

OPINION

by Prof. Rozalina Engels-Kritidis, PhD

ON

DISSERTATION

for acquisition of educational and scientific degree

“DOCTOR”

in Professional field 1.2. Pedagogy,

doctoral program “Preschool Pedagogy”

Faculty of Educational Studies and the Arts of Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”

by **DEISLAVA IVANOVA STOEVA**

TITLE:

“Development of 5-6-year-old children’s social competence in Montessori and conventional/mass kindergartens in Bulgaria”

Scientific supervisor:

Prof. Danail Danov, DSc

The dissertation authored by Desislava Ivanova Stoeva titled **“Development of 5-6-year-old children’s social competence in Montessori and conventional/mass kindergartens in Bulgaria”** represents an interesting and relatively-unexplored viewpoint on the research of the social competence of 5-6 year-old children in the context of the contribution of Montessori educational practices and environment to the traditional educational process in kindergartens in our country.

The aim of the dissertation is “to research the social competence of 5-6 year-old children from both Montessori and conventional/mass kindergartens, as well as to propose a framework for a model for creating an educational environment for development of social competence” (p. 17), based on successful Montessori practices in this direction.

The author of the dissertation, Desislava Stoeva, has carried out a huge amount of research work and has walked a fruitful path of development.

In the theoretical aspect, the significance of the topic has been sought and correlated with major key European and national documents.

There is a positive and logical message of affirmation of the perception of the period from 0 to 7 years of age as an integral process in human development, as an interconnected and building whole. In the dissertation under review, “early childhood development” is meant to

include the age between birth and starting primary school, based on key concepts that have gained legislative regulation due to official translations of European documents that, unfortunately, do not take into account key principles of the processes of localization and do not apply a historical approach that would pay attention to national specifics. In this aspect it can be said that an attempt is made apply a scientific approach to comment on this kind of sources based on the time of their publication.

It is commendable that Desislava Stoeva defines very adequate limitations of the study – precise and extensive, with clear awareness.

The research hypothesis is formulated with precision and is oriented toward the claim that “5-6 year-old children being educated in a Montessori environment via Montessori educational practices in addition to the basic traditional ones will have a higher level of social competence compared to their peers in the general kindergartens” (p. 17). The author also presents separately the bases for formulating and testing of such a hypothesis, which are sought in four main directions: a supporting and inclusive Montessori educational environment; the opportunities afforded by Montessori educational practices for individual support for each child; the freedom of choosing a partner in the mixed-age groups in Montessori kindergartens; and, last but not least, the Montessori multisensory didactic materials, through which children learn to communicate, negotiate, build meaningful relationships.

In addition to the relevance of the issues related to the application of the Montessori method, I consider the choice of tools to be one of the strongest aspects of the dissertation. Desislava Stoeva has selected such research tools that can be an adequate measure of the social skills of both children in Montessori environments and children in mainstream kindergartens.

The educational technologies developed by the author, as well as the proposed framework of a model for creating a supportive educational environment for the development of social competence of children from 3 to 6 years old, are useful for implementation both in the Montessori environment and in mainstream kindergartens in our country.

I consider the outlined contributions of the dissertation research, which Desislava Stoeva rightly sees primarily as those of a practical and applied nature:

- One of the first empirical studies on social competence among 5-6-year-old children in a Montessori environment and in mainstream kindergartens in Bulgaria (60 children, 60 teachers and 37 parents) in terms of innovation.
- The prerequisites and factors to be considered in the development of educational technologies for creating a supportive educational environment developing the social competence of preschool children are outlined in an empirical way.

- Educational technologies and framework for a model for creating a supportive educational environment for the development of social competence of children from 3 to 6 years old have been developed.
- Two research tools have been selected and adapted that could be successfully used to study the social competence of children both in Montessori and in mainstream kindergartens:
 - 1) a questionnaire for teachers and parents of children, scales for “Social competence”, “Social interaction” and “Attention and concentration” of the Dortmund screening *DESK 3-6 R* ;
 - 2) test with children – *Challenging situations task (CST 3-6), Version A (Denham et al., 1994)*;
- Recommendations are outlined for regulatory changes and deepening of empirical research in our country in order to improve the quality of education and support the development of social competence of children from early and preschool age.

The procedure for submission of the dissertation for public defense is compliant with the current legislative framework. The abstract correctly presents the content of the dissertation. The author's publications meet the scientometric requirements for awarding the degree of Doctor.

A question which would be interesting for the author of the dissertation to answer is the following:

How does the socio-demographic profile of parents relate to their choice for their children to be educated in an alternative pedagogical environment?

In conclusion:

Desislava Stoeva’s dissertation has the required qualities for a doctoral dissertation and contributes to the field of preschool education. Considering the research and the practical value of the dissertation under review, I confidently give my positive vote and my proposal to the esteemed Scientific Jury for **Desislava Stoeva to be awarded the educational and scientific degree of “Doctor” of 1.2. Pedagogy (Preschool Pedagogy).**

The author of the Opinion: 

01 July 2024

/Prof. Rozalina Engels-Kritidis, DSc/