



## REVIEW

by Prof. Dr. Dr. Mira Tzvetkova-Arsova,

Department of Special Education at the Faculty for Educational Studies and the Arts of  
Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski"

of a doctoral dissertation

for awarding of the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" (PhD) in the scientific field 1.2.  
Pedagogy/Education (Special Education)

**Doctoral student: Dimitrios Nikolaos Chatzis**

**Title: "Educational interventions promoting the inclusion of autistic students"**

**Scientific supervisor: Prof. Dcs Milen Zamfirov**

### 1. Short description of the presented set of materials for the procedure

By order of the Rector of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" No. 38-274/ 03.06.2024 I have been appointed as a member of the Sciences Committee/jury for the procedure for conducting the defense of the doctoral dissertation of **Dimitrios Chatzis**, a full-time doctoral student in special education in English language at the Department of "Special Education" at the Faculty for Educational Studies and the Arts of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" with scientific supervisor Prof. Dcs Milen Zamfirov.

The set of materials on electronic media submitted to me for review includes the necessary documents, among them the full text of the doctoral dissertation in English language, the Autoreferat (Abstract) in Bulgarian language, CV, publications on the topic of the dissertation, and other documents.

### 2. Short biographical information about the doctoral student

**Dimitrios Chatzis** holds a BA in Modern History from the University of Crete and an MA in History, Local History: Research and Teaching from the University of Western Macedonia in Greece.

He was enrolled as a full-time doctoral student in special education in English language at Sofia university, Faculty for Educational Studies and the Arts, department of special education in 2019 with a study period of 3 years.

**Dimitrios Chatzis** has worked as a primary teacher in various schools in Greece since 2019.

### **3. Relevance of the title and of the topic**

Undoubtedly, the title of **Dimitrios Chatzis's** doctoral dissertation is relevant, as it intertwines two important contemporary educational trends - integration and inclusion on the one hand, and children on the autism spectrum in preschool age, on the other. The search for appropriate solutions related to facilitating the integration and inclusion of these children in a general education environment is of great importance both for theory and practice.

### **4. Characteristics and evaluation of the structure and organization of the doctoral dissertation**

The doctoral dissertation of **Dimitrios Chatzis** has a total volume of 230 pages, of which the actual text is 204 pages. Its structure includes: one theoretical chapter, one chapter on research design, one chapter on data analysis and results, one chapter interpreting and discussing the results, conclusions, contributions, bibliography, appendix. The structure is traditional and has a classical character. The ratio between the theoretical part, the design of the research and the analysis and interpretation of the results is approximately 110:25:65 pages.

The theoretical chapter contains two major parts or sections. The first section is entitled "Autism and autistic Students – general characteristics in school age" and the second section is entitled "Inclusion of autistic students – General characteristics, definitions, and Main Factors". Both sections contain multiple paragraphs in which the exposition is good, well organized and structured. Both classical and modern references are presented and cited in the theoretical chapter, which shows a good knowledge of the subject. Various well-known strategies and approaches for working with students with autism spectrum disorder are described, including ABA, TEACCH, PECS and others. The second part focuses within four paragraphs on inclusive education in regard with children with autism spectrum disorder and some problems arising in preschool age, the possibilities for inclusion

of this group of children, the main factors influencing the inclusion of children with autism and finally the role of general education teachers. This chapter covers about 110 pages.

The second part/chapter, which is under No. III, introduces the research part. The goal is relatively well defined, mentioning that based upon aforementioned concerns the effectiveness of a behavioral-analytical intervention in increasing the social interactions of preschool children with autism with their typical developmental classmates will be investigated. It would have been appropriate to specify here these concerns. Three hypotheses are raised. In them, it would have been good to specify again what interventions would increase social interactions. Participants in the research were 3 children with autism spectrum disorder aged 4, with whom an analysis was performed and who were the subject of research for 2 years. Areas in their development were studied: communication, motor development, everyday skills, social area. A program has been created for the children, which was implemented in the preschool group, mainly within the framework of play activities. Parental consent was requested and given. The interventions were carried out in two phases, followed by a re-evaluation/re-check. Children's responses to initiating interactions, self-management, etc. were measured. I believe that if more cases of children had been analyzed (more case-studies), more significant findings and conclusions could have been reached.

The third chapter presents an analysis of the collected data. Multiple graphs are presented here outlining the baseline and the changes over time within the research phases.

In the fourth chapter, the data from the analysis are interpreted, comparing them with other research and studies. Some appropriate teaching techniques and strategies that have a positive impact are also described.

The references include a sufficient number of literary sources, mostly in English language, including some from the last five years.

## **5. Contributions to the theory and practice**

The contributions that **Dimitrios Chatzis** outlines are in three directions: fundamental, to practice and to theory, respectively 4, 2 and 5 in number of each type. Some of them sound too broad and generic.

## **6. Evaluation of publications on the topic of the doctoral dissertation**

The number of publications on the topic of the dissertation is four. They are conference papers from conferences of Sofia University in the period 2019-2022. Their titles are related to the topic. Three are single-authored and one is a joint publication with the supervisor.

## 7. Autoreferat (Abstract)

The abstract has a volume of 43 pages and reproduces well and in an abbreviated form in Bulgarian language the content of the full text of the doctoral dissertation.

## 8. Questions and recommendations to the doctoral student:

I have the following questions for **Dimitrios Chatzis**:

- Do you think that development of self-management skills is appropriate and possible for preschool children with autism spectrum disorder? If so, why are such skills necessary at this age?
- The research is based on three children with autism spectrum disorder in preschool age. To what extent can your results and conclusions be accepted as generally valid?

## Conclusion:

The doctoral dissertation of **Dimitrios Chatzis** with title “**Educational interventions promoting the inclusion of autistic students**” with scientific supervisor Prof. Dsc Milen Zamfirov has a good structure and has scientific-theoretical and scientific-applied value. The doctoral dissertation meets the requirements of the regulations in Bulgaria stated by the Law of the Development of the Academic Staff and, in particular, the requirements of the Regulations of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" for the acquisition of scientific degrees, in terms of significant topic, good structure and organization. The doctoral dissertation shows that the doctoral student **Dimitrios Chatzis** possesses the required theoretical knowledge on the topic, has competencies for conducting research as well as has the skills for analysis and interpretation of scientific data and results, in the scientific field 1.2. Pedagogy/Education ( Special Education).

Based on everything stated above, **I give a positive evaluation** to the doctoral dissertation and the Autoreferat (Abstract), and I propose to the esteemed scientific committee/jury to award the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" (PhD) to **Dimitrios Chatzis** in professional field 1.2. Pedagogy (Special Education).

Sofia, August 20, 2024

Sincerely:

(Prof. Dsc Mira Tzvetkova-Arsova)