

OPINION

by **assoc. prof. Diyana Georgieva, PhD**

of a dissertation for the award of an educational and scientific degree "Doctor"

in the field of higher education 1. Pedagogical sciences

professional direction 1.2. *Pedagogy*

doctoral program *Special pedagogy*

Author: *Maria Nikolaos Kyriakopoulou*

Topic: "Holistic approach to the development of learning skills of students with special educational needs"

Research supervisor: *Prof. Tsanka Zlateva Popzlateva, PhD*

1. Administrative highlights of the competition

By order No. RD-38-659/15.12.2023 of the Rector of SU "St. Kliment Ohridski" I am included in the scientific jury of **Maria Nikolaos Kyriakopoulou** in the procedure for the defense of a dissertation work to obtain the educational and scientific degree "Doctor". Maria Kyriakopoulou is a full-time doctoral student in professional field 1.2. *Pedagogy (Special Pedagogy)* in the Faculty of Educational Sciences and Arts.

2. General description of the presented materials

The set of electronic materials presented by Maria Kyriakopoulou includes the required documents according to the specific requirements of SU "St. Kliment Ohridski".

The peer-reviewed dissertation has a volume of 221 pages, divided into the traditional three chapters, conclusion, bibliography (271 titles: 268 in Latin and 3 in Cyrillic) and appendix. Data are visualized within 33 tables and 18 figures.

3. Relevance of the topic and appropriateness of the set goals and tasks

The topicality of the issues being developed is determined not only by the scale and significance of the problem in real life, but also its diverse and multifaceted interpretation by modern science. The knowledge that children with different abilities receive at school, without understanding why they need it, without having formed a sense of security and comfort, without being aware of the learning process, remains "closed" in itself. At the same time, the school performance of students with special educational needs can be significantly more successful if they have a clear idea of the resource at their disposal and the strategies by which to use it effectively. The key to reforming special education and freeing up the space for inclusive processes to take place is precisely in the search for approaches that are distinguished by their flexible and comprehensive nature. The Greek education system has its tradition in the field of inclusive education and the application of the holistic approach, but it should be

expanded and enriched, which is why I welcome and support the serious research done in this area.

4. Knowing the problem

Doctoral student Kyriakopoulou knows the issues developed by classic and contemporary authors, publishing in English and Bulgarian, adding her own author's interpretations of the theoretical material and its application in practice.

5. Research methodology

The content of the selected research methodology includes the "Questionnaire for inclusion of students with special educational needs in secondary mass schools (special pedagogues/resource teachers)" constructed by the author. Developed in 4 sections, the questionnaire contains 123 statements designed to collect empirical data on the factors (*independent variables*) determining the learning skills (*dependent variables*) of students with special educational needs according to the model of holistic education. *The first section* contains general information about special educators and resource teachers, and *the second section* provides data on the demographic profile of the students. *The third section* of the questionnaire is supplemented by a Greek standardized version of a generalized scale for expert evaluations of teachers of students from 11 to 18 years old, shaping the content of *A Teacher Report Form (TRF, Achenbach, 2013)*, which includes referents for categorizing 6 independent scales in each student's psychological profile. Students' academic progress is assessed through another group of 21 statements (Questions C54-C74), divided into 3 subcategories and rated on a Likert scale. *The fourth section* of the questionnaire focuses on assessing the quality of the supportive environment of the student with unique needs. The developed system of 31 questions, also divided into 3 subcategories, clarifies the influence of socio-pedagogical factors on the learning ability and behavioral patterns of students.

6. Characterization and evaluation of the dissertation work

In the introduction of the dissertation research, the practical relevance and scientific need of researching the problem of application of an interdisciplinary approach to offer rational and creative solutions for academic prosperity and successful adaptation of children with different capabilities to the complex realities of modern life is stated. Reference was made to the possibility of a deep transformation of the Greek education system at all levels and a reinvention of education in order to set trajectories ensuring the overall well-being of these children.

In **the first chapter**, PhD student Kyriakopoulou presents an in-depth theoretical study in which the holistic paradigm is established as a new global view of education and development, breaking the traditional canons of science and practice. Aspects of change from the standpoint of the holistic framework, in which the different dimensions of special educational needs in the inclusive space are included, are specified. An analytical review of the four conceptual educational models that represent the backbone of the philosophy of the holistic approach is made. This is followed by the unfolding of the discourse with the presentation of a communicative profile of children with atypical development during their adolescence, a description of the general and specific factors determining the contrasts between age-related psychological characteristics in typical and atypical development. Particular attention is paid to the policies governing the

education of children with special needs, as well as to their reflection. An important emphasis is bringing out the positives of inclusive education for the subjects fully participating in the implementation of this educational strategy. The problem of the state of inclusive education, which has come under the influence of a social situation dramatically transformed by COVID 19, has not been resolved either. Last but not least, the issue of the family (timely parental intervention, emotional regulation, parenting styles, positive family atmosphere) was commented on as a significant factor for the overall well-being of adolescents.

The second chapter is devoted to the empirical research methodology. The purpose, object, subject and main thesis of the research corpus are clearly specified. The formulated 4 hypotheses and defined research tasks are a logical consequence of the critical analysis of literary achievements. The research participants formed two representative samples of 100 special pedagogues/resource teachers working in the middle course of the general education school, and 200 students with special educational needs taught in the regular class of schools and lyceums in Greece. The diagnostic toolkit is based on empirical methods and the interpretation method. The relevant dependent and independent variables are identified. The major research was preceded by a pilot research procedure in which a group of 10 special educators participated in order to test the constructed diagnostic tool, which stood out with high reliability parameters (0.7 - 0.8). The collected data were coded, recorded and processed through the components of descriptive and inductive statistics and procedures for recording the normality of the distribution of statistical units. SPSS 23 statistical package was applied. The precise and balanced selection of statistical methods is a clear proof of a high level of statistical culture of the doctoral student.

In **the third chapter**, the results obtained during the experimental study are analyzed in relation to 8 directions: (1) deriving demographic characteristics of special educators in 6 areas; (2) a presentation of the demographic profile of students with SEN in 4 areas; (3) forming an emotional-behavioral profile of students: recording emotional-behavioral reactions, manifestations of anxiety, physical discomfort, cognitive dysfunction and hyperkinetic disorder, challenging and antisocial behavior patterns; (4) student learning and academic performance, including: basic skills, performance on cognitive tests and exercises, achievement in academic subjects, all influenced by biological, cognitive, and behavioral characteristics; (5) family, school, and social environment of differently abled students; (6) influence of internal factors on student behavior and learning; (7) Influence of specific socio-pedagogical factors on students' learning competence; (8) Influence of the interaction between internal and socio-pedagogical factors on learning competence. An original model for predicting the results of student performance in exercises and tests is presented, which gives the dissertation development an even higher added value. I appreciate the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the obtained data and their in-depth interpretation. The presented visualization of the empirical material also makes an excellent impression.

Important and at the same time alarming is the general conclusion reached by PhD student Kyriakopoulou. On this basis, she formulates recommendations, the content of which is saturated with ideas for improving the hierarchical organization between educational policies, structures, activities, and accordingly establishing cooperative relations between the people who implement them: special pedagogues, resource

teachers, general pedagogues, representatives of mental health services, parents and other interested individuals.

7. Contributions and significance of the development for science and practice

The scientific contributions of the dissertation work can be divided into three areas: theoretical, methodological and scientific-applied. I accept all contributions listed. This applies with particular force to the diagnostic tool constructed based on the philosophy of the holistic paradigm, oriented to the assessment of "the micro-system and the macro-system of each inclusive environment, as well as to set realistic and objective educational goals in each school year".

8. Evaluation of publications on the dissertation work

The doctoral student has published 4 scientific materials in the period 2020-2023, which present to the scientific community essential moments of the dissertation research. All are with the independent participation of the author.

9. Abstract

The abstract reflects the content of the dissertation work. The relevant sequence of the exposition has been observed and all the important components of its structure are present. The produced text is presented in sophisticated professional and literary language and style.

10. Recommendations for future use of dissertation contributions and results

I recommend a wider popularization of the obtained empirical results, as the dissertation has outlined applied value and expected effects in current educational practice. Dissertation results can be designed and published as a monographic work.

CONCLUSION

The dissertation work of Maria Kyriakopoulou contains valuable results for science and practice, which I appreciate as a significant contribution in the pedagogical space. They are in accordance with the requirements of the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria (LDASRB) and the Regulations for the Implementation of LDASRB.

Given the creative and modern thinking of the doctoral student embodied in the dissertation work, I confidently give my positive assessment and propose to the respected scientific jury **to award the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" to Maria Nikolaos Kyriakopoulou** in the field of higher education 1. Pedagogical Sciences, Professional Direction 1.2. Pedagogy, Doctoral program *Special pedagogy*.

17.02.2024

Prepared the opinion:

/assoc. prof. Diyana Georgirva, PhD/