

## OPINION

by assoc. prof. **Diyana Georgieva, PhD**

of a dissertation for the award of an educational and scientific degree "Doctor"

in the field of higher education 1. Pedagogical sciences

professional direction 1.2. *Pedagogy*

doctoral program *Special pedagogy*

**Author: *Chrysoula Joanis Anthopoulou***

**Topic: "Model of improvement of social interaction of autistic students"**

**Research supervisor: *Prof. Milen Zamfirov, Ed.D.***

### **1. Administrative highlights of the competition**

By order No. ПД-38-616/29.10.2024 of the Rector of SU "St. Kliment Ohridski" I am included in the scientific jury of **Chrysoula Joanis Anthopoulou** in the procedure for the defense of a dissertation work to obtain the educational and scientific degree "Doctor". Chrysoula Anthopoulou is a full-time doctoral student in professional field 1.2. *Pedagogy (Special Pedagogy)* in the Faculty of Educational Sciences and Arts. The set of materials submitted by the doctoral student on an electronic medium includes the required documents according to the specific requirements of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski".

### **2. Biographical presentation of the doctoral student**

The doctoral candidate's educational credentials include a degree in English from the University of Cambridge in 2001; a diploma from a completed bachelor's program at the University of the Aegean (Degree 8.1), *Department of Early Childhood Education and Educational Planning* (2009); a document from a Master's degree in Educational Sciences at the University of Nicosia (2016). In addition, the doctoral candidate holds certificates for: computer use (2008); *Special Education Training program* (2010); use of a *Learning system of writing and reading of the blind (Braille)* (2016).

The doctoral candidate has many years of professional experience, first as an employee in a private educational institution (2009-2013), and then as a special educator, developing her labor and creative potential in the state structures of preschool education in the Republic of Greece (from 2013 to the present). The variety of childcare institutions in which doctoral candidate Anthopoulou has enriched her expertise in the educational field is impressive.

### **3. Relevance of the issue under consideration**

Autism spectrum disorder is a phenomenon that continues to sustain the scientific interest of researchers. To date, a large database of intervention programs has been

accumulated, based on the principles of behavioral therapy, designed to improve parent-child relationships. However, there are undoubtedly other important aspects that contain the potential for optimizing results in the long term. One of them is the organization of early intervention with an emphasis on social, communicative and behavioral development, implemented in an inclusive environment, in which a specialized team operates, with in-depth knowledge of the problem of autism and excellent orientation in the individual characteristics of the child/student. The particular relevance of the developed topic is rooted in the need to find rational solutions for the development of social interactions and communicative behavior in children with ASD.

#### **4. Structure and content of the dissertation work**

The evaluated dissertation is 201 pages long, organized in a classical structure consisting of an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion, a bibliography (369 titles: all in Latin), appendices (in English) and contributory elements. The visual material supporting the interpretation of the results includes 8 tables, 6 figures and 12 photographs. Despite the small number of images, the ranked data are fully utilized for the qualitative analysis.

**The introduction** of the dissertation contains the reasons that motivated the doctoral student to undertake and administer the experimental study. Despite the existence of a series of studies targeting the issue of autism, the need to enrich school practice by developing effective intervention programs to stimulate the social and communicative well-being of people with autism spectrum disorders is among the leading motives for the creation of a new scientific product.

**The first chapter** stands out with a detailed analysis of the dynamic picture of autism research. The beginning of the text is determined by information related to autism as a phenomenon, discussed through the prism of modernity. Traditionally, the emphasis covers the terminological clarifications, symptoms of manifestation, differential characteristics, the etiological structure of the disorder, as well as diagnostic criteria and some of the approaches to creating a predictable and inclusive environment. The following is a description of the social and communicative aspects of autism through the eyes of researchers who have devoted their creative efforts to the enigma, in which interest not only does not subside, but is becoming increasingly unstoppable due to the rapid, unfortunately, increase in "clinical" cases worldwide. Special attention is paid to strategies and approaches for improving the social and communicative functioning of students with autism. In this paragraph, valuable information is provided by the stages/levels of communication that children with autism spectrum disorders go through in order to build the ability for reciprocal interactions; the techniques and strategies for developing communicative potential; effective therapeutic solutions for the formation and development of social skills. This part of the dissertation concludes with summaries through which the doctoral student has demonstrated her skills and competencies for generalizing all information based on the scientific facts subjected to systematic analysis.

**The second chapter** presents the methodology of the study. Correct formulations have *the goal* related to identifying the effect of an applied intervention scheme on the social interaction and communicative well-being of preschool children, and *the supporting descriptive research tasks*. 2 hypotheses (null and alternative) were raised, subject to verification. *The formed sample* is limited to a chamber composition of 3

individuals – children aged between 5-6 years, who have been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders by authorized specialists in the field, and who are educated in children's general education structures of South Attica, Greece. *An experimental research design* of the “before” and “after” type was used, which allowed to establish the degree of influence of the independent variable (the intervention program) on the dependent variable (social and communicative behavior). *The instrument set* includes an administered Social Communication Questionnaire (SCQ), consisting of 40 items focused on behavioral manifestations observed in the time interval of three months; SPG Peer Selection Checklist, the content of which is borrowed from the Autism Focused Intervention Resources & Modules (AFIRM) – designed to assess the social and communicative skills of children with typical development and their interactions with their peers with ASD; a scale with subscales for measuring behavior, named Autism Social Skills Profile (ASSP), including 49 items assessing general social functioning.

The second chapter also provides detailed information about the intervention program *Structured Play Groups* (SPG) in terms of its organization, duration and procedural aspect. The program includes the so-called social stories - a multifunctional and effective tool for orientation in social situations.

*Statistical procedures* were performed by applying quantitative analysis, including the percentage of non-overlapping data method (to estimate effect size) and a paired-samples T-test to compare means, with the resources of the SPSS statistical program.

**The third chapter** is dedicated to the results obtained in the course of the experimental study. A qualitative analysis is proposed – a descriptive approach, which allows the disclosure of dynamic characteristics in the behavior of the three children during the applied intervention and after it. This is followed by a quantitative analysis, through which a significant effect of the specialized program is established on the subscales *Social Reciprocity* and *Social Engagement/Social Avoidance*. In contrast, no statistically significant difference was registered between the mean indicators before and after the intervention in terms of *socially unacceptable behaviors*. However, general social functioning shows positive dynamics in the development of social and communicative skills after the implementation of the structured program, which implies the rejection of the null hypothesis. This part of the dissertation is supplemented by a discussion that reveals the skills of the doctoral student to summarize the data on the achieved achievements and their comparison with the results of similar studies. The author of the dissertation correctly discusses the limitations of the study and methodology and outlines alternative solutions related to the sample size, the assessment of the effectiveness of the program in different settings and the monitoring of results in the long term. The doctoral student also determines the directions for future research projects.

The results of the study lead to an important conclusion regarding the search for alternative solutions to improve reciprocal interactions and communication skills in children with ASD, on the one hand, and early intervention, which is stated as an invariable necessity, on the other hand.

## **5. Scientific-theoretical and practical-applied contributions**

The dissertation has its undeniable contributions in theoretical and applied aspects, which the doctoral student has refined as formulations. All statements made are relevant and well-considered.

## 6. Abstract

The 43-page abstract presents a short version of the dissertation work. The linearity of the discourse has been maintained and the requirement for synthesizing the information from the original text has been achieved.

## 7. Publications on the topic of the dissertation

The doctoral student has proposed 4 articles in the period 2019-2022. All publications are in English, and one of them is co-authored.

## 8. Personal impressions

My personal impression of Chrysoula Antopoulou's awareness and knowledge is that she is well versed in the issues developed by classical and contemporary authors. The skillful combination of specialized and literary vocabulary is impressive.

## 9. Notes and Recommendations

Given the status of the dissertation as a scientific work with a pronounced applied value, and its significance for contemporary inclusive practices, I recommend presenting the material in a publishing format convenient for the doctoral student – a study or a monograph.

## 10. Conclusion

The dissertation work of PhD student Chrysoula Antopoulou offers facts significant for theory and practice, which I value as a substantial contribution in a social and pedagogical context. Their presentation is in accordance with the normative documents – the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria (LDASRB) and the Regulations for the Implementation of LDASRB.

Given all the arguments in the presentation, I confidently give my positive assessment and propose to the respected scientific jury **to award the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" to Chrysoula Joanis Anthopoulou** in the field of higher education 1. Pedagogical Sciences, Professional direction 1.2. Pedagogy, Doctoral program *Special pedagogy*.

15.12.2024

Prepared the opinion:

/Assoc. prof. Diyana Georgieva, PhD/