

REVIEW

written by

Assoc. Prof. Lora Ilieva Spiridonova, PhD

ABOUT DISSERTATION FOR AWARDING OF EDUCATIONAL AND
SCIENTIFIC DEGREE "DOCTOR"

PROFESSIONAL FIELD:

1.2. PEDAGOGY (PRESCHOOL PEDAGOGY)

TOPIC OF THE DISSERTATION:

“Development of 5-6-year-old children’s social competence in
Montessori and conventional/mass kindergartens in Bulgaria”

Author of the dissertation: Desislava Ivanova Stoeva

Supervisor: Prof. Danail Danov, D.Sc

FESA, Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski"

Compliance of the procedure with the current regulations

The procedure corresponds to the requirements of the Law of the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and the Law of Scientific Degrees and Titles, as well as the Regulations for their implementation. There is no plagiarism in the work and no violation of intellectual property rights.

Biographical presentation of the candidate

Desislava Stoeva has been a part-time assistant at Sofia “University St. Kliment Ohridski” since 2012. She is a lecturer in the Master's program “Montessori pedagogy in the digital society”, as well as in the post-graduate qualification program “Montessori pedagogy in the modern society” at FESA. She also leads seminars in “Social pedagogy” in the Bachelor's specialty “Pedagogy” at the Faculty of Pedagogy.

Her competence as a university lecturer is complemented by extensive professional experience in the practice of preschool education. She is a founder of the Montessori community and kindergarten “Casa dei Bambini” in 2008 and she is their mentor until now.

Desislava Stoeva graduated from the Master's program “Virtual Culture” at the Faculty of Philosophy of Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” in 2002. In 2012, she acquired an International Diploma in “Early Child Development and Montessori Pedagogy” from the "Montessori Center International", London, and, in 2019, an International Diploma for a Montessori Trainer, as a result of her graduation from the same institution.

Desislava Stoeva has a fluent level of English and Spanish, as well as an independent level of French. She has digital competence for effective communication in a virtual environment, for creating digital content, and for processing information.

Her communication, organizational, and management competencies have been proven nationally and internationally in her long-term work with children, students, teachers, and adults.

The numerous organizations in which Desislava Stoeva is a member, coordinator, and consultant are, on the one hand, a field for applying these competencies, and on the other, an opportunity for their constant improvement. Some are the American Montessori Association, the European Montessori Association, and the Alliance for Early Childhood Development.

Relevance of the topic

Montessori pedagogy, as the most widespread alternative pedagogical approach, is often defined in modern times as innovative, despite its long history. This is largely due to its flexible application in kindergartens today, which combines the concept of Maria Montessori with the needs of modern education.

Desislava Stoeva has many years of experience applying this approach and skillfully interweaves its theoretical and practical dimensions in the dissertation.

The topic is relevant since the socializing functions of the kindergarten are essential for the child's development. Bringing out the social and emotional well-being of children as an aspect of their healthy development, as well as as a prerequisite for their cognitive development, the PhD student justifies the importance of this scientific problem.

Structure and content of the dissertation

The dissertation is 243 pages long, of which 15 are a bibliography. There are seven applications.

The main concepts used in the work were clearly defined at the beginning, which significantly contributes to the integration of its content. The dissertation is very well structured due to the precisely constructed conceptual framework – goal, tasks, object, subject, and hypothesis.

The logical connection between these elements was supported by the argumentation of the hypothesis through four main specifics of the Montessori approach, which have a direct influence on the development of social competence of children, namely the inclusive environment, materials, individualization, and groups with children at different ages.

In the *first chapter*, a critical analysis of literary sources and normative documents was made in which the author's position was clearly advocated. Concepts of early childhood development and the personal and institutional dimensions of quality early childhood education and care at national and global levels were systematized. The development of social competence, as a main concept in the dissertation, was considered as an aspect of quality education in early childhood. From this point of view, normative possibilities and limitations for the implementation of innovative practices in preschool educational institutions in Bulgaria were identified, which have a direct influence on the development of children's social competence.

The *second chapter* emphasizes the theoretical and applied parameters of the dissertation. Two main foci in the interpretation of scientific literature were covered. The first is a theoretical analysis of concepts and normative documents on social development in early childhood, as well as a systematic review of definitions of social competence, as a result its definition was adopted for the purposes of the dissertation. The second is a comprehensive review of research and its findings related to early childhood socialization.

In sync with the theme of the dissertation, the second chapter concludes with a presentation of the specifics of the Montessori approach in the context of children's socialization, which includes an overview of concepts, research results, and practical, and applied dimensions.

In the *third chapter*, the relevance of the study was justified by the focus placed in modern kindergartens on the cognitive development of children, despite their significant socializing functions, as well as by the need for a systematic approach to the development of social

competence in early childhood. The stages of the empirical research were presented with step-by-step designed and implemented tasks, and the achieved results were described for each of them. Specialized training for the PhD student, related to acquiring additional competencies necessary for the research realization was planned and implemented. The limitations of the empirical study were described in detail, as well as the theoretical frameworks of the two instruments used - a questionnaire for teachers and parents and a Picture Test with a task for challenging situations. The structure of the sample was presented in a table as the number and percentage of children, teachers, and parents in the mass/conventional and Montessori groups from the kindergartens where the experiment was conducted. The results were illustrated by diagrams, graphs, and tables. They were thoroughly analyzed based on the specifics of Montessori pedagogy and its application in practice - an undoubtedly very different approach in terms of the role of the environment and the functions of the teacher, which is reflected in the children's reported achievements. They provide a basis for using the characteristics of Montessori pedagogy to create a model to support the development of children's social competence.

The framework of this model, presented in the *fourth chapter*, consists of five parts - an educational environment rich in stimuli and multisensory didactic materials, which supports the overall development of the children; an environment in which movement, concentration, and socialization are concerned; individualized and differentiated pedagogical interaction; supportive adults and supportive relationships. Their specifics were described in detail and accompanied by diagrams and photographs. Together with the following recommendations, they illustrate the PhD student's ideas for building on the existing practices for social competence development in early childhood with theoretical and practical dimensions of Montessori pedagogy.

The *conclusions* were drawn and interpreted to the results obtained according to each of the components of the study with children (prosocial behavior/reaction; aggressive behavior/reaction; crying behavior/reaction; avoidant behavior/reaction), parents, and teachers (“Social Competence”, “Social interaction” and “Attention and concentration” scales). More general conclusions and recommendations for future research were also presented.

I accept the formulated **contributions** as achieved with a focus on:

- the analysis of documents and studies of international and national organizations about early childhood development and the systematization of the characteristics of Montessori pedagogy in the context of the development of social competence in early childhood;
- the adaptation of research tools for monitoring the development of children's social competence;
- the developed framework of a model for children's social competence formation.

Author's summary

The author's summary of the dissertation follows the structure and the content of the dissertation and presents the main points of the research. The requirements for its structure and form have been met, and all mandatory elements have been covered.

Publications

The presented reference shows a sufficient number of publications (5 in total), which are on the topic of the dissertation. The numerous participations of PhD student Desislava Stoeva in national and international scientific conferences and forums, as well as her participation in research projects, have to be underlined.

Personal impressions

PhD student Desislava Stoeva had a concept of the chosen scientific issue since her admission to the PhD program, which she developed with great dedication. An example is the numerous national and international scientific forums and conferences, where she presents the results of her work. This is evidenced also by the specialized training she has implemented, one of which is Erasmus+ mobility. As a result, she finished the work on the dissertation before the deadline. Her theoretical knowledge and practical experience find their projection in the dissertation.

In conclusion, my assessment of the dissertation is positive and I suggest with conviction to the scientific jury awarding the educational and scientific degree “Doctor” in Professional Field 1.2 Pedagogy (Preschool Pedagogy) to Desislava Stoeva.

Date: 15.06.2024

Sofia

Reviewer:

/Assoc. Prof. Lora Spiridonova/