

OPINION

by Prof. Snezhana Hristova Nikolova, PhD

on the dissertation on „Social inclusion of students with intellectual disability during extracurricular activities”

for obtaining the educational and scientific degree „Doctor” in the doctoral program

Special pedagogy, in the field of higher education 1. Pedagogical sciences,

professional field 1.2 Pedagogy

PhD candidate: Maria Vaitsi Alexakudi

Scientific adviser: Prof. Katerina Karadjova, PhD

1. General presentation of the procedure and the PhD student

By order No. RD-38-591/ 24.10.2023 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: „Social inclusion of students with intellectual disability during extracurricular activities” 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 Maria Vaitsi Alexakudi – a full-time doctoral student studying English at the Department of „Special Pedagogy“ of the Faculty of Education Sciences and Arts with scientific supervisor Prof. Katerina Karadjova.

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“. Maria Alexakudi has fulfilled all the activities of her individual plan and has been discharged with the right of protection.

2. Relevance of the problem

The relevance of the topic of the dissertation is indisputable, considering both the large number of students with mental disabilities and the presence of a number of unresolved problems in connection with their inclusive education. Part of the problems are related to providing optimal conditions for social and educational integration. Modern trends in the educational systems of Bulgaria and Greece imposed the model of inclusion in the natural social and learning environment. Building a stimulating environment requires rethinking conventional methods and forms of social interaction. In this sense, the role of extracurricular activities as part of the special-pedagogical toolkit of innovative and adaptive

strategies for social inclusion of students with mental disabilities is significant.

The doctoral student concentrates on improving the process of social integration of students with intellectual disabilities by applying different techniques and approaches during extracurricular activities.

3. Knowledge of the issues by the doctoral student

The introduction of the dissertation development points to the significance of the research problem.

The structure and content of the theoretical justification of the dissertation are proof of a good level of knowledge of the basic scientific issues. Several main points are highlighted, detailed in separate paragraphs, on which the research concept is consolidated:

- ✓ Social status and social skills of students with mental disabilities;
- ✓ The educational environment as the main factor for improving social skills in students with mental disabilities;
- ✓ Improving social skills and social inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities during extracurricular activities.

The presence of the short summary at the end of the theoretical chapter makes a good impression, although it is relatively short.

4. Characteristics of the dissertation development

The dissertation corresponds to the requirements for scientific development. The research program has a conceptual framework, covering research requirements with a theoretical and experimental part. The dissertation was developed in a volume of 169 computer pages, of which 145 pages are the main text, 13 pages are a bibliography with 72 sources in Latin, and 35 pages are appendices. The content is presented in 4 chapters: one theoretical chapter, research design and results; conclusion (fourth chapter), literature and 3 appendices – observation form of an educational experiment to assess social, motor and perceptual skills; a questionnaire for teachers about experimental work with students with mental retardation and an interview with teachers. 25 tables and 8 diagrams are included in the text.

5. Methodology and organization of the research

The research program is presented in *the second chapter* of the dissertation. The purpose of the research, the main hypothesis and the 6 accompanying hypotheses that specify it and specify the emphasis of the research program are correctly and precisely formulated. In this regard, the tasks of the educational experiment were defined.

The research contingent was determined – 22 students with a mild or moderate

degree of mental retardation, aged 14-21, attending secondary schools. 12 students from them are in an experimental group, i.e. participate in a school program with extracurricular activities, and 10 students form a control group. Part of the students have concomitant disorders: motor, sensory, autistic spectrum.

As respondents, 8 teachers of different specialties from the school where the experimental process takes place and who cooperated with the researcher during the implementation of the extracurricular activities and the assessment of the students' skills were determined.

The research toolkit was selected according to the purpose of the research. It enables the objective collection and analysis of scientific data for each of the extracurricular activities of the implemented program and includes specific criteria for evaluating the impact of the program on the three categories of skills of the studied students (social, motor and perceptual).

A questionnaire to teachers was also used as a research tool, through which the importance of environmental factors on the effectiveness of activities for social inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities was sought. The semi-structured interview with open-ended questions was used to collect primary data.

The subsequent experimental process of the research implementation is described in detail. The 11 extracurricular activities used are presented with their description, purpose and duration.

Empirical data were processed statistically by Simple T-Test.

In the *third chapter* – Results, the results of the quantitative research are presented, after the corresponding statistical analysis of the data.

At the beginning, a quantitative assessment is presented regarding statistically significant differences in students' social skills before and after their participation in extracurricular activities. The results of the control group are presented in a similar way.

The impact of participation in extracurricular activities on motor, social and perceptual skills and social inclusion of students from both groups is presented and analyzed sequentially.

Teachers' perceptions of the contribution of extracurricular activities to better social inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities are investigated. Analyzes the impact of school culture, specifically the level of cooperation between teachers in solving problems of a professional nature.

In the second paragraph, the results of qualitative research are included regarding

teachers' opinions about the importance of social inclusion and extracurricular activities, as well as determining the barriers to the participation of students with intellectual disabilities in extracurricular activities.

The statistical analysis of the data was performed correctly, according to the established hypotheses. The results of the research are visualized through tables and diagrams, and this enables both their easier perception and their competent interpretation.

From the analysis of the obtained data and the formulated conclusions, it can be seen that Maria Alexakudi has the competence to independently and correctly interpret the results in relation to the set goal and the formulated hypotheses. I do not detect plagiarism in the literal sense. I accept that PhD student Alexakoudi personally conducted the experimental study.

6. Contributions

Usually, the contributions of the dissertation work are defined as theoretical – to the scientific theory of the problem under consideration and scientific-practical – through the tools used. In my opinion, PhD student Alexakudi approached the formulation of the contributions carelessly – lacks detail, clarity and concreteness.

7. Critical notes and recommendations

✓ In the theoretical part, publications by Bulgarian authors could be included and analyzed (K. Karadjova, Z. Dobrev, M. Zamfirov, P. Shapkova, etc.) In this way, the volume of analyzed literature would be enriched and expanded.

✓ The dissertation lacks formulated contributions from the conducted research.

✓ Typographical and stylistic errors are noted. There is a discrepancy in the numbering of the chapters - there is a fourth chapter missing, but there is a fifth chapter.

✓ It is unnecessary, in my opinion, for the conclusion to be in a separate chapter, especially since it consists of only two pages.

8. Evaluation of the abstract and publications

The abstract is developed on 46 pages. It correctly reflects the main theses of the dissertation research, the obtained results and their analysis.

On the topic of the dissertation development, three independent publications are indicated, presenting the possibilities for social inclusion of students with mental disabilities through extracurricular activities.

CONCLUSION

The dissertation development is carefully designed, planned and structured. It is in

accordance with the requirements for writing a similar kind of scientific works and is definitely a creative achievement of the doctoral student, carried out under the competent guidance of Prof. Katerina Karadjova.

My evaluation of the dissertation work, publications and auto-abstract is positive. This gives me reason to propose to the Honorable Scientific Jury to award the educational and scientific degree degree „doctor“ to SU „St. Kliment Ohridski“ in the field of higher education 1. Pedagogical sciences, Professional direction 1.2. Pedagogy (Special Pedagogy) of Maria Vaitsi Alexakudi.

11.04.2024

Shumen

Prof. Snezhana Nikolova, PhD