

REVIEW

by Prof. Snezhana Hristova Nikolova, PhD

**about a dissertation on the topic „Attitude towards the Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs in the General Education School“
for the awarding of an educational and scientific degree „doctor“ in the field of higher education 1. Pedagogical sciences, professional direction 1.2. Pedagogy (Special Pedagogy)**

PhD student: Ekaterini Pericles Anagnostu

Research supervisor: Prof. Tsvetanka Lukanova Tsenova, DSc

1. Compliance of the procedure with the current regulations

By order No. RD-38-348/02.07.2024 of the Rector of Sofia University „St. Kliment Ohridski“ I have been appointed as a member of the scientific jury to ensure a procedure for the defense of a dissertation work on the topic: „Attitude towards the Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs in the General Education School“ for the acquisition of the educational and scientific degree „doctor“ in the field of higher education: 1. Pedagogical sciences, professional direction: 1.2. Pedagogy (Special Pedagogy).

The author of the dissertation is Ekaterini Pericles Anagnostu – a full-time doctoral student studying English at the Department of „Special Pedagogy“ of the National Institute of Scientific Research, with scientific supervisor Prof. Tsvetanka Lukanova Tsenova, DSc.

The procedure and the presented set of materials are in accordance with the requirements of the RASRB and the Regulations for its application, as well as with the Regulations for the development of the academic staff of Sofia University „St. Kliment Ohridski“. Ekaterini Anagnostu has fulfilled all the activities of her individual plan and has been discharged with the right of defense.

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

In 2012, Ekaterini Anagnostou graduated as a BA in the Department of Psychology at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of the University of Patras (Greece).

In 2015 he completed a postgraduate qualification in „Educational Technologies and Human Resource Development“ and in 2017 he completed a postgraduate qualification in Special Pedagogy at the University of Nicosia. In recent years, he has been a full-time doctoral

student in the Special Pedagogy doctoral program at Sofia University „St. Kliment Ohridski“, to the Department of „Special Pedagogy“ of the Faculty of Educational Sciences and the Arts.

From 2014 to 2018, he worked as a philologist at Theoklitus Secondary School in Athens, Greece. Since 2018, Ekaterini Anagnostu has been a special education teacher in a general education school.

He holds certificates of excellent proficiency in English (from the University of Michigan), French (DALF C2) and Spanish (from del Instituto Cervantes, Dele B2).

3. Actuality of the issues of the dissertation work

The process of inclusion of students with special educational needs in the general education school is complex, multifaceted and long-lasting. Requirements for a change in the organization of school management, for a change in the models and pedagogical toolkit of training, for a change in the type and methods of assessment, for a change in attitudes towards diversity in general are being discussed.

Through inclusive education, equal opportunities to receive effective education are ensured, including for children with disabilities, who must be provided with the necessary additional aids and resource support in a general education environment in order to prepare them as full members of society.

The development of doctoral student Ekaterini Anagnostu is dedicated to an extremely important aspect of the education of students with special educational needs. On the one hand - the opinions of general education teachers in Greece regarding the integration of this group of students, and on the other - the barriers to inclusion and the need for effective practices to remove them.

Already in the introduction, emphasis is placed on the intended goal of the dissertation - to study and offer a comprehensive understanding of teachers' attitudes towards the implementation of inclusive policies and the need for support to be given to them in their pedagogical practice.

4. Structure and content of the dissertation (Knowledge of the issues by the doctoral student)

The dissertation corresponds to the requirements for scientific development, a study with a theoretical and experimental part is presented. The dissertation was developed in a volume of 189 computer pages, of which 162 pages are the main text and 27 pages are a bibliography with 307 sources in Latin. The content is presented in 2 main parts. The first part

includes an overview of the theory on the problem, and the second part presents the research and its relevant results. The discussion on the problem of the dissertation research, conclusions, recommendations for practice and contributions are also referred here. At the end of the development, the list of used literature and an appendix representing a questionnaire for teachers are included. 47 tables and 12 diagrams are used in the text.

The introduction of the dissertation development points to the importance of the topic. The boundaries of the researched problem are outlined - the expectation is to reveal the complex relationship between teachers' opinions and perceptions regarding the capacity and limitations of students with special educational needs and their attitudes towards the possibility of supporting them in implementing inclusive practices.

The theoretical foundations (*part one*) are covered in three separate chapters that are logically linked. Their content is proof of a good level of competence and knowledge of basic and current scientific issues.

The content of the *first chapter, Special Education and Disorders*, presents special education in a historical context.

The attitude towards people with disabilities has been traced from antiquity (Hippocritos, 400 BC) to the present day. The two main models of impairment are considered. According to the medical model, the child or adult with a disability is perceived as a problem only because of their disability and special needs. This model labels people with disabilities as „sick“ and in need of treatment. The social model affirms above all people and their personhood and emphasizes the need for structural changes to enable people with disabilities to take control of their own lives as part of a society that is inclusive, accessible and supports the right to personal choice and freedom.

The most common educational needs as a result of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), speech and language problems, autism spectrum disorders, movement disorders, mental retardation, sensory disorders, learning disabilities are correctly described. Each of these disorders is presented with its specific manifestation, the etiological factors for the respective disorders are also indicated.

A second chapter is devoted to inclusion. Within five pages, the term „inclusion“ is defined, clarifying that in Greek literature it occurs as „integration“ and „inclusive education“. The main principles on which the philosophy of inclusive education is based are described, such as: equal access to education, elimination of segregation, promotion of joint learning, individualization and differentiation of the learning process, etc. Attention is paid to the benefits of inclusion, as well as to the barriers to the implementation of this process – the

feeling of rejection, stigma, difficulties related to the organization of the learning process and the adaptation of learning material for students with special educational needs, etc.

The third chapter presents the essence of the underlying idea in the dissertation development - the relationship to children with special educational needs. In this way, the conduct of the research presented in the dissertation related to the teachers' attitudes regarding the inclusion of students with special educational needs is argued. The social perspective of inclusion of these children is commented: how they build relationships with students with typical development in class, how they perceive themselves and form their self-esteem and self-esteem, how they are involved in class work and in activities with peers and in extracurricular activities .

On the basis of conducted research (Woolf, 2019; Zoniou – Sideri, 2012), the role of the „integration“ pedagogue (resource teacher) is indicated in terms of his preparation and his work with students with special educational needs.

The attitudes of general education teachers towards students with disabilities were monitored. Both the optimistic attitudes and the fears and concerns of teachers regarding the presence of students with special educational needs in the classes are presented. Attention has been paid to the fact that the type of violation affects the attitudes of general education teachers (Miesera & Gebhardt, 2018). Factors such as gender, teaching tenure and experience also affect teachers' attitudes (Avramidis & Kalyva, 2007; Tsakiridou & Polyzopouloy, 2014). A number of studies on differences in the attitudes of preschool pedagogues, primary teachers, junior high school teachers towards the inclusion and inclusion of students with special educational needs in general education classes are indicated.

A separate paragraph includes the attitudes of parents of children with special educational needs. Attention is paid to the difference in the attitudes of mothers and fathers, to the importance of the economic and social status of parents in relation to the inclusion of students in a general education environment.

At the end of this chapter, a place is devoted to the attitudes of students with typical development for the integration of students with special educational needs.

The theoretical foundations presented in the *first part* are proof of the doctoral student's ability to handle and analyze a significant volume of scientific literature, and the personal attitude to the chosen topic is noticeable.

The second part presents the research approach.

Research methodology and results

The aim of the study and the research tasks are correctly and accurately justified and formulated. On this basis, six hypotheses are derived.

A primary quantitative study is planned.

The research contingent includes 120 teachers teaching at the lower secondary and upper secondary levels of education in general education schools.

The research toolkit is selected according to the purpose and the research questions. This is a structured questionnaire that consists of five sections. *The first section* concerns the collection of demographic information – gender, age, level of education, position in the school. In *the second section*, the scale „My Thinking About Inclusion Scale“ MTAI (Stoiber et al., 1998), consisting of 28 statements, was applied. *The third section* addresses specific barriers to inclusion, *the fourth section* lists methods of inclusion, and *the fifth section* includes seven different special education needs. Respondents are asked to rate each of the statements on a 5-point Likert scale.

The collection of empirical data was carried out online, in the period March - April 2023, through Google Forms. Statistical analysis was based on the use of factor analysis, independent sample t-test, Anova statistical test, through the SPSS statistical package.

The presentation of empirical data is consistent across each section of the questionnaire. At the beginning of the analysis, the results of the respondents' answers regarding the main perspectives, expected results and classroom practices regarding the inclusion of students with special educational needs are presented. The conclusion that emerges is that participants are moderately positive towards inclusion.

The following is an analysis of the beliefs about the obstacles to inclusion and inclusion of students with special educational needs in a general education environment. The results of the teachers' ability to deal with the main categories of special educational needs prove that they are not familiar with any of these needs. However, they are somewhat familiar with movement disorders and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

After processing the results regarding the readiness of schools to deal with students with special educational needs in terms of infrastructure and resources, a rather pessimistic conclusion is reached - insufficient and incomplete resources and almost no infrastructure. The possibility of statistically significant differences was examined for each educational need separately using a paired samples t-test.

At the end of the analysis, statistically significant differences between teachers' beliefs regarding the inclusion of children with special educational needs are presented; good practices for seamless inclusion and barriers to inclusion based on teacher demographics.

The results of the research are visualized through 12 diagrams and 47 tables, which makes it possible for them to be more easily understood and interpreted.

From the analysis, it can be seen that PhD student Anagnostu has the competence to independently and correctly interpret the results in relation to the research questions.

It found that teachers are not aware of special educational needs and are not confident how to manage them effectively, schools do not have effective resources to help them deal with these needs. This, in turn, determines attitudes towards inclusive education and the presence of students with special educational needs in a general education environment.

In this direction, recommendations have been formulated for the implementation of practices through which teachers can qualify and change their attitudes towards the inclusion of students with special educational needs.

5. Scientific-theoretical and practical-applied contributions

The contributions in Ekaterini Anagnostu's dissertation work are divided into contributions of a theoretical nature and contributions of a practical nature. Three theoretical contributions have been made, correctly reflecting the doctoral student's efforts to formulate the achievements of the work from a theoretical point of view. The definition of the presented practical contributions, in my opinion, could be refined in view of the content of the dissertation and the results achieved. So phrased they sound more like findings than contributions.

6. Abstract

The abstract is developed on 65 pages. Adequately presented the main theses of the dissertation research, the obtained results and their analysis. A list of the used literary sources is also attached at the end of the abstract.

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

Three individual publications are presented. They fully cover the scientometric requirements. They are placed in collections of scientific and practical conferences "Education and Arts: Traditions and Perspectives" of the Faculty of Sciences for Education and Arts at SU „St. Kliment Ohridski“ in the period 2022 – 2023. They treat basic issues related to the subject of the dissertation development: inclusion of children with special educational needs; teachers' attitudes and parents' attitudes towards the inclusion of students with special

educational needs.

They are printed in full:

1. Anagnostou, A. (2022, Nov 10–11). Inclusion of children with Special Education Needs: It's social side. 3rd Scientific and Practical Conference on “Education and Arts: Traditions and perspectives” (Sofia), ISSN 2738-8999, pp.1023- 1034
2. Anagnostou, A. (2022, Nov 10–11). Inclusion of Children with Special Education Needs: The Importance of the teachers’ role and their attitudes. 3rd Scientific and Practical Conference on “Education and Arts: Traditions and perspectives” (Sofia), ISSN 2738-8999, pp.1035- 1047
3. Anagnostou, A. (2023, Oct 26–27). Parents’ Attitudes towards the Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs. 4rd Scientific and Practical Conference on “Education and Arts: Traditions and perspectives” (Sofia), ISBN 978-954-07-5061-3, pp. 945-952

8. Personal impressions

I have no personal impressions.

9. Notes and recommendations

In my opinion, in terms of structure, the theoretical part would be better organized if the different aspects of the research problem would be presented in separate paragraphs (with corresponding sub-paragraphs) and not in different chapters.

The dissertation development is distinguished by a correct interpretation of a complex issue, through the use of an interesting style, with complexly presented evidence from various cognitive spaces in support of the author's thesis. The results of the dissertation can be an argument for future research regarding the professional development of teachers teaching students with special educational needs and the possibility of learning flexible strategies and skills for teamwork and communication.

CONCLUSION

The dissertation development is in accordance with the requirements for writing a similar kind of scientific work. It is designed carefully and with understanding.

My evaluation of the dissertation, contributions, publications and abstract is positive. This gives me reason to propose to the Honorable Scientific Jury to award the educational and scientific degree "doctor" to SU „St. Kliment Ohridski“ in the field of higher education 1.

Pedagogical sciences, Professional direction 1.2. Pedagogy (*Special pedagogy*) of **Ekaterini Periklis Anagnostu**.

18/09/2024

Prof. Snezhana Nikolova, PhD