

STATEMENT

on dissertation

for the award of educational and qualification degree “Philosophy Doctor”
in field of higher education 1. Pedagogical Sciences,
professional field 1.2. Pedagogy - scientific specialty "Special Pedagogy"

by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Zhivko Zhekov, Medical University "Prof. Dr. Paraskev
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Theme: “Parameters of specific learning difficulties in students with
communication disorders in grades II-IV“

Relevance and importance of the research problem

The presented dissertation of Borislava Veselinova Petrova is dedicated to a problem that is of interest not only to professionals in the field of special pedagogy, but also to society as a whole. This is because this problem is reflected at different levels in the educational sphere.

The topic of the dissertation has undeniable relevance not only in the field of Bulgarian science, but also outside it. It justifies the necessity of applying early screening and assessment of the parameters of specific learning difficulties, and dyslexia in particular, in students with communicative disorders in order to avoid aggravation of the problem.

The inability to read, combined with stuttering, could have a significant impact on people's mental and emotional well-being, not only in school, but also in adulthood.

There is still no consensus on the factors causing specific learning difficulties. Nevertheless, enough has been done in terms of symptom description to identify children with disorders in a timely manner. It is a fact that specific learning difficulties can be observed at all ages, but they are naturally most pronounced in the primary grades.

In terms of formal indicators - volume, structure, layout and style of presentation, the dissertation fully meets the requirements for this kind of scientific work. It is presented in 147 standard computer pages, of which 139 are scientific text, 10 pages of references, and 13 pages of appendices. It is organized into an introduction, 3 chapters, conclusions, recommendations, and a conclusion. The reference list includes 133 titles, of which 103 in English and 30 in Bulgarian. The results are summarized in 17 tables and 32 figures.

Evaluation of the theoretical review.

The theoretical part, 70 pages in length, is presented in one chapter.

In it the author discusses "1.1. Typology of communicative disorders. Research models.", where he presents us in detail the classifications of communicative disorders according to the medical and linguistic-behavioral model.

A comparison is made with the classification according to the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) model and with the classification of communicative disorders according to the B. Matanova and E. Todorova.

In paragraph "1.2. Specific learning disabilities. Defining concepts" we are introduced to the manifestation and characteristics of dyslexia based on the research in the field of the International Dyslexia Association, which updates the characteristics of the manifestation and divides them into 4 groups: oral language, reading and reading difficulties, written language and other common symptoms that occur in dyslexia.

The doctoral student also notes the difficulties in the search for an optimal toolkit for early diagnosis of dyslexia, which cannot be unified due to the specific characteristics of different groups of individuals.

Assessment of dyslexic manifestations can be done as early as preschool age, where neuropsychological deficits are clearly highlighted and it is possible to do an early screening to detect risk factors and to start intensive speech therapy to overcome deficits by school entry.

Paragraph 1.3, "Psychological and Pedagogical Functioning in the Context of Communicative Disorders Determining Learning Difficulties," discusses aspects of cognitive development in school-age children, focusing on research over the past 40 years without reviewing this development in children with communicative disorders. The development of specific mental operations, remembering strategies, emotional aspects at primary school age, social aspects, linguistic aspects, phonological, lexical, morphological, syntactic and pragmatic development of children in norm are discussed. Numerous theories of the development of the aforementioned categories have been presented, but all in the context of the development of children in the norm. Psychological and pedagogical functioning in the context of communicative disorders is not presented in any way.

Evaluation of the study structure and procedure.

In the second chapter "Assessment of specific difficulties in the field of reading in students with prosodic stuttering disorder (operationalization, selection and development of instruments) - the doctoral student provides a rationale for the study, emphasizing that in order to determine the parameters of learning disorders in students with communicative disorders (stuttering), it is necessary to develop and adapt a diagnostic toolkit that is both simple and of high utility for educational professionals in order to achieve objects.

On this basis, the author formulated the aim of the study - selection, development and integration of a toolkit for assessment of specific difficulties in the area of reading in students with communicative stuttering disorder.

The subject and object of the dissertation require refinement in accordance with the aim.

Based on the aim of the study, tasks are formulated to achieve the proof of the hypothesis put forward - that the selection, adaptation and development of a toolkit with a focus on prosodic stuttering disorder contributes to the full parameterisation of the assessment of specific reading difficulties, the formulation of which would benefit from revision.

The contingent of the study includes participants differentiated into two groups depending on the criteria of the subjects of the educational process: students with communicative disorder stuttering at primary school age and pedagogical specialists.

The methodology of the study is described in detail and gives full clarity about the actions performed by the PhD student and their sequence. The procedure of conducting and the criteria for evaluating the results are presented in detail.

The structuring of the experimental toolkit in terms of content speaks of a good diagnostic erudition of the PhD student and is one of the positive aspects of the work.

The instrument for the study of pedagogical specialists consists in the completion of an anonymous questionnaire, the purpose of which is to investigate the attitudes and opportunities for identifying specific difficulties in the learning process of students with communication disorders (stuttering). The study involved 221 persons with qualifications - teacher, resource teacher, speech therapist, therefore they are considered as the target group - respondents of the study.

The questionnaire contains 11 questions, 8 of which are closed-ended with multiple choice. Some of the questions inform about the presence of learning failures, the most common difficulties and their concrete manifestation. The other part focuses on the difficulties experienced by respondents from the three professions in the process of communication with children and also on the availability of good practices and methods for early assessment of dyslexia.

The Learning Difficulty Parameter Toolkit for Students with Communicative Disorder Stuttering is a comprehensively developed model for early screening and detection of learning difficulty parameters - in students with communicative disorder stuttering. The model is adapted to Bulgarian educational conditions and includes modules from the third edition of the detailed Kaufman Test of Educational Achievement - KTEA-3 (Kaufman & Kaufman, 2014) and modules from the fourth edition of the Woodcock-Johnson Tests of Cognitive Ability - WJ IV (Proctor, Mather, & Stephens, 2015).

Chapter Three, "Parameters of Reading Difficulty in Students with Stuttering (An Empirical Study)," presents the research design. It was carried out in six stages: stage one - development of a questionnaire for the survey of educational professionals; stage two - selection of schools in which to conduct the survey of students; stage three - reading performance testing and assessment;

Stage four - revision of the eligibility criteria for respondents in the subsequent stages of the study; Stage five - testing and assessment of students' cognitive processes, which is conducted by a psychologist; Stage six - a confirmatory study. The methods used in the research process are: documentary method; survey and observation.

The student survey was conducted over 30 school days during the second term of the 2020/2021 school year.

The experimental study involved 183 students from grades II-IV from 7 schools in the city of Stara Zagora.

It is noteworthy the huge number of pupils diagnosed with communication disorder stuttering - 183, with an average of 26 children in each school. I would say this is an alarming statistic for the prevalence of stuttering in the city. Stara Zagora.

In Figure 3.2, Figure 7, it is noticeable that the responses do not match the study participants who are mentioned above in the text (221).

The analysis of the survey results is presented in paragraph 3.3, which includes three parts.

In the first part, "Results of the assessment of reading difficulties of students with communication disorder stuttering" are presented. The following samples are also presented and analyzed: letter-sound identification; word decoding; quasi-word decoding; spelling; and reading comprehension.

The second part, "Cognitive Process Assessment Results," includes: phonological awareness; phonological memory; spelling awareness; rapid naming; working memory.

The third part, "Results of the Teaching Staff Survey," gives us specific information about participants' responses to each of the survey questions.

The results of the study are presented in graphical and tabular form for greater clarity. Microsoft Excel and SPSS software were used for their systematization.

Correlation analysis was done to increase the objectivity of the results to determine the parameters of learning difficulties of students with communicative disorder stuttering.

On the basis of the thorough analysis the author formulates several conclusions and relevant recommendations.

The theoretical and practical contributions mentioned in the dissertation I accept in part.

The presented publications (4 in total, three independent and one co-authored) are in the context of the PhD thesis.

The abstract (31 pages in length) meets the requirements for a summarized presentation of the work, but it would have been better to present more fully the analysis of the experimental results obtained with emphasis on their conclusions.

CONCLUSIONS:

By its topicality and scientific performance the dissertation work of Borislava Veselinova Petrova "Parameters of specific learning difficulties in

students with communicative disorders in II-IV grade" meets the conditions for obtaining a doctoral degree in a professional field 1.2. Pedagogy, scientific specialty Special Pedagogy.

Expressing my positive attitude to the theoretical and diagnostic-practical value of the dissertation, I propose the esteemed Scientific Jury to give a positive vote and to award Borislava Veselinova Petrova the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in the professional field 1. 2. Pedagogy - Special Pedagogy.

Varna
21.12.2022 г.

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Zhivko Zhekov: