

REVIEW

On a thesis project for the conferral of the scientific and educational degree Doctor of Philosophy in the higher educational area 1. Pedagogical Sciences, professional field 1.2. Pedagogy (Special Education - in English) - on the topic:

A Model for Improving the Social Interaction of Autistic Pupils

Author: Hrisula Antopoulou

Scientific advisor: Prof. Milen Zamfirov, PhD

Reviewer: Prof. Neda Balkanska, PhD

General description of the submitted materials

By Order PД-38-616 / 29.10.2024 of the Rector of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" *I have been appointed a member of the scientific jury* for devising a procedure for the defense of a thesis *on the topic "A Model for Improving the Social Interaction of Autistic Pupils"*- for the acquisition of the educational and scientific degree Doctor of Philosophy in the higher educational area: 1. Pedagogical sciences; professional field: 1.2. Pedagogy (Special Education). *The author of the thesis is Hrisula Antopoulou* - a full-time PhD student at the Department of Special Education, with a *scientific advisor Prof. Milen Zamfirov, PhD* from Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski".

The set of materials submitted by Hrisula Antopoulou on electronic medium *demonstrates that the applicant has fulfilled the minimum national requirements* under Article 2b(2) and (3) of the LDASRB.

General presentation of the applicant. Educational and scientific background.

Hrisula Antopoulou graduated *her Bachelor's degree in 2009 from Aegean University, Republic of Greece*, in the field of Preschool Pedagogy and Educational Management. In 2016, *she obtained her Master's degree from the University of Nicosia*, in the field of Educational Sciences. Since 2018, she enrolled as a **full-time PhD student at the Faculty of Educational and Art Sciences, Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski"**, Department of Special Education. Concurrently, the PhD student has undergone **a number of certified trainings**, including -

English language at Cambridge University; Special Education at Aegean University; Systems of teaching literacy skills to the visually impaired (Braille).

Her professional career started in 2009 as a *teacher in a private kindergarten*. From 2013 to 2019 she has been practicing as a special preschool teacher, on a substitute basis, in various educational institutions. Since 2019, she has been employed full-time as a preschool teacher.

The educational status and professional path of the doctoral student testifies to consistency and motivation in the field of preschool education, in particular the work with children with special educational needs.

Relevance of the thesis

Children with autistic spectrum disorders represent an important part of SEN persons. Their number is constantly increasing and many are educated in mainstream institutions - kindergartens and schools. This presents mainstream teachers with the challenge of meeting the specific needs of this group of children. The main difficulties of children with autistic spectrum disorders are related to communication. Wholesome communication is key to optimal socialisation and to a great extent presets higher learning achievements. The search for approaches that stimulate the formation of communicative abilities in this group of children is an important task facing special educators.

In this sense, *the topic of the present work is characterized by a pronounced relevance* for the contemporary scientific-practical sphere.

Structure of the thesis

The paper spans over 202 pages and contains an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion and an appendix. The references include over 100 titles in Latinized script.

The theoretical setting of the problem is presented in Chapter one. The emphasis falls on clarifying the nature of autism- its basic characteristics, causes and diagnostic procedures. Moreover, the social and communicative characteristics of children with autistic spectrum disorders are highlighted, and strategies for stimulating communicative and social development in the target group are suggested. I would recommend a restructuring of the first chapter into two paragraphs, in order to underscore the two main lines of the theoretical analysis more clearly.

The design of the empirical study contains the aim, objectives and hypothesis. The research contingent includes three children with autistic spectrum disorders, aged between 5 and 6 years. A single case study has been conducted, that comprised a diagnostic and formative experiment with the application of an impact program (structured group play). I would remark the presence of a certain discrepancy regarding the target group indicated in the title of the dissertation, which should include school-age representatives versus the actual participants in the experiment, who were preschoolers.

The text of the abstract *faithfully reflects the content* of the dissertation. It is 43 standard typed pages in length, allowing additional key information from the research to be included to reach a wider readership.

There are **four publications** on the topic of the dissertation (*one co-authored with the advisor*), *all of which meet the scientific requirements for dissertations*.

This thesis is characterized by the following **contributions of scientific and applied nature**:

1. The theoretical information related to the peculiarities in the social and communicative development of children with autistic spectrum disorders has been systematized and analyzed;
2. An intervention programme has been implemented, whose principles could be applied more broadly by professionals in special and mainstream education settings and also adapted to individuals with other disorders;
3. Specific components of the curriculum may also become part of the procedures for assessing the achievements of children with autism.

The **anti-plagiarism check** report showed an increase by a factor of 2 (8.65%), with the advisor stating his opinion that plagiarism cannot be suspected here.

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

1. The paragraph related to the statistical analysis of empirical data to be switched from Chapter Three to Chapter Two;
2. A clearer description of the contributions.

I highly appreciate the fact that Hrisula Antopoulou has integrated a great part of the recommendations made during the preliminary discussion of her thesis.

CONCLUSION

I propose to *the Honourable Scientific Jury* to award to Hrisula Antopoulou *the educational and scientific degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the higher educational area: 1. Pedagogical Sciences, professional field 1.2. Pedagogy (Special Education)*.

11.12.2024

Reviewer:

Sofia

(Prof. N. Balkanska, PhD)