

# **STANDPOINT**

**by Prof. Neda Balkanska PhD**

**of the dissertation project for awarding the scientific and educational degree "doctor" in the field of higher education 1. Pedagogical sciences, professional direction 1.2. Pedagogy (Special Education)**

**on the topic: Holistic approach to the development of learning skills of students with special educational needs**

*Author: Maria Kiriakopoulou*

*Supervisor: prof. Tzanka Popzlateva PhD*

## **General description of the presented materials**

By Order RD No. 38-659 dated 15.12.2023 of the Rector of SU "Saint 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 "Holistic approach to the development of learning skills of students with special educational needs" - 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 Education). The author of the dissertation is Maria Kyriakopoulou - a full-time doctoral student at the "Special Education" department, supervised by Prof. Dr. Tsanka Popzlateva from the "St. Kliment Ohridski".

The set of electronic materials presented by Maria Kyriakopoulou testifies that the candidate has fulfilled the minimum national requirements under Art. 2b, para. 2 and 3 of ZRASRB.

## **General presentation of the candidate. Educational and scientific status.**

Maria Kyriakopoulou completed her BA in 1996 as a graduate of the University of Crete, majoring in Philosophy and Social Sciences. In 2012 she obtained a Master degree of Arts in Special Education from John Moores University, Liverpool. In 2024, she should complete a second master's program in "Pedagogical Studies" at the "Hellenic Open University". Since 2019 Maria

Kiriakopoulou is a full-time doctoral student at FESA, SU "St. Kliment Ohridski", Department of "Special Education"

She participates in a number of forums, seminars and trainings dedicated to the modern challenges facing the education system and teachers, as well as participates as a coordinator in a number of programs that aim to improve the inclusive educational environment at school. All this testifies to the high professional motivation and consistency of the doctoral student.

### **Actuality of the dissertation.**

In contemporary educational conditions, specialists are faced with serious problems related to the growing diversity of the needs of children and students, and along with this, the decreasing effectiveness of traditional teaching methods. This necessitates a change both in terms of the educational system and in terms of the teachers' pedagogical approach. Overcoming the described barriers would be possible through the flexible and creative application of approaches considered "alternative", such as cooperative learning, the Montessori method, which obey the principles of the holistic approach.

In this sense, the topic of the present development is characterized by a high relevance for the scientific and practical sphere.

**Structure of the dissertation.** The work has a volume of 230 pages and contains an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion and an appendix. The bibliography includes titles in Cyrillic and Latin.

**The theoretical formulation of the problem** is structured in the first chapter. The essence of the holistic approach and its application in the inclusive educational environment is revealed. The importance of early diagnosis, intervention and the family environment for the development and academic achievements of students with special educational needs is deduced. Against this background, the policies and normative framework of inclusive education are outlined.

**Empirical research design** contains subject, object, aim, tasks and hypotheses. The research sample includes 100 special educators and 200 students with special educational needs, educated in general schools and lyceums in Greece. A questionnaire was developed for the purposes of the study. Empirically obtained data are subjected to quantitative and qualitative analysis,

on the basis of which conclusions and recommendations for the practice are formulated.

**The text of the autoreferate** completely reflects the content of the dissertation. It is in a volume of 57 computer pages.

**There are four publications** on the topic of the dissertation that cover the scientometric requirements for dissertations.

**The scientific and practical contributions** of the reviewed work are the following:

1. Theoretical information related to the main directions of application of the holistic approach was systematized and analyzed, as well as substantiating the need to transform the traditional educational environment;
2. A questionnaire has been developed that can also be used in future research, as well as be applied in practice for attesting educational conditions and the level of inclusion of students with special educational needs, registering learning difficulties, as well as the level of academic achievements;
3. In the course of the research, the Achenbach scale was applied to create an emotional-behavioral profile of the studied students, which can become a good practice in the activities of school psychologists.

**My recommendations and notes are as follows:**

1. Some working elements remaining in the official text of the dissertation to be cleaned up;
2. The descriptive part at the beginning of the theoretical chapter unnecessarily burdens the structure of the work and the reader;
3. There is some disorganization regarding the information in the first chapter and although the content is presented very engagingly, at times the focus on the holistic approach and its application in educational settings is lost;

4. The examples given in the text are mainly aimed at students with autism. I would recommend that the other groups of children with special educational needs should also be affected, as the topic has a wider range.

I have the **following question:**

The topic of the dissertation does not specify a certain age group, but in the content the author mainly refers to the representatives of teenagers and adolescents with special educational needs. Would the issues be different in other educational stages?

### **CONCLUSION**

The dissertation contains scientific and practical achievements which represent an author's contribution to science and meet the requirements of the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria (ZRASRB), the Regulations for the Implementation of ZRASRB and the relevant Regulations of SU "St. Kl. Ohridski". The presented materials and dissertation results fully correspond to the specific requirements adopted in connection with the Regulations of the SU for the application of the ZRASRB.

The dissertation shows that the PhD student Maria Kyriakopoulou possesses theoretical knowledge and demonstrates skills for independent conduct of scientific research.

Due to the above, I confidently give my positive assessment for the conducted research, achieved results and contributions, and I propose to the honorable scientific jury to award the educational and scientific degree "doctor" to Maria Kyriakopoulou in the field of higher education: 1. Pedagogical sciences, professional direction 1.2. Pedagogy (Special Education).

**23.02. 2024.**

**Author of the standpoint: .....  
(Prof. Neda Balkanska PhD)**