

STATEMENT

written by

Assoc. Prof. Lora Ilieva Spiridonova, PhD

ABOUT DISSERTATION FOR AWARDING OF EDUCATIONAL AND
SCIENTIFIC DEGREE "DOCTOR"

PROFESSIONAL FIELD:

1.2. PEDAGOGY (PRESCHOOL PEDAGOGY - INTERCULTURAL
EDUCATION)

TOPIC OF THE DISSERTATION:

**"INCLUSION OF CHILDREN WITH A BACKGROUND OF
MIGRATION INTO GREEK KINDERGARTENS VIA PHYSICAL
EDUCATION AND OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES"**

Author of the dissertation: Vaia Dimitrios Ntouska

Supervisor: Prof. Rozalina Engels-Kritidis, D.Sc

FESA, Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski"

Biographical presentation of the candidate

Vaia Ntouska is a primary school teacher with a proven work experience of over 30 years. Currently, she is a school principal of 3rd Elementary School in Paleo Faliro, Athens. She was a regular member of the Regional Service Council of Primary Education, served as Vice President, General Secretary, and Treasurer of the Board of Principals of Primary Education Teachers of Paleo Faliro for over a decade.

As a competent primary teacher and a school principal, Vaia Ntouska had a clear idea of the chosen scientific issue since her admission to the PhD program. She worked with desire and dedication, and as a result, she finished the dissertation before the deadline.

Compliance of the procedure with the current regulations, author's summary, and publications

The presented reference shows a sufficient number of publications (6 in total) – single-author papers and co-authored publications with the supervisor, which are on the topic of the dissertation. The author's summary of the dissertation follows the structure and the content of

the dissertation. The procedure corresponds to the requirements of the Law of the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and the Law of Scientific Degrees and Titles, as well as the Regulations for their implementation. There is no plagiarism in the work and there is no violation of intellectual property rights.

Relevance of the topic

The PhD student focuses her research on an interesting and significant topic. Its relevance can be considered from several points of view.

On the one hand, there is the need for the inclusion of children of migrant origin in the educational space, whose number is increasing in European countries, as well as to ensure their quality education and well-being.

On the other hand, it is the specific field that Vaia Ntouska has chosen, namely physical education in preschool age. The choice itself is very well argued by emphasizing the opportunities that physical education provides for building relationships between children based on experiences, and not so much on verbal communication. In a multicultural environment where children have different levels of proficiency in the official language, this greatly facilitates interaction between them.

Another thing that makes the topic extremely relevant is the skillful justification of the relationship between intercultural and inclusive education, without any of these areas losing their specificity.

Structure and content of the dissertation

The dissertation is 237 pages long, of which 39 pages are for bibliography and 10 pages for annexes. The text incorporates 91 tables and 11 figures. The bibliography includes 461 titles in the English language.

In the first chapter, the PhD student examines the development of ideas about inclusion and interculturality in historical terms - from the concepts of integration and assimilation, both supposing changes of the children, to inclusion and interaction, which require a change of the environment to meet the needs of each child. In this way, she justifies inclusive and intercultural education as oriented towards all children, taking into account their differences.

From this more general basis, Vaia Ntouska directs the analysis to the problems of children of migrant origin who belong to different ethnic, cultural, and linguistic minorities. She advocates the thesis that inclusive practices in a multicultural environment, in addition to

the cognitive, should also support the personal, emotional, and social development of children while preserving their cultural identity.

The comparative analysis of intercultural and inclusive education is a contribution of the theoretical part of the dissertation. The common ground in both concepts is drawn in terms of:

- the understanding of difference as enrichment and overcoming prejudiced attitudes expressed in discrimination and segregation;
- the importance of interaction with the child's community outside the educational institution and with the family to ensure its well-being;
- the necessity of adaptation of educational policies to the needs of the children.

Another theoretical contribution is the systematization of the practical dimensions of the inclusion of children of migrant origin in educational institutions. The focus of the PhD student is on:

- the different cultural perspective that needs to be integrated into the educational content in all subjects;
- the interaction and exchange of experience between children;
- the requirements for the materials and textbooks;
- the problems related to the acquisition of the official language, which is not the mother tongue for children of migrant origin;
- social aspects of the physical environment;
- the continuation of the interaction with the children outside the educational institution.

These practical dimensions of inclusive intercultural education logically point to the importance of intercultural training for teachers.

Vaia Ntouska convincingly argues the need to adapt the methods and approaches that teachers use in a multicultural environment. She systematizes basic dimensions of the changed role of the teacher, who supports and coordinates children's activity but is also aware of his own cultural identity, prejudices, and stereotypes.

The PhD student analyzes the problems of inclusion in the Greek educational system, which are similar to those in the Bulgarian one - despite the denial of the theory of segregation, in practice it continues to exist in various ways. From this point of view, she systematizes research results that clearly show the advantages of inclusive kindergarten and school.

Of interest is the profile of children of migrant origin in Greece, examined historically after 1980, which shows the great diversity of cultures in Greek educational institutions. Arguing in this way the need for intercultural education in Greece, Vaia Ntouska makes a brief

review of the normative documents related to its development. She also systematizes the results of numerous studies, according to which the teacher must take into account the specific cultural background of each family to organize effective interaction.

In the second chapter, the importance of physical education in preschool age is examined both for the formation of motor skills and for the development of emotional, social, and cognitive skills of children. A theoretical analysis of research results was made, according to which physical activity has a positive effect on the self-regulation of emotions and behaviour.

In this chapter, Vaia Ntouska brings out basic values of the inclusive multicultural environment, which are formed through physical education - respect, acceptance of difference, cooperation, equal opportunities for participation, and responsibility. She characterizes the parameters of physical education in the practice of preschool institutions, and more specifically in Greece. In accordance with the theme of the dissertation, she pays special attention to outdoor activities, differentiating them into two main groups - teacher-led activities and free play, including traditional, folklore, and exploratory play in a natural environment. All of them support a sense of community, managing and overcoming friction and conflict situations, an interaction between children, and an orientation in the natural, social, and cultural environment.

Based on an extensive theoretical analysis regarding the role of the environment, the teacher, and parents in physical education, the PhD student advocates the thesis that it contributes to the effective inclusion of children of migrant origin in educational institutions. She supports this thesis by systematizing empirical studies in the direction of the specific aspects of their inclusion.

The parameters of the experiment were presented in the *third chapter*. The aim of the research was clearly stated, namely to identify the effects of physical education on preschool children with a migrant background and at the same time to investigate how outdoor activities contribute to the inclusion of these children in the school environment.

The research tasks were correctly set and fulfilled.

Five hypotheses were formulated regarding the results of the implementation of the program developed by the author with a focus on its positive influence on:

- creating a positive environment;
- the development of empathy, self-awareness, and self-regulation in children;
- the development of children's social skills for interaction, cooperation, and adaptability;
- the reduction of behavioural problems;
- the active participation and well-being of children.

Seven questionnaires were used - for parents, for teachers, and for children, which were modified by the PhD student according to the objectives of the dissertation and by the specifics of the Greek educational environment.

The experiment was conducted in a control and experimental group, and the results were processed with SPSS. The experiment could also be defined as socio-pedagogical, as it seeks positive changes in the microclimate of the group before and after the intervention.

The *fourth chapter* presents the content and the organizational parameters of the author's program for the inclusion of children of migrant origin. The stages of its implementation, goals, and activities were systematized in a table, being differentiated into three sections and connections with other directions were shown. This highlights the advantages of the program both in terms of the richness of topics and about its applicability in the practice.

The *fifth chapter* presents the results of the conducted experiment, which show the positive influence of the author's program in a multicultural environment. Of interest are the results of the observations for each week obtained during the trial of the program. According to them, in the beginning, children preferred individual activities, after some time they formed groups according to their cultural background and at the end of the intervention constructive intercultural interaction was observed.

Conclusions reflect the achievements of the thesis. They were systematized in four parts:

- evaluation of the program and highlighting its positive effect on children of migrant origin and children of Greek origin;
- results, leading to acceptance of the five hypotheses;
- identified limitations of the study and guidelines for its future expansion;
- final conclusions regarding the applicability of the author's program.

I accept the formulated **contributions** as achieved with a focus on:

- analyzing and systematizing concepts and research findings and bringing out the relationship between intercultural and inclusive education;
- the development and testing of a program for the inclusion of children of preschool age in the multicultural educational institution through physical education;
- the developed system of research tools for measuring the inclusion of children in the school environment.

In conclusion, my assessment of the dissertation is positive and I suggest with conviction to the scientific jury awarding the educational and scientific degree “Doctor” in Professional Field 1.2 Pedagogy (Preschool Pedagogy - Intercultural Education) to Vaia Ntouska.

Date: 29.05.2024

Sofia

Reviewer:

/Assoc. Prof. Lora Spiridonova/