

OPINION

by

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Member of the scientific jury of the competition appointed
by order RD 38-453 / 19. 07. 2023
of the rector of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski"
and announced by the Faculty of Pedagogy at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski"
in SG, no. 56 of 30. 06. 2023
for the acquisition of the academic position of *Associate Professor*
in professional strand: 1.3. Methodology of Teaching Bulgarian Language and
Literature in the Initial Stage of Education

Candidate: Assoc. Prof. Maya Sotirova Sotirova, PhD – South-West University
"Neofit Rilski", Faculty of Pedagogy

Competition data

One candidate participated in the competition - Associate Professor Maya Sotirova Sotirova. There are no violations in the procedure. The submitted documents correspond to the legal norms regarding the development of the academic staff in the Republic of Bulgaria.

Research activity

Maya Sotirova has a total of 76 publications, she participated in the competition with 22 of them: one monograph, 10 articles in scientific editions, referenced and indexed in world-famous databases with scientific information, and 11 articles in non-referenced journals with scientific review.

Taken as a whole, Maya Sotirova's publications demonstrate a thorough and purposeful research work. They testify to the candidate's ability to discover important topics and develop them with professional competence.

Maya Sotirova's habilitation thesis *Personalized Teaching of Bulgarian Language at the Initial Stage of the Basic Educational Level* is firmly grounded in the modern transformation of the educational environment under the influence of the information boom and high technologies, as well as in the need for the student to become an even more active subject of educational interaction. The mastery of language competences in primary school age is considered as the foundation of personalized teaching – starting from this indisputable general position, the research advances towards the actual institutional prerequisites for personalizing teaching, demonstrating detailed knowledge and including punctual reference to the normative documents in force in our country and to important European directives in the field of education. The motivation with which the research topic was chosen is also based on three current approaches in modern education - competence-oriented, personality-oriented and value-oriented. Maya Sotirova also validates her research choice through the works of authoritative Bulgarian and foreign pedagogues and educational thinkers. The presentation of personalistic pedagogy in the light of personalistic philosophy is an additional expression of the desire for a comprehensive presentation of the socio-cultural determinism of the chosen research topic.

From the very beginning, the thesis is quite reasonably directed towards the terminological differentiation of the concepts of *individualization* and *individual approach*, *personality orientation*, *personalization of teaching*. Bringing historicizing elements into her work, Maya Sotirova presents the individualization of education in our country about a century ago as an alternative to the unifying Herbartianism. It remains unclear, however, why the author believes that the "influence of progressive Russian pedagogy" is decisive in this respect (according to the quote by Yordan Kolev) - especially since Petar Noikov, who specialized in pedagogy in Switzerland and Germany, points to Petar Noikov as an influential Bulgarian advocate of individualized education in the first place. Along with this logical inconsistency, one may question the condensation of the historical education paradigm with reference only to the journal "Home and School" without including the journals "Philosophical Review" and "School Review" which published numerous articles with an exceptional scientific appeal to individualized teaching (by Dimitar Mihalchev, Dimitar Katsarov, Hristo Nikolov, Petko Tsonev, etc.). The analysis of the contemporary interpretation of individualized teaching justifiably rests both on its

unquestioned acceptance by the scientific community and on the debate around its theoretical consideration.

In her effort to cover the existing variety of interpretations, Maya Sotirova develops a complex conceptual network where in some cases the same concept appears with a different volume of content, sometimes two different concepts partially overlap, etc. (p. 46 - 60). Realizing the impossibility of getting out of this conceptual Babylon, the candidate summarizes the existing (and apparently insurmountable) "confusion of terms" (p. 59). The essential achievement in this part of the thesis is the presentation of the main characteristics of personalized teaching - despite the reservation that "personalized teaching is a developing concept which is still in the process of theoretical conceptualization" (p. 68). There is, however, another terminological confusion which had been surmountable, – namely the definition of personalization in teaching as both a "method" (p. 61) and an "approach" (p. 69, 81).

One of the assets of the thesis is the presentation not only of the positive aspects of personalized teaching, but also of the risks and questions it brings forth that are related to its goals, content, organization, evaluation, etc., that is, at this point the unhealthy obsession with one's own research subject, which often occurs in scientific discourse, is avoided.

In her pursuit of comprehensiveness in the formulative part of her work, Maya Sotirova touches not only upon important aspects of personalized education, such as interest-based activities, additional education, preparation of individual study plans and programs, but also ranges over some additional dimensions - violence prevention, speech therapy activities etc., which has led to a slight defocusing of the main research task and to a voluminous leveling of the theoretical prologue and the specific focus on Bulgarian language teaching at the primary education level.

Presenting the possibilities of constructivism in the field of personalized teaching, Maya Sotirova points to the limited applicability of this educational philosophy in institutionalized Bulgarian language teaching and recommends thinking not so much about personalized teaching as about personalized learning - through research, discovery, problem-solving and decision-making, project planning, etc. Thanks to her good scientific orientation in the large body of significant pedagogical research on the topic, Maya Sotirova manages to systematize the prerequisites for effective personalized

teaching - interactivity supported by today's digital technologies, support of individual styles of learning, experiential learning, collaborative work.

An essential achievement of the monographic work is the proposal of a conceptual framework for the future development of specific didactic technologies for transformative personalized teaching of Bulgarian language in primary school. In the first place, the correct goal setting corresponds both to the desire to form linguistic, sociolinguistic, strategic and discourse competences, and to the personal qualities of the students. Curricular content is the second aspect of transformative personalized teaching where certain flexibility is envisaged regarding the individual cognitive characteristics of students – despite the static nature of this predetermined element of education. The paper reasonably emphasizes the methods and means of teaching that would contribute to the personalization of Bulgarian language teaching. With respect to theoretical correctness the exposition also includes a densely woven network of quotes from modern authorities in pedagogy, after which it concretizes its ideas in terms of the student's independent work and his participation in a small group, the interactive activities, the communicative and project orientation of teaching, the situational and game exercises. Demonstrating scientific integrity, the thesis also recalls the main forms of learning that the teacher can consider in the perspective of personalized teaching. The development does not fail to pay attention to students with SEN and to the corresponding special personalization of the teaching process. The proposed conceptual framework also includes the problem of evaluation.

Additionally, the thesis contains an empirical study - a survey with teachers about the challenges and prospects for personalized teaching. I can characterize the conducted survey as scientifically sound in its design, professionally conducted and carefully analyzed.

In summary, the presented habilitation work is a contribution to the theoretical understanding of personalized teaching of Bulgarian language at the initial stage of the basic educational level. Its value is also evident in the preparation of a conceptual framework for future technological concretization of personalized teaching, as well as in a pedagogically sound survey research. The question that, in my opinion, remains theoretically incomplete concerns the difference between personalization and personalization of teaching.

The articles with which Maya Sotirova participated in the competition confirm my conviction about the candidate's ability to focus on current problems of modern Bulgarian language teaching (interactivity, communicativeness, game-based activity, multiculturalism, etc.), to connect theory with practice and to put the topics discussed in a current sociocultural context.

Maya Sotirova's name is known to the pedagogical body in our country, proof of which is the large number of citations and references to her publications.

Teaching activity

Maya Sotirova has teaching experience with various theoretical and practical student courses and with teacher qualification courses.

Other professional competences

In addition, Maya Sotirova has administrative experience gained at the Center for Continuing Education at South-West University "Neofit Rilski" where she was deputy director, and at the Faculty of Pedagogy at the same university where she held the position of deputy dean. She has worked on numerous national and international educational projects. She is a member of teams for creating study sets and methodical aids in Bulgarian language and literature for the primary school level. She participated in numerous teaching courses at home and abroad, as well as in the teaching mobility course of the Erasmus program.

Recommendation

Since Maya Sotirova's publications are primarily related to the teaching of Bulgarian language, I would recommend that sufficient attention be paid to the teaching of literature in the future.

Conclusion

The presented research and teaching activity is at a high scientific level. Consequently, I strongly suggest to the esteemed scientific jury to award Maya

Sotirova Sotirova the academic position of *Associate Professor* at the Faculty of Pedagogy of the Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" in professional direction 1.3. Methodology of Teaching Bulgarian Language and Literature in the Initial Stage of Education.

Sofia, October 13, 2023

Assoc. Prof. Ogniana Georgieva-Teneva