



REVIEW

by **Prof. DSc Yuliya Georgieva Doncheva, PhD**

Angel Kanchev University of Ruse

regarding the materials of doctoral student *Dimitrios Nikolaos Hatzis*, for awarding the educational and scientific degree "Doctor", in the field of higher education 1. Pedagogical sciences, by professional direction 1.2. Pedagogy (Special Pedagogy), with scientific supervisor Prof. DSc Milen Zamfirov Zamfirov, PhD at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", Faculty of Educational Sciences and Arts with the topic of the dissertation work: "*Pedagogical impacts facilitating the integration of students with autism*"

Data, finding and assessment of the competition procedure, doctoral studies, dissertation, abstract and publications for the competition.

1. Compliance of the procedure with the current regulations. Data on the competition and the doctoral program - On the basis of Art. 4 of the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria (promulgated SG No. 38 of 21.05.2010, amended by SG No. 81 of 15.10.2010, amended by SG No. 101 of 28 12. 2013 amendment No. 04.05 d.), decision of the Faculty Council of the Faculty of Educational Sciences and the Arts dated 28.05. 2024, Protocol No. 8 and on the basis of Order No. RD-38-274 of 03.06.2024 of the Rector of Sofia University, full-time doctoral student Dimitrios Nikolaos Hatzis was dismissed with the right of defense with a positive decision of the primary readiness unit, opening his procedure, giving a move to defend the dissertation work. All preliminary legal and regulatory rules provided for in this procedure have been complied with.



2. General biographical presentation of the candidate (education, qualifications, professional experience, etc.).

From the presented autobiography regarding the education and qualification, as well as the academic achievements of the doctoral student in chronological order, it is clear that the educational qualification, academic growth and upgrading is active and dynamic, namely:

September 2007 – November 2011: Bachelor Degree in “History of Modern Times” Degree: 7,07 (Very Good),_University of Crete,_Faculty of History and Archaeology, Greece.

September 2011 – June 2014: Degree in Primary Education, Degree: 8.47 (Very Good), European University of Cyprus.

September 2015 – June 2017: Master Degree in “History, Local History: Research and Teaching”, Degree: 8.72 (Excellent), University of Western Macedonia/Greece, Faculty of Primary Education.

February 2019 – to date: Doctoral studies in the field of “Special Education”, Doctoral Dissertation: “Educational interventions promoting the inclusion of autistic students”, Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”, Faculty of Educational Studies and the Arts, Bulgaria.

Working experience:

January 2019 - to date: Chatzis Dimitrios working as a Teacher (Primary Education) in different regions of Greece.

Certification documents Training:

2007 – 2008: Courses on “Informatics”, University of Crete, Faculty of History and Archeology, Greece

May 2010: Workshop on “School Mediation: Peaceful Solving of Conflicts at School”, University of Crete, Faculty of Educational Studies.



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March 2019: Seminar on "Supporting Schools to create an inclusive environment for refugee students", Ministry of Education, Research and Religions, Institute of Educational Policy.

May 2019: Seminar on "Special Education: A comparative overview", Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", Faculty of Educational Studies and the Arts.

July 2019 - February 2020: 420 hours Seminar on "Special Education and Training", Aegean University (Mytilini/Greece), Educational Center for Lifelong Learning.

June 2019 – March 2020: 408 hours Seminar on "Intercultural Education for students with migratory background or refugees.", Aegean University (Mytilini/Greece), Educational Center for Lifelong Learning.

June 2021: 20 hours Seminar on "Distance Training", National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Educational Center for Lifelong Learning.

November 2021 – January 2022: 36 hours Seminar on "Skills Training of Teachers through workshops.", Ministry of Education, Research and Religions, Institute of Educational Policy.

March 2022 – to date: 36 weeks (450 hours) Seminar on "Autism: Understanding, Education and Intervention.", University of Patras, Educational Center for Lifelong Learning.

Foreign languages:

July 2014: English (Lower), Test of English for International Communication – TOEIC (580) Educational Testing Service, Hellenic American Union.

August 2018: English (Proficiency), Test of Interactive English, CEFR Level: C2.



Other skills:

Certified Computer User by ACTA:

- Word Processing (MS Word 2007 GR). Spreadsheets (MS Excel 2007 GR). Internet Application & Communication (MS Internet Explorer 8.0 GR & MS Outlook 2007 GR. MS Windows. Microsoft PowerPoint 2007 GR.

Doctoral student Dimitrios Nikolaos Hatzis is an ambitious young man, constantly upgrading himself, with a desire, aspiration and realization for learning, self-improvement and provoking new academic achievements of the doctoral student, such as the last one to date, namely the educational and scientific degree Doctor (PhD).

3. Actuality of the issues of the dissertation work.

The topic "*Pedagogical influences facilitating the integration of students with autism*" is extremely relevant for the following reasons, argued:

- **Growing number of children with autism:** According to data from the World Health Organization, worldwide 1 in 100 children is diagnosed with autism. In Bulgaria, the number of children with autism is around 10,000. According to a 2018 study, 1 in 145 children in Greece is diagnosed with autism. (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7408756/>). This is higher than the average rate for Europe, which is 1 in 100. (<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/autism-spectrum-disorders>) The number of children with autism in Greece is considered to be underestimated, as not all children are diagnosed.

- **Growing awareness of the importance of early detection and intervention:** Early diagnosis and the application of appropriate pedagogical interventions can have a significant impact on the development of children with autism and help them successfully integrate into society.



• **Change in education policies:** In many countries, including Bulgaria and Greece, there are changes in education policies that aim to ensure better inclusion of children with autism in the education system.

• **Development of new pedagogical approaches:** More and more new and effective pedagogical approaches are being developed and implemented for working with children with autism. As such, the following can be mentioned:

• *Use of technology* - Technology can be used in different ways to help integrate children with autism, for example for communication, for learning, for socialization, etc.

• *Application of an individual approach* - Every student with autism is different and has his own, specific needs. It is important that the pedagogical effects are tailored to the individual characteristics of the child. • *Creating a supportive environment* - Children with autism need a supportive environment where they feel safe and accepted.

• *Cooperation between the family, the school and the specialists* - The successful inclusion of children with autism depends above all on the effective cooperation between the family, the school and the specialists in this field.

Summary: In conclusion, the topic is extremely relevant and important. The development of new pedagogical approaches and their practical application is a key factor for the successful integration of children with autism into society.

As always, the scientific supervisor of the doctoral student, Prof. DSc. Milen Zamfirov, PhD a nationally and internationally recognized scientist, finds the most relevant, the most modern, and in this case, mentoring the doctoral student, brings this difficult subject to completion, both as an object and a subject, and as research methodology. Congratulations!

4. Structure and content of the dissertation work. Dissertation Data -

The dissertation consists of an introduction, four chapters (a literature review of



educational interventions and impacts promoting the inclusion of students with autism, research design, analysis of results, interpretation of findings and conclusions), a list of publications on the topic of dissertation and bibliography. The dissertation has a volume of 230 pages. There are 12 tables and 13 figures in the text. The bibliography is from 279 sources cited in the text.

In summary, the structural content of the note has the following components:

Introduction: the subject of the inclusion of students with autism in the general education environment is considered. Theoretical frameworks related to autism, educational interventions, and inclusion are presented.

Theoretical overview: A definition of autism and characteristics of students on the autism spectrum is given. The typical manifestations of autism are discussed. A variety of educational interventions for students with autism were reviewed, including applied behavior analysis, the TEACCH program, the PECS system, and sensory-motor interventions. Environmental factors influencing the learning of students with autism are discussed. Strategies for increasing the effectiveness of educational interventions are presented.

Inclusion of students on the autism spectrum: setting the stage for inclusion and integration. Pedagogical problems of preschool students with autism are discussed. Factors for successful inclusion are analyzed. The role of mainstream teachers in implementing interventions promoting inclusion is examined. A "Theoretical framework of the study" is presented.

Research part: Aim and objectives of the research. Hypotheses. Research participants. Research methodology.

Summarizing results: Using generalization strategies. Maintaining social skills. Self-management skills. Reliability and internal validity of the study. Limitations of the study. Contributions of the study are derived.

Conclusion: The dissertation contributes to a better understanding of the inclusion of students with autism in the general education environment.

- Offers practical guidance for teachers and other professionals working with children and students on the autism spectrum.

5. Scientific-theoretical and practical-applied contributions.

Content and evaluation of the scientific contributions - To the contributions (I accept his wording), as well as the conclusion and conclusions that correspond and color the dissertation research, brought out by the doctoral student Dimitrios Nikolaos Hatzis, I will add the following aspects:

Scientific theoretical contributions. *Expanding theoretical knowledge about autism and its manifestations:* A deeper understanding of the specific characteristics of students with autism in the context of the learning process. Identification of the factors that influence the integration of students with autism in the general education environment. Development of new theoretical models for understanding inclusion and integration processes.

Developing new pedagogical approaches: Creating effective teaching and learning strategies tailored to the needs of children and students with autism. Development of adapted learning materials and resources. Identifying the most appropriate methods for assessing the knowledge and skills of students with autism.

Raising Autism Awareness: Debunking Autism Myths and Preconceptions. Increasing public understanding of the needs of children and students with autism. Encouraging tolerance and acceptance of differences.

Practical-applied contributions. *Improving the educational results of children and students with autism:* Increasing their motivation and engagement in the learning process.



Developing their knowledge, skills and competencies. Preparation for independent living and successful socialization. Creating a more inclusive educational environment: Promoting positive interactions between children and students with autism and their peers. Develop policies and practices that support the inclusion of all children and students. Providing resources and support for teachers and other professionals working with children and students with autism.

Improving the quality of life of students with autism and their families: Reducing stress and anxiety levels. Increasing their self-esteem and confidence. Facilitating their integration and inclusion in society.

In conclusion, it is important to note that the dissertation work "Pedagogical impacts facilitating the integration of students with autism" is a dynamically developing thematic area in which new discoveries are constantly made and new approaches are developed. Research in this area is essential, contributing to a better understanding and improving the lives of children and students with autism, as well as creating a more just and inclusive society.

Summarizing the obligatory part of the opinion about the contribution moments of the scientific work, I will mark those developments of this kind should find a place in the scientific literature, so that pedagogical, non-pedagogical specialists, experts, interested in the issue can find their answers.

6. Data on the auto-reference. The abstract is in Bulgarian and English, with a total volume of 44 pages, of which one page "List of publications" on the topic (4 in number) and seven (7 pages) Bibliography. Meets all the standard requirements for a synthesized and adequate, analytical-systematic development of the primary document, the scientific text, as well as the objective reflection of the content of the dissertation research. The scientific and technical requirements for its design and presentation in paper form and in digital form as an online publication have been met. The correctness is visible, the scientific value of the



scientific work has been analyzed, as well as the quantitative data according to the normative requirements in the national and internal-institutional laws and regulations.

I state with satisfaction that no violations have been committed regarding the compliance of the dissertation and the originality of the work with the requirements of LDASRB, the Regulations for it, the Regulations for the acquisition of scientific degrees at SU "St. Kliment Ohridski" and the institution's internal rules.

7. Publications on the topic of the dissertation (content and fulfillment of scientometric requirements).

7.1. Publication data. The dissertation student presents 4 (four) publications on the topic of scientific research, published in the period 2019-2022. Three are independent, one is co-authored with a research supervisor. Their content is adequate and corresponds to the dissertation, both as a stage and as a continuum.

7.2. Conformity assessment of scientific production according to the requirements of LDAS. The doctoral student participates with the following scientific production, related to the Scientometric criteria for the minimum national requirements for the scientific and teaching activity of candidates for acquiring scientific degrees and occupying academic positions, Field 1. Pedagogical Sciences, as follows:

- *Dissertation work for awarding the educational and scientific degree "doctor", Group A, Indicator 1 → 50 points.*
- *Group G 7. Articles and reports published in non-refereed journals with scientific review or published in edited collective volumes: **3 number of independent x 10 points = 30 points; 1 co-authored issue = 5 points***



Publications - **Total number** of points for the Publications indicator = **35 points**.

Total number of points for indicators from groups A and G = **85 points**.

From here it can be summarized that the sum of the indicators of the respective groups **fully meets** the minimum national requirements under Art. 2b, para. 2 and 3 of LDASRB and Art. 1a, paragraph 1 of the RILDASRB and, accordingly, according to Art. 24, para. 1 of the Regulations for the implementation of the LDASRB (for the educational and scientific degree "doctor") for area 1. Pedagogical sciences, Professional direction 1.2. Pedagogy (Special pedagogy).

8. Personal impressions.

I do not know Dimitrios Nikolaos Hatzis personally, but judging by the scientific production - dissertation, abstract and publications submitted for participation in the competition, I can state that together, under the extremely professional and competent guidance of his scientific supervisor Prof. DSc. Milen Zamfirov, PhD has been finalized a scientific work, the topic of which is significant and current, containing no significant weaknesses that would detract from its merits. Congratulations!

9. Notes, recommendations and questions.

Notes, positive: It is important to emphasize that the topic is extremely current and significant, both from a scientific and a practical point of view. Research in this area is essential to improving the lives of students with autism and creating a more just and inclusive society. The material presented is well structured, contains up-to-date information and is supported by relevant sources. In addition, I would like to emphasize that the topic is significant and it is important to continue the work in this direction.



Recommendations: More examples of successful practices for inclusion of children and students with autism in the general education environment could be added. It would be useful to examine in more detail the challenges faced by teachers and other professionals working with children and students with autism. Attention can be paid to the role of technology in facilitating the integration of children and students with autism. It would be interesting to examine international practices and trends in the field of inclusive education for children and students with autism.

- *Dissemination of results:* Research results can be presented at scientific conferences and published in scientific journals to reach a wider audience. That is, it is good for the doctoral student to expand her participation in international educational projects, to have an aspiration for/to popularize the results of the research activity in publications, conferences, scientific meetings, etc., so that the results are heard and visible.

Questions:

- What is the most effective teaching and learning strategies for students with autism?
- What are the most appropriate methods for assessing the knowledge and skills of students with autism?
- What are the most important factors in creating an inclusive educational environment for students with autism?
- What are the roles and responsibilities of teachers, parents, specialists and other stakeholders in the process of integrating students with autism?
- What are the challenges faced by students with autism in the integration process?
- What are the benefits of integrating students with autism for themselves, for their peers and for society as a whole?



10. Conclusion - Doctoral student Dimitrios Nikolaos Hatzis has fulfilled his obligations arising from the requirements of the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria (LDASRB), the Regulations for the Implementation of LDASRB, the Regulations of SU "St. Kliment Ohridski", as well as the obligations under the corresponding individual study plan of the doctoral student, that is, it meets the minimum national requirements under Art. 2b, para. 2 and 3 of LDASRB and Art. 1a, paragraph 1 of RILDASR. The form and content of the dissertation meet the requirements of Art. 27 of RILDASRB. All administrative procedures have been followed.

Bearing in mind the above, I confidently give my **positive assessment** of the conducted research, presented in the dissertation work, the abstract, the achieved results and contributions.

I declare my **positive vote for awarding the educational and scientific degree "Doctor"** to **Dimitrios Nikolaos Hatzis** from professional field 1.2. Pedagogy (Special pedagogy), field of higher education 1. Pedagogical sciences.

Prepared the review, as a member of the scientific jury:
(Prof. DSc Juliya Doncheva, PhD)

11.07.2024

