SENSITIZATION OF PARENTS OF CHILDREN OF PEERS INVOLVED IN THE INCLUSIVE PROCESS IN MACEDONIA AND BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

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Abstract:

The global trend of incorporating students with disabilities into mainstream education is on the rise, a phenomenon observed in countries like Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, the attitudes of parents with typically developing children play a pivotal role in shaping the educational journey of students with special needs within regular school systems. This study aims to delve into the level of sensitization among parents of typically developing students concerning their peers with diverse developmental disabilities in Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Data for this investigation were collected through a survey comprising 10 questions, each offering 3/4 possible responses. The sample size includes 90 parents of typically developing students attending regular schools across North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Thematic analysis of survey results unveils challenges and barriers in the inclusive education process, shedding light on parental sensitization. This exploration identifies specific issues and proposes potential solutions to enhance the inclusivity of the education system. The identified issues emphasize the necessity for targeted interventions and proactive measures to raise awareness among parents, fostering a more supportive and inclusive educational environment. By suggesting plausible solutions, this study contributes to the ongoing discourse on inclusive education, serving as a foundation for further research and practical initiatives.

Keywords: North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sensitization, Parents, Students with Developmental Disabilities, Inclusive Education.

INTRODUCTION

In numerous nations, policies and legislation have codified the entitlement to inclusive education for all students, with an increasing global participation of learners in inclusive schooling (Round et al., 2016).

In recent years, a discernible global shift towards inclusive education has emerged, transcending borders and impacting diverse educational landscapes, including regions undergoing significant transformations such as North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The core essence of inclusive education lies in the integration of students with developmental disabilities into mainstream school systems, aiming to provide equal opportunities and nurture diversity within learning environments. While this progressive shift is evident on an international scale, it brings to the forefront a critical consideration: the pivotal role of attitudes in shaping the success of inclusive education. Beyond the structural changes in educational systems, the attitudes of educators, administrators, and the broader community play a central role in determining the efficacy of inclusive practices. This recognition underscores the need for a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics surrounding attitudes, as they profoundly impact the inclusivity, acceptance, and overall success of the inclusive education paradigm. As educational landscapes continue to evolve, acknowledging and addressing these attitudes becomes paramount in ensuring that inclusive education realizes its potential to create equitable and enriching learning environments for all students.
Achieving success in inclusive education is intricately linked to achieving success in societal inclusion. Simultaneously, it is crucial to consider various other groups of children and young individuals involved in the inclusive process. Beyond just focusing on children with developmental disabilities, inclusive education encompasses an educational system that remains accessible to all children requiring additional assistance and support during their growth (Mujkanović & Mujkanović, 2018).

Certainly, an additional obstacle involves how parents of children with typical development will embrace the inclusion of the child in the class. Likewise, collaboration with the teaching staff, devising a suitable working methodology aligned with the child's abilities, and ensuring professional support present ongoing challenges (Mujkanović, 2023).

Parents of typically developing children exhibit favorable sentiments regarding the integration of children with developmental disabilities. Their most affirmative outlook is directed towards the inclusion of children with sensory impairments (auditory, visual) and those with moderate or mild intellectual disability. However, a less optimistic stance is observed when it comes to the inclusion of children with more pronounced developmental disabilities, such as autism or severe intellectual disability (Tomić & Nikolić, 2021).

In a qualitative study conducted in the United States, exploring the perspectives of parents of typically developing peers on the inclusion of children with disabilities in early childhood development classrooms, (Sira et al., 2018) discovered that these parents not only endorsed inclusion but also took active measures to educate their children about accepting all peers. Upon their children sharing information about a peer's disability or behavior, these parents encouraged their children to befriend and offer support when necessary. Similarly, a quantitative study conducted in Norway focused on the attitudes and satisfaction of parents of children with disabilities regarding inclusion in physical

education classes. In this study by (Wilhelmsen et al., 2019), parents expressed positive attitudes towards inclusive education.

Both parents of children with disabilities and parents of typically developing peers shared the belief that teachers might encounter challenges in effectively instructing all students in the classroom. While parents of children with disabilities expressed concerns about teachers lacking the necessary pedagogical skills to include their children in lessons (Mann et al., 2015), parents of typically developing peers voiced worries that teachers might allocate more time to children with disabilities, potentially affecting the educational experience of their own children negatively (Lohmann et al., 2018). It is evident that parents of children with disabilities consider their active involvement in schools crucial to ensure that their children receive the required attention in the classroom.

Several studies have indicated that parents with higher levels of education tend to exhibit more favorable attitudes toward practicing inclusive education compared to those with limited or no formal qualifications (Abu-Hamour and Muhaidat, 2014; Akpede et al., 2018; Amponteng et al., 2019; Lohmann et al., 2018; Su et al., 2018; Torgbenu et al., 2018; Zanobini et al., 2018). In an examination of factors influencing parental attitudes, knowledge, and social norms that promote the implementation of inclusive education in Nigeria, (Torgbenu et al., 2018) enlisted parents of both children with disabilities and typically developing peers to evaluate their perspectives.

Duhaney and Salend (2000) undertook a literature review examining the experiences of parents with and without children with disabilities in relation to inclusive educational programs. Their review incorporated 17 studies, encompassing perspectives from two studies involving mothers of children with disabilities and 15 studies involving parents of both children with and without disabilities. The findings from this review indicated that a significant proportion of parents of children with disabilities endorse inclusion and generally hold positive attitudes toward inclusive education. This positivity extends to their beliefs about the crucial role of inclusion in supporting their child's learning, as well as their social and emotional development. Despite these positive sentiments, parents in the reviewed studies expressed apprehensions concerning schools' capability to adequately address their child's needs. These concerns included worries about the provision of personalized and differentiated support, along with anxieties about their child's acceptance by peers. A more recent review conducted by (De Boer et al., 2010) yielded similar findings. This review encompassed 10 studies published since 1998, exploring parental attitudes towards inclusive education. It revealed that a majority of parents surveyed in these studies held positive attitudes towards inclusion; however, they also voiced concerns about schools' ability to meet their child's needs, citing challenges such as a lack of individualized instruction and limited resources.

METODOLOGY

Research Problem: The research problem revolves around the attitudes of parents with typically developing children and their impact on the educational experiences of students with diverse developmental disabilities in the context of inclusive education in North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Subject of Research: The subject of the research is the level of sensitization among parents of typically developing students regarding their peers with diverse developmental disabilities in the inclusive education systems of North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Aim of Research: The aim of the research is to explore and understand the level of sensitization among parents of typically developing students and how their attitudes may influence the inclusive education process for students with developmental disabilities in regular schools in North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Hypothesis:

(H1): It is assumed that there is a correlation between the level of parental sensitization and the inclusiveness of educational experiences for students with developmental disabilities in regular schools in North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

(H2): It is assumed that there is no difference in parents' attitudes towards inclusive education between North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

(H3): It is assumed that the challenges identified in the sensitization of parents significantly affect the overall inclusiveness of the educational system for students with disabilities, and addressing these challenges can lead to improvements in the inclusiveness of regular schools.

Research Methods and Techniques: The research employed a survey methodology to collect data. The survey consisted of 10 questions, each providing 3/4 possible responses. The sample size for the study included 90 (45 from Macedonia & 45 from BiH) parents of typically developing students attending regular schools across North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Thematic analysis was applied to the survey results to unveil challenges and barriers in the inclusive education process and to gain insights into parental sensitization. This qualitative method helped identify specific issues and propose potential solutions to enhance the inclusivity of the education system.

The research also involved a comparative analysis between North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina to understand regional variations and similarities in parental attitudes towards inclusive education. The findings from this research can contribute to informed decision-making and the development of targeted interventions to improve the inclusive education environment in both countries.
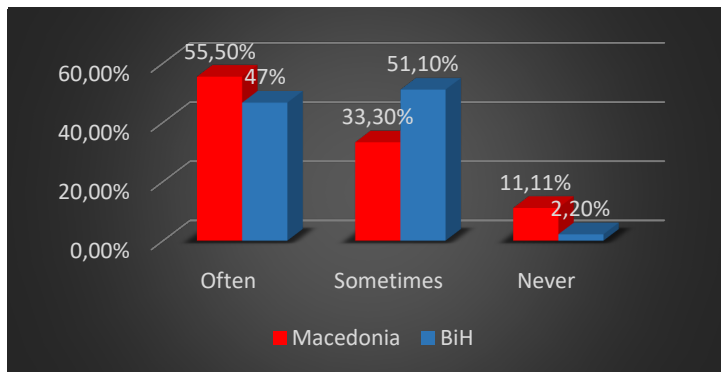
RESULTS

Figure 1 *I know a child with difficulties or a person with a disability!*
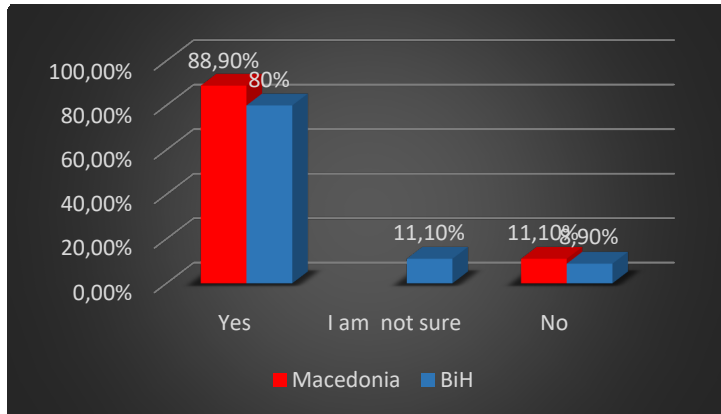
In terms of how many of the respondents know a child with a disability, in the largest percentage they know a child with difficulties, North Macedonia even 88%, and Bosnia and Herzegovina 80%.

Figure 2 *How often do you meet children with difficulties or people with disabilities?*

Regarding the question of how often they meet a child with disabilities, 55% of respondents from North Macedonia answered often, 33% answered that sometimes, while 11% answered that they never meet a child with disabilities. Respondents from Bosnia and Herzegovina 47% often meet a child with disabilities, 51% sometimes, and only 2% answered that they never meet a child with disabilities.

Figure 3 *I am uncomfortable around children with disabilities or people with disabilities!*
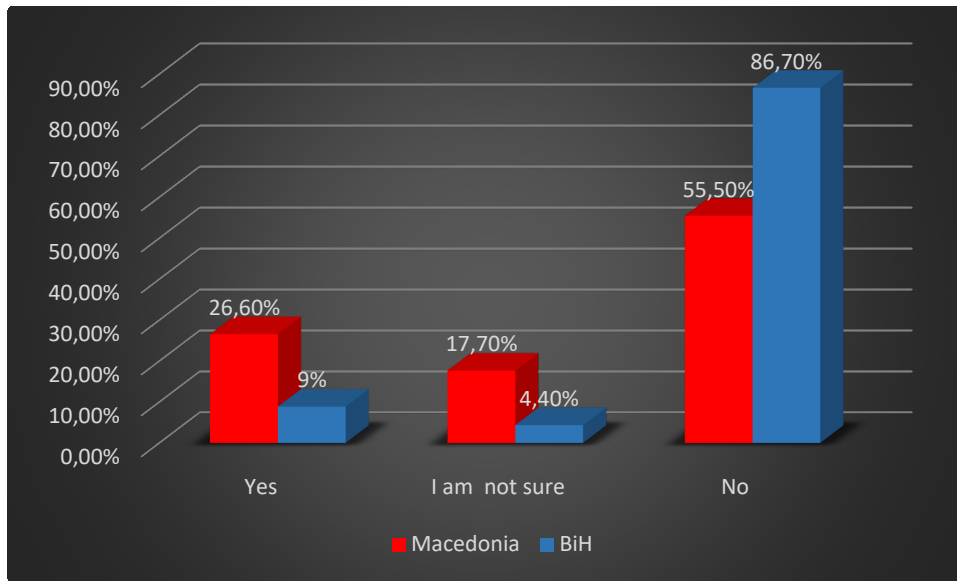

Regarding whether they feel uncomfortable in the presence of a person with disabilities, the majority of respondents from both North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina answered that they do not feel uncomfortable.

Figure 4 *I am okay with my child having a friend with a disability!*
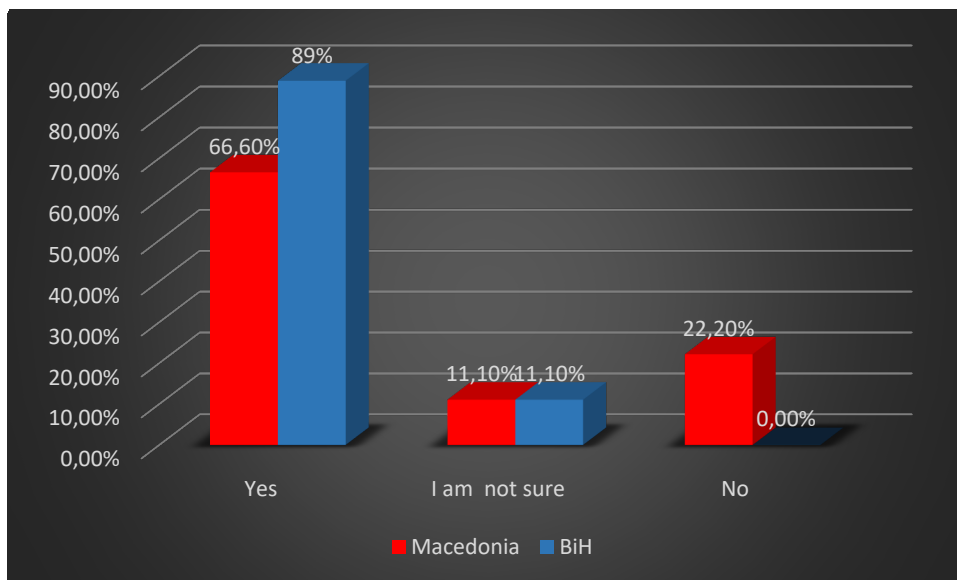

Respondents from both countries have a positive attitude towards it if their child has a friend with disabilities.

Figure 5 *I would be fine with a child with developmental disabilities sitting in a desk with my child during class!*
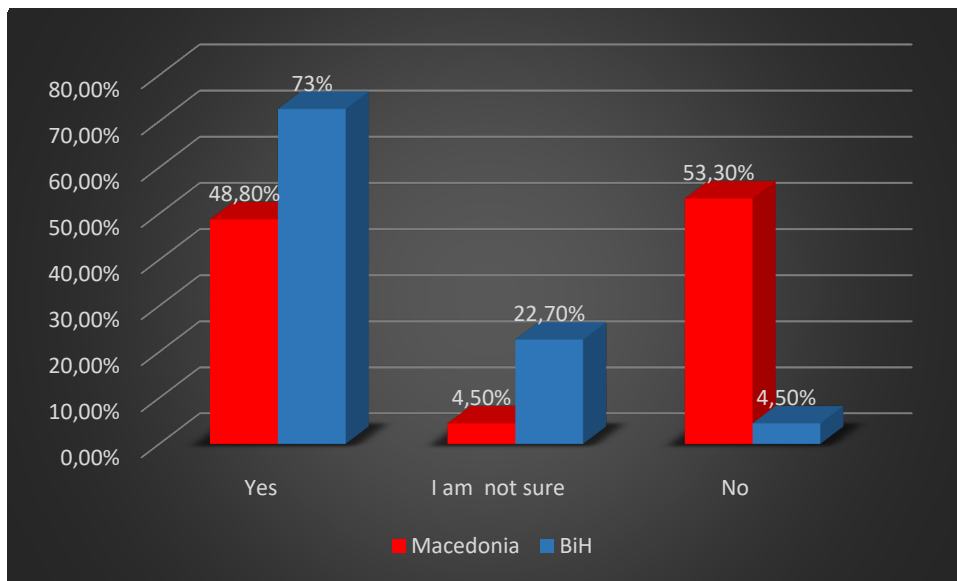

On the question of whether the respondent's child can sit in a school desk together with a child with a disability in North Macedonia, we have an almost divided opinion, 47% have a positive attitude, while 53% have a negative attitude. Regarding the same issue in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the largest number of respondents 73% declared that they would like it, while 22% are not sure if it is good.

Figure 6 *I feel sorry for children with disabilities and adults with disabilities!*
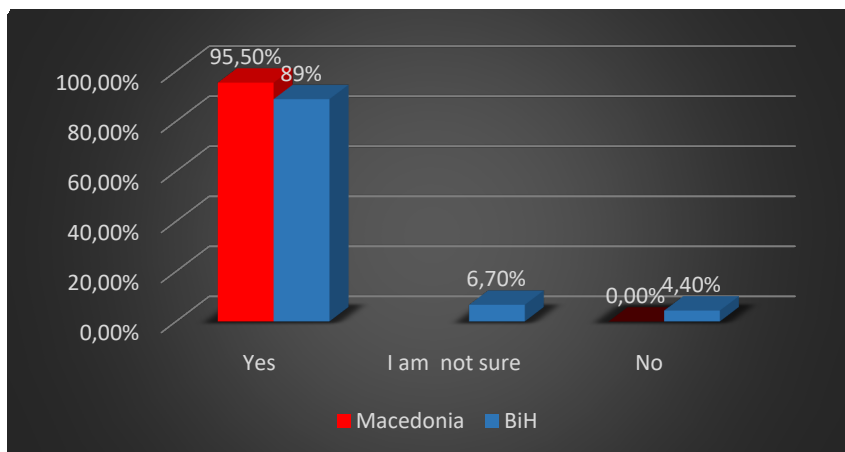

Quite a large percentage 95% in North Macedonia and 89% in Bosnia and Herzegovina feel pity for people with disabilities.

Figure 7 *I would invite a child with a disability to celebrate my child's birthday.*
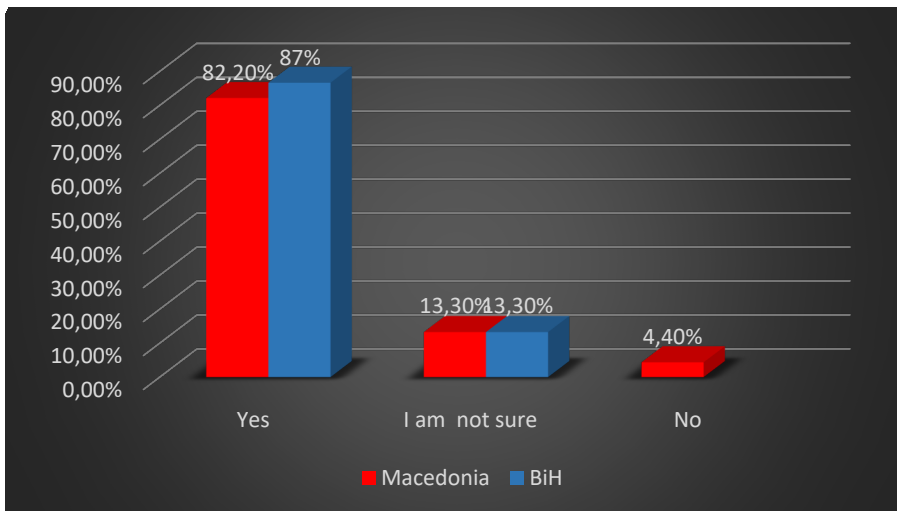

According to the answers, 82% of respondents from North Macedonia and 87% of respondents from Bosnia and Herzegovina would invite a child with disabilities to their child's birthday party.

Figure 8 *I know how to communicate with people with various types of disabilities. I don't need any more information***!**
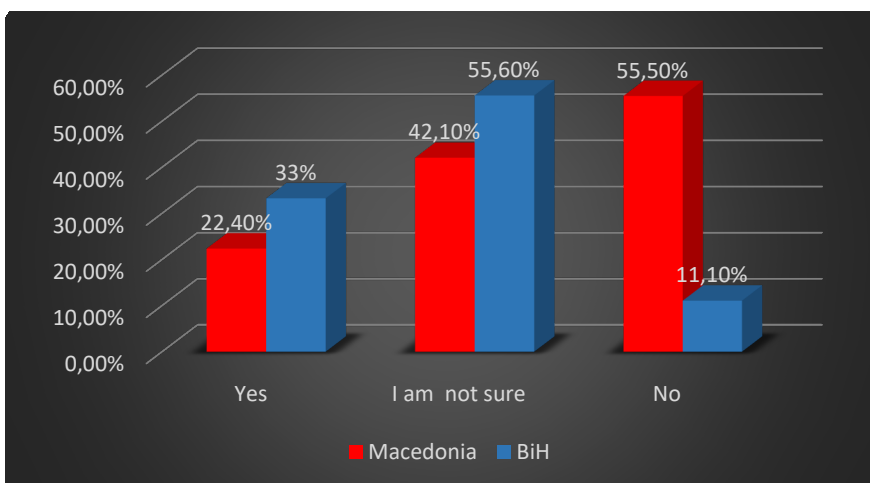

Regarding the question of whether respondents know how to communicate with a person with various types of disability and whether they need additional information, we received a variety of answers: 22% of the respondents from North Macedonia answered that they know, 42% that they are not sure, and even 55% that they do not know. The situation is slightly different with respondents from Bosnia and Herzegovina where 33% answered affirmatively, 55% that they are not sure and a small percentage of 11% that they do not know.

Figure 9 *I explained to my child how to relate to children with difficulties and people with various types of disabilities!*
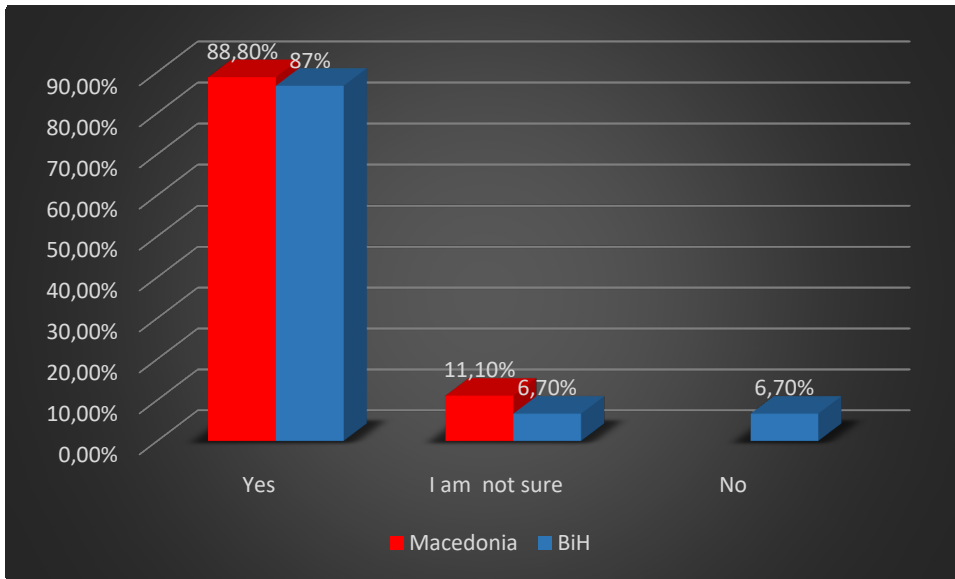
Regarding children's awareness of children with developmental disabilities, the majority of them in both countries are informed by their parents.

Figure 10 *I want my child to learn more about the attitude towards children with difficulties and people with disabilities at school!*
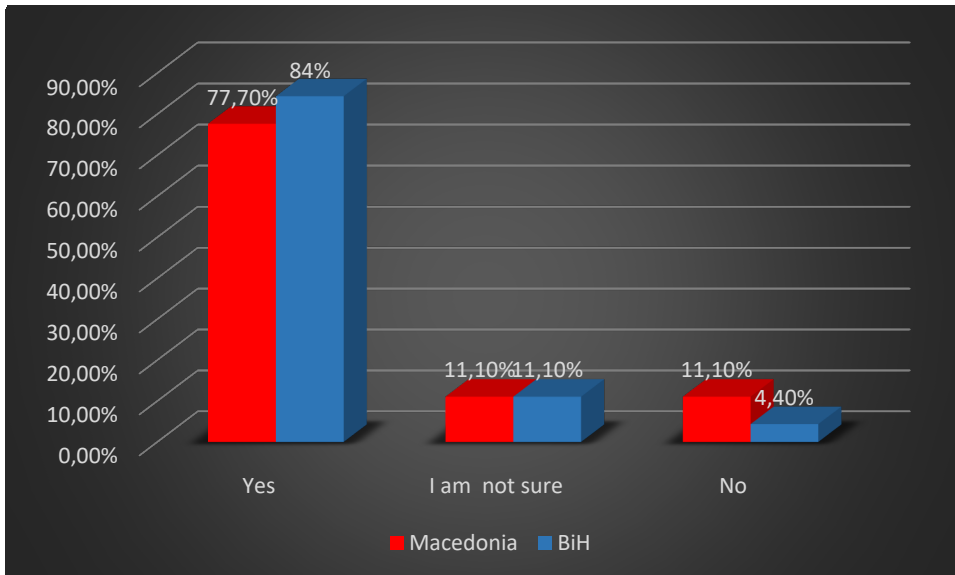
The largest percentage of parents want their children to learn something more about children with disabilities. 77 percent of respondents in North Macedonia and 84 percent of respondents in Bosnia and Herzegovina answered positively. While a very small percentage from both countries are either not sure if they want to learn, or don't want to.

Discussion

Regarding the verification of the set hypotheses, the existence of a correlation between the level of parental sensitization and the inclusiveness of educational experiences for students with developmental disabilities in regular schools in North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, perceived through the responses of the respondents, confirms our first hypothesis. We have a complete confirmation of the second hypothesis that there are no differences in the attitudes of the respondents from both countries regarding inclusive education. The challenges identified in the sensitization of parents significantly affect the overall inclusiveness of the educational system for students with disabilities, and dealing with these challenges can lead to the improvement of the inclusiveness of regular schools in North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, thus confirming the third hypothesis.

Globally, the existence of inequality in society has sparked conversations about equity and providing everyone with equal access to opportunity. According to (Ainscow and Sandill, 2010), inclusive education has been recognized as a crucial policy to create a society in which every child attends regular schools and realizes their full potential.

Above all, it appears that effective inclusive practices depend heavily on public education regarding the application of inclusive education. This emphasizes how important it is for legislators and teacher educators to work with schools to find practical strategies to involve parents in the educational process. Parental attitudes can be changed through programs like cultural orientation (McBrien, 2011), parental engagement about their role and contributions (Mendez, 2010), hiring parents as teaching assistants, and door-to-door sensitization campaigns, which are used in Samoa (Samoa Ministry of Education, Sports, and Culture, 2016). This will make both the home and the school aware of their responsibilities for the effective implementation of inclusive education for all students.

In addition to delivering high-quality instruction, inclusive education is thought to be essential in helping children with special education needs form friendships and win acceptance from others. The following are some advantages of inclusive education, per (Allen and Cowdery, 2005): First of all, students always have this essential right, equal education for all children, regardless of their talents or impairments; second, the chance to help pupils advance their social skills; and third, access to high-quality education. The Malaysian Ministry of Education chose to integrate SEN students into national schools as part of a reform push to educate the community and raise awareness of the educational rights of children and youth with disabilities in order to facilitate such societal harmony (Jelas & Ali, 2012; Ali, Mustapha, & Jelas, 2006). The fact that students can attend school alongside their peers despite having special needs is something that many educators, parents, and people with special needs are happy about (Beacham & Rouse, 2012; Krahé & Altwasser, 2006).

Students with and without impairments benefited greatly from an inclusive approach to SEN in terms of social interactions (Hwang and Evans, 2011) also found that teachers showed that they comprehended the social role of inclusion by pointing out that children without disabilities acquired the ability to recognize and comprehend those who were unique. Teachers in this study are aware of the distinction between integrating and fully incorporating kids with disabilities because they want students with special education needs to be welcomed as much as possible among their peers. Parents, families, and peer

groups have an impact on children's social development, according to (Desforges, Abouchaar, and Britain, 2003).

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