

STATEMENT

From Assoc. Prof. Harieta Emanuilova Manolova, PhD, Medical University - Sofia, Faculty of Medicine, Department of Psychiatry and Medical Psychology.

For a dissertation work for awarding of educational and scientific degree "doctor", scientific field 3.2. Psychology (Clinical Psychology), with author Vaska Trayancho Zdravkova and topic “The potential of cognitive-behavioral psychotherapy for the management of depressive states in developmental dyslexia”.

Developmental dyslexia is a specific learning disorder characterized by difficulties in reading comprehension and writing of words, without impairment of general intelligence and without sensory deficits, while maintaining the ability to learn effectively in class (APA, 2014; British Dyslexia Association, 2011; WHO, 2008). The difficulties in reading are explained by multi-factorial causal models emphasizing mainly phonological deficits. Most studies, however, mention an increased risk of elevated psychopathology and a presence of psychiatric comorbidity. Researches has established a greater increase in internalizing disorders characterized by withdrawal, anxiety, and depression, as well as the fact that those affected by developmental dyslexia more frequently report the presence of depressive symptoms. Among the commonly described symptoms are suicidal thoughts, negative self-esteem, anhedonia, fatigue, and problems in social relationships. In a meta-analysis conducted by a team of Chinese researchers and published in the journal Brain Sciences in 2022, the summarized prevalence of developmental dyslexia is 7.10% with a significantly higher occurrence in boys compared to girls (boys: 9.22%, girls: 4.66%). This higher prevalence in boys (about 2/3) has been established in most studies and contradicts the author’s writing, that there are no gender differences in developmental dyslexia.

The presented work does not examine subgroups by gender and age, although the participants are of both genders and across a broad age range, where there are substantial differences in functioning from the perspective of psychological development. The study would have been more objective if, in addition to self-assessment questionnaires completed by the participants, there were data representing the opinion of parents and professionals, which is a point the author herself mentions in the sections “Limitations” and “Recommendations for future research”.

A very good impression is created by the design of the study, with its clarity and an absence of pretense to investigate large number of variables, which usually complicates the experimental part and leads to confusion and loss of the main line of the research. The language and the style of expression are unsatisfactory, likely related to the foreign nationality of the author, but sometimes the interpretations sound rather simplistic, unscientific and in some instances the meaning is not even understood. It is not clear how and where the participants have been diagnosed in order to establish the diagnosis of “developmental dyslexia”, nor what exactly "treatment as usual" involves. It is also unclear whether the experimental group had "treatment as usual" in combination with cognitive-behavioral therapy, which is important for the purity of the data.

Respect is due to the truly labor-intensive implementation of a therapeutic program consisting of 12 sessions, described in detail by the author, containing clear goals and periodic verification of results. It is not clear what the original source of the therapeutic program is, and what are the author's contributions to its improvement or development for the needs of the current study. The author's qualifications for conducting cognitive-behavioral therapy with children and adolescents are also not stated.

The research methods are well chosen and focused on the experiences of the participants and on the subset of depressive symptoms, which are the object of this study. Of interest is the inclusion of focus groups, allowing for a qualitative analysis of the results of the program, which is currently relevant in the scientific literature. This would require additional effort and group work skills of the author of the thesis, but the results obtained would be more objectively evaluated if, for example, a SWOT-analysis were used.

The research process follows the logical sequence of the stated aim, objectives and hypotheses. This also applies to the content of the cognitive-behavioral program, which focuses on the main variables being investigated through questionnaires: depressive states, negative automatic thoughts and social and adaptive functioning. The results are categorical and show a positive effect of including a therapeutic program targeting the experiences and social skills of individuals with developmental dyslexia and improving their emotional state and social functioning.

In conclusion, in addition to being scientifically relevant, the proposed work has a clear structure, procedures and logical outcomes, that demonstrate the need for a multidisciplinary team when working with children and adolescents with developmental dyslexia. The presence of psychologists on the team will not only contribute to the identification and treatment of the psychopathology, but it will also allow for the prevention of onset of similar conditions and

symptoms through intervention at an earlier age. The outcomes of the study, and especially the developed cognitive-behavioral program, have implications of applied and practical nature, as the therapeutic interventions could be further developed and applied not only among Macedonian children.

For these reasons, as well as due to other qualities of the proposed work, which are described above, and in spite of the critical remarks, I give a positive assessment of the dissertation and propose to the esteemed Scientific Jury to award Vaska Trayancho Zdravkova the educational and scientific degree "DOCTOR".

Sofia,

05.07.2024

Member of the Scientific Jury:

Assoc. Prof. Harieta Manolova