

## **REVIEW**

on the dissertation work of Desislava Ivanova Stoeva, a Ph.D. student in the Faculty of Education and Art Sciences, in the "Preschool and Media Pedagogy" Department of the University of St. Kliment Ohridski" Sofia on the topic: topic: "Development of social competence among 5-6-year-old children in Montessori and mass kindergartens in Bulgaria"

for the acquisition of the scientific and educational degree "DOCTOR" in professional direction 3.1 "Public Communications and Information Sciences"

with scientific supervisor: Prof. DSc Danail Danov

reviewer: Prof. DSc Dobrinka Stancheva Peicheva

The review was made based on Order No. RD-38-286/04.06.2024 of the Rector of SU "KI Ohridski following ZRASRB and in connection with a decision of a meeting of the primary unit at the Department of Preschool and Media Pedagogy with Protocol No. 08 and decision of the Faculty Council of FSOA on 28.05.2024.

### **Applicant data**

Desislava Stoeva is a Ph.D. student in the Department of Preschool and Media Pedagogy since 2021. She passed all doctoral exams with excellent grades and fulfilled the state requirements for admission to official defense. At the same time, Desislava Stoeva is a part-time assistant at the Faculty in several programs and qualifications: Master's program "Montessori pedagogy in the digital society" in "Montessori pedagogy", "Montessori pedagogy for mastering the language", "Montessori pedagogy in the contact of children with art", "Hospitalization", "Methodology of Montessori education", "Management of the Montessori group", "Creation of a supportive environment and Montessori materials for the development of media-digital literacy", "Montessori pedagogy for mastering mathematical concepts", and in a postgraduate qualification program: "Montessori pedagogy in modern society" "Montessori theory and practice", "Montessori philosophy and practice", "Supporting children in their independence, activities of daily life and the development of their creativity", "Application of Montessori at home", "The role of the assistant teacher in the Montessori group", "Management of innovations in the kindergarten", "Management of the Montessori group", "Management of the Montessori group", "Montessori therapy", "Montessori and STE(A)M", "Montessori at an early age", "Internship"; "Application of Montessori pedagogy in the elementary stage",

as well as in the bachelor's program "Pedagogy of Mass and Artistic Communication" - in "Media Pedagogy" and "Public Relations".

Desislava Stoeva currently holds important national and international positions. Stoeva is a consultant to the American Montessori Association. He is the coordinator of the working group "Early Learning and Early Childhood Education"; Alliance for Early Childhood Development (NGO bringing together over 50 organizations working in the field of early childhood development). Since 2020, she has been a member and participates in the meetings and discussions of the international Montessori research group at "Montessori Europe", Madrid (Spain). Stoeva participates in the work of two research groups - "Neurodidactics" and "Media Literacy" at Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain. He is a member of the European Montessori Association and a mentor of "Together in an Hour", in the Eleven Venture investment fund.

Desislava Stoeva has an international diploma for Montessori trainer from Montessori Center International, London, United Kingdom; an International Diploma "Early Child Development and Montessori Pedagogy" at Montessori Center International, London, United Kingdom

She has a master's degree in philosophy, specialization in virtual culture at the Faculty of Philosophy, SU "St. Kliment Ohridski", Sofia, and a bachelor's degree in economics, specialization in finance from the University of National and World Economy, Sofia.

Stoeva is a trainer within the project "Strengthening the capacity to work with refugee and migrant children of specialists in the field of RDR/ECD" Training of Trainers: Foundation Training on PFA and trauma-informed practices with young children and their caregivers, International step by step association and UNICEF.

She has 6 scientific publications on the subject of his dissertation work.

Her project activities have included 3 international positions: 1. 27.11 - 1.12.2022 Participation in a project and presentation on the topic "STEAM and Montessori", project "STEAM"

<http://www.gabinetecomunicacionyeducacion.com/en/research/european-media-literacy-education-study-remedies> 2014, 020-1-HU01-KA227-SCH-094051), New Bulgarian University;

2. Research Associate for Bulgaria European Media Literacy Education Study, EMEDUS, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain

<http://www.gabinetecomunicacionyeducacion.com/en/research/european-media-literacy-education-study-Emedus> 2014

3. Research Associate for Bulgaria FilmEd – Film Education in Europe Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain. <https://filmedeurope.wordpress.com/proyecto/>.

Stoeva has 23 participants in international conferences, as well as 9 participants in national conferences.

The reference for the implementation of the scientometric indicators by the minimum national requirements in connection with the procedure for awarding the educational and scientific degree "doctor" in a scientific direction 1.2. Pedagogy, doctoral program "Preschool Pedagogy" indicates that it fully meets the legal requirements.

## **2 Content characteristic of the dissertation work**

The dissertation work "Development of Social Competence among 5-6-year-old children in Montessori and Mass Kindergartens in Bulgaria" is dedicated to an extremely topical problem related to the state and prospects for children from traditional and private kindergartens, in particular private Montessori kindergartens, regarding the construction and development of social competence among 5-6-year-olds.

Within a very well-structured text, containing four proportional chapters and an introduction, which includes the main dissertation ingredients - subject, object, methodology, hypotheses, etc. and a conclusion that relevantly explains what has been achieved in the dissertation work, research is developed problem within 243 pages, which has the characteristics of a finished academic scientific product, broadly responding to its stated goal, namely: "to study the social competence of 5-6-year-old children from Montessori and mass kindergartens, as well as to proposed a model framework for creating an educational environment for the development of social competence"

The very scientific tasks set to solve the goal are not only relevant but also irreplaceable for the achievement of the goal.

The main tasks of a dissertation and research are:

1. To outline the specifics of education and care from birth to admission to the first class in Bulgaria through analysis of documents with recommendations and research of international and national organizations;
2. To outline the theoretical parameters of social competence, considered in the context of preschool practice in our country;
3. To clarify the characteristics of Montessori pedagogy and to consider the context of its application as an innovative educational approach to preschool practice in Bulgaria and the development of social competence of 5-6-year-old children;
4. To research social competence among 5-6-year-old children in Montessori environments and mass kindergartens in our country, to analyze the results and to draw conclusions;
5. To develop a model framework for stimulating the social competence of

preschool children.

The subject of the dissertation work is also relevantly determined - the social competence of 5-6-year-old children in Montessori and mass kindergartens in Bulgaria.

The subject of the dissertation is based on examining the aspects of the Montessori educational environment that support the development of social competence in 5-6-year-old children.

In the first chapter, the main concepts and dimensions of the research object are explained. The term "Montessori kindergartens" in the dissertation study refers to private preschool units organized according to the methods of M. Montessori, which function as kindergartens, which only partially work according to the program requirements approved by the Ministry of Education, and organize their activities according to an internationally approved Montessori practice.

Many more working scientific concepts and the legal and regulatory documents behind them are presented. Social competence/social competencies/social competencies (self-management, self-awareness, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making) are positioned as key to future individual development - to be a good student, citizen, and worker and to reduce high-risk behaviors. Behind their affirmation are many academic professionals, practical workers from the civil sector, representatives of European and non-European institutions, and teachers' and parents' organizations.

My assessment of the conceptualization of the theoretical-methodological and applied side of the dissertation work is more than high. The successful interweaving of traditionalist inclinations with innovative views and socialization practices is explained with enviable representational skills and convincing messages, which make the dissertation not only a curious read but also a serious academic work that deserves scientific (and not only) admiration.

A practical-applied orientation of the work is quite reasonably realized through a mixed methodology, combining theoretical analysis with the methods of analysis of the document and empirical research. Improving the quality of early childhood education and care through innovative approaches is relevantly centered and reasonably targeted in legislative changes as well as in innovations in socialization processes.

Within the framework of the second chapter, competence as a collective category is explained through four models for social positioning competence, which, based on the meaningful results of several quantitative and qualitative studies, points out the support that could be given to children in the development of their social competence - in the family, in children's collectives, through the media, and in pre-school educational institutions. Here again, the normative foundations are substantiated and in this connection, the suitability of Montessori pedagogy in

preschool practice in our country is outlined, and in particular in its three aspects - supportive environment, supportive adult, and child. Cohesion as the ultimate goal of Montessori pedagogy is rightly centered as the center of the dissertation under consideration. Indeed, the examined relationship between cohesion and socialization through the prism of screen media is more than a scientific finding. The two presented studies from 2023, in which social competence and socialization in a Montessori environment are analyzed, are the provoked premise for the study of possible differences in social competence between the two types of educational institutions. The third chapter is a scientific emanation of the research searches and implementations with its purpose, tasks, selected methodology, and relevant tools for non-representative research, correctly argued and practically applied limitations that give grounds to the Ph.D student to derive and propose a framework of a model for the development of social competence in preschool age. The assimilation of the potential possibilities of many of the statistical techniques for deriving correlations, as well as of relevant applied methods, psycho-techniques, tests, observations, screenings, tests, etc., gives the results a high degree of reliability, and the doctoral student an extremely high evaluation for their assimilation and selection of the most relevant ones.

The fourth chapter is dedicated to creating and explicating a model for creating a supportive and inclusive environment for every child, which builds on traditional educational practices in the preschool stage and contains the potential to contribute to the upgrading of the quality of preschool education, as well as to the development of social competence of every child. The framework of the model, built on the principles of Montessori pedagogy, includes the best practices applied in mass kindergartens in the embryonic period for the formation of character and society, as Stoeva calls it.

### **3. Notes and recommendations**

I have no notes. I recommend printing all the text of the dissertation work.

I have a question about Stoeva's scientific thesis: what is it?

The **abstract** corresponds to the dissertation work. It follows the structure of the dissertation and preserves the original numbering of the figures, graphs, tables, and diagrams therein. The bibliography in the abstract covers only the literature that is cited in it.

The style of the dissertation is strictly academic but at the same time understandable.

Relevant specialized Bulgarian and foreign literature was used. Stoeva has 6 published scientific articles and several participations in research projects.

All that has been said so far gives me the reason to provide the highest possible evaluation of the work and to confirm the main elements of the self-assessment of the contributions of the dissertation work.

#### **4. Contributions**

For me, the **contributions** are:

1. The first complex sociological study on social competence among 5-6-year-old children in a Montessori environment and in mass kindergartens in our country (60 children, 60 teachers, and 37 parents) was conducted on the effects of the implementation of innovative programs in kindergartens.
2. The research tools were selected and adapted to be used successfully for researching the social competence of children both in Montessori and mass kindergartens.
3. The factors and prerequisites for developing a model for a supportive educational environment that develops the social competence of children between 3 and 6 years of age are outlined.
4. A model framework for a supportive educational environment has been created for development of social competence of preschool children, enriching traditional educational environment with Montessori practices.
5. A systematic analysis of the specifics of education and care by birth to entry into first grade in our country based on document research and research of international and national organizations and recommendations for normative changes and deepening of empirical ones are proposed research in our country, to improve the quality of education and support the development of social competence of children from birth to entry into elementary school.
6. The place of Montessori pedagogy as an innovative educational practices in our country, also related to the development of social competence in kindergartens, based on meta-analyses of existing research in this field, is shown

#### **5. Conclusion**

Desislava Stoeva has achieved an extremely high level of conceptualization, verification, and innovative development of the main parameters for the social development and social competence of children up to 6-7 years of age and beyond.

The high scientific and research achievements, her established international experience and positions held, as well as what has been said so far about the high quality of the dissertation work, give me the reason to declare that I will vote with conviction "Yes" for the awarding of

the educational and scientific degree of Doctor of Desislava Ivanova Stanoeva in professional direction 1.2. Pedagogy (Preschool pedagogy) at the Faculty of Educational Sciences and Art at SU "Kl. Ohridski".

reviewer

prof Dobrinka Stancheva Peicheva, Dsc