



OPINION

by: **Prof. Tanya Gocheva Taneva – Pohlupkova, PhD**

Trakia University – Stara Zagora

**on dissertation paper
for obtaining PhD scientific and educational degree**

Field of higher education: Pedagogical sciences

Professional Management: 1.2. Pedagogy (Special Pedagogy)

University: Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski"

Faculty: Faculty of Educational Studies and Arts

Name of the PhD Student : Dimitrios Hatzis

Scientific supervisor: Prof. Milen Zamfirov, DscPed.

Theme of the Dissertation paper:

**"PEDAGOGICAL IMPACTS FACILITATING INTEGRATION OF STUDENTS
WITH AUTISM"**

1. Compliance of the procedure with the current legislation.

The materials submitted for my opinion contain the necessary documents, according to the requirements of the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff of the Republic of Bulgaria and the Regulation on the development of the academic staff of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski". In addition to the dissertation (in English), 4 publications on the topic of the dissertation research and an Abstract are attached.

2. General biographical introduction of the candidate

PhD student Dimitrios Hatzis completed his BA in Modern History, Pedagogy and Psychology at the University of Crete in 2011. In 2017, he graduated as Master of History, Local History: Research and Teaching.

In 2019 Dimitrios Hatzis was enrolled as a full-time PhD student in 1.2. Pedagogy (Special Pedagogy).

In the period 2019-2022, he has received training with more than 900 academic hours in Special Education and Training, Special Education: comparative review, Autism: understanding, education and intervention, respectively at the University of Patras, Lifelong Learning Educational Center; Aegean University- Mytilini, Lifelong Learning Educational Center and Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", Faculty of Educational Studies and Arts.

3. Actuality of the dissertation problems

The whole work is subordinated to the extremely important societal goal of enabling children with disabilities to participate fully in both academic and social activities, maximizing the conditions for their smooth socialization. The more the pedagogical community is aware of the



idea of implementing inclusive education and "opening up" mainstream schools and kindergartens to students and children with special educational needs, and in particular children with autism, the more imperative becomes the preparation and qualification of teachers and school management in terms of logistics and infrastructure, but also in terms of curricula, teaching aids and teaching methods.

In this sense, both the research presented here and any developments in pedagogical science towards educational interventions for improvement of the functionality of children with autism play a very important role in the success of inclusive education. The research also contributes to the validation of the humanistic idea of the recent decades that developmental deficits, and autism in particular, are usefully seen not as a problem but as an opportunity to develop appropriate educational approaches to foster and improve social communication, desirable acceptable behaviour, self-control and self-care skills. Implementing early intervention increases the likelihood of growth and development of the potentials of children on the autism spectrum.

4. Structure and content of the dissertation.

The dissertation paper is composed according to the requirements for academic scientific research. It is structured in an introduction, four chapters, references and appendices. **The bibliography** is rich and contains 284 sources, both classical theories and recent empirical and theoretical studies.

The introduction presents the importance of the research problem, outlines the idea of the research both in terms of the rights and development of children with disabilities and with a focus on inclusive education policies.

The theoretical study offers a rich literature review, which sufficiently clarifies the main concepts and concepts related to the topic of the dissertation, but also refers to contemporary research in the field.

The concept of the study represents a logically well connected, methodologically defensible and clarified basis for reliable, original scientific research. **The purpose** of the study was clearly stated: to examine the effectiveness of a behavior-analytic intervention to increase social interactions of preschoolers with autism with their typical developmental classmates. This objective is meaningfully decomposed to examine the processes of self-management of desired behavior, self-assessment, social support seeking, and their combined impact on children with autism with different developmental baselines, in the natural context and setting of a mainstream preschool. In addition, the study set out and realized the crucial goal of examining the possibility of withdrawal of support provided by the chaperones of the children who participated in the study and the maintenance of the frequency of social interactions after the end of the intervention.

The contingent of the study, 3 verbal preschool boys diagnosed with autism in hospital medical units, was well selected based on the criteria of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, 4th edition (DSM-IV). Although the size and nature of this symptomatic sample preclude generalizability of the results of the present study to a larger group of individuals with autism, the results are valid for children with autism with similar characteristics to those in the sample-preschool-aged, with normal levels of mental functioning, to whom intensive behavior-analytic intervention was applied. The studied children were from families of similar socioeconomic status and parental presence, which somewhat isolated the influence of this factor on the study. On the other hand, differences in parental educational level and the presence of other children in the families may



have modified the impact of the intervention on the children's social skills, an influence that is useful to track in future research. The same is true for differences in the duration and frequency of the behavior-analytic therapeutic and psychoeducational intervention that children received before the start of the study and the amount of time they were educated on a weekly basis.

Dependent Variables that operationalize Initiatives, such as: asking questions, emotional manifestations, commands-bans, announcements, invitations, and other forms of social interaction, are very clearly functionally defined and practically clarified, which shows the conceptual clarity and systematicity of the research approach and the analysis carried out by the PhD student.

The adopted **criteria for evaluation** of the effectiveness of the intervention - evaluation by persons from the immediate social environment of the participants, but also by comparison with regulatory data are acceptable for case study type research.

The **procedure of the study** is described very correctly and in detail, which allows an objective analysis of the results, both the contributions and the limitations of the study.

In terms of **experimental design and conditions**, the use of individual experimental designs are appropriate for the applied analysis of outcomes (in this case, behaviour change) and for the evaluation of interventions.

Of particular interest in the study is the 2nd intervention condition: self-management, which contains

self-management procedures, through which the children who participated in the research were trained to apply a self-management system, in which they self-observed their behaviour, recorded "the frequency of their interactions and then self-assessed their level of performance and self-imposed the supportive consequences, through the search for social support by the researcher". It is this procedure that effectively contributes to reducing adult intervention and increasing individual autonomy.

The applied **reliability assessment instrument** of the method for assessing the effects of the intervention is highly appreciated and deserves special attention. This is a challenge with such small samples and expert estimates for which the widely used Reliability statistical tools for validity and reliability in large samples are inapplicable.

The **social validity of the experiment** has also been well substantiated by criteria accepted in the scientific literature and presented by various authors. This allows social skills to be set as learning objectives relevant to the physical context analogous to social skills displayed by typical peers.

Results and discussion

The results of the present study suggest that systematic behavior-analytic intervention in the natural environment of a mainstream kindergarten can effectively help children with autism to exhibit and improve both age-appropriate intellectual skills and social interaction skills with typically developing children in the kindergarten.

The conclusions are clinically and socially significant.

All three research hypotheses of the study are confirmed.

Initiatives for the interaction of children with autism with their peers and their responses to peer initiatives are increasing. The acquisition of self-management skills led to the maintenance and further increase in the frequency of social interactions of the children who participated in the



studies that range in the same levels as those shown by their peers with typical development. The current study also showed that preschool children with autism can learn to record their own social behaviour, as well as seek social support based on self-assessment of their performance in mainstream kindergarten, skills contributed to complete withdrawal of partial support from a chaperone or researcher.

The children with autism who participated in the study were trained to exhibit generalized responses when simultaneously using speech and self-report to various forms of interaction, such as questions, announcements, invitations, commands, and prohibitions that were harmonized with conditions of social reconciliation.

Statistical analysis of the results of the present study showed that the effect of the intervention on the behavior of 3 children with autism was statistically significant.

The discussion fulfills the requirement for comparability of the results with those already known in the scientific literature, which is a merit of the analysis.

A very important feature of the Study on the children with autism is that it takes place in the natural environment of the kindergarten, in the day care in the presence of all peers or during free play. This complicates the conduct of the intervention and the analysis of the results, but immensely increases the applicability of the results. Previous research has most often used controlled conditions of a set experimental environment.

Last but not least, the presented study shows that it is possible to maintain post-intervention interaction skills at levels similar to or higher than those of the intervention. This parameter has not been systematically investigated by studies..

Objective criteria were used to assess the magnitude of the effect that the intervention had on behaviour by comparing participants' performance with regulatory data, a process that ensured the social validity of the intervention.

This study is the first implementation in Greece of an educational program for children with autism in self-reporting skills and social support seeking. It advances knowledge of self-management processes through a detailed description of the didactic processes, providing social support and partial assistance.

5. Scientific-theoretical and practical-applied contributions

I fully support the fundamental and applied contributions formulated by the PhD student.

This dissertation presents original research that enriches the limited research to date on techniques that promote the interaction skills of children with autism with their typically developing peers.

The hypothesis that the acquisition of self-management skills by children with autism is likely to contribute to improved interactions between children with autism and mainstream school teachers may be a very useful direction for development of the research.

The development of self-management programmes that can be implemented by mainstream school teachers to develop the school and social skills of their students with disorders from the autism spectrum would reduce the need for these students to be accompanied and supported by specialist therapists and resource teachers in the inclusive process.



Some elements of the content of the proposed intervention and the results of the study are also useful for my practice in teacher education. The proposed comparative analysis points towards making sense of the limitations in the existing interventions.

6. The abstract adequately presents the dissertation, meets the requirements for volume and structure.

7. Publications on the topic of the dissertation

The four publications presented are on the topic of the research and demonstrate the skills and sustained interest of the doctoral student to systematically and consistently deploy research on the topic of the doctoral program

8. Personal impressions

I have no personal impressions of the PhD student.

9. Comments, recommendations and questions.

I concur with the PhD student's view that identifying the variables that maximize the effectiveness of intervention programs can be very useful in optimizing the time required to achieve a positive effect from it.

For example, it is interesting in future studies to predict as an independent variable the presence of other children in the family, which may have a bearing on the level of development of social skills of children with autism. In the study, it is striking that in children, one of whom is the only one in the family, and the other - with a large age difference from the older children in the family, lower levels of development of the majority of the studied skill groups were found. It can be checked whether this is not also due to a lack or weaker exchange of shared experiences and communications with other children in the family environment.

10. Conclusion

As a result of the scientific merits of the dissertation, the doctoral student's demonstrated skills of theoretical analysis, empirical research, in-depth interpretation of empirical data and applied orientation of the research, I confidently suggest to the respected scientific jury to positively evaluate and award the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" to Dimitrios Hatzis in the field of higher education 1. Pedagogical sciences, 1.2. Pedagogy (Special Pedagogy).

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Prof. Tanya Taneva, PhD