

## **REVIEW**

by prof. Dora Levterova – Gadjalova, DSc

PU "Paisii Hilendarski"

of a dissertation for awarding the educational and scientific degree "PhD"

professional direction 1.2. Pedagogy (Special Pedagogy)

***Author: Maria Alexakoudi***

***Topic: „Social inclusion of students with intellectual disability during extracurricular activities“***

***Research supervisor: Prof. Katerina Karadjova, PhD, SU "St. Kliment Ohridski"***

### **1. General presentation of the procedure and the PhD student**

By order RD-38-58/ 29.01.2024 of the Rector of SU "St. Kliment Ohridski" I have been appointed as a member of the scientific jury to ensure a procedure for the defense of a dissertation work on the topic "Social inclusion of students with mental disabilities through extracurricular activities" for the acquisition of the educational and scientific degree "doctor" in a professional direction 1.2. Pedagogy (Special Pedagogy), doctoral program Special Pedagogy. The author of the dissertation is Maria Aleksakudi - a full-time PhD student at the Department of Special Pedagogy, supervised by Prof. Dr. Katerina Karadjova from the University of St. Kliment Ohridski"

The set of paper materials presented by Maria Alexakudi includes the following documents:

- a request to the Rector of SU to disclose the procedure for the defense of a dissertation work;
- curriculum vitae in European format;
- protocol from the departmental council related to reporting the readiness for opening the procedure and preliminary discussion of the dissertation work;
- dissertation work;
- abstract;
- a list of scientific publications on the subject of the dissertation;
- copies of scientific publications;
- list of noticed citations;

- declaration of originality and authenticity of the attached documents;

PhD student Maria Alexakudi has attached 3 publications on the topic of the dissertation work.

## **2. Relevance of the topic**

Maria Alexakoudi holds a master's degree in Agriculture from the Democritus University - Orestiada, Greece; and Master's degree in Special Pedagogy from the University DEGLI STUDI DI ROMA "TOR VERGATA" – Rome, Italy. He works in the Ministry of Education - Greece as a special educator specializing in agronomist.

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

The issues developed in the dissertation work are current and of extreme importance and perspective. Social inclusion and the formation of social skills of students with intellectual disabilities in the conditions of the rapid development of digital technologies are important predictors for a higher social standard and for the realization of the labor market of persons with intellectual disabilities. Extracurricular activities are a valuable foundation for the imperceptible formation of social skills that find their application in life and professional functioning. In this context, formed social skills support the social inclusion of persons with intellectual disabilities.

## **4. Knowing the problem**

PhD student Maria Alexakudi knows the problems of the dissertation work and creatively interprets the scientific literature on the problems of forming social skills and the social inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities through extracurricular activities.

## **5. Research methodology**

The chosen research methodology allows achieving the set goal and getting an adequate answer to the tasks solved in the dissertation work. Research methods include The SSRS scale was created by Gresham and Elliott (1990) to assess students' social skills, behavioral problems, and academic performance; assessment of motor skills using 12 items obtained as a result of the study of different scales, such as Vineland-3 teacher Form, Bayley-III, Movement ABC-2 checklist (according to Matson, 2018); assessment of perceptual skills through 8 items constructed following a review of the existing literature on weighted scales to assess this type of skill; and conducted a semi-structured interview with four axes: 1. perceptions of knowledge about social integration; 2. knowledge / experience in relation to extracurricular activities; 3.

benefits for students with mental deficiency from participation in extracurricular activities; 4. barriers to the participation of students with mental disabilities in extracurricular activities.

The duration of the educational experimental process is one school year (from September 2021 to May 2022), including teachers and students from the experimental and control groups.

11 extracurricular activities were conducted with a total of 41 study hours. Study hours are different for individual extracurricular activities according to their specifics.

## **6. Characterization and evaluation of the dissertation work**

The dissertation is constructed from three chapters.

In the first chapter, a theoretical overview of social integration of students with intellectual disabilities in extracurricular activities is made. The definitions and general characteristics of intellectual disabilities in the school-age period, the social status and social skills of students with intellectual disabilities in the conditions of mass education are interpreted with scientific expertise. An analytical view of the existing literature on the issues of the educational environment as the main support for improving the social skills of students with intellectual disabilities and of improving the social skills of students with intellectual disabilities during extracurricular activities is presented. A final focus of the theoretical interpretations of the scientific literature is placed on the social inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities in extracurricular activities. Separate educational programs for the formation of social skills have been interpreted as the VGI intervention approach; improving cooperation abilities (working in groups, performing tasks in groups) and using role models (modelling); social stories and videos (video modeling); task analysis methods, social games or the use of board games for collaboration skills, as well as interaction skills to enforce linguistic and non-linguistic skills. The indicated models are analyzed with an emphasis on extracurricular activities. In the development of the theoretical analysis, the rich scientific awareness of the doctoral student and her personal opinion on the interpreted problems are evident.

The second chapter is devoted to the research design. The objective of the empirical study is clearly and precisely stated and follows logically from the theoretical interpretations. The formulated main hypothesis is decomposed into six hypotheses, which are correctly deduced in sequence. Six research tasks are set in algorithmic dependence. The research philosophy is based on the experimental methodology and the philosophy of the learning experiment. The procedure of the empirical research, the patterns and the course of the research are stated clearly and correctly.

The participants of the research are a total of 22 secondary school students attending the Unified Special Vocational High School (ENEEGIL) and 8 teachers from different specialties. The age of the students is from 14 to 21 years. Out of a total of 22 students, 12 (54.5%) participated in a school program with extracurricular activities (experimental group), while the remaining 10 (45.5%) were the control group. To complete the program of extracurricular activities, the researcher specializing in agriculture cooperates with other teachers from different specialties (eg music, arts, philology and mathematics). Regarding comorbidity, 3 students have autism spectrum disorder, 2 students have movement disorders, 1 student has hearing/speech disorders, 3 have behavioral problems and 1 has epilepsy. In the control group - 2 of the students have movement disorders, 2 have behavioral problems and 1 - an autism spectrum disorder.

Teachers answer the questionnaire and are interviewed for the qualitative study. All teachers work in the school where the experimental process takes place, and they additionally collaborate with the researcher during the implementation of extracurricular activities and the assessment of students' skills. The teachers were selected as follows: in the fields of Agriculture (2), Music (1), Mathematics (1), Philology (1), Fine Arts (1), Gymnastics (1) and Informatics (1).

In the third chapter, the results obtained from the empirical research are presented and analyzed. An analysis was made of the impact of participation in extracurricular activities on the social skills of students with intellectual disabilities, the impact of participation in extracurricular activities on the motor skills of students with intellectual disabilities, the impact of participation in extracurricular activities on the perceptual skills of students with intellectual disabilities, differences in teachers' perceptions of the impact of extracurricular activities on the social inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities, the impact of school culture on the contribution of extracurricular activities to the social inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities. The results are presented in charts and tables after statistical processing and each result obtained is analyzed.

The results of the qualitative research are presented analytically and with personal bias. A serious interpretation of teachers' opinions about the importance of social inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities and teachers' opinions about the importance of extracurricular activities was made. The benefits and barriers of participation in extracurricular activities for students with disabilities are presented in an interpretive order. Important and supporting hypotheses are derived the separate opinions of the respondents.

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

Contributions are indicated, which I accept because of their significance in enriching the existing literature on the implementation of new practices and especially extracurricular activities for students with intellectual disabilities in order to improve their social skills. On a practical level, the present study reveals a program of extracurricular activities that can be implemented in school and that will contribute to the effective integration of students with intellectual disabilities.

The main contributions of the dissertation work are:

1. Implementation of teacher training programs on the contribution of extracurricular activities to the development of students' social skills
2. Cooperation between schools in Greece and abroad to inform and implement innovative practices related to extracurricular activities for students with mental disabilities.
3. Researching ways to optimize educational policies for the inclusion of extracurricular activities in curricula

## **8. Evaluation of publications on the dissertation work**

The publications (a total of 4 articles) are on the topic of the dissertation work, they are made in representative editions and are full-text.

## **9. Personal participation of the PhD student**

I am fully convinced that the dissertation work is a personal work and a personal merit of the doctoral student

## **10. Abstract**

The abstract is made according to the requirements of the relevant regulations, and reflects the main results achieved in the dissertation work.

## **11. Recommendations for future use of dissertation contributions and results**

As a recommendation to the PhD student Maria Alexakudi, I recommend that she publish the dissertation work to be implemented in the educational process as useful for the work of teachers and for the social inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities through the formation of social skills in extracurricular activities.

## **12. Critical remarks and recommendations**

I have no recommendations for the conducted research and the presented set of materials.

## **13. Personal impressions**

I do not know PhD student Maria Alexakoudi personally.

## **CONCLUSION**

The dissertation contains scientific, scientific-applied and applied results, which represent an original contribution to science and meet all the requirements of the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria (ZRAS-RB), the Regulations for the Implementation of ZRASRB and the relevant Regulations of SU "St. Kliment Ohridski".

The dissertation shows that the doctoral student Maria Alexakoudi possesses in-depth theoretical knowledge and professional skills in the scientific specialty Pedagogy (Special Pedagogy) by demonstrating qualities and skills for independent conduct of scientific research.

Due to the above, I confidently 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 honorable scientific jury to award the educational and scientific degree "doctor" to Maria Alexakoudi in the field of higher education: 1. Pedagogical sciences, professional direction 1.2. Pedagogical teacher, doctoral program Special pedagogy.

16 April 2024

Reviewer: .....  
(prof. Dora Levterova – Gadjalova, DSc)