REVIEW

by Prof. Dr. Dr. Mira Tzvetkova-Arsova,

Department of "Special Education" at the Faculty of Educational Studies and the Arts of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski"

of a dissertation

for awarding of the educational and scientific degree "doctor" (PhD) in a scientific field 1.2. Pedagogy/Education (Special Education)

Doctoral student: Maria Nikolaou Kyriakopoulou

Title: "HOLISTIC APPROACH TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF LEARNING SKILLS OF STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS "

Scientific supervisor: Prof. Dr. Tzanka Popzlateva

1. **Short description of the presented set of materials for the procedure**

By order of the Rector of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" No. 38-659/15.12.2023 I have been appointed as a member of the Sciences Committee/jury for the procedure for conducting the defense of the doctoral dissertation of Maria Kyriakopoulou – a full-time doctoral student in special education in English language at the Department of "Special Education" at the Faculty of Educational Studies and the Arts of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" with scientific supervisor Prof. Dr. Tzanka Popzlateva.

The set of materials on electronic media submitted to me for review includes the necessary documents, including the full text of the dissertation in English language, the Autoreferat (Abstract) in Bulgarian language, CV, publications on the topic of the dissertation, etc.

2. Short biographical data for the doctoral student

The PhD candidate Maria Kyriakopoulou holds a BA in Philosophy and Social Sciences from the University of Crete, Greece, and MA in Special Education from the University of Liverpool, UK, with a Diploma in Dyslexia from the same university, and is currently studying at the Hellenic Open University in Greece.

She worked as a teacher of ancient and modern Greek literature and history in a private school, subsequently worked as a substitute teacher in the system of inclusive education, and from 2008 to the present moment is a special education teacher with a permanent position, working with students with SEN in a high school.

She was enrolled as a full-time doctoral student in special education in English at Sofia University, Faculty of Educational Studies and the Arts, Department of Special Education, in 2020 with a study period of 3 years under the scientific supervision of Prof. Tzanka Popzlateva. She was dismissed with the right to defend in 2023. I congratulate the PhD candidate for the fast defense, which happens very soon after her dismissal from the PhD program.

3. Relevance of the title and of the topic

The topic of Maria Kyriakopoulou's dissertation focuses on the holistic approach and its application to students with special educational needs (SEN) and the development of their learning skills. The views on using a holistic approach are important at international level and reflect on the contemporary views of researchers in relation to various areas of life, including to learning skills. In this sense, I consider the topic of the dissertation as disserable, important and relevant for theory and practice.

4. Characteristics and evaluation of the structure and organization of the doctoral dissertation

Maria Kyriakopoulou's dissertation has a total volume of 230 pages and has a classic structure. It contains 3 chapters, one of which is theoretical, one chapter introduces the research methodology, one chapter offers an analysis of the data and results, discussion, recommendations for the practice, conclusion, contributions, bibliography and one appendix. The actual text is 197 pages long, followed

by an extensive bibliography including 271 references, mostly in English language, as well as an appendix. References from the last 5 years (respectively from 2019 an 2020) are included.

The doctoral dissertation includes 33 tables and 18 figures.

The ratio between the theoretical and the research parts in the doctoral dissertation is approximately 80:20:62 pages with a slight predominance of the theoretical part.

The doctoral dissertation begins with an introduction, which actually summarizes the contents of the text by chapters.

The first chapter is devoted to the holistic approach in the development of learning skills in students with SEN. It consists of 6 paragraphs. The first defines and introduces the essence of the holistic approach, the second presents the characteristics of adolescents with SEN, the third presents some legislative measures, the fourth introduces the influence of social factors on inclusive education, the fifth is dedicated to the parental role, and the last to the inclusive school environment. A conclusion summarizing what was written in the first chapter follows. This chapter is about 80 pages long and well structured. It presents the contemporary views and understandings of the holistic approach and of inclusive education in relation to students with SEN. The importance of factors such as the involvement of parents and the social environment is emphasized. The theoretical review of the special literature leaves a good impression of comprehensiveness, orderliness and coherent presentation of international studies and views related to the holistic approach.

The second chapter introduces the methodology of the research. It begins with a presentation of the object and the subject of the study. Research questions follow, and then the main goal, the objectives, hypotheses, participants in the research, and research methodology are presented. The main goal is well defined. Four hypotheses are raised. Participants in the study were a total of 100 special education teachers who reported data on their 200 students with SEN aged 12-18. Students with various disabilities are included – with dyslexia, ADHD, autistic spectrum disorder (ASD), intellectual disability, impaired vision, as well as one student without exact diagnosis, but experiencing difficulties in learning. I appreciate the fact that participants from different settlements in Greece were included in the study, in order to verify the influence of the socio-economic factor under different conditions. A questionnaire consisting of a total of 112 questions, entitled Questionnaire on inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs in Secondary Mainstream Schools (for the Special Educators/ Resource Teachers) was developed. As the PhD candidate Maria Kyriakopoulou points out, the

questionnaire was developed in the spirit of the holistic approach and aligned with the four main approaches to learning, namely learning how to learn, learning to do, learning to live, and learning for living together. In addition, the factors that influence these types of learning were described - subjective factors related to students' personal characteristics, and objective factors that in turn include the applied policies, the material base, the interactions between teachers and other members of the school staff, the preparation and qualification of teachers, the role of the family. The questionnaire is divided into four subcategories – 1) demographic data for the teachers; 2) demographic data for the adolescents with SEN: 3) personal characteristics of the students, including emotional, physical, behavioral, attentional, anxieties, academic progress; 4) the influence of the environment - family, school, social environment, etc. The questionnaire used is very well described and explained with the distribution of questions by groups. It is also well explained why the various questions are included in the questionnaire. The questionnaire uses a Likert scale. The research itself was conducted during the school year 2022-2023. The questionnaire was distributed electronically via Google form to the participants.

In the third chapter, an analysis of the collected empirical data is made. A statistical processing was performed with the program SPSS-version 23.0 as well as percentage ratios were done. All collected data has been skilfully and thoroughly analyzed, starting with the presentation of percentage ratios of the demographics of teachers and students with SEN. A statistical analysis of the results of the questions in the questionnaire follows. Tables and figures are included, as well as enough text to explain the performance of the surveyed students on the individual questions in the questionnaire is offered. The main statistical tests used are the Kruskal-Wallis test, Pearson's x2, Spearman's correlation coefficient, multiple regression, etc. The reasons for their use are explained well and in detail in the second chapter. I believe that the third chapter is sufficiently informative and in it an analysis of the data from the questionnaire was carried out in maximum detail. The PhD student Maria Kyriakopoulou managed well to find a fine balance between an extensive and comprehensive analysis and a skillful brevity. Up to § 3.5. the data is mainly based on percentage ratios. From § 3.5. further, a significant statistical analysis begins. There is also text here, commenting on the hypotheses and their statistical dependencies.

On page 172 begins a discussion which is 10 pages long. It is well constructed and skilfully compares its own results with those of other related studies and research. The discussion includes a table in which the confirmation or rejection of the four hypotheses is indicated in great detail,

including comments on the individual components of the hypotheses. It becomes clear that Hypotheses 1 and 2 are fully confirmed, while Hypotheses 3 and 4 are partially confirmed. I appreciate the work on the hypothesis analysis, stating in great detail what the results showed in each part of the hypotheses, and reporting very precisely which part of the hypotheses is confirmed and which is rejected. This shows high scientific correctness and striving for comprehensiveness in interpretation.

Recommendations follow, which are about 10 in number. They are followed by text stating about the limitations of the study.

The conclusion is also 10 pages long. It again cites foreign research and comments on the hypotheses. There is some overlap in the discussion and the conclusion. Nevertheless, the conclusion part nicely finalizes the reflections and personal thoughts on the topic of applying a holistic approach to the learning of students with SEN.

5. Contributions to the theory and practice

In § 3.10 the contributions are described. They are divided into three groups - theoretical, methodological, scientific and applied. The contributions are explained textually, without numbering, but it still becomes clear what exactly contributions the PhD candidate Maria Kyriakopoulou brings due to her own research. For me the most important contributions are in the implementation of the holistic approach, in the development of a questionnaire and in the inclusion of a sufficient number of diverse participants in the study, which allows analysis of the impact of different factors on the holistic approach paradigm.

6. Evaluation of publications on the topic of the dissertation

On pages 196 and 197 in the main text in English, as well as on the last page of the Abstract, four publications on the topic of the dissertation work are listed. They are correctly and fully bibliographed. Their titles are related to the topic of the doctoral dissertation and I accept them as such. All of them are single-authored and are published in the proceedings of the annual conferences of the Faculty of Educational Studies and the Arts, held in 2020, 2021, 2022 and 2023. I appreciate as a particularly positive fact this sequential reporting on the topic of the doctoral dissertation in several consecutive years.

7. Autoreferat (Abstract)

The review of the Abstract of the doctoral dissertation in Bulgarian language shows a volume of 57 pages and a good representation of the structure and content of the main text. I approve its content and structure, as well as the Bulgarian translation, which is clear, understandable and correct. The Abstract presents a balanced part of the theoretical overview, sufficient information about the research part and sufficient analysis of the results.

The Abstract is a good proof of the skills of the doctoral student Maria Kyriakopoulou to present in a summary and in an abbreviated form the main text of her doctoral dissertation.

8. Questions and recommendations to the doctoral student:

1. I recommend publishing parts of the full text of the doctoral dissertation or the whole text as a book or in a series of articles, but in Greek scientific journals, in order to promote both the developed questionnaire and the research results in Greece. The current publications are in Bulgarian editions.
2. I have the following question: how well known, familiar and applied is the paradigm of the holistic approach in the learning process for students with SEN in Greece according to the results of the questionnaire?

Conclusion:

The doctoral dissertation of Maria Kyriakopoulou on the topic "*Holistic approach to the development of learning skills of students with special educational needs"* with scientific supervisor Prof. Dr. Tzanka Popzlateva is valuable, up-to-date, structurally and textually well composed and organized. It contains scientific-theoretical propositions and scientific-applied results, which are a contribution to the science and practice of special education.

The doctoral dissertation meets the requirements of the framework accepted in Bulgaria, which are listed in the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff and in the Regulation of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" for acquiring scientific degrees. The doctoral dissertation is devoted to a topic that is important, and the text itself meets the requirements in terms of structure, organization and contains all the necessary parts and components. The dissertation presents a well-constructed and

conducted study with 100 participants reporting the results of 200 students with different types of special educational needs in Greece. The whole text shows that the PhD candidate Maria Kyriakopoulou has deep theoretical knowledge of the topic of her doctoral dissertation, which is evident from the text in the theoretical chapter, she has qualities and skills for planning and practical implementation of scientific research, which is clear in the second chapter, which presents the methodology of the research, as well as he has good skills to analyze scientific data, to interpret the obtained results and to compare them with other, similar studies, proven in the third chapter of the doctoral dissertation, and last, but not least, she has the skills to assess and evaluate the state of scientifically elevated and formulated hypotheses, in a truthful and realistic way, in a scientific field 1.2. Pedagogy - Special Education.

In addition, the text of the doctoral dissertation has been appropriately popularized through four scientific publications in Bulgaria.

Based on everything stated above, I give a **positive assessment and evaluation** to the doctoral dissertation and the Autoreferat (Abstract), and I propose to the esteemed scientific committee/jury to award the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" (PhD) to **Maria Nikolaou Kyriakopoulou** in professional field 1.2. Pedagogy (Special Education).

Sofia, February 24, 2024   Sincerely:

(Prof. Dr. Dr. Mira Tzvetkova-Arsova)