

## THE ATTITUDES OF STUDENTS IN BULGARIA AND THE CZECH REPUBLIC TOWARDS PEOPLE WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

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**Abstract:** The paper is covering a survey aimed to find out what is the publicity and the interest of society in people with disabilities, what is the public attitude of students towards this stigmatized group of people, are there any already formed stereotypes and positive stigmas of the people with disabilities, how to achieve their overall integration into society, i.e. starting from the family, through university and finally at work.

We carried out surveys (questionnaires) among students from the Czech Republic and Republic of Bulgaria, as for this purpose we interviewed 100 students from both countries.

This work reviews the concept of a relation between people with disabilities and the students, and the positive attitude of the latter for the purpose of integration into society. This survey uses several statistical methods. This fact increases its value and in great extent increases the possibilities of obtaining adequate and credible results.

As a result of the survey, we determined the following: Direct contact with people with special educational needs is more influential both for people with disabilities and for the change of attitudes towards them. Overcoming the problem with the socialization and realization of the people with disabilities, both in public and personal aspect are a positive stigma which is a motivator and generator of new attitudes. Positive stigma, positive examples and direct contact are catalysts of the social processes related to people with disabilities and stimulate attitudes of the society and the individual.

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### Introduction

Attitudes consist of cognitions – beliefs, views, conceptions, ideas, affects, intentions to respond with a certain type of behavior, and behavior. When combined these components form the attitude of a person. The way we reflect and react to the world around us expresses our attitudes and influences on our behavior towards the people and the environment around us. If we change our attitudes this will lead to a change in our behavior as well. People try to behave according to their attitudes so that our beliefs, thoughts and actions match with each other. Attitudes are a preliminary intention for a certain behavior, they are variable, they are influenced by the information we have, by change in the public opinion, by positive examples, by negative examples, and by the behavior of our friends. Therefore, it is essential to know the attitudes towards people with disabilities. The change in different situations in which we happen to be, the contact with different people, often might change our attitudes. However, very often there is difference between what we believe in and what we do. Often, being constrained by public attitudes we do not share our actual thoughts or if we stand in front of a person of authority with another attitude we conceal our own opinion. Often even for justifying our behavior we tend to change our attitudes.

In this context, positive attitudes are fundamental for the positive stigma towards the people with special educational needs. A person is ready to defend and fight for what they believe in. The motivation and attitude of the students, who are the progressive part of society, is of particular importance for forming public attitudes and values towards people with disabilities.

### Methodology

The subject of this empirical survey are people with disabilities, permanently residing on the territory of Republic of Bulgaria; students of University of Plovdiv Paisii Hilendarski, as well as their colleagues, students in the Charles University in Prague, Czech Republic.

This analysis is made on the basis of a quantitative survey, with the help of a preliminary prepared questionnaire. On the grounds of the data obtained from the survey carried out, we managed to find out major opinions and attitudes related to the self-assessment of people with disabilities, their social identity, motivation for communicating without prejudice on part of the students, as well as establishing a good environment for the beneficial professional relations between the future social workers and people with disabilities. It was of particular importance for the survey to identify points

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of match and/or mismatch between the views of the interviewed people regarding the personal opinion and the attitudes of the public – in the face of experts in special pedagogics and psychology.

For the purpose of this survey, we formed three random samplings with sufficient volume, namely 50 respondents related to the general aggregates of people with disabilities, students from Bulgaria and the Czech Republic. For the purpose of this survey we used the method of the anonymous written questionnaire, carried out in the form of an interview between the interviewer and the respondent.

The method of questionnaire was chosen because:

- It provides quality information about the opinions, motives, interests and preferences of the respondents;
- It allows quick and effective collection of a relatively large amount of data at relatively low costs, compared to other methods for data collection, such as focus groups, expert panels, etc.
- It uses a questionnaire prepared in advance, which reduces the deviations in the answers of the respondents;
- It allows us to monitor the interaction between the different variables of the survey;
- It allows the respondent to choose a convenient time for them to fill out the questionnaire, to think over their answers, and if necessary, to use additional information.

Particularly, in order to survey the attitudes of the future psychologists and pedagogues we used a set of tools developed on the basis of a concept, terminology and indicators, structured in two separate questionnaires. They are intended for the students who study pedagogics and psychology in Bulgaria and the Czech Republic. With the cooperation of the latter two groups we obtained information about their motivation to communicate without prejudice with people with disabilities, as well as about their impression of the people with disabilities based on contacts made with them.

For the purpose of obtaining an adequate basis for comparison of the attitudes of the professionals in both countries, we developed identical questionnaires separated in two individual blocks. The questions in the first block of the questionnaire contain different opinions or motivation for prejudice towards people with disabilities. Some of these opinions reflect internal motivations towards the others, while others reflect more external and social motivations. Certainly, people can be motivated by both external and internal opinions, but we have to emphasize that some types of motivation by definition are better than others.

The questions in the second block of the questionnaire give the opportunity to create a communication scale with people with disabilities. For this purpose, we have prepared twenty items, each one containing five possible answers.

The structure and the content of the questionnaires are carefully considered while observing the main requirements towards the structure of questionnaire surveys, as well as towards the external look of the questionnaires. During the development process of the questionnaires, we followed several steps, namely:

- First, we formulated the main target subjects of the survey;
- Next, we formulated draft questions, particular groups of answers and a choice of the type of question (Yes/No, multiple choice, scale of significance);
- Modification of the draft questions for the purpose of achieving clarity and lack of ambiguity, achieving maximally simple language, adding explanatory texts, where necessary;
- Grouping the questions in logical thematic order, by starting from the easiest, in order to predispose the respondent;
- Approval of the final formulation of the questions included in the questionnaire.

On the basis of the questionnaires filled-in by 100 respondents from Bulgaria and the Czech Republic. The analysis, the conclusions and the recommendations of the survey are made after the summarized presentation of the empirical results in tables, with the respective graphics.

The surveyed variables in this task are categorical (non-metrical). They are measured by a slight scale (nominal). They are also defined as independent, as they cannot be summarized by one and the same unit of measurement. As a result of this, when solving a particular issue, we apply a non-parametrical criterion for independent samplings. The application of non-parametrical criteria is related also to the

type of scale used. In this aspect when scaling along nominal, ranking and ordinal scale we can apply only non-parametrical criteria.

The verification stages are defined as follows:

Stage 1: In the first place, it is necessary to define the zero and the alternative hypotheses.

The zero hypothesis states that there is no significant statistical difference between the answers of the students in social pedagogics and psychology in Bulgaria and the Czech students with regards to their motivation to communicate without prejudice with people with disabilities, as well as their impressions about people with disabilities on the basis of contacts with such people.

The alternative hypothesis is a logical rejection of the zero hypothesis, and in this particular instance it has the following interpretation: there is a statistical difference between the answers of the students regarding their motivation to communicate without prejudice with people with disabilities, as well as their impressions about the people with disabilities on the basis of contacts with such people.

Stage 2: Determining the statistical mistake of I-st kind -  $\alpha$ . This mistake is obtained in case the zero hypothesis is true, while the scientist takes the decision to reject this statement. In cases of hypothesis verification in the social field, it is accepted that the value of  $\alpha$  is equal to 0.05.

Stage 3: Choosing a criterion for hypothesis verification and obtaining the respective empirical property. The latter is entirely determined by the type of the verified hypothesis. In this particular case there are only qualitative variables. We used the so called Mann – Whitney Test in its capacity of a non-parametrical criterion for the survey of qualitative variables, measured at slight scales.

Stage 4: Determining the type of the critical zone. In this particular case the critical zone is one-sided, reflecting the application of the criterion in the previous third stage of the verification.

Stage 5: Determining the respective theoretical characteristic depending on the applied probability distribution.

Stage 6: Applying a rule for decision making. For this purpose, we apply the significance level. The latter is defined as the respective probability of the calculated empirical characteristic, which is compared to the chosen value of  $\alpha$ . In case the significance level is less than the probability for the mistake of I-st kind, the zero hypothesis is rejected. The alternative hypothesis is accepted as true, which is proof that the difference in the answers of the students from Bulgaria and the Czech Republic is not accidental, that it is considerable and big enough so to be able to accept the statement that there is a difference in the stereotypes and attitudes of future psychologists and pedagogues from the two countries.

## Results and discussion

As a result of the carried out hypothesis verification, it was determined that there are differences in the attitudes towards people with disabilities of the students in special pedagogics and psychology in eight of the thirty variables. Essentially, they can be identified with the following statements:

- 1) If I behave in a prejudiced manner towards people with disabilities, I shall be worried about inflicting their anger on me.
- 2) I demonstrate lack of prejudice towards people with disabilities in order to avoid the disapproval of others.
- 3) I try not to be prejudiced towards people with disabilities under the pressure by others.
- 4) Because of the public standard I try to demonstrate lack of prejudice towards people with disabilities.
- 5) How often did you have a long conversation with people with disabilities?
- 6) How often did you have a meal with people with physical disabilities?
- 7) How often have you worked with a person with disabilities?
- 8) How often did you feel pleasure from the behavior of a person with disabilities?

This conclusion was obtained after comparing the values of the indicators in the table below:

Table 1: Results of the survey after verification of statistical hypotheses

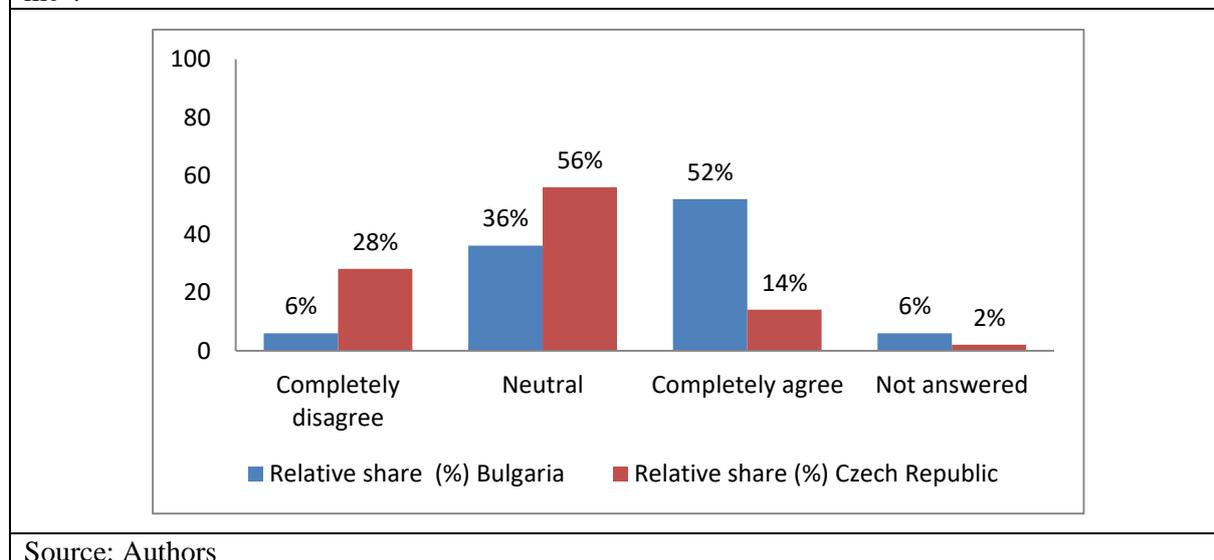
	1)	2)	3)	4)	5)	6)	7)	8)
Mann-Whitney U	643.500	831.000	755.000	625.000	854.000	886.000	820.500	673.500
Wilcoxon W	1918.500	2106.000	2030.000	1900.000	2129.000	2161.000	2095.500	1948.500
Z	-4.504	-3.118	-3.636	-4.618	-2.844	-2.777	-3.264	-4.176
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.002	.000	.000	.004	.004	.001	.000

Source: Authors

The significance level (Asymp. Sig.) by absolute value, for each of the eight variables is less than the probability for a mistake of I-st kind, due to which the zero hypothesis was rejected in a correct manner. The alternative hypothesis is accepted as true, which is a proof of the fact that the difference in the answers of the students from Bulgaria and the Czech Republic is not accidental, that it is significant and big enough so that to be able to assume the statement that there is difference in the stereotypes and attitudes of the future psychologists and pedagogues from the two countries. In order to be able to create a picture of the opinions of the two groups of students towards people with disabilities for each of the presented statements, the results are presented and visualized with suitable graphics.

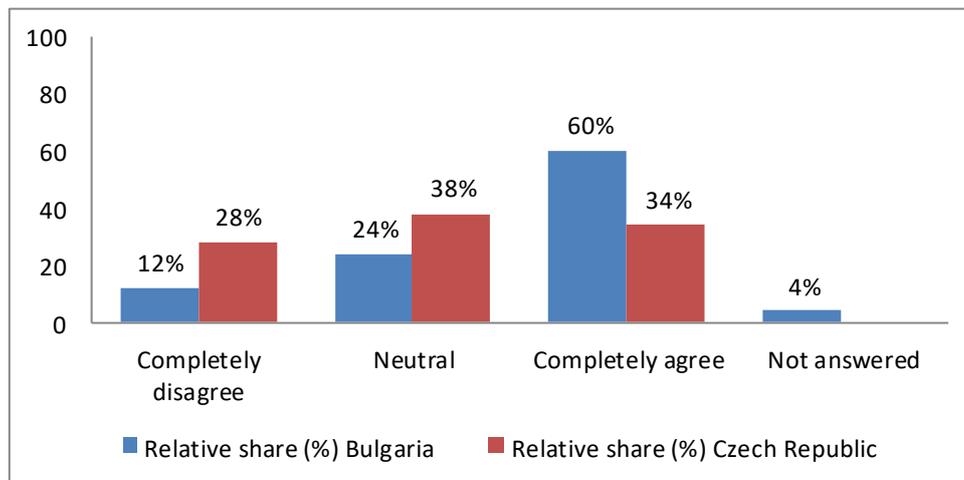
Regarding the first statement, the resulting Figure 1 with a distribution of the students by this characteristic, shows that not all respondents have answered this question – 6% of the Bulgarian students have not replied, and about 2% of all interviewed students also have preferred not to mark one of the given answers. Also 6% of the Bulgarians are not worried of the fact that if they act with prejudice towards people with disabilities they will be angry at them. A considerably bigger percentage of the Czech students completely disagree with this statement, namely 28%. 36% of the interviewed Bulgarians and 56% of the Czechs are neutral. The latter means that 52% of the Bulgarian students worry that if they act with prejudice towards people with disabilities, these will be angry at them, whilst just 14% of the Czech students agree with this opinion.

Figure 1: Graphed data of the interviewed students about their attitude towards the statement “If I act with prejudice towards people with disabilities, I shall be worried about inflicting their anger on me”.



The assessment of the respondents to the statement is mainly endorsed and approved entirely by 60% of the Bulgarians and 34% of the Czechs. One fourth of the questioned Bulgarian students are neutral regarding this statement. At the same time this answer is preferred by 38% of their Czech colleagues. 12% of the Bulgarians do not consider the disapproval of the others, therefore they show complete disagreement with this statement. Similarly to them, 28% of future Czech psychologists and pedagogues disagree with this (Figure 2).

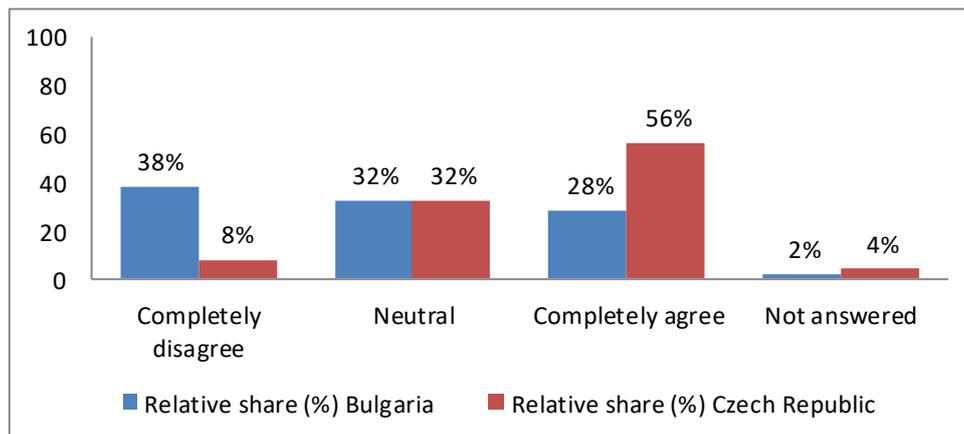
Figure 2: Graphed data of the interviewed students about their attitude towards the statement “I demonstrate lack of prejudice towards people with disabilities in order to avoid the disapproval of others”.



Source: Authors

A very small amount of the Czechs think the same – barely 8%. The latter is a prerequisite for the fact that the attitudes and stereotypes towards people with disabilities are not a personal expression, but they depend on the pressure of others. These conclusions are also obtained after analyzing the results obtained on this statement and the expression of consent with it by the two groups of students, which is – 56% of the Czech students “completely agree” with this answer, whilst the relative share of their Bulgarian colleagues is just 28%. Also, the relative share of the neutral respondents is not small, with regards to the statement: “I try not to be prejudiced towards people with disabilities under the pressure by others” (Figure 3).

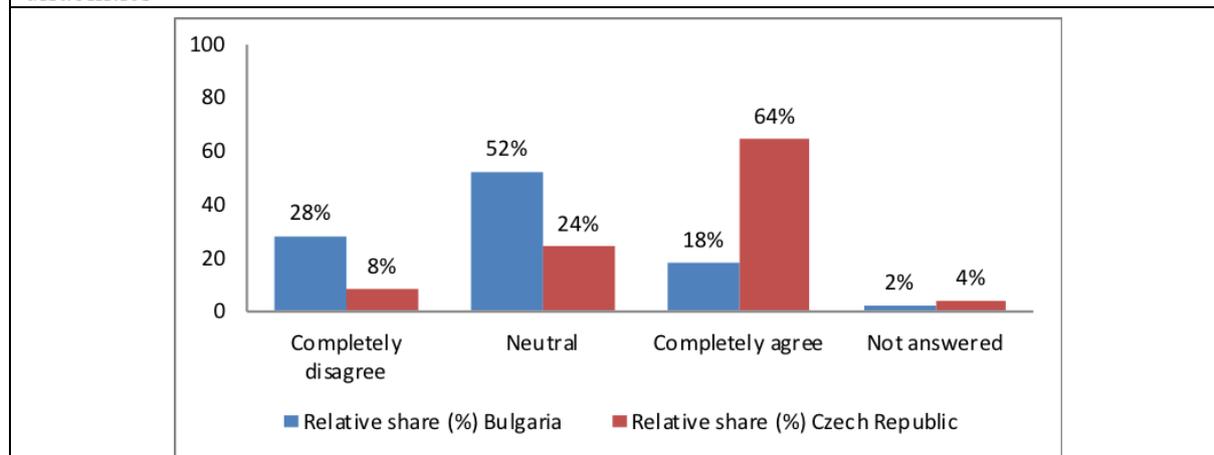
Figure 3: Graphed data of the interviewed students about their attitude towards the statement “I try not to be prejudiced towards people with disabilities under the pressure by others”.



Source: Authors

According to the results obtained from the significance tests, the last statement for which it was proven that there is a statistically significant difference between the answers of the Bulgarian and the Czech students is: “Because of the public standard I try to demonstrate lack of prejudice towards people with disabilities”. Or to what extent do the stereotypes of the people with disabilities imposed by the society influence on the opinion of the future psychologists and social pedagogues from the two countries.

Figure 4: Graphed data of the interviewed students about their attitude towards the statement “Because of the public standard I try to demonstrate lack of prejudice towards people with disabilities”



Source: Authors

Because of the public standard, 56% of the Czech students and 18% of the Bulgarian students try to demonstrate a lack of prejudice towards people with disabilities. The latter gives grounds for the conclusion that the Czech students try to demonstrate a lack of prejudice towards people with disabilities solely because of the imposed public standard, which to some extent means a lack of personal opinion. 52% of the Bulgarians and 24% of the Czechs have shown neutral attitude towards this statement.

### Conclusion

The obtained results are a valuable resource for the formation and change of the attitudes of non-stigmatized people towards those under a stigma. The positive attitude of the students towards people with disabilities would influence both personal and public attitudes and the formation of a socially committed society.

Usually, we do everything possible to preserve our attitudes and to defend them. The process of attitude change is slow, and it is related to the accessibility of the attitude at the public level. We tend to distort and exaggerate knowledge that could lead to a change in our attitudes. The human mind tends to defend its own rightness and will to convey this rightness to the people around us, while thinking that in this way we exert control over ourselves too, we are inclined towards “cognitive conservatism”. Attitudes can be changed in an easier way by behavior. In order to influence attitude, the behavior has to be chosen by ourselves. Therefore, this survey is particularly important for us – we want to study the behavior of the students and their motivation to communicate with people with disabilities, and the results should be the positive stigma that could change the attitudes of the others too, which are neutral or negative. We do not need to check the truth of the attitudes towards people with disabilities, but we need their validation as a positive stigma in society. This task is not easy, because attitudes are stronger when people are interested in them. Then the other’s arguments pro and con have no particular significance. But when there is no interest, the message of the arguments might not influence us.

According to Daruwalla and Darcy (2005) it is easier to change public attitudes than those of the individual. Very often the process of filling in the questionnaires makes us think about issues which we have consciously or unconsciously avoided.

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