

REVIEW

On the works of Assoc. Prof. Neda Zlatinova Balkanska, PhD, submitted for the purposes of a competition for the conferral of the academic title of Professor in the higher educational area 1. Pedagogical Sciences, professional field 1.2. Pedagogy (Special Education), promulgated in State Gazette, issue 74 of 21.08.2020.

Referee:

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1. Brief biographical background and description of the academic interests and the pedagogical activity of the candidate

Assoc. Prof. Neda Balkanska, PhD graduated Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" in 1992 as a Master of Special Education (Speech and Language Rehabilitation and Therapy). In 1995, after winning a competition, she began work at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" and consecutively occupied the positions of assistant (19.01.1995-17.02.1997), senior assistant (18.02.1997 – 15.05.2001), chief assistant (16.05.2001 – 10.03.2010) and associate professor (11.03.2010 – to present). Throughout this period, she has pursued an active research and teaching career.

For the purposes of this competition Assoc. Prof. Neda Balkanska has presented 31 research works: two monographs, one methodology (as a co-author); two teacher's books (to one of which she is the sole author, and to the other - a co-author); four workbooks to complement the textbook sets (as a co-author). All of them have been developed and published after the acquisition of the academic title of associate professor.

The research interests of Assoc. Prof. Neda Balkanska are related to the area of special education and inclusive education. More specifically, she has explored the language abilities of deaf children, the reading competence of impaired hearing children, the efficiency of alternative literacy methods that take into consideration the sensitive periods found in Maria Montessori's classification. She has shown profound interest in the area of modelling resource support in scientific ways to suit children and pupils with special educational needs. More specifically, she has developed models for integrating children with hearing impairments. Integration has been differentiated as social, academic and formal. Assoc. Prof. Neda Balkanska has explored in an original manner the interaction between multiple intelligence and learning styles, and the differential approach to learning. Another area of her academic interests includes issues related to the early impact and interaction with parents of SEN children. Her research on this subject is directed towards developing models of interaction between specialists and parents encountered in various situations of everyday communication. In order to assist practitioners during the build-up of partnership relations with families of SEN children, Assoc. Prof. Neda Balkanska has proposed a scientifically grounded classification of the parents of these children. Her research - planned and conducted with respect to the requirements of contemporary research methodology, is reflected in the monograph *Montessori method and inclusive educational environment* and the research articles specifically submitted for the purposes of this competition. Besides the indicated monograph, the candidate has presented 19 other research publications, among which another monograph, a study, five articles in research journals, and 12 articles in scientific proceedings. Furthermore, she has presented 11 textbooks, methodological handbooks, and manuals for teaching SEN children. Assoc. Prof. Balkanska's research and applied activities also include participation in research projects, funded by the Ministry of Education and Science, Sofia University Research Fund, etc. She has taken part in eight MES research projects and in four creative teams and workgroups at the Ministry of Education and Science focusing on the development of textbooks (team manager), and the development and update of curricula containing special subjects for pupils with hearing impairments (deputy workgroup manager). We must also mention her research-related participation in scientific juries for the election of associate professors and professors. Assoc. Prof. Neda Balkanska, PhD has participated in 30 scientific juries for the acquisition of the educational degree of Doctor and promotion to academic positions – chief assistant, associate professor and professor.

The pedagogical activity of Assoc. Prof. Neda Balkanska, PhD includes teaching intra- and extramural classes. The intramural classes include lectures and practical trainings. At present, Assoc. Prof. Neda Balkanska, PhD teaches five obligatory and one elective courses in the BA programme in Special Education, one obligatory and one elective course in the BA programme in Speech Therapy, three obligatory courses in the MA programme in Special Education and two electives in the MA programme in Speech Therapy. Assoc. Prof. Neda Balkanska, PhD has performed rather intensive extramural educational work as an academic advisor to PhD and post graduate students. She has been an academic advisor to eight PhD students, three of whom have already defended their theses. Twenty-four graduates have defended their theses under her tutelage.

It is important to note that Assoc. Prof. Neda Balkanska, PhD constantly upgrades her qualification as a university lecturer. She has completed an intensive English course with excellent results and a course on design and online teaching, and acquired the professional qualification 'Specialist in the design and delivery of online education'. She has also participated in a practical workshop on the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) at the Centre for Psychological Counselling and Psychotherapy. The workshop focused on the following topics: 1. Communication; 2. Team interaction; 3. Alternative communication system – PECS – stages and applications. She was awarded a certificate upon completion of the workshop.

On the whole, I highly evaluate the pedagogical and research activity of the participant in the competition for professorship Assoc. Prof. Neda Balkanska, PhD. Her pedagogical and research work satisfy even the highest requirements for the academic title of professor.

2. Review and analysis of the monograph

For the purposes of this competition Assoc. Prof. Neda Balkanska, PhD has especially prepared the monograph *Montessori method and inclusive educational environment*, due to the fact that she is not a Doctor of Sciences. The monograph reviews the scientific theories, therapeutic techniques and current perspectives in theoretical research and educational practices of Maria Montessori. The author of the monograph describes in thorough detail the concepts of inclusion and the components of the Montessori method. The first two chapters follow the life and work of Maria Montessori (Chapter one) and offer a substantial characterization of her method (Chapter two). The second chapter contains a rigorous analysis of the Montessori method and discusses

the main principles of her pedagogy. Moreover, the candidate lists multiple examples from her own pedagogical practice to prove the importance of movement for learning and cognition, catching objects by children, and emphasizes the role of crawling for kinetic coordination. According to Montessori's concepts, a child's movement and interaction with objects during the different sensitive periods are exceedingly important for the child's cognitive development, which has provoked Assoc. Prof. Balkanska, PhD to pay special attention to the methods for their stimulation. In Chapter one she describes in detail the six sensitive periods in a child's development with respect to Montessori's classification by giving numerous examples to illustrate their nature. Concurrently, she explores the laws formulated by Montessori which rule children's behavior, such as the law of work/ action, the law of independence, the law of attention, the law of will, the law ruling the development of a child's imagination and creativity. These laws have been linked to certain developmental factors, such as the psychic factor reflecting the emotional and spiritual development of the child, and the factor related to the stages of a child's growth. Assoc. Prof. Balkanska, PhD has discussed in depth the five periods of growth which Montessori derived from her theoretical concepts and pedagogical work. In Chapter two of the monograph Assoc. Prof. Neda Balkanska, PhD examines the main principles of Montessori pedagogy, such as the principle of kinetic activity and cognition (thinking); the principle of improved learning and comfort when children feel control on their lives, i.e. a sense of free choice; the principle that children learn better when their subject is interesting; the principle that linking activities with material rewards such as money in return for reading or high grades has a negative impact on the child's motivation; the principle that common (group) activities are very beneficial for learning, etc. In this chapter Assoc. Prof. Balkanska, PhD has used very interesting examples to show the importance of movement for learning and cognition, the significance of catching objects and its stimulation in the Montessori programme, of crawling and coordination of movement. In a separate paragraph in this chapter the author of the monograph examines in further detail the relationship between movement and cognition. She describes the role of movement for spatial orientation, memory, social cognitive processes, and the creation of educational (developing) environment through signs. In another section the author views the organization of learning within the Montessori system. Chapter three is dedicated to the application of the Montessori method in early childhood when the indicated principles, laws, and factors are implemented. Chapter four reviews the learning zones in Montessori pedagogy.

Of particular interest is the presentation of the learning zone for language and grammatical categories. Here Assoc. Prof. Balkanska, PhD has described her own experimental studies on the use of personal pronouns by using a contemporary testing theory for measuring achievement – the Item Response Theory.

In conclusion to this section, I shall point out that the author of the monograph has managed to fulfill her goal and “subject to an in-depth analysis both the philosophy and the scientific justification of the Montessori method (which usually remains outside the scope of specialists who focus on the practical side), as well as to present practical activities in a systematic way.”

3. Characteristics and evaluation of the contributions of the monograph.

The presented monograph is a thorough research work which, besides its comprehensive description of the Montessori method, also reveals its relations with contemporary inclusive education, teaching hearing impaired children and those with special educational needs. As a scientific contribution, I may point out the scientifically grounded methods for applying Montessori pedagogy to contemporary educational practices, the combination of its fundamental bases, ideas and activities with other, related to them, that “may lead to an improved quality of teaching and learning, as well as stimulate the development of children in the first few years of their life.” Even though it has been dedicated to the Montessori method, the monograph is an original work with numerous new ideas and approaches which the author has presented as an extensive rendition of Montessori pedagogy. In this sense, the monograph deserves a highest evaluation.

4. Review and analysis of the other research works of the candidate.

Besides the monograph, Assoc. Prof. Neda Balkanska, PhD has presented a total of 19 research publications, among which another monograph, a study, five articles in scientific journals, and 12 articles in proceedings. These works may be organized into several problematic areas.

4.1. Works related to creating diagnostic tools and language methodology for children with special educational needs (RW3, RW5, RW9, RW10, RW13, RW15, RW18, RW19).

In this subgroup of works, of particular interest is the article “Functional evaluation of the communicative and language abilities of children and pupils with special educational needs and multiple disorders” (RW9), in which the author has offered a complex methodology for evaluation of the communicative abilities of the studied individuals, including the impressive and expressive side of the communication act; with respect to the language sphere – the state of the impressive and expressive speech, the state of written speech and the state of phonemic articulation. The suggested methodology has a number of advantages, among which its accessible application, its adaptability to various groups of children of all ages, and its possibilities for greater precision in the quantitative, and largely qualitative evaluation of deficits in individual developmental areas. This allows higher specificity of the personal work programme for each child. Another interesting study is presented in the article “Practical aspects for the formation of morphological competence of children with hearing impairments in primary school age” (RW13). The study includes three stages – initial diagnostic experiment, teaching experiment and final diagnostic experiment. Tests created to meet the requirements of the contemporary Item Response Theory have been applied as methods for measuring language competences. On the basis of the obtained results, the author has inferred thoroughly substantial conclusions for learning by which children with hearing impairments can acquire morphological competence. In RW15 the methodology of learning the grammatical category ‘number of nouns’ by deaf children constitutes an applied scientific contribution. The author’s methodology for mastering syntactic structures by hearing impaired children has been published in RW18 and also constitutes a scientific contribution to the systems for language learning designed for deaf children.

4.2. Works directed towards resource support to children and pupils with special educational needs and inclusive education (RW4; RW5; RW6; RW11; RW12)

The most interesting article in this subgroup is RW12: “Methodology for assessing the reading comprehension ability of children with hearing impairments”. It contains very intriguing results from studying reading comprehension skills of hearing impaired children. This study presents a developed methodology for assessing the reading comprehension ability of children with hearing impairments. The methodology has six modules. The first module requires children to arrange key sentences in their logical consequence. The second module consists of answering questions

on the reading content. The third module includes sentence completion tasks with respect to the text. Multiple choice questions on the text are part of the fourth module. The fifth module makes children add information to sentences, and in the sixth module children must choose an answer inferred from the reading passage. This methodology studies comprehension (first, second and third module), interpretation (fourth module), semantic fields, corresponding to the words in the text (fifth module), and overall comprehension (sixth module). A total of 54% of the investigated pupils from 1st to 5th grade with hearing impairments successfully tackled the test. This methodology is very suitable for studying children with impaired hearing with various hearing prostheses. The methodology definitely represents an applied scientific contribution.

5. Characteristics and evaluation of the contributions of the research works in §4.

The most essential contributions of the research works besides the monograph lie in the development of methodologies for assessing the language competence of children with hearing impairments. During the developing stage, the author has considered the current requirements for measuring language competence, such as tests constructed within the framework of the Item Response Theory. Furthermore, in several of the studies the candidate has applied contemporary research methodology that includes planning and running factorial experiments. The positive sides of the majority of the works besides the monograph confirm our high evaluation of the presented research articles.

The research publications of Assoc. Prof. Neda Balkanska, PhD have found a wide acclaim within the research community, evidenced by 64 citations of her works.

6. Evaluation of the manuals presented for the purposes of this competition.

Assoc. Prof. Neda Balkanska, PhD has published 10 textbooks, methodological handbooks and manuals to most of which she is the lead author. I shall mention first the methodological handbooks TEACHER'S BOOK (SPEECH DEVELOPMENT FOR 2ND GRADE PUPILS WITH HEARING IMPAIRMENTS); TEACHER'S BOOK (PRONUNCIATION FOR 1ST GRADE PUPILS WITH HEARING IMPAIRMENTS) (in co-authorship with Galya Georgieva-Darvenicharska, Blagovesna Yovkova).

She has also published the following textbooks for pupils with hearing impairments: SPEECH DEVELOPMENT FOR 1ST GRADE PUPULS WITH HEARING IMPAIRMENTS (in co-

authorship with Petya Andreeva); SPEECH DEVELOPMENT FOR 2ND GRADE PUPILS WITH HEARING IMPAIRMENTS (in co-authorship with Petya Andreeva and Sevdalina Dzhongarska); SPEECH DEVELOPMENT FOR 3RD GRADE PUPILS WITH HEARING IMPAIRMENTS (in co-authorship with Petya Andreeva and Sevdalina Dzhongarska); PRONUNCIATION FOR 1ST GRADE PUPILS WITH HEARING IMPAIRMENTS (in co-authorship with Galya Georgieva-Darvenicharska, Blagovesna Yovkova, Sevdalina Dzhongarska). She has published the following manuals: WORKBOOK FOR PRONUNCIATION OF 1ST GRADE PUPILS WITH HEARING IMPAIRMENTS (in co-authorship with Galya Georgieva-Darvenicharska, Blagovesna Yovkova, Sevdalina Dzhongarska); WORKBOOK FOR SPEECH DEVELOPMENT FOR 1ST GRADE PUPILS WITH HEARING IMPAIRMENTS (in co-authorship with Petya Andreeva); WORKBOOK FOR SPEECH DEVELOPMENT FOR 2ND GRADE PUPILS WITH HEARING IMPAIRMENTS (in co-authorship with Petya Andreeva, Sevdalina Dzhongarska), and WORKBOOK FOR SPEECH DEVELOPMENT FOR 3RD GRADE PUPILS WITH HEARING IMPAIRMENTS (in co-authorship with Petya Andreeva, Sevdalina Dzhongarska). These textbooks are used by children in the special schools for pupils with hearing impairments, while the methodological handbooks are consulted by the teachers of these children. These facts are an indicator for the high quality of the textbooks, methodological handbooks and manuals. The candidates for professorship must publish textbooks, as well. By this criterion Assoc. Prof. Neda Balkanska, PhD deserves a high evaluation.

7. Critical remarks and commentaries.

In general, I have no critical remarks on the research work, the teaching and methodological activity of Assoc. Prof. Neda Balkanska, PhD. I wish to note that the entire documentation for the purposes of this competition has been prepared in an impeccable way. Proof has been provided for all data submitted for evaluation.

8. Personal impressions on the candidate

I have known Assoc. Prof. Neda Balkanska, PhD since her doctoral studies in the capacity of her academic advisor. My personal impressions are excellent. I have admired her constant wish to plan and do research employing contemporary methodology, her creative thinking and strive to introduce innovative technology to the teaching of children with hearing impairments and pupils


with special educational needs. She loves her work and continuously improves her teaching style with new ideas. In her research she applies new research technologies and develops methodologies for specific projects. Since her PhD years, I have witnessed that underneath her activity lies deep internal motivation for continuous professional development and successful performance.

9. Conclusion

Judging from the review of the research and teaching activity of Assoc. Prof. Neda Balkanska, PhD and my highest evaluation on all aspects of these activities I may conclude that she meets the strictest criteria and requirements for the conferral of the academic title of professor. On the basis of the above and the high esteem I hold for her I therefore suggest that Assoc. Prof. Neda Zlatinova Balkanska, PhD be conferred the academic title of PROFESSOR in the higher educational area 1. Pedagogical Sciences, professional field 1.2. Pedagogy (Special Education). I strongly urge the honorable members of the scientific jury to vote in favor of this proposal.

Sofia, 4 November 2020

Signature:



/Prof. Encho Gerganov, PhD, DSc/