

OPINION

by Prof. Dr. Snezhana Hristova Nikolova

regarding a dissertation on the topic "Parameters of specific learning difficulties in students with communication disorders in class II-IV"

for awarding the educational and scientific degree "doctor" in the field of higher education 1. Pedagogical sciences, professional direction 1.2 Pedagogy (Special pedagogy)

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By order No. 3043/30.09.2023 of the Rector of TrU - Stara Zagora, 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: "Parameters of specific learning difficulties in students with communication disorders in class II-IV" for acquiring the educational and scientific degree "doctor" in the field of higher education 1. Pedagogical sciences, professional direction 1.2. Pedagogy, doctoral program Special pedagogy. The author of the dissertation is Borislava Veselinova Petrova – a full-time doctoral student at the "Pedagogical and Social Sciences" department of the Faculty of Pedagogy at the Thracian University – Stara Zagora.

The set of materials presented for evaluation and drafting of an opinion corresponds to the RSASR and the Regulations for the Development of the Academic Staff of the Thracian University – Stara Zagora. In addition to the dissertation work, 4 publications on the topic of the dissertation research, the Author's abstract, a report on the contributions and all the necessary documents required by the RSARB and PRAS of the TrU are attached.

Actuality of the topic

The topic of specific learning disabilities is undoubtedly interesting in terms of the need for support due to the specific needs of this heterogeneous group of students, as well as for the purpose of improving diagnostic and teaching strategies. In recent years, the number of students with specific learning difficulties has been increasing. These are students who have learning disabilities that manifest as specific difficulties in reading (dyslexia), writing (dysgraphia), mathematical skills (dyscalculia) and spatial-temporal concepts. These students typically perceive, process, and express information differently, which affects how they learn. Mastering reading, writing, operating with linguistic and mathematical symbols is a serious challenge for some students. They learn these skills, but relatively more difficult than

their peers. The presented dissertation focuses on combining two disorders in the topic – specific learning difficulties and communication disorders. In this sense, the scientific development is characterized by marked relevance. The emphasis of the research raises expectations related to the possibilities of parameterizing difficulties related to reading in students with communicative disorders, some of which remain unnoticed, but have a significant impact on the social and cognitive development of these students.

Knowledge of the issues by the doctoral student

Borislava Petrova has bachelor's degrees in Elementary School Pedagogy with English and Bulgarian Philology, obtained consecutively at Neofit Rilski University. In 2015, he acquired a master's degree in Management of Social and Pedagogical Organizations at Thracian University – Stara Zagora.

He has professional experience as an educator and teacher of English in the initial stage of education. From October 2018 to the present moment, he is an assistant in primary school pedagogy at the DIKPU at TrU – Stara Zagora. In this context, doctoral student Petrova's interest in her chosen problem area for the development of a doctoral dissertation is completely understandable. Demonstrates knowledge of the underlying theories regarding inclusive education and early childhood education.

Characteristics of the dissertation development

The dissertation contains an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion, scientific contributions and used literature from 30 sources in Bulgarian and 102 in Latin. It is illustrated with 32 figures and 17 tables. There are 7 appendices attached to the dissertation, including a survey card for the study of pedagogical staff, a test for rapid naming of letters, numbers, colors or objects, reading comprehension texts for the second, third and fourth grades, etc.

The dissertation is well structured and, in terms of quantity and content, meets the requirements for writing similar type of works. A theoretical-applied study with a well-conceived and implemented design is presented.

The introduction presents Borislava Petrova's motivation for choosing a problem and directing research efforts to study and propose a model for early screening and assessment of specific learning difficulties in students with communication disorders. Even here, the purpose, tasks, object and subject of research and the contingent are presented. The selected research methods are described – theoretical analysis, documentary method, survey, experimental method, observation, as well as the statistical methods used (Microsoft Excel

and SPSS software products for correlation analysis of the selected dependencies). A hypothesis is formulated and the limitations of the study are indicated.

In terms of content, *the first chapter* is a demonstration of awareness and knowledge of the basic scientific issues, on the basis of which the concept of the study is subsequently built:

- ✓ Typology of communicative disorders. Research models;
- ✓ Specific disorders of learning ability;
- ✓ Psychological-pedagogical functioning in the context of communication disorders determining learning difficulties.

In addition to clarifying the concept of communicative disorders, doctoral student Petrova presents in a comparative plan their classification according to the Medical Model and the Linguistic-Behavioral Model. In addition, it presents a classification according to the model of the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA). Petrova also includes a classification of communicative disorders, which is considered by Bulgarian scientists such as V. Matanova and E. Todorova (2013).

The approach to selection, systematization and analysis of scientific information speaks of knowledge of the specific scientific issues regarding specific disorders of learning ability (Lyon, Shaywitz & Shaywitz, 2003; IDA, 2002; APA, 2013; DSM-V; Stanley & Petscher, 2017 ; Chobanova, 2014; Lalaeva, 1983; Castles, Wheldall, & Nayton, 2014; Hulme & Snowling, 2016, etc.). This approach is also found in screening performance (Puolakanaho, Ahonen, & Aro, 2007; (Thompson, Hulme, Nash, & et.al., 2015).

A special paragraph is devoted to the *cognitive aspects* of children's development in the period 7-10 years. According to Piaget, this is the period of concrete operations. The characteristics of the specific operative thought are described – identity, reversibility, understanding of the preservation of qualities, etc. *The emotional aspects* in the development of students from the initial stage of education are also indicated, correctly noting that the ability to regulate emotions is developed at this age. *Social and linguistic aspects* are given a place in the development of students. Emphasis is placed on lexical, morphological, syntactic and pragmatic development, which are the basis of the accumulation of knowledge and skills for conversation, narration and use of language in the presentation.

At the end of the first theoretical chapter, based on the presented theories and those of Bulgarian and foreign scientists, *conclusions and generalizations* are made regarding the importance of expanding students' vocabulary through more reading tasks for learning difficult language forms. Met linguistic awareness reflects and makes sense of language use.

The second chapter "Assessment of specific difficulties in the field of reading in students with prosodic stuttering disorder (operationalization, selection and development of instruments)" focuses on the conceptual foundations for the development and adaptation of a diagnostic toolkit for determining the parameters of learning disorders in students with stuttering.

In a separate paragraph, an experimental model for early screening and detection of parameters of learning difficulties in students with stuttering is presented. The model is adapted to the Bulgarian educational conditions and includes: modules from the third edition of the detailed *Kaufman Test for Educational Achievement* – KTEA-3 (Kaufman & Kaufman, 2014) and modules from the fourth edition of the *Woodcock-Johnson Cognitive Ability Tests - WJ IV* (Proctor, Mather, & Stephens, 2015).

The Reading Skills Assessment Module is an author's adaptation of individual items from the Kaufman Test – KTEA-3.

The following is a description of tasks related to sound-letter analysis skills; reading (decoding) words; spelling; reading comprehension.

The next diagnostic step concerns the assessment of cognitive processes: phonological awareness, phonological memory, orthographic awareness, rapid naming, and working memory.

At the ascertaining stage, a developed research map is applied, in which the quantitative and qualitative results of the application of the tests are entered in detail for each examined student separately.

The third chapter presents the research design. The stages of the research are correctly described – development of a questionnaire for pedagogical specialists; selection of schools for conducting the research; study and assessment of reading efficiency; revision of respondent eligibility criteria; research and assessment of students' cognitive processes; finding research.

183 students from grades 2-4 from 7 schools on the territory of Stara Zagora were included in the study. There were 221 pedagogical specialists participating in the study, with the largest number being teachers (74.3%), significantly fewer speech therapists (12.6%) and resource teachers (13.15%).

In two consecutive paragraphs, the testing of the model for the assessment of specific reading difficulties in students with stuttering and the analysis of the results of the conducted research are presented. The results are visualized through tables and graphs. A correlation analysis was carried out for the objectivity of the results on selected indicators for

determining the parameters of the learning difficulties of students with stuttering. After each analyzed task, a conclusion is formulated.

Borislava Petrova concludes that the parameters of specific difficulties in reading in students with stuttering do not differ significantly compared to those in students without communicative disorders.

The doctoral student brings to our attention the finding from the conducted survey with the pedagogical specialists that the biggest difficulty is that the students do not understand the meaning of what they read and have a poor vocabulary.

It also shows that most schools (75.9%) do not have established practices for early identification of dyslexia and dyslexia screening tools.

The performed analysis gives grounds for the doctoral student to make sufficiently serious conclusions and recommendations. Summarizing the results of the conducted study, Borislava Petrova confirms the research hypothesis. It is concluded that both in primary school-age students without communicative disorders and in students with stuttering, the parameters of specific reading difficulties are expressed mostly in difficulties in letter-sound recognition; decoding of quasi-words; difficulties with spelling and reading comprehension.

Dissertation Contributions

The theoretical and practical contributions presented in the dissertation are relevant to the content of the study.

Abstract and publications

The abstract is developed according to the requirements. It is in accordance with the content of the dissertation and reflects the main theoretical foundations of the research, as well as the structure of the research. A good balance is made between description and data.

The publications accompanying the dissertation development are 4, dealing with topics related to the dissertation problem – cognitive functioning and communicative disorders in children of primary school age, logo- and rhythm therapy for disorders of speech fluency. They were published in the E-magazine "Pedagogical Forum" and in the Trakia Journal of Sciences in the period 2020-2021.

Notes and recommendations

It is unnecessary to present the research elements such as aim, tasks, hypothesis, object and subject in the introduction and the beginning of the second chapter, as well as the research methods appearing in the introduction and the beginning of the third chapter.

The lists of tables and figures at the beginning of the dissertation (pp. 3-5), the arrangement of the figures presenting the results in percentage terms (pp. 73-74) are

completely redundant.

There is some fragmentation in structuring individual moments of the theoretical part of the dissertation.

I think that the presentation of the content of the dissertation could be improved aesthetically – alignment, blank pages, arrangement of the bibliography, etc.

CONCLUSION

The dissertation submitted for review meets the requirements for writing a similar type of scientific work. Competences for the scientific-theoretical substantiation of a dissertable problem and its experimental development using relevant tools have been demonstrated. Due to the above, I give my **positive assessment** of the dissertation work, the author's abstract and the scientific publications and **I propose to the Honorable Scientific Jury to award the educational and scientific degree "Doctor"** of the Thracian University – Stara Zagora in the field of higher education 1.Pedagogical sciences, Professional direction 1.2.Pedagogy (*Special pedagogy*) of Borislava Veselinova Petrova.

20.12.2022

Shumen

Prof. Dr. Snezhana Nikolova