

STANDPOINT

By **Prof. Katerina K. Karadzhova, PhD** from Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” on the materials submitted for the purposes of a competition for conferral of the academic title of Professor promulgated by SU “St Kliment Ohridski” in State Gazette №74 of 21.08.2020 in the area of higher education 1. Pedagogical Sciences, professional field 1.2. Pedagogy (Special Education)

Candidate: **Assoc. Prof. Neda Zlatinova Balkanska, PhD**

I. General presentation of the procedure and the candidate

By order №ПД 38-475 of 02.10.2020 I was appointed a member of the Scientific Jury for the competition for professorship on 21.08.2020 with a sole participant Assoc. Prof. Neda Zlatinova Balkanska, PhD. The candidate acquired her higher education at SU “St. Kliment Ohridski” as a Master of Special Education (Speech and Language Rehabilitation and Therapy), and later defended a doctoral thesis on *Grammatical competence of deaf children at early school age*.

Assoc. Prof. Balkanska, PhD has worked for the Faculty of Education and Art Sciences since 1995 and currently heads the Department of Special Education at the same faculty.

As a scholar and lecturer, Assoc. Prof. Balkanska actively tackles the problems related to the research, education and rehabilitation of children with hearing impairments, cochlear implants and articulation problems.

Throughout the years, she has grown from a teacher, assistant, senior and chief assistant to an associate professor. As a result, she has gained a substantial practical experience which is a serious prerequisite for achieving scientific theoretical and practical results.

Assoc. Prof. Neda Balkanska, PhD has a strongly expressed and dominant presence in the national and international academic community. She actively participates in many scientific conferences (national and international) and popularizes her views on innovations in the area of speech and language rehabilitation. Concurrently, she has co-developed and implemented a number of research projects, and taught courses for pedagogical specialists, directors and academic lecturers.

II. Characteristics of the scientific theoretical and applied production of the candidate for the academic title of professor.

Assoc. Prof. Balkanska has a rich and interesting research production. For the purposes of this competition, she has submitted 31 research works, including two monographs, one study (in English), 12 articles in scientific journals, 11 textbooks, methodological handbooks and manuals. I will mention some of the more important publications related to the specifics of the announced competition and the academic and lecturing qualities of Assoc. Prof. Neda Balkanska, PhD.

Monograph: *Montessori method and inclusive educational environment*

This work, that carries the subtitle *Scientific premises, therapeutic techniques and current perspectives*, spans over 232 pages and includes an introduction, four chapters, conclusion, appendix and references.

In the introductory part the author explains her interest in the Montessori problematic, namely the presence of similar professional understanding and positions to the approach of Maria Montessori and her philosophy.

Chapter one presents the concept of inclusion of all children, and views the prerequisites for their development in academic and social aspects. The hereby offered analyses are comprehensive, competent and professional. The author has heavily underscored the good practices and the related positive results in teaching all children. As she outlines the main difficulties and challenges that inclusive education is facing, Assoc. Prof. Balkanska presents the main factors of scholastic inclusion. These are teachers, learning activities, alternative strategies, activities, methods and forms. The author has described succinctly, yet precisely and scientifically the Montessori method and its philosophy, and has emphasized its similarity to the philosophy of inclusive education.

Chapter two and three are dedicated to the Montessori method and early childhood. The author has analyzed comprehensively and systematically the different stages of the Montessori method, by stressing on the importance of child activity and the need to stimulate it.

Undoubtedly, the most significant part in the reviewed monograph is Chapter four. In it, the process of formation of practical or social skills of children, as well as the relationship between the preserved senses and sensory integration are viewed at the level of comparison. The sensory exercises which Maria Montessori proposes are particularly popular nowadays. The idea of stimulating sensory development harmonizes fully with the contemporary theory of multiple intelligence according to which the main sensory organs are underlying the different types of intelligence. Assoc. Prof. Neda Balkanska, PhD launches the idea that the theory of multiple intelligence may be used to reorganize the process of traditional education, by including individual

approach, flexible forms of teaching and the active participation of all children in the class, regardless of their abilities or disorders. This eventually suggests a complete transformation of the educational environment. In the context of the above, I may add that the author further develops the ideas of Maria Montessori on sensory stimulation, by linking them to the potential of children with sensory deficiencies. The author's ideas regarding the connection of sensory stimulation and sensory exercises with the compensatory processes in children with sensory deficiency sound very pertinent and scientifically grounded.

As the exposition develops, Assoc. Prof. Neda Balkanska, PhD shares some cases from her practical experience and presents empirical data from a conducted study in which she offers her original methodology for handling specific morphological categories of children with language deficiencies.

The author of the reviewed monograph has selected very suitable sensory exercises and pictures demonstrating the sensory, social and academic development of children. These materials may be used successfully in the work with children with special educational needs and when optimizing the inclusive educational environment.

In conclusion, the author justifies the importance of the analyzed model and relates it to the practice of inclusive education where specialists face serious difficulties.

Monograph: *Including the child with hearing impairments in the educational environment – from scientific evidence to practical solutions* (as a co-author).

At a moment when the ideas for inclusive education are being introduced rapidly into mainstream educational environment, the efforts of specialists are directed toward finding adequate means and methods of influencing the various categories of SEN children. The positive educational environment presupposes the application of flexible strategies related to the adequate choice of schools, the adaptation of the environment and the pedagogical approach to each specific child, including the child with hearing impairments. The author has shown professionally and thoroughly that hearing impairments may have a negative impact not only on the quality of communication, but also on the cognitive and social functioning. The precision and will of the author to present the decisive factors for the quality of speech in children with hearing impairments deserve much praise. These efforts comply with the current trends for the optimization of the inclusive educational environment.

The subsection *Textbooks, methodological handbooks and manuals* contains the collective publication *Methodology for assessing the individual needs of children and pupils with multiple disorders*. To the list of publications, the author has attached an authorship agreement form. The methodology proposed by the author allows both quantity and quality assessment, which enables specialists to register the deficits in the development of the studied persons and to apply the individual approach in working with them. The possibility of attesting the results achieved has been emphasized which undoubtedly makes a substantial contribution to special education.

Studies, articles in research proceedings and journals

As a whole, in these publications Assoc. Prof. Neda Balkanska, PhD is concerned with the issues related to inclusive education of children with hearing impairments. In the context of the above, I will mention the discussion related to the academic and formal integration, as well as the need for a differential approach not only for children with hearing impairments, but also for all SEN children.

The publications which envision the ways of including children with hearing impairments in mainstream educational environment and the need for their optimization are interesting and very significant. In the context of the above, I will mention the impact the theory of multiple intelligence has for each child and the inclusion in activities that foster social integration.

An important place in the publications of Assoc. Prof. Balkanska are the presented psychological and pedagogical profiles of students with hearing, vision and motor disorders. The author has explained professionally and competently the need for teachers to know well both the strong sides of these students, as well as the difficulties they face during their educational process and notably during communication with other people.

A positive instance in the research works of Assoc. Prof. N. Balkanska, PhD is the fact that she presents the main models of cooperative teaching and current trends in inclusive educational environment, as well as the need for innovations when assessing reading comprehension ability of pupils with hearing impairments.

The author may also be complimented on the fact that most of her research works present the competences of hearing impaired children, parental attitudes, practical aspects of language therapies of children with hearing impairments, etc.

I may not undermine the fact that Assoc. Prof. Neda Balkanska has authored many textbooks, manuals for students and pupils, which can be successfully used during seminars or for exam preparation.

All of the above is a very serious attestation of the candidate for the academic title of professor.

III. Contributions:

I highly value and approve of the contributions described by the candidate for the academic title of professor. They are differentiated in five areas and constitute a synopsis of the scientific theoretical and practical aspects of the whole research production. I fully accept them. In this part of my review I will try to summarize and present them in the way I have perceived them.

1. An immense volume of analyzed problematic. Thorough and comprehensive interpretations which focus on the need to search for and find innovative approaches in the organization and structure of inclusive educational environment.
2. Thorough professional skills for scientific interpretation and adequate application of the developed innovations in the area of diagnostics and language teaching of SEN children.
3. Scientifically grounded innovations in the area of resource support of SEN children and pupils, as well as launching the idea for accessible educational environment.
4. Justifying the need for early impact and interaction with parents of SEN children.
5. Significance and applicability of the author's methodological handbooks, textbooks and manuals.

Assoc. Prof. Neda Balkanska, PhD has 64 registered citations. This fully meets the requirements for conferral of the academic position for which she is applying.

The number and quality of the reviewed publications, scientific contributions and originality of the conducted studies completely satisfy the minimal scientific requirements for acquisition of the academic title of professor. With respect to the minimal national requirements set by article 25 of the Law on the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria on the research and teaching activity for the minimal number of points by the indicators for conferral of the academic title of professor, I found that Assoc. Prof. Neda Balkanska, PhD exceeds them multiple times. The minimal number of points according to the groups of indicators for acquiring the academic title of professor is 550, whereas Assoc. Prof. Balkanska has 1445,5.

Conclusion:

I believe that the reviewed research production fully meets the requirements for conferral of the academic title for which Assoc. Prof. Neda Balkanska, PhD is applying.

From the above said, I can firmly claim that Assoc. Prof. Neda Balkanska, PhD has the potential to continue her research studies, and by doing so she will help implement innovations in the science related to inclusion of SEN pupils and the speech and language rehabilitation of children with hearing impairments.

On the basis of all positive sides described and argued in my standpoint, and considering the qualities and abilities of Assoc. Prof. Neda Balkanska, PhD, I urge the honorable Scientific Jury to vote in favour of the conferral of the academic title of professor.

Referee:

Prof. Katerina Karadzhova, PhD

20.11.2020