

OPINION

by Prof. Dr Pelagia Terziyska, South-West University „Neofit Rilski” for a dissertation work on the topic: „**HOLISTIC APPROACH TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF LEARNING SKILLS OF STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS**”, for obtaining the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in Professional direction 1.2. Pedagogy (Special Pedagogy)

PhD Candidate: **MARIA NIKOLAOU KYRIAKOPOULOU**

Supervisor: **PROF. DR TSANKA POPZLATEVA**

This opinion was prepared on the basis of order No. RD-38-659/15.12.2023 of the Rector of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", as well as the decision of the scientific jury on the procedure.

General presentation of the procedure and the PhD student

Maria Kyriakopoulou is a full-time doctoral student in professional field 1.2. Pedagogy (Special Pedagogy) with English language training in the Department of Special Pedagogy, Faculty of Educational Sciences and the Arts of the Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”.

The procedure and the presented set of documents are in accordance with the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff and the Rules for the Development of the Academic Staff of Sofia University.

The education received by Maria Kyriakopoulou motivates her to continue her studies in the Doctoral Program "Special Pedagogy" of Sofia University "Kliment Ohridski" and to carry out research activities regarding the development of learning skills of students with special educational needs.

Actuality of the topic

The search for adequate teaching approaches that correspond as fully as possible to the peculiarities of the development of children with special educational needs is an essential problem for today. In this context, the holistic approach has its significant place in the teaching and learning process of children with SEN. It has a variety of functions and provides enough opportunities to develop their learning skills. Therefore, Maria Kyriakopoulou's dissertation work is a necessary and interesting study regarding the enrichment of pedagogical theory and practice.

Based on researched literature sources and familiarization with the results of modern research in the field of education of children with SEN, PhD student Kyriakopoulou draws attention to the need to look for opportunities to make changes in their learning, as they often have difficulties in obtaining skills for learning. She emphasizes the need for better differentiation of the professional roles of the special pedagogue in primary and secondary school, due to the different specificity of the difficulties and the ways to deal with them in the different age groups.

Presentation of the dissertation work and assessment of content

The dissertation submitted for review contains a total of 230 pages, of which *196 pages main text* is structured in an introduction, 3 chapters and a conclusion. The literature is listed on 25 pages, including online sources presenting titles in Greek (167), English (201) and Bulgarian (3). The application is spread over 9 pages.

The dissertation includes 33 tables and 18 figures.

The introduction indicates the relevance of the chosen topic and emphasizes the importance of the holistic approach for school performance of students with special educational needs and their best possible inclusion in the structures of mass education.

The literature review on the researched issues is made in the *first chapter* of the dissertation. It presents a concept of a holistic approach - origin and constructivist model. Emphasis is placed on key positions in the concept, having a significant impact on child-adolescent development, education, diagnosis and therapeutic strategies. In the paradigm of constructivist theories and inclusive education, the questions about the specific manifestations of special educational needs (SEN) in the period of adolescence are considered. Attention is directed to the impact of policies and special circumstances on ongoing reforms to promote inclusive education, as well as the importance of the family environment on adolescent development and learning. The key role in managing the educational needs of children and the needs of their families of the special educator is emphasized, including the need to build a culture of collaborative teaching and learning, as an important pathway to building the professional readiness of the special educator.

The research methodology is presented in the *second chapter*. The purpose of the empirical study, the main research questions, and the research toolkit - a standardized questionnaire for special educators covering the diverse interactions that occur in the different aspects of the holistic paradigm in an inclusive environment - are formulated. The main research thesis is clearly presented.

The contingent of the research carried out in the academic year 2022-2023 has been specified - 100 special education teachers from different prefectures of Greece, who evaluate a total of 200 students with SEN from the middle course of mass schools. When determining the target group for collecting information about educational conditions and processes, the experience and position of special educators in modern educational conditions are taken into account.

The empirical research is aimed at investigating essential characteristics of the interactions between the main participants in the educational process, and at applying the holistic approach to students with SEN in mass secondary schools.

In the *third chapter*, the analysis of the obtained results is made. They are presented in the context of the emotional-behavioural profile of adolescents with SEN, their achievements in mainstream school, the characteristics of their family, school and social environment, and the differential influence of internal factors and specific socio-pedagogical factors on behaviour and learning.

The analyzes and findings lead PhD student Kyriakopoulou to the formulation of recommendations for the educational practices.

Evaluation of publications:

The publications are 4 in number and are on the subject of the dissertation work.

Abstract

The abstract presents the dissertation work in a summarized way. The content of the individual chapters is sufficiently informative. The author's summary conclusions, recommendations and contributions are highlighted.

Contributions:

I accept the contributions indicated by PhD student Maria Kyriakopoulou, which she formulates in 3 groups: contributions of a theoretical nature; methodological contributions and scientific-applied contributions.

CONCLUSION:

The presented dissertation work, developed by doctoral student Maria Kyriakopoulou, meets the requirements that apply to developments for the acquisition of the educational and scientific degree "Doctor".

On the basis of the outlined merits of the work, the demonstrated skill for scientific research and the contributions of the author, I give a positive assessment and

propose to the honorable scientific jury to award the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" Maria Kyriakopoulou in the field of higher education: 1. Pedagogical sciences, professional direction 1.2. Pedagogy, doctoral program "Special Pedagogy"

Author of the opinion:

3/02/2024

Prof. Dr Pelagia Terziyska