

REVIEW

**from professor DSc Zhana Atanasova Yankova,
University of Plovdiv "Paisii Hilendarski" Faculty of Education,
Department "Pedagogy and Education Management"**

of a dissertation for awarding the educational and scientific degree "**doctor**"

by: field of higher education 1. Pedagogical sciences

professional direction 1.2. Pedagogy

doctoral program Special pedagogy with English language training

Author : Maria Nikolaos Kyriakopoulou

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

Academic supervisor : Prof. Dr. Tsanka Zlateva Popzlateva , SU "St. Kliment Ohridski"

1. General description of the presented materials

By order No. RD 38-66 3 of 19. 12.202 3 years of the Rector of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" I have been appointed as a member of the scientific jury to ensure a procedure for the defence of a dissertation work on the topic " Holistic approach to the development of learning skills of students with special educational needs " for the acquisition of the educational and scientific degree "doctor" in the field of higher education 1. Pedagogical sciences; professional direction 1.2. Pedagogy, doctoral program Special pedagogy with instruction in English. He is the author of the dissertation Maria Nikolaos Kyriakopoulou - PhD student in full-time study at the " Special Pedagogy " department at the "St. Kliment Ohridski"

Presented by Maria Nikolaos Kyriakopoulou a set of materials on paper is in accordance with the requirements of ZRASRB and the Procedural Rules for the acquisition of scientific degrees and holding academic positions at SU "St. Kliment Ohridski", including all necessary documents.

2. Brief biographical data of the PhD student

Doctoral student Maria Nikolaos Kyriakopoulou graduated with a BA in 1996 from the University of Crete. The master's degree graduated in 2012 from the University of John Moors, Liverpool , Great Britain . In the same year, he completed the post-graduate qualification at Liverpool University in dyslexia.

In 2020, he was enrolled as a full-time doctoral student in the Department of "Special Pedagogy and Speech Therapy" at the University of St. Kliment Ohridski" , professional field of Pedagogy, doctoral program Special Pedagogy with training in English. From 1996 to 2008, he taught ancient Greek and modern Greek literature in Crete and Athens . From 2008 to 2024, he worked as a special educator with children and students with special educational needs. She participated in a number of seminars and conferences related to the special and inclusive education of children and students with special educational needs. She was also the coordinator of health and environmental education projects.

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

The research problem on which the doctoral student works is relevant both in special pedagogy and in inclusive education with reforming practices . The focus of the dissertation research is on the holistic approach in education and more specifically on the development of learning skills of students with special educational needs , but also on their psycho-social and emotional development .

The presented dissertation contains a wide range of theoretical and empirical data, analyzes and discussions, directly related to the outlined aspects of the problem.

The research objective is clearly defined with a specific study of the influence of internal biological, cognitive, emotional and behavioral factors with external family, social and pedagogical factors on the learning and educational progress of students with special educational needs in the inclusive environment of school education. The tasks of the dissertation research are specific and expediently implemented in their sequence in the relevant chapters of the dissertation work.

4. Knowing the problem

The doctoral student knows the state of the issue very well and skilfully interprets the scientific literature. The theoretical positions on the researched problem are presented in a comprehensive, multifaceted and in-depth manner. The research focus is specified through

the formulated research thesis and the main objective in four generalized hypotheses related to the measurement of the internal factors and socio-pedagogical factors regarding the learning competence of adolescents with special educational needs in the inclusive environment of school education in the Republic of Greece.

5. Research methodology

The research methodology chosen by the doctoral student allows to achieve the goal and obtain adequate answers to the tasks set in the dissertation work.

The research toolkit is related to: the developed author's toolkit with a structured rating scale: "Questionnaire for the inclusion of students with special educational needs in secondary schools (for special pedagogues/resource teachers)" based on the model of holistic education ; with consideration of learning skills defined as dependent variables according to statistical terminology: Learning to learn; To learn to do; To learn to live; Learning to live together; with factors that influence the state of learning skills (independent variables) divided into the categories of subjective and objective. To the subjective factors *three subgroups* are assigned: the first group is related to the personality of the student with special educational needs, the knowledge and attitudes towards them from special and general education teachers, classmates and parents; the second is related to the knowledge and attitudes of teachers, parents and classmates towards the potential of students with special educational needs for learning and mastering the four categories of skills in the learning process and life situations, as well as the student himself; the third group of factors related to relations with the knowledge and skills of pedagogues to organize the educational environment and the joint educational activity in class, taking into account the individual differences of students, and the objective factors include policies, material base, organization of interaction between teachers, other specialists and parents.

For the purpose of the study, a questionnaire on inclusion of students with special educational needs in secondary schools" (for special educators/resource teachers) was developed in four parts containing a total of 123 questions (items).

To derive personal characteristics in the context of the emotional-behavioral sphere, a part of an internationally recognized psychological tool - "Achenbach's Behavioral Assessment System" (ASBA), in Greek standardization - was applied in the study. The summary scale for expert evaluations of teachers of students aged 11-18 years - "Teacher Report Form" (TRF, Achenbach, 2013) was selected. The standardized questionnaire offers norms for categorizing

six independent scales in each student's psychological profile as falling on the normative, borderline, or clinical spectrum. The six rating scales are : Emotional problems, Anxiety problems, Physical problems, Attention problems, Oppositional/defiant behavior problems, Conductive (antisocial) behavior problems .

The used statistical methods of data processing and analysis make it possible to outline the theoretical basis of the problem and to reveal the empirical justification of a complex of factors that influence the model of interaction of the special pedagogue with the student and his parents, with the school management as well as with other specialists - psychologists, social workers and medical personnel.

6. Characterization and evaluation of the dissertation work

The dissertation has a volume of 230 pages, of which 221 pages are the main text and 1 appendix. The structure includes: introduction, three chapters, discussion, recommendations for pedagogical practice, conclusion and appendix.

In *the introduction*, the doctoral student points out the relevance of the topic of applying the holistic approach in the inclusive education of students with special educational needs, so that they can develop their skills and build their strengths . Outlines the theoretical and practical significance of the researched problem in an argumentative manner

Chapter *one* presents the theoretical analysis of the concept of a holistic approach in a historical aspect. The construction model on which the holistic approach is based is presented, as well as the factors with which the holistic approach is carried out. Table 1 on page 22 of the dissertation presents the dimensions of the holistic approach in the context of the needs of students with special educational needs. In paragraph 1.2. the communication and general characteristics of students with special educational needs are presented, as well as the factors that influence their development. In a conceptual plan, the attitude of the policy and regulatory framework to inclusive education in Greece is presented, with an emphasis on adolescents with special educational needs. It makes a very good impression that the doctoral student makes a summary of the theoretical research on the issue with the aim of covering all the mapped areas in the holistic approach to their individual development, learning and school achievements.

The second chapter is entitled *Methodology of Empirical Research*. In paragraph 2.1. the doctoral student very skillfully presents the subject and the object and the research thesis.

How the holistic approach can support the development of students with special educational needs in inclusive education with all the internal biological, cognitive, emotional, behavioral factors and characteristics of the student, which in interaction with the socio-pedagogical factors of the family, school and society influence the general educational progress.

The purpose, hypotheses, tasks are presented in a logical sequence, the participants and the research methodology. The processing and presentation of the results was done using descriptive and inductive statistics. The results are presented through graphs, frequency tables and indicators, such as mean value and standard deviation, while possible correlations between variables are investigated in inductive statistics. All descriptive measures and inductive statistical controls were derived using the SPSS 23 statistical package for use in the social sciences .

In *the third chapter* are the results of the conducted empirical research are presented. A PhD candidate demonstrates very good skills at analysing the quantitative and qualitative results, which is a strength of the dissertation. With 18 diagrams and 33 tables, the analysis of the results of an empirical study is visualized, accompanied by a discussion of the corresponding result.

The dissertation ends with *a conclusion*. Based on the analysis of the results of the empirical research, evidence is presented in support of the main research thesis that in the period of adolescence, the essential biological, cognitive and personal characteristics of students with special educational needs and the characteristics of their socio-pedagogical development situation suffer qualitative changes, which also reflects on their interaction. This updates the problem of their differentiated recognition in the context of the holistic educational model. The author also makes recommendations for pedagogical practice.

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

The contributions of scientific research can be reduced to:

- *Contributions of a theoretical nature*
- Advantages of the Holistic Paradigm in Special Education for Optimum Support of Learning Skills of Students with Special Educational Needs. The position is defended that the current assessment of difficulties and potentials for acquiring new learning skills by students with special educational needs is the key moment that guides special

education teachers in choosing adequate methods and strategies for coordinating activities in the family, the school and society as well as to create a holistic culture for learning and teaching.

- The study identified an increased risk for borderline and clinical symptomatology in the emotional-behavioral sphere during adolescence, which are a factor in the school achievements of students with special educational needs and should be the focus of mental health professionals, but also of the family and the school .
- A holistic strategy in special education has been identified, manifested through trends to adapt educational goals to the biological, emotional, behavioral and cognitive needs of students with special educational needs, for expanded awareness and partial meeting of parental needs, as well as ongoing reforms in the modern school environment and social communities.

- *Methodological contributions*

- A multifactorial methodology was developed to extract empirical information from representative samples of special educators and students with special educational needs in secondary school. The applied quantitative strategies and statistical methods ensure the reliability of the conclusions drawn about the influence of the differentiated interactions between internal and external factors on the learning ability of students with special educational needs in adolescence. Such comprehensive information is not available in other research in the field of special pedagogy.
- The constructed research toolkit is based on modern strategies for expert assessment and method of scaled responses and collection of structured empirical information on specific biological, behavioral, emotional and cognitive characteristics of adolescents with special educational needs, but also on the readiness of the educational, parental and social environment to meet current needs in a holistic manner.

- *Scientific and applied contributions*

- The empirical research accumulates scientific evidence of positive effects of the application of the holistic paradigm through the current reforms in the secondary school level of the education system in Greece, but also a feedback on the difficulties and problems to be solved in the near future.

- Special educators are placed at the center of the educational process of adolescents with special educational needs , and their professional activities imply new and broader competences for identifying the current and immediate needs of students and for synchronizing activities to meet them.
- "*Questionnaire for inclusion of students with SEN in secondary mass schools* " was developed , which is intended to be used for ongoing assessment of the micro-system and macro-system of any inclusive environment, as well as for setting realistic and objective educational goals during each school year.

The contributions of the dissertation give me reason to point out that they find their application both in special pedagogy and in inclusive education .

8. Evaluation of publications on the dissertation work

The doctoral student has attached 4 publications on the topic of the dissertation, which were presented at doctoral conferences. The publications fully comply with the requirements of the University of St. Kliment Ohridski" for an open procedure of the dissertation work and reflect the achieved results and scientific contributions in the dissertation research.

9. Personal participation of the doctoral student

Maria Nikolaos Kyriakopoulou was a full-time doctoral student in English. She personally carried out the entire dissertation research with the competent assistance of her supervisor. I acknowledge that the text, results and contributions are her own work.

10. Abstract

The abstract reflects the structure and content of the dissertation work and the main results of the research.

11. Critical remarks and recommendations

Recommendation to the doctoral student is to publish the author's questionnaires so that they can reach and be used by educational institutions in the inclusion of students with special educational needs.

CONCLUSION

The dissertation of Maria Nikolaos Kyriakopoulou contains scientific and practical-applied results and answers to all requirements of the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria (ZRASRB), the Regulations for the Implementation of the ZRASRB and the Regulations for the Terms and Procedures for Acquiring Scientific Degrees and Holding Academic Positions at SU "St. Kliment Ohridski".

The dissertation shows that the doctoral student *has* in-depth theoretical knowledge and professional skills in the scientific specialty such as *demonstrated* qualities and skills for independent conduct of scientific research.

Given the above, I give my *positive assessment* of the conducted research, presented by the above-reviewed dissertation work, abstract, achieved results and contributions, and ***I propose to the honourable scientific jury to award the educational and scientific degree "doctor" to Maria Nikolaos Kyriakopoulou*** in field of higher education: 1. Pedagogical sciences; professional direction: 1.2. Pedagogy (Special Pedagogy) with training in English

17.02.2024

Reviewer:

Prof. Zhana Atanasova Yankova, Ph.D