

# **Theoretical review of the inclusive approach of the learning difficulties in the ESL classroom in Bosnia and Herzegovina**

**Elma Velić Bešić**

*Bosnia and Herzegovina*

## **Abstract:**

Learning difficulties (LDs) refer to a range of complex and often misunderstood neurological-based processing challenges. In most cases, these processing cause challenges to the acquisition of basic skills such as reading, writing and math. Different teaching methods may need to be applied to compensate for the specific aspects of learning that children find challenging to a process of learning. In most ESL classrooms, there are no qualified special needs teachers or teachers who are trained to work with students with learning difficulties. Even if there are, only a few teachers are trained on how to deal with learning disabilities in an ESL classroom and there is very little information on the subject. This paper will introduce the research concerning the difficulties and the education in the inclusive system among the teachers in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

**Keywords:** inclusion, specific learning difficulties, dyslexia, ADHD, special education, teacher training

## **1. Introduction**

Children with Disabilities are expected to "fit" within the existing system and in Bosnia and Herzegovina. During the reforms and strategies for children with disabilities, only theoretical part of fitting in is alive. Inclusion, the term that everyone is familiar with, is implemented in 2004 and since then, only a few crucial aspects of educational expectations has been implemented. The main point, apart from children with disabilities, is the schools, where the inclusion has been implemented. Teachers of any subject, including English as a second language, have not been prepared nor educated to work with students with disabilities of any kind. Even after a decade, most of the schools are not equipped and teachers are still not informed and educated enough. During the research, among the fellow teachers, and working at the state primary school, I have noticed many aspects of inclusion implemented, but also many aspects still untouched and superficially used. Yet in 2016, the Inclusion Strategy in the Una-Sana Canton has been introduced and the seven-year plan of inclusion in this Canton is planned.

The five-day educational workshops for teachers' assistants, which included more than 300 teachers, were held in 2015, as a part of the Strategy and in 2016, teaching assistants will be included into the Inclusive classroom. Apart from that, not many educational workshops were organized nor any other kind of education for teachers who work in Primary or Secondary schools.

This paper will introduce Learning difficulties in classrooms in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in the second language acquisition, the teachers' education, and training, and how the difficulties are seen in their classrooms.

## 2. Inclusion in numbers

The term Special education or Kids with Special needs, as we call them among us, has evolved since the introducing of the Inclusion in 2004. Everyone knows about it, everybody talks about it, but very few actually are familiarized with the terms, definitions, strategies, accommodation or testing, when it comes to different kinds of kids with disabilities or difficulties. Teachers are aware of the situation, the lack of education towards the special education needs, and there are not enough experts to recognize and help both sides. It is possible that in every classroom in Bosnia and Herzegovina, one child with difficulty is present. The fact that the categorization of the children happens only when the disabilities are visible or when the difficulties are in the severe level, lots of children in primary school are not ever recognized as those having the difficulties, and some of them even graduate high school without being categorized or recognized, being labeled as 'bad students' or lazy ones. According to Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) " Specific learning disability is "a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which disorder may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations. " Learning disabilities are both real and permanent. In the United States of America, every fifth child has the learning difficulty. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, in the research analysis of the Federal ministry of education, about the number of kids with some disability is roughly made and cannot advocate the right situation in the country.

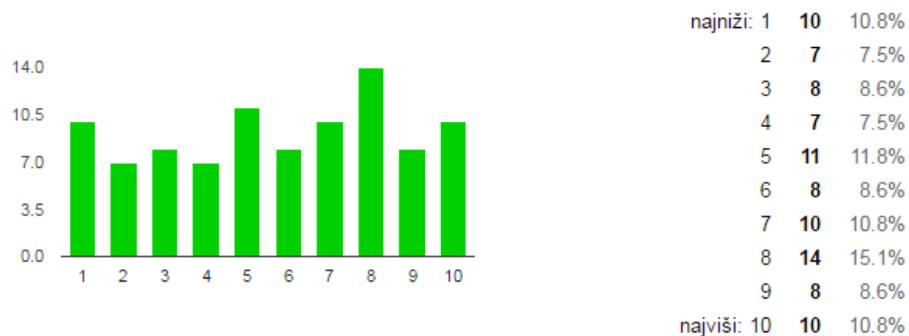
Table 1: The review of the number of children with disabilities in different cantons in Bosnia and Herzegovina presented in the Analysis of the Inclusion.

Red. br.	Kantoni u FBiH	Broj djece s teškoćama u razvoju	Broj Roma i pripadnika drugih nacionalnih manjina	Broj djece povratnika	Broj djece iz ruralnih/udaljenijih sredina	Broj djece iz porodica sa niskim socio-ekonomskim statusom	Broj djece bez jednog ili oba roditelja
1.	USK	625	80 (Romi)	-	3147	822	936
2.	PK	51	4	-	380	82	18
3.	TK	306	-	-	-	-	-
4.	ZDK	379	310 (Romi)	-	-	-	717
5.	BPK	111	9	130	93	238	49
6.	SBK	503	219 (Romi)	-	-	-	-
7.	HNK	186	162	1159	4986	986	308
8.	ZHK	30	-	-	-	-	-
9.	KS	1953	178 (Romi)	-	-	-	-
10.	K10	-	-	-	-	-	-

As you can see in the table that the recording of the children with disabilities distinguished by the cantons and it is not categorized in details or disability areas. Learning difficulties are not even recorded and probably not even data collected. In the research I conducted among my fellow teachers, about the *difficulties*, I have come to the results which confirmed my starting point of research. In the first poll I had ninety-six teachers from Bosnia and Herzegovina, randomly selected, where I compared their answers based on the question asked about the Inclusion or Children with difficulties.

Figure 1: The figure showing the poll results of the question about the school adequacy in implementing inclusion, by the teachers' opinions.

Na ljestvici od 1 do 10, koliko je vaša škola uključena u inkluziju?



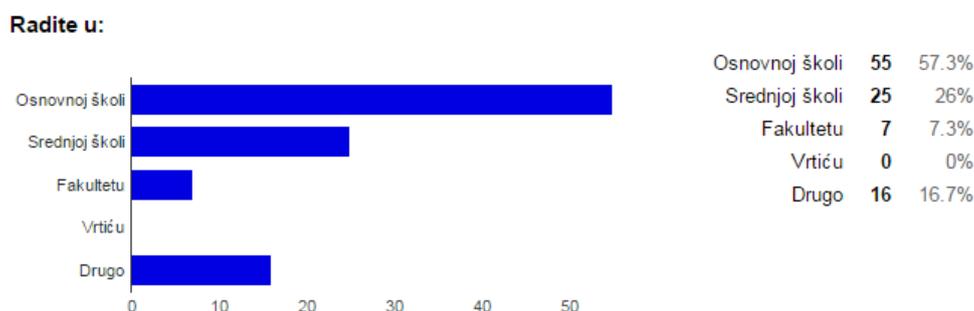
An interesting fact is that 10.8% of the lowest number on the scale, eight of ten were primary school teachers, and only two out of ten, from the highest number of the scale, were high school teachers.

Table 2: The review of the factors which directly affect the at the Inclusion level in the Primary schools in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina according to the Research of the Federal ministry of Education

Red. br.	Kantoni u FBiH	Prilagođen ulaz u školsku zgradu (pristup)	Arhitektonske barijere unutar školskih objekata	Uključenost roditelja	Podrška drugih relevantnih službi i institucija
1.	USK	82% škola DA	U planu adaptacija jednog broja školskih objekata	DA, ali pojedini roditelji ne pokazuju spremnost za saradnju	DA, ali ne direktno školama
2.	PK	Uglavnom NE	Uglavnom nisu otklonjene	Uglavnom DA	DA, ali njihov rad nije dovoljno uvezan
3.	TK	DA	Uglavnom nisu otklonjene	DA, ali pojedini roditelji ne pokazuju spremnost za saradnju	DA, ali nedovoljna
4.	ZDK	Određen broj škola DA	U određenom broju škola otklonjene	DA	DA
5.	BPK	DA	Uglavnom nisu otklonjene	DA	DA
6.	SBK	Određen broj škola DA	U određenom broju škola otklonjene	DA	Nije navedeno
7.	HNK	Uglavnom NE	Uglavnom nisu otklonjene	DA, ali pojedini roditelji ne pokazuju spremnost za saradnju	DA, ali na pojedinačnoj osnovi
8.	ZHK	DA	Nije navedeno	DA	DA
9.	KS	DA u 26% škola	DA u 26% škola	DA	DA
10.	K10	-	-	-	-
	Ukupno	3 kantona u potpunosti, 4 djelimično	U 3 kantona djelimično otklonjene	9 kantona uključilo roditelje u rad škola.	U 4 kantona dobra podrška, u 4 kantona podrška postoji ali nije dovoljna.

As shown in table 2, only three cantons have the ramp for wheelchairs and are physically accessible, while others are superficially equipped or not equipped at all.

Figure 2: The review of the schools level where teachers work



The figure above shows where the teachers, who took the poll, work and as shown, most of the teachers work in the primary school, where again, due to my poll, 64.8% teachers, who answered the highest number, as to confirm that their school is prepared for the inclusion, work in primary school, while only 37.2% work in high school. As for those results, the expert teams, educational seminars and conferences or any other teams for support and improvement are rare or nonexistent. Only in the Canton Sarajevo the expert team, as well as teaching assistants and other aspects of support are implemented, while in some cantons almost nothing of the asked was present.

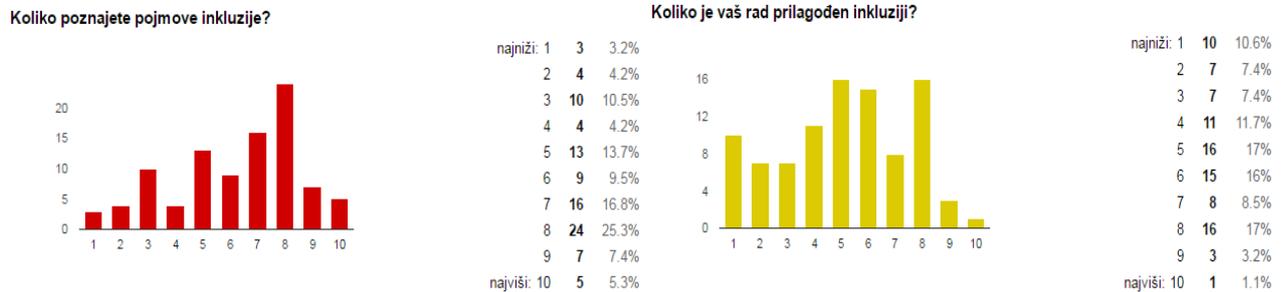
Table 3: The review of the presence of experts, teams of support and other aspects of inclusive support in the cantons

Red. br.	Kantoni u FBiH	Mobilni stručni timovi	Školski timovi za inkluzivno obrazovanje	Asistenti u nastavi	Stručno usavršavanje	Druga vrsta podrške
1.	<b>USK</b>	NE	NE	DA <sup>40</sup>	DA	DA
2.	<b>PK</b>	NE	NE	NE	DA	nije navedeno
3.	<b>TK</b>	NE	NE	NE	DA	nije navedeno
4.	<b>ZDK</b>	NE	DA	NE	DA	DA
5.	<b>BPK</b>	NE	DA	NE	DA	DA
6.	<b>SBK</b>	NE	DA <sup>41</sup>	NE	nije navedeno	DA
7.	<b>HNK</b>	NE (ali je u toku)	NE	NE	DA	DA
8.	<b>ZHK</b>	NE	NE	NE	DA	DA
9.	<b>KS</b>	DA	NE	DA <sup>42</sup>	DA	DA
10.	<b>K10</b>	-	DA <sup>43</sup>	-	-	-
	<b>Ukupno:</b>	<b>1 kanton</b>	<b>4 kantona</b>	<b>2 kantona</b>	<b>8 kantona</b>	<b>7 kantona</b>

In the table above, the professional development for teachers is present in eight cantons. In the mentioned poll, with randomly picked teachers, as you can see, most teachers are still not familiarized with the inclusion terms, and teaching children with disabilities. This doesn't

prove that all teachers are not educated enough or informed, but these results still have to be taken into account and approach to them with care.

Figure 3: The results of the poll about the inclusion and teachers' information and involvement



In brief, the educational aspect of the implementation of the inclusion has lacked its purpose, and while numbers show that we can recognize children with disabilities and familiarize with the terms of the inclusion, the proper teacher training and involvement of the teachers in the expert teams is inevitable.

## 2.1. Learning difficulties in ESL classroom

As stated in the previous pages, Learning difficulties are not even included in the research, and if so they are subjoined to some of the disabilities that are mentioned in the research. Why do I think this is a huge lapse? Learning difficulties, especially in the second language acquisition, are the main problem and worry, mostly because they are not being recognized nor treated fairly. The most common and problematic type of learning difficulty in the second language acquisition are those that impact the areas of reading. Dyslexia is the term associated with specific learning disabilities in reading but also difficulty with phonemic awareness, decoding, phonological processing, spelling, vocabulary, comprehension and written expression. Dyslexia might be the worst problem for teachers and a silent suffer for students if the difficulty is not recognized. Also, Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is a brain-based disorder that results in hyperactivity, distractibility or a combination of both, with some other characteristics as well. It is also a difficulty that cannot be seen if not in severe level or could be recognized as badly behaved or negligent child. Other difficulties, such as Dysgraphia, Auditory Processing Deficit, Visual Processing Deficit and Dyscalculia, can severely damage child's motivation and school success if not recognized, treated and helped by the teachers and community. "Learning disabilities are not a prescription for failure. With the right kinds of instruction, guidance and support, there are no limits to what individuals with LD can achieve." (Sheldon H. Horowitz, Ed.D., Director of LD Resources National Center for Learning Disabilities). Most of the students, who have LD and are not categorized, usually don't participate in school activities or are labeled as bad or lazy. Very important part of the education of students with LD is the awareness of the difficulty, education and support of the teacher and community and also self-acceptance, as being a different learner. Every student is different and every student has its own learning styles. Being different, students with LD have the difficult time adjusting to teachers' styles of teaching, subject or environment in which the learning is taking place. "Apart from having

academic problems, students with LD also have social and career problems later in life. In addition, families may experience stress related to the social and behavioral problems often experienced by children with LD "(Dyson, 2003). Peer rejection and social difficulties are most significant for children who have both LD and AD/HD (Wiener, 2004) and are of concern to parents. Early intervention during the first three years of schooling is essential for children with LD. A primary focus of research over the past two decades has been on the prevention of reading failure. The early years are the focus for the prevention of reading difficulties and children who get off to a poor start in reading rarely "catch up" (Lentz, 1988; Neuman & Dickinson, 2001; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Torgesen, 1998; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2001)."

Motivation is the main aspect of children's lives. They should believe in themselves, in the possibility to succeed no matter what kind of difficulty they have or what level of the difficulty there is. Teachers should be prepared and educated for working with students with LD in a way to understand them, use different strategies and know how to accommodate and assess. Usually, the wrong impression is made about the education of teachers due to recognizing and working with children with LD. Teachers are not obligated to recognize and diagnose the difficulty, but to recognize symptoms and know how to approach them professionally. After that, an expert or team of experts should recognize, diagnose and record the difficulties, if present and help teachers to create and support the child in the best manner. Also, one more misunderstanding about teachers' education is that the teacher should know how to create the curriculum and lesson plan right after the difficulty is stated. Every child with LD is different and it has its own characteristics, which might correlate with other children and difficulties, but only the experts can characterize and make assumptions and solutions towards someone's difficulty and way of supporting it. Teachers should be aware of the difficulties, be educated enough to use different teaching styles, strategies, and methods, and be considerate and understand different needs of every child. Accommodation is the key to working with children with LD, where teachers can approach every kid with the different style or individually, based on the need. "An accommodation is a change or alteration to the regular way a student is expected to learn, complete assignments or participates in the classroom" (Alberta Education, 2002, p. 47). Participation in the classroom, based on the skills and knowledge of a child with LD can be measured by the task appropriate instructions, towards the subject and the child's possibilities. Teaching instructions, such as differentiation and individualization can help the child to participate in the activities and task which he is capable of doing and which are differentiated in such a way that no one could notice his or her difficulty. Differentiation—one facet of expert teaching—reminds us that these things are unlikely to happen for the full range of students unless curriculum and instruction fit each individual, unless students have choices about what to learn and how, unless students take part in setting learning goals, and unless the classroom connects with the experiences and interest of the individual (Tomlinson, 1995, 1999). Differentiating the classroom eases the lesson process for everyone – teacher, because based on what you are differentiating, the lesson will be successful and for the student because everyone gets what he can do and give their maximum in every lesson. Individualization has been designed to help students with LD or any other difficulty in addressing the lesson in different style for better understanding and assistance. You can use individualization with students who don't have any difficulty in a

way of stations. That's how you can split the content of the lesson, its pace and methods of teaching. No matter what furniture is in your room, stations are possible.

The individualization for students with LD can be implemented in many ways, but the best and most productive one would be with assistive technology, specially developed for learners with LD. Assistive technology is actually a piece of equipment or system that helps people work around or compensate for learning difficulties. Assistive technology helps increase the independence of the person with learning differences. Many times, students with LD rely on someone to help them do some assignments, such as teaching assistants, siblings, peers or parents. Using assistive technology can make the students with LD more independent, individually task oriented and perform activities on their own feeling confident and successful. "For people without disabilities, technology makes things easier. For people with disabilities, technology makes things possible (Cardinali and Gordon, 2002). Unfortunately, many schools in Bosnia and Herzegovina don't have enough financial help to provide such technology, so teachers usually just use what they have, meaning computers and sometimes some online exercises. Assessment in the classroom can include observation and reviewing the student's work, progress and process of learning, monitoring the development and use of learning strategies and habits, but also understanding what student is capable doing. Assessing students with LD are based on what he can do and not on what he cannot do. By assessing, teachers have to think about what do they want to assess – the difficulty of that student or the hard work he put in that learning despite the difficulty. Understanding one's own abilities and accepting them as a part of personality, helps teachers to have more productive and successful lessons, teach every child to his highest potential and carry out the goals specified in the curriculum. With different strategies, instructions, methods and assistive technology, teachers can succeed in their intentions and development of their plan.

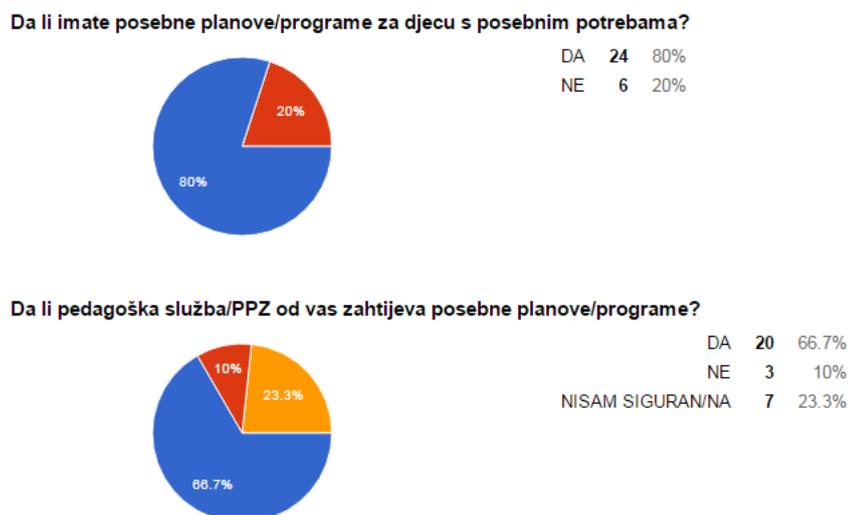
## **2.2. Teacher training for the ESL teachers**

Among many online courses for teachers and all others, interested in learning difficulties such as Dyslexia, ADHD or Speech impairment, there are not many courses, seminars or training for aspiring teachers in Bosnia and Herzegovina. During faculty years, teachers don't get enough information nor exercise and examples to work with children with any disability or difficulty. Usually, when teachers start working in a school, they familiarize themselves with terms, methodology, difficulties and other aspects of teaching, struggle for a while and sometimes never find the right solution for their problem. With the sponsorship of the American Embassy in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the project Face the difficulties and study with me has been implemented. The main goal of the project is to inform and educate teachers in the Una-Sana canton about the learning difficulties and provide enough information about working with students who have some of the difficulty. Hence, teachers will have opportunities to meet and discuss the possible solutions to problems, exchange experience, and materials and help each other for better and easier understanding of learning difficulties. Since the beginning of the project, four teachers have participated in two out of five workshops. At the end of the project, a handout will be published, as a part of the educational goals of the project, and it will be of use to all people who want to know how to teach students with learning difficulties and how to recognize the difficulties

itself. Workshops are being held in the Una-Sana Canton, until the end of the project in August 2017.

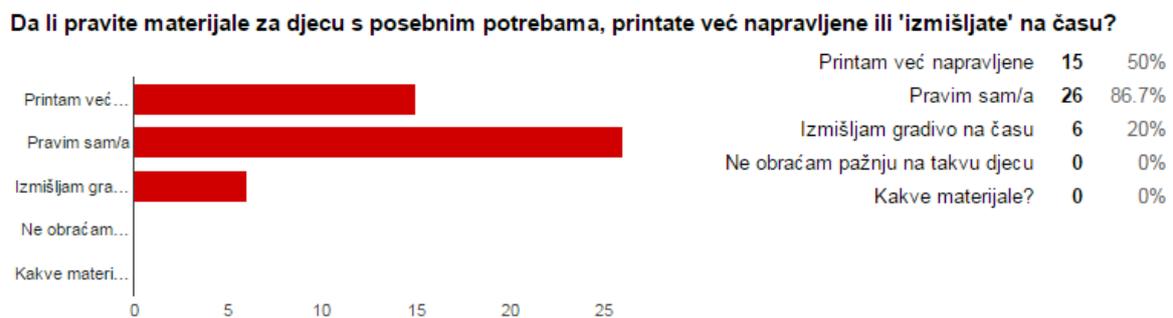
The very famous style of learning is the MOOC and very educational and admissible. Teachers can, throughout MOOC, on many online sites, learn and follow educational workshops, where they can participate and practically experience the real learning. Such educational workshop can be found on web pages such as course,edX or FutureLearn, which offer many different courses on special education and similar titles. A massive open online course (MOOC /mu:k/) is an online course aimed at unlimited participation and open access via the web. In addition to traditional course materials such as filmed lectures, readings, and problem sets, many MOOCs provide interactive user forums to support community interactions among students, professors, and teaching assistants (Wikipedia). Another kind of educational workshops can be also held at the school where teachers work. Teachers are obligated to write a research paper every school year and have a presentation in their school and in their own way and pace, they could research and get information on the topics they are interested in. Through education and seminars, conferences and courses, lots of information are offered but also lots of ideas, which seemed impossible suddenly get closer. Even though many teachers never had the training to work with special needs nor did they had the training to write lesson plans, many of them still try to support children with difficulties and help them get the better education. Based on the research I conducted among 30 randomly chosen teachers, results of their involvement and support is shown in the figure below.

Figure 4: Poll results of using lesson plans for children with special needs



As seen in the figure above, 80% of teachers have lesson plans and only 20% don't write them. 66,7% of teachers said that the Cantonal educational office or school ask them for special plans while 23,3% are not sure if they do. Another reason why education and seminars are needed is because of the materials and content of the lesson plans, for different kinds of difficulties. Many teachers are not sure how to decide how much or how hard should the content of the lesson be and how to make or write the materials.

Figure 5: The results of the poll about the material used in the classroom for children with special needs



This all leads to the conclusion that we all need more education and workshops on topic of special education and specific learning difficulties and that teachers' job would be much easier if the Ministry of education or other institutions, who are responsible for educational system, help and support teachers with seminars, workshops, and conferences, on the topic of special education and needs.

### 3. Conclusion

Many aspects of inclusion are still untouched and not possible to carry out in most of the schools in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Even though there are new strategies and plans for Inclusive education, the main and most important aspect was not accomplished. Teacher education! Educating only a few teachers is not the solution, but rather a burden on those teachers to act and support, while others cannot. Every school should have campaigns, sharing awareness of disabilities and difficulties, supporting children who have them, and social raise awareness of other children in the school, as well as parents and community." The inclusion of students with disabilities in the regular education classroom is becoming more prevalent in today's schools" (Winzer, 1998). Schools should be implementing regular inclusive workshops for children and parents, make possibilities and chances, by providing children with disabilities the same conditions like everyone else. If the child with the physical disability never goes on the upper floor of the school or takes lessons in a special room apart from his peers, then it's not an inclusion but opposite of everything that inclusion stands for. Taking into account that we have only started with the inclusive reform a few years ago, Bosnian and Herzegovina schools are not ready to completely implement inclusion in its full aspects.

Many questions remain concerning toward including students with disabilities. Professional development is the most important part of the inclusion, if we want to have successful academic and social model of education . "Providing teachers with the training and tools necessary to foster positive attitudes about inclusion is a key step to insuring the success of inclusion "(Huber, Rosenfeld, & Fiorello, 2001; Colber, 2010).

As I stated above, learning difficulties are the main concern in the second language acquisition, due to problems with language as the major difficulty children have. Not recognizing or dealing with learning difficulties in our classrooms can evolve into enormous

academic and social omissions and problems. We labeled the 'special needs' as something bad and undervalued, and most of the teachers and children usually act towards it with fear and prejudices. Most parents, because of that, are frightened to label their children with some difficulty, even though they won't get the education they deserve. And most children are more willing to be labeled as 'bad' or 'lazy' but 'special need' because the community made the negative platitudes and assumptions. Educating teachers to work with children with special needs, raising awareness with children in school, and also community and adapting the educational system step by step, towards the best inclusive practices are the next steps Bosnia and Herzegovina have to make.

### References:

- Abell, D. J. (2000, November). Differentiation of instruction for disadvantaged gifted students: A systemic change model. Paper presented at the meeting of the MidSouth Educational Research Association, Bowling Green, KY.
- Alberta Education, "Students with Special Needs", 2009; ([www.albertaeducation.ca](http://www.albertaeducation.ca))
- Assistive Technology for Children with Learning Difficulties ([http://www.pluk.org/Pubs/ATguide4LD\\_419k.pdf](http://www.pluk.org/Pubs/ATguide4LD_419k.pdf))
- Candace Cortiella, The Advocacy Institute Sheldon H. Horowitz, Ed.D., National Center for Learning Disabilities: The State of Learning Disabilities Facts, Trends and Emerging Issues (Third Edition, 2014)
- Huber, K. D., Rosenfeld, J. G., & Fiorello, C. A. (2001). The differential impact of inclusion and inclusive practices on high, average, and low achieving general education students. *Psychology in the Schools*, 38(1), 497-504.
- Lentz, F.E. Jr(1988), On-task behaviour, academic performance, and classroom disruptions: Untangling the target selection in classroom interventions, *School Psychology Review*, 17 , 243-257;
- Tomlinson, C. (1995). *How to differentiate instruction in mixed-ability classrooms*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Tomlinson, C. (1999). *The differentiated classroom: Responding to the needs of all learners*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Winzer, M. (1998). The inclusion movement and teacher change: Where are the limits? *McGill Journal of Education [H.W.Wilson - EDUC]*, 33(3), 229.