STATEMENT OF OPINION
by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Zhivko Zhekov,
MU "Prof. Dr. Paraskev Stoyanov"- Varna

on dissertation

"READING DISORDERS IN PUPILS WITH MILD MENTAL
RETARDATION"

for the award of PhD in
field of higher education 1. Pedagogical Sciences,
professional field 1.2. Pedagogy - scientific specialty "Special Pedagogy"

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Scientific supervisor: Prof. DSc Neli Vasileva

1. General characteristics of the dissertation

The thesis presented for defense is a comparative study of reading skills (decoding, fluency, morphosyntax and comprehension) in 2nd and 3rd grade pupils of a mass school with a mild degree of mental retardation and with typical development.

In terms of structure and content, the dissertation meets all the requirements for a similar type of scientific work. Its total volume of 171 pages includes summary, introduction, operational units, two parts with three chapters each, conclusions, contributions, limitations of the study, recommendations, bibliography of 180 Latin titles and appendices.

The development is illustrated with 18 tables and 20 figures. In connection with the procedure, Tomai-Maria Andreopoulou has submitted all the documents required by the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and the regulations for its implementation. The attached list of scientific publications on the subject includes 8 publications in English, two of which are co-authored by the scientific supervisor.

2. Relevance of the dissertation

The formation of reading skills in children with mild mental retardation is a challenge for pedagogical specialists under conditions of inclusive education. How students cope with reading mastery, how this process takes place, what its dynamics is, and last but not least, how to evaluate and interpret the processes related to decoding, fluency, morphosyntax and reading comprehension.

The long history of studying the problem is not a reason to claim that all the difficulties faced by pupilss with mild mental retardation in mastering reading have

been revealed. The heterogeneous nature of the group, determined by various etiological factors and forms of disorder, leads to a complex combination of verbal and non-verbal symptoms, which makes working with these students even more difficult.

The presented scientific work is one of the few in this direction, and in it the author makes a successful attempt at an in-depth analysis of the reading process and its specific features among students with mild mental retardation.

3. Content aspects and contributions of the thesis

Acquaintance with the work leaves the impression of a competently conceived and very well realized scientific development. In it, the doctoral student presents an in-depth analysis of the mechanisms and processes of reading, with an emphasis on the specifics of its mastery in students with mental retardation.

The first part of the work, devoted to a theoretical review of the problem under consideration, includes the following main paragraphs: Theoretical and diagnostic problems of the state "mental retardation"; Peculiarities of language functioning in pupils with mental retardation; The special education of pupils with mild mental disorders in the Republic of Greece.

The good scientific style of presentation of the material and Tomai-Maria Andreopoulou's ability to comment and summarize a large number of literary sources are impressive. The literature review shows insufficient development in theoretical and empirical terms of the problem of mastering reading in children with mild mental retardation.

The second part of the dissertation, dedicated to the research design, clearly presents its purpose, hypotheses (3 in total), methodological framework and research participants. The tools for collecting and processing the data, the procedure for applying the test and the diagnostic focus of the samples in it are described in detail.

The aim of the dissertation research is a comparative analysis of different components of the reading habit (operational and content) in pupils with mild mental retardation and pupils with typical development from the second and third grade of the mainstream school.

To implement it, the "Reading Test - Test A" was applied, standardized for the Greek student population and assessing the reading skills of elementary school students (Panteliadou & Antoniou, 2007). The structural-content characteristics of the test cover four main parameters of reading: word decoding, fluent reading, use of the rules of morphology and syntax, text comprehension. The thoroughly described tasks in each of them allow an objective comparison of the results of the two groups of students.

The object of the research is a total of 80 students from the second and third grades of Greek mainstream schools. The students were evenly divided into two groups by age and diagnostic criteria, respectively: 40 second-grade students, of which 20 with mild mental retardation and 20 with typical development; 40 students of the third grade, of which 20 with a mild degree of mental retardation and 20 with typical development. The average age of children with mental retardation is respectively: 7-8 years in the

second grade, except for four children aged 9 years, and 8-9 years in the third grade, except for five children aged 10 years.

The design of the empirical study is specified in detail and clearly presented. Data processing and quantitative analysis of the study were performed using the statistical software package IBM SPSS Statistic, version 20. Descriptive statistical analysis was applied to analyze the demographic data, the results of which are presented in figures. The purpose of descriptive statistics is the collection, organization, and summary presentation of data in an easy-to-understand format (Chalikias et al., 2015).

The fifth chapter of the dissertation is dedicated to the analysis of own data from the study, the interpretation of which was carried out according to the individual scales of the methods used. The characteristics of the sample are represented by the chi-square test of association between two nominal variables, which shows a uniform distribution and similarity by gender of the two samples of pupils studied. Descriptive statistics of the entire sample for the studied variables are presented. The results of the normality test for the study scale variables are presented using the Shapiro Wilk test. Individual variables were compared between students with typical development and students with mild mental retardation according to the parameters: Reading - decoding; Reading fluency; Morphosyntactic level of reading; Reading Comprehension.

The results of the Spearman's rank correlation test between the variables in the group of students with typical development are graphically presented, where statistically significant positive correlations were observed in all cases, except for the relationship between decoding and comprehension, which was not significant. This is complemented by literary data on reading problems, which speak of a lack of direct connection between the technical and the content side of reading. The results of the Student's t-test for the comparison of mean values of independent variables show the presence of significant differences between second and third grade pupils in 3 of the variables.

The "Discussion" presented in the sixth chapter is dedicated to a detailed qualitative interpretation of the statistical data from the conducted research. The analysis is centered around four research questions, which the doctoral student tries to answer both from the standpoint of statistical analysis of the collected data, and by comparing them with other literature on scientific research on reading problems among students with mild intellectual disabilities.

The obtained results and data analysis confirm all three working hypotheses of the study. The hypothesis that typically developing children in the second and third grades show significantly better results on all four reading assessment parameters - decoding, fluency, morphology-syntax and comprehension - than students with a mild degree of mental retardation is proven.

I accept the conclusions drawn despite the fact that some of them are decidedly predictable. As the most significant, I would define conclusions 6 and 7, which refer to the main differences in reading skills between the two groups of students, namely: for students with typical development, there is no direct relationship between text

decoding and reading comprehension, while for those with mental retardation, comprehension depends directly on decoding skills.

I partially accept the theoretical and practical-applied contributions formulated in the dissertation work.

The presented publications - a total of 8, of which 6 independent and 2 co-authored with the supervisor, are in the context of the dissertation.

The abstract (in a volume of 62 pages) meets the requirements for a summarized and comprehensive presentation of the work.

I have the following questions for the doctoral student:

1. How and according to what criteria was the control group of students determined and selected?

2. What is the reason for the results - conclusion 8, that according to the indicator of reading fluency, the pupils in the second grade show better results than the pupils in the third grade?

CONCLUSION:

In terms of its topicality and scientific implementation, Tomai-Maria Andreopoulou's dissertation meets all the conditions and requirements for awarding the educational and scientific degree "doctor" under the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria, the regulations for its application and the Rules for the Development of the Academic Staff of Sofia University University "St. Cl. Ohridski".

Expressing my positive attitude towards the theoretical and diagnostic-applied value of the work and the overall positive assessment of the completed dissertation research, I propose to the respected Scientific Jury to give a positive vote and award Tomai-Maria Andreopoulou the educational and scientific degree "DOCTOR" in professional direction 1. 2. Pedagogy - Special pedagogy.

City of Varna   Assoc. Prof. Dr. Zhivko Zhekov**:**
17/04/2024