e.g., unpleasant to watch and/or talk to a person who is physically disabled), if they thought that people with physical disabilities had deviant characteristics and therefore needed to be segregated (e.g. people with physical disabilities have a deviant personality profile or it would be best for people with physical disabilities to live and work in separate communities) and whether they had a tragic view of people with physical disabilities (e.g. people



with physical disabilities cannot have a normal social life and/or they over-pity themselves). The average neutral position is denoted by the value 3; if the person shows a negative attitude, the value exceeds 3; and if the person shows a positive attitude, the value is below 3. If the average value (M) of attitudes is closer to 1, then the participant has a more positive attitude towards persons with physical disabilities.

**Table 1.** Teacher, parent and student attitudes towards people with physical disabilities

Attitudes	Participants	N	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	F <sub>(2,1126)</sub>
Affective aspect of attitude: Discomfort in interaction with people with physical disabilities	Teachers	196	1.90	0.80	0.753	-0.130	70.11**
	Parents	192	1.87	0.84	0.949	0.236	
	Students	740	2.56	0.93	0.100	-0.714	
Cognitive aspect of attitude: Implications of deviant characteristics and segregation of persons with physical disabilities	Teachers	196	1.76	0.66	0.643	-0.680	103.28**
	Parents	192	1.90	0.74	0.728	-0.176	
	Students	740	2.40	0.60	0.247	0.292	
Cognitive aspect of attitude: tragic perception of people with physical disabilities	Teachers	196	2.18	0.60	-0.032	-0.627	125.70**
	Parents	192	2.24	0.79	0.390	-.0287	
	Students	740	2.86	0.63	-0.018	0.418	

\*\*  $p < 0.01$

The results (Table 1) show that all participants (teachers, parents and students) had positive attitudes towards people with physical disabilities. All three aspects of attitudes were slightly positive, arguing in favor of the fact that the participants in the research did not feel discomfort in interaction with people with physical disabilities, nor did they believe that persons with physical disabilities had deviating characteristics or that they needed social segregation, and they did not look tragically on people with physical disabilities. Respectively, for both aspects of attitudes (affective, e.g. emotions, compassion; and cognitive, e.g. mental level, understanding) participants showed positive attitudes towards people with physical disabilities.

The obtained results are certainly positive and can be a reflection of the government efforts to make people with physical disabilities feel equal in the society. In addition, they are in accordance with previous studies that have found more positive attitudes toward people with physical disabilities than with other types of disabilities (Chan et al., 2009). It is possible, however, that, due to the various

campaigns that have been conducted in the last five or six years in Croatia on the issue of equalization of the rights of persons with disabilities, research participants were aware that it was desirable for persons with physical disabilities to be equally involved in the community, but the question remains if they were actually ready to take certain steps to make people with physical disabilities really equal participants in the society.

It was further checked whether attitudes towards people with physical disabilities differed between participants. For this purpose, a two-way analysis of variance for independent samples (ANOVA) was conducted to test the difference in attitudes between teachers, parents and students. Table 1 shows the results of the analysis suggesting that there are statistically significant differences between groups of participants in attitudes towards persons with physical disabilities (F test is statistically significant). After a post-hoc analysis with Games-Howell correction, groups of participants that differed in attitudes towards people with physical disabilities were defined. The results show that there were no statistically significant differences in any aspect of attitudes between teachers and parents, but students differed from both groups in all three aspects of attitudes to a statistically significant degree. In comparison with students, all three aspects of parents' and teachers' attitudes toward people with physical disabilities were found to be more positive. Although students had slightly positive attitudes towards people with physical disabilities, the value is very close to neutral (especially the cognitive aspect of tragic view of people with physical disabilities and the affective aspect of experiencing discomfort in interaction with people with physical disabilities). These results are consistent with a previous study which showed that college students had more positive attitudes toward persons with physical disabilities in comparison to primary school students (Leutar & Štambuk, 2006).

It can be concluded that adults are more likely to perceive people with physical disabilities more positively as opposed to adolescents, although we cannot be fully sure of the cause of this difference. It is possible that adults are cognitively, emotionally and morally more mature than adolescents, so their attitudes are consistent with it, but it is equally possible that because of the maturity and the higher degree of development adults are more likely to give socially desirable answers, especially since the present study has tested explicit and not implicit attitudes.

### 5.3.2. TEACHERS' ATTITUDES TOWARD INTEGRATION OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES IN REGULAR SCHOOLS

Integration of students with disabilities into regular high schools, i.e. their right to inclusive education, largely depends on teachers. Although there are numerous laws and regulations that guarantee the right of students with developmental disabilities to enroll into and attend regular schools, the realization of their rights in practice depends heavily on teaching or school staff. For the purpose of obtaining the attitudes of teachers towards integration of children with developmental disabilities in high schools, teachers completed a scale, based on which insight into attitudes of teachers towards integration of students with disabilities was gained. The neutral attitude is expressed by the value 2.5. The greater the value is means teachers had a more positive attitude towards the integration of students with certain disabilities into regular high school. The results of the research show that teachers had positive attitudes towards integrating students with all types of disabilities into regular high schools (Table 2).

It can be concluded that positive attitudes of teachers reflect the awareness and knowledge of teachers about the rights and opportunities of children with disabilities for regular education. However, it should be taken into account that the obtained attitudes are only slightly positive (the values of the attitudes range between 2.5 and 3.0) and are often close to the neutral value. These findings point to the fact that teachers still need to work on raising the awareness of this problem and to involve equally students with different developmental disabilities in regular high schools.

**Table 2.** Teachers' attitudes toward integration of children with disabilities in regular schools

Attitude	N	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	F <sub>(5,185)</sub>
Physical disabilities	196	2.96	0.47	-.594	.616	35.97**
Multiple disabilities	196	2.65	0.56	-.246	-.359	
Intellectual disabilities	196	2.64	0.57	-.082	-.199	
Behavioral disorders	196	2.66	0.57	-.127	-.266	
Learning disabilities	196	2.84	0.52	-.262	-.017	
Other disabilities	196	2.68	0.61	-.611	.076	

\*\*p < 0.01

A post hoc analysis with Bonferroni correction showed that teachers had more positive attitudes toward the integration of students with physical disabilities

than that of students with other disabilities. Teachers also showed more positive attitudes towards integrating students with learning disabilities than all other disabilities (except physical), while for other disabilities there was no statistically significant difference in teachers' attitudes towards the integration of children with developmental disabilities into high schools.

As expected, the most positive attitudes about the inclusion of children with disabilities in regular high schools were related to physical disabilities, followed by learning disabilities. The obtained results are in accordance with a study of Croatian primary schools, where teachers had the most positive attitudes concerning the inclusion of students with physical disabilities, followed by those with learning disabilities, and the most negative for mentally retarded students (Kapetanović, 2013). Apart from the fact that physical disability is the most obvious disability, the Government has so far mostly worked on the social inclusion of this group of people. In addition, learning disabilities are the most commonly recognized disorder in schools, and teachers have some experience and knowledge of working with students with this type of disability.

### 5.3.3. LIMITATIONS OF THE CONDUCTED RESEARCH AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

When considering the obtained results, some methodological limitations should be taken into consideration. One of the research limitations is using the self-evaluation questionnaire for measuring participants' attitudes. Self-evaluation questionnaires were used for all measured variables. Although peoples' attitudes are in correlation with their behavior, participants are prone to give socially desirable answers, especially if they are aware that the Government supports such attitudes. Their behavior in real life is then questionable. Moreover, in the present research, measures of explicit attitudes were used, which could have produced slightly more positive attitudes (Mikić, 2016). Despite the fact that teachers had slightly positive attitudes about the inclusion of children with developmental disabilities in high schools, the issues of students' attitudes toward their peers with developmental disabilities and practical performance in schools still remain. Future research should ask people with physical disabilities what has actually changed in other people's behavior towards them. It is also necessary to use some other behavioral measures of attitudes (especially measures of implicit attitudes) in order to collect more precise and general data.

### 5.3.4. PRACTICAL IMPLICATION

The Faculty of Education, Josip Juraj Strossmayer University in Osijek, has recognized the importance of active professional participation in the inclusion issues, and in 2014 started to actively support the inclusion of children with developmental disabilities in regular schools. A major lack in staff trained to work with children with developmental disabilities in practice has been observed. Because of this, the Faculty of Education has created two brand new educational programs intended for education of class assistants and specialists of inclusive education, which are the first systematic educational programs of this type in Croatia. In the academic year 2015/2016 started the education of the first generation of class assistants for children with developmental disabilities in primary and secondary schools, and the academic year 2017/2018 has been scheduled for the enrollment of the first generation of specialists of inclusive education.

#### *5.3.4.1. The training program for assistants for children with developmental disabilities and persons with disabilities (Velki, 2015a)*

The main objective of the training program for assistants for working with children with developmental disabilities and people with disabilities is to provide adequate information about the specifics of this population and ways to meet their needs. The main tasks of the training program for assistants for working with children with disabilities and persons with disabilities are introducing the participants with the clinical and social manifestation of a particular disability/impediment, clarifying the functioning of education based on inclusive values with the presentation of appropriate development practices and mastering techniques to facilitate the general social inclusion. Due to the existence of differences in the needs of children with developmental disabilities and persons with disabilities, the program is divided into three modules: 1) Module A: Class assistants (in which the first generation 2015/2016 is enrolled); 2) Module B: Assistants for persons with disabilities / personal assistants; 3) Module C: Assistants in kindergartens.

#### 5.3.4.2. *Postgraduate specialist study of inclusive education (Velki, 2015b)*

When we consider the current quality of education for children with developmental disabilities and children at risk, the data indicate the existence of certain problems, such as negative attitudes of teachers, inadequate equipment level of educational institutions and the lack of specialists with educational and rehabilitation profile that could directly work with children and families (Brajša-Žganec et al., 2012). As a special issue, the lack of professional staff and trained professionals highlights why this postgraduate specialist study may help raise the quality of education at all levels. In addition, due to the increase in the total number of children with developmental disabilities and children exposed to risk factors that will be included in the regular educational system, starting a postgraduate specialist study of inclusive education is a timely response to current and future demographic and social changes. The main objective of this program is the acquisition of theoretical knowledge necessary for understanding the problems of working with socially marginalized groups (children and young people with developmental disabilities or exposed to risk factors, and persons with disabilities) within different programs of inclusive education and planning of counseling and rehabilitation interventions depending on needs of end beneficiaries (children, young people and adults). The emphasis is on practical and experiential learning and practicing acquired skills, which should be applied in direct work with children. The program is mainly designed for all teachers and people within the educational institutions who are working with children with developmental disabilities.

### 5.4. CONCLUSION

The present study shows slightly positive attitudes toward people with physical disabilities, although they are less positive in the group of high school students compared to their parents and teachers. Despite the fact that the government efforts for equalization of the rights of people with disabilities have had some positive influence, it is still very important to work on the rights and inclusion of all people with different types of disability, and not only on the rights and inclusion of persons with physical ones. Teachers also show positive attitudes towards the integration of students with all types of disability into regular high schools, but they are more positive only for students with certain disabilities (e.g. physical and learning disabilities) while for some others the attitude is almost neutral

(intellectual and multiple disabilities). Appropriate teacher education is necessary in order to implement the inclusion in Croatian schools, and the Faculty of Education has proposed some new study programs as a solution for the problem of inclusive education in Croatia.

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