

OPINION

from Assoc. Prof. Dr. Gencho Vassilev Valchev

about a dissertation on a topic

"A MODEL FOR IMPROVING THE SOCIAL INTERACTION OF STUDENTS WITH AUTISM"

for awarding the educational and scientific degree "Doctor"

in the professional field 1.2. Pedagogy(Special pedagogy)

Doctoral student: Chrysoula Ioannis Antopoulou

Scientific supervisor: Prof. Milen Zamfirov Zamfirov

Compliance of the procedure with the current regulatory framework

By order No. RD-38-616/ 29.10.2024 of the Rector of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" on the procedure for the defense of a dissertation on the topic "Strategies for teaching students with dyslexia and dyscalculia" of Chrysoula Ioannis Antopoulou, a full-time doctoral student in the professional field 1.2. Pedagogy /Special Pedagogy/ with instruction in English, with scientific supervisor Prof. Dr. Milen Zamfirov Zamfirov, for the award of the educational and scientific degree "doctor", I have been appointed as a member of the scientific jury for this defense.

The set of materials submitted for evaluation and preparation of an opinion is in a format and with content that complies with the ZRASRB and the Regulations for the Development of the Academic Staff of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski". In addition to the dissertation (in English), an Abstract, an up-to-date CV of the doctoral student and a list of publications are attached.

Relevance of the dissertation work's issues

The relevance of the researched issue is argued by the significance of several substantive perspectives defining the parameters of the scientific field in which the dissertation research is developed:

1) Autism is a generalized developmental disorder affecting the mental, speech, intellectual and social spheres of the individual and manifests itself as a symptomatic complex of communicative, mental, psychic and behavioral characteristics with various combinations of symptoms determining the social functioning of the individual.

2) Autism spectrum disorders (ASD) are the result of a complex combination of cognitive, linguistic, neurological, etc. factors that significantly affect the academic behavior and achievements of the person;

3) There is a wide variety of therapeutic approaches, numerous therapeutic and intervention strategies, determined by individual differences, the dynamics of basic needs changing with age. This greatly complicates the definition of therapeutic goals, the selection of appropriate therapeutic interventions and ultimately is a prerequisite for limiting the effectiveness of therapy.

In this context, the relevance of the topic and its dissertationability are beyond doubt.

Structure and content of the dissertation

The design of the dissertation has a classical structure and includes an Introduction, three main separate parts (structured as chapters): Chapter One contains a theoretical overview of the research problems (includes 5 paragraphs, according to the parameters of the problem); Chapter Two - Research Design (includes the methodological parameters and the research program; Chapter Three presents the results of the study - quantitative, qualitative analysis and interpretation of the obtained data, ASSP analysis of the data to assess the overall effectiveness of the selected intervention), discussion, conclusion, contributions and a list of sources used (369). An appendix is also included with the dissertation.

The total volume is 201 pages, of which 189 pages are the main text, which represent the actual part of the work. The text includes 8 tables, 6 figures and 12 photographs. Structurally, the dissertation is logically constructed and well balanced.

The structure and content of the First Part of the dissertation work (Chapter One) are a demonstration of good awareness and knowledge of the basic and current scientific issues in the three areas on which the concept of the study is built:

- 1) Essence and characteristics of autism and its presence in society and the educational system, social and communicative aspects of autism;
- 2) Social and communicative functioning of students with autism;
- 3) Strategies and approaches for improving social and communicative interaction in students with autism.

An analysis of pedagogical and therapeutic intervention strategies for improving school learning, as well as the relationship between communicative functions and the development of social and academic skills in students with autism spectrum disorders (ASD), was conducted.

Good knowledge of the educational, communicative and socio-adaptive resources of students with ASD, determined by the specifics of their deficits, is associated with sufficient competence in the field of intervention strategies for teaching students with these disorders.

The approach to selecting, systematizing and analyzing scientific information shows knowledge of the specific issue, as well as formed skills for working with sources of scientific information.

The research program is presented in the second separate part of the dissertation (Chapter Two). The goals and objectives of the study fully correspond to the declared working hypothesis (presented as the Null Hypothesis and Alternative Hypothesis). They are correctly formulated and determine the emphases of the research program.

The study involved three kindergarten children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), aged 5 to 6 years. They were fully included in mainstream classrooms in southern Attica, Greece. Each child had a formal diagnosis of ASD by pediatricians or registered child psychiatrists and displayed significant social and communication deficits.

The research program is developed in detail and in a constructive plan represents a structure of research phases (the SPG Program). The SPG Program, applied in this study, was conducted with a duration of 12 weeks to one year. The empirical study has well-thought-out chronological parameters.

The instrument has been developed precisely, the research procedures are correctly and in detail described. The statistical methods used for data processing are adequate to the objectives of the study.

The results of the study are presented in the third separate structural part of the dissertation (Chapter Three): a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the results, author's

suggestions and recommendations, a discussion of the results of the study are presented. The differentiation of the emphasis areas of the analysis is in accordance with the purpose of the study.

Statistical processing was performed, looking for statistically significant dependencies in terms of Social Reciprocity (SER), Social Participation/Avoidance (SPA), Detrimental Social Behaviors (DSB) and assessing general social functioning. ASSP analysis of the data was performed to assess the overall effectiveness of the selected intervention. The statistical methods are highly accurate and allow for variable analysis of the data.

I did not find specifically formulated conclusions, but the discussion of the results of the study confirms the hypothesis.

Contributions of the dissertation work

The contributions of Chrysoula Ioannis Anthopoulos's dissertation are complex:

- 1) to the scientific theory on the problem of pedagogical and therapeutic intervention strategies to improve the learning of students with ASD, by providing evidence for the effectiveness of SPG programs in promoting positive peer relationships.
- 2) contributions of a practical nature - emphasizes the importance of early intervention during critical stages of development, offering applicable strategies for improving social interaction, communication and play skills.

I accept the validity of the contributions that has formulated with the remark that the formulations could have been more precise.

I would like to note that when presenting the contributions of the dissertation work, the doctoral student was objective and did not exaggerate the merits of the dissertation.

Publications on the topic of the dissertation

4 publications on the topic of the dissertation are presented. The content of the publications is in accordance with the problem areas covered in the work. According to this indicator, the regulatory requirements are met.

Evaluation of the Abstract

The abstract is in a format and with content that meets the requirements of the Bulgarian Law on Academic Affairs and the Regulations of the University of Sofia. Its content accurately reflects the presented dissertation work.

Personal impressions

I do not know the doctoral student Chrysoula Antopoulos and I have no personal impressions.

Conclusion

My assessment of the presented dissertation is based on the following markers:

1. Compliance with the regulations of the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria (ZRASRB) and the Regulations on the Development of the Academic Staff of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski". – The presented work and publications fully comply with the regulatory requirements.

2. Contributions. - The scientific results achieved in the dissertation are significant for special pedagogical theory and practice.

3. Design. – The structuring of the content and layout have been carried out precisely and competently.

The doctoral student Chryssoul Antopoulou possesses the necessary resource of theoretical knowledge and professional skills in the scientific specialty of Special Education and demonstrates qualities and skills for independent conduct of scientific research. This gives me reason to propose to the esteemed scientific jury to give a positive vote for awarding the educational and scientific degree "doctor" to Chryssoul Ioannis Antopoulou Professional field 1.2. Pedagogy.

10.12.2024

Stara Zagora

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Assoc. Prof. Dr. Gencho Valchev