

OPINION

by prof. Dr Pelagia Terziyska, South-West University "Neofit Rilski"
on the dissertation work on the topic: „**Social inclusion of students with intellectual disability during extracurricular activities**”, for obtaining the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in Professional direction 1.2. Pedagogy (Special Pedagogy)

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This statement was prepared on the basis of order No. ПД-38-58/ 29.01.2024 of the Rector of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", as well as the decision of the scientific jury on the procedure.

General presentation of the procedure and the PhD student

Maria Alexakoudi is a full-time doctoral student in professional direction 1.2. Pedagogy (Special Pedagogy) with training in English at the Department of Special Pedagogy, Faculty of Educational Studies and the Arts of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski".

The procedure and the presented set of documents are in accordance with the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff of the Republic of Bulgaria and the Rules for the Development of the Academic Staff of the Sofia University.

The master's degree in Special Pedagogy, which she graduated in 2016, as well as her qualification as an agronomist, gave her the opportunity to work as a substitute teacher in the secondary education system since 2017. Since 2020 she was appointed as a teacher of children with SEN. This motivated Maria Alexakoudi to continue her education in the Doctoral Programme in "Special Education" in the Faculty of Educational Studies and the Arts of the Sofia University "St. Kliment

Ohridski" and to carry out research activities on problems of teaching students with intellectual disabilities.

Actuality of the topic

The process of social inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities is complex, multifaceted and long-lasting, provoking the need to search and find appropriate methods, means, and forms aimed at providing conditions for the formation of social skills. The developments of social and emotional skills through the interaction with the people who surround the student - parents, teachers, and peers have a significant impact on his socialization. In the context of the thesis that through the creation of a supportive environment, students with intellectual disabilities can achieve good results, both in education and in social and life functioning, Maria Alexakoudi's dissertation research is topical and significant.

In the specific case applying different techniques and approaches during the extracurricular activities provides an opportunity to enrich pedagogical theory and practice.

Based on researched literary sources and familiarization with the results of modern research in the field of intellectual disability, PhD student Alexakoudi directs attention to improving the social skills of students with mental disabilities during extracurricular activities. Emphasizes alternative opportunities for social skills development, as mainstreaming and teaching social skills in the classroom for these children has limited impact. The benefits of participation in activities outside the classroom contribute favourably to children's social inclusion.

Presentation of the dissertation work and evaluation of the content

The submitted dissertation contains a total of 170 pages, of which 145 main texts is structured in an introduction, 3 chapters and a conclusion. The literature is listed on 13 pages, including titles in Greek and English, as well as online sources.

The three applications are spread over 12 pages. The main text includes tables and 8 diagrams presenting the results of the empirical research.

The introduction argues for the relevance of the chosen topic.

The literature review on the researched issues is done in the first chapter. Conceptions of different authors about the essence of mental deficiency, as well as its characteristics in the period of school age are briefly indicated. Studies on the behavior of students with intellectual disabilities and findings on their interactions with their classmates are presented, as well as the need to focus on how and what is taught, not just where it is taught. Doctoral student Alexakoudi summarizes the opinions presented in the literature about the importance of social games or board games for the formation of cooperation skills, as well as interaction skills, for building linguistic and non-linguistic skills. Emphasizes the importance of learning strategies, role plays, rehearsals, constructive games, and techniques for building social skills and reinforcing them during extracurricular activities.

Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 present the research methodology, analysis and summary of the obtained results. The purpose, tasks, and the main hypothesis of the research, specified in 6 hypotheses and methods of the research - a didactic experiment, are correctly specified. The research participants were 22 secondary school students attending the Unified Special Vocational High School-Lyceum (ENEELIL), with an official diagnosis of mild or moderate mental retardation. 8 teachers from different specialties, working in the school where the experimental process takes place, were interviewed. For each of the extracurricular activities of the implemented program, a form is filled out, including specific criteria for evaluating the impact of the program on the three categories of skills of the studied students (social, motor and perceptual).

25 tables and 8 diagrams present the average differences in the four subscales of social skills of students with intellectual disabilities before and after participation

in extracurricular activities; mean differences in social skills of students with intellectual disabilities from the control group before the start of school and at the end of the school year; mean differences in the two subscales of motor skills of students with intellectual disabilities before and after participation in extracurricular activities and those of the control group before the start of school and at the end of the school year; mean differences in the three subscales of perceptual skills of students with intellectual disabilities before and after participation in extracurricular activities, and those of the control group before the start of school and at the end of the school year. The last two charts present teachers' perceptions of the impact of extracurricular activities on the social, motor, and perceptual skills of students with intellectual disabilities, as well as teachers' perceptions of school culture.

The analysis of the results obtained from the conducted research gives reason to doctoral student Alexakoudi to summarize that extracurricular activities contribute to a large extent to the development of social skills mainly due to the continuous interaction between students, taking responsibility in group work, developing self-control skills, etc. Significant improvements were also observed in students' motor and perceptual skills. All this has a positive effect on the development of the skills of cooperation, self-control, responsibility, and empathy, which are important social skills necessary to achieve an independent life.

Evaluation of publications:

The publications are 3 in number and are on the subject of the dissertation work. All are published in "Education and Arts: Traditions and Perspectives" - University Publishing House "St. Kliment Ohridski".

Abstract of the dissertation

The abstract presents the dissertation work in a summarized way. The content of the individual chapters is sufficiently informative. The author's summary conclusions, recommendations and contributions are highlighted.

Contributions:

I accept the contributions mentioned by PhD student Maria Alexakoudi

Recommendations and notes on the dissertation:

- The conclusion is not a separate chapter, it stands alone, like the introduction;
- The dissertation work would have won if the point of view of the doctoral student stood out more clearly in the theoretical part.

A question:

What recommendations can you give to teachers to effectively organize extracurricular activities for students with intellectual disabilities?

CONCLUSION:

The presented dissertation work, developed by a doctoral student, Maria Alexakoudi, meets the requirements that are presented to developments for the acquisition of the educational and scientific degree "Doctor".

On the basis of the outlined merits of the work, the demonstrated skill for scientific research and the contributions of the author, I give a positive assessment and propose to the honorable Scientific jury to award the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" to Maria Alexakoudi in the field of higher education: 1. Pedagogical sciences, professional direction 1.2. Pedagogy, doctoral program "Special Pedagogy".

Author of the opinion:

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