

REVIEW

From Professor Ivanka Vasileva Asenova, PhD
International Higher Business School - Botevgrad, professional field 3.2. Psychology
(Medical Psychology (Neuropsychology)),
Member of the scientific jury for awarding the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in professional
field 7.4. Public Health, scientific specialty Logopedics

Dissertation topic: 'Indirect therapeutic interventions for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder'

Author of the thesis: Tsveta Assenova Kamenski, PhD student at New Bulgarian University

Scientific advisors: Assoc. prof. Margarita Stankova, MD, PhD
prof. Maria Grozeva, Ph.D.

The present review is made based on the Order of the Rector of the New Bulgarian University No. Z-RK-117/05.02.2025 to support the defense of doctoral dissertation of Tsveta Assenova Kamenski, PhD student, which was awarded the right to defend in the PhD program "Logopedics", NBU, professional field 7.4. Public Health, scientific specialty "Logopedics", for obtaining educational and scientific degree "Doctor of Philosophy".

Short biography of the applicant

Tsveta Kamenski holds a Master's degree in Applied Linguistics from the Southwest University "Neofit Rilski" since 1999 with a professional qualification in English and French translation. She continued her studies in the field of Southeast European Studies at the Central European University, Budapest, 2000 where she was awarded Master's Degree. In 2018, she enrolled as a full-time PhD student in the Logopedics programme (professional field 7.4 Public Health).

Tsveta Kamenski is one of the co-founders of the Centre for Therapy of Communicative, Emotional and Behavioural Disorders at the NBU, where she worked as a manager for many years. She teaches courses in Clinical Psycholinguistics, Clinical Aspects of Nonverbal

Communication, Prevention of Communication Disorders and Integration of Children with Communicative Disorders in Bulgarian and English languages.

Her research interests include Autism Spectrum Disorders; work with parents and caregivers of children with developmental delays and disabilities. She has authored and co-authored over 25 scientific publications, 8 of which are indexed in SCOPUS, she has 39 citations in 23 sources and a SCOPUS h-index of 4.

She actively participates in scientific conferences and forums as a speaker and member of organizational and scientific committees (e.g. "New Technologies in Diagnostics and Therapy of Developmental Disorders", NBU, 2018; International Conference "70 Years of Speech Therapy Practice in Bulgaria", NBU, 2025)

Tsveta Kamenski participated in various projects related to communication disorders ("Integration of children with communication disorders" (ESF, 2011), "Videomodelling for social communication in individuals with ASD" (ESF, 2024-2025) and "Integrated approach to involve parents as co-therapists in the therapy of children with ASD" (2024-2025).

Since 2018 she is a National Consultant for Early Childhood Development at UNICEF-Bulgaria, focusing on the work with parents and training programs for children with difficulties. Since 2020, she is the Clinical Director of a specialized unit at the Foundation for Educational Transformation for the therapy of children with autism.

Relevance of the dissertation

The problem related to the diagnostics and therapy of ASD acquires particular relevance in the context of its increasing prevalence worldwide and the challenges related to the effectiveness of existing therapeutic approaches.

In this context, the presented dissertation work can be considered as a significant contribution to the scientific-applied aspect of speech therapy. The PhD student sets and successfully implements two main research goals: to validate for Bulgarian conditions the FOCUS tool, designed to measure the dynamics of communicative development and the effect of speech therapy in the age period 2-6 years, and to develop and approve a structured therapeutic program for working with children with autism spectrum disorders, carried out with the active involvement of parents at home settings.

The analysis of the results of the conducted formative experiment confirms the scientific and practical significance of the author's proposed therapy program for children with autism spectrum disorders.

Structure and content of the PhD Thesis

The structure of the dissertation meets the requirements for writing a PhD thesis based on scientific research. The total volume of the work is 204 pages, and the structure follows the classic one – it includes an introduction, three chapters, discussion, conclusions, contributions, a bibliography of 237 sources (30 in Cyrillic and 207 in Latin alphabet), and appendices (N=5).

In the introduction, the PhD student justifies the relevance of her chosen research topic and presents her goal to validate an instrument for assessing the levels of communicative abilities and their dynamics in children aged 2 to 6 years of age, and to create and approve a program for indirect (through parents) intervention for the development of language and communication of children with ASD.

The theoretical part consists of 61 pages and represents the first chapter of the manuscript. The theoretical part has two focuses: the multifaceted description of autism spectrum disorder and an overview of therapeutic interventions and programs for this disorder.

The current conceptualization of autism spectrum disorder is presented in an informative and exhaustive manner. After briefly tracing the history of its research, the doctoral student details the more popular and empirically better supported theoretical assumptions about the etiology and pathogenetic mechanisms of this neurodevelopmental disorder, its clinical manifestations, and criteria for diagnosis according to the two most recent revisions of the ICD and DSM (ICD -10 and 11, and DSM- 4 and 5). Considering the topic of the dissertation, quite logically, when describing the cognitive and behavioral profile of children with ASD, the focus is on the specifics of language, communication, speech development, social functioning and behavior, and when describing the diagnostic process, the most widely used worldwide diagnostic and screening tools (ADI-R, ADOS-2, CARS, CAST), as well as medical procedures and tests are presented in detail.

The second part of the theoretical chapter is devoted to evidence-based therapeutic interventions, practices, and programs for working with children with ASD. Special attention is given to the role of parents in the therapeutic process, as well as to existing programs in the country for training parents of children with developmental disorders.

A logical conclusion of the theoretical part of the dissertation is the description of the theoretical constructs that form the basis of the conducted research and the author's program developed for its purposes.

Tsveta Kamenski demonstrates a thorough knowledge of the problem she is researching. The literature review shows her ability to synthesize and summarize, as well as critically

interpret the theoretical propositions and empirical data discussed. She has analysed an impressive amount of literature relevant to the dissertation topic, as evidenced by the extensive bibliography.

Chapter two of the dissertation presents the empirical design of the study. It is 33 pages long, which is indicative enough of the comprehensive description of the methodology of the formative experiment. The object, subject, aims, objectives and stages of the study are presented correctly and clearly. The conceptual model of the study is presented in detail. The research tasks are linked to the main objective and serve as the basis for the formulation of four hypotheses. In my judgment, the third hypothesis is redundant, as it substantively repeats the first and the second ones. The characteristics of the research contingent - 21 children with a diagnosis of Childhood Autism according to ICD-10, previously diagnosed in a medical institution, and their parents, are correctly described, but some details are missing, such as the average age of the group of children studied, place of residence. It is also not stated how the participants were recruited, whether only one or both parents were trained and accordingly participated in the experiment.

The appropriately selected and adequately applied research instruments allow the testing of the formulated hypotheses. Firstly, and in great detail, the author's program of indirect intervention for the development of language and communication skills in children with RAS, which is the main instrument in the conducted formative experiment, is presented. A sufficiently informative description of the other questionnaires and instruments used in the study is presented as follows:

- The Childhood Asperger Syndrome Test (CAST) is a screening tool for assessing signs of ASD in children aged 4 to 11 years. The doctoral student administered this test at the beginning of the study in order to confirm the diagnosis of the children participating in the study.

- Child Behaviour Checklist for Ages 1.5-5 (CBCL) - a tool to assess emotional, social and behavioural problems in children aged 1.5-5 and to screen for disorders such as anxiety, depression, hyperactivity, aggressive behaviour, sleep problems, etc., The Language Development Survey (LDS) section of the questionnaire assesses speech development, identifies delayed language development and communication disorders. The questionnaire was adapted for the Bulgarian population by Stankova (). The doctoral student administered this questionnaire twice - before and after the formative experiment, in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the applied author's therapeutic program.

- FOCUS - Focus on the Outcomes of Communication Under Six (FOCUS) - a questionnaire assessing various aspects of communication, such as social skills, comprehension and expression, which can be used to track the dynamics of a child's communication abilities. The instrument has been translated and validated for the Bulgarian population through factor analysis by the PhD student and this is one of the undisputed contributions of the thesis. For the purpose of the study, the questionnaire was completed twice by the parents - before and after the formative experiment, in order to record the effect of the intervention on the communicative abilities and behaviour of the studied children.

- Supervision protocol and parental feedback questionnaire - developed by the PhD student in order to assess how well the parents apply the principles and strategies of the therapeutic program and, additionally, what is their assessment of its content and effectiveness.

The third chapter of the dissertation covers 40 pages of the total manuscript and presents the results of an adequately applied statistical analysis of the rich empirical material obtained. It consists of:

- Comparative analysis of the results of Part 1 and Part 2 of the FOCUS test (scales) obtained before and after the formative experiment;
- Comparative analysis of the Child Behaviour Checklist for Ages 1.5-5 (CBCL) scores obtained before and after the formative experiment;
- An analysis of the results of the Parental Supervision Protocol on each of the 10 set criteria, which informs how accurately parents have implemented the strategy and principles of the therapeutic programme.
- Analysis of the results of the parental feedback survey on the qualities and imperfections of the indirect intervention program.

The description of the obtained results is detailed, correct and illustrated with sufficiently informative tables and graphs.

The concluding part of the dissertation offers a summary interpretive analysis of the research results that impresses with its fairness and research ethics. The hypotheses are empirically supported with statistically significant results. The conclusions drawn are entirely based on the empirical data obtained. The contributions of the dissertation are adequately and correctly presented. The limitations of the conducted empirical study are not pointed out.

Scientific and Applied Contributions of the Dissertation

The rich theoretical and experimental scope of the dissertation, as well as the achieved goals and objectives, make the scientific work significant and productive. The results of the dissertation research can be directly applied in speech therapy theory and practice.

I accept the proposed scientific and applied contributions, which correspond to the content of the dissertation, but I believe that their description can be optimized in the following way: 1. Current concepts about ASD are systematized and a detailed overview of existing therapeutic interventions and practices for working with children with ASD and their families in our country and worldwide is made. 2. An innovative therapeutic program for indirect intervention of children with ASD, implemented through their parents, has been developed and its effectiveness has been proven at group level. 3. The FOCUS questionnaire, designed to measure the dynamics of communicative development in the age period 2-6 years, has been translated and validated for Bulgarian conditions.

Abstract and scientific publications on the topic of the dissertation

The abstract accurately and completely reflects the structure and content of the thesis. Four scientific publications in specialized journals are presented - three of which are co-authored, and one independent, all of which are indexed in Scopus, which far exceeds the minimum scientific metrics for obtaining the PhD in professional field 7.4. Public Health.

Critical comments and recommendations

I have no major criticisms of the content and structure of the thesis, but there are some incompleteness and inaccuracies which I will point out below:

- Some details are missing from the description of the participants in the study, such as the mean age of the group of children and their place of residence; how the participants were recruited; whether only one or both parents were trained and therefore participated in the experiment. The limitations of the study are not described.

- The bibliography lacks the description of some references cited in the text, which I assume is an omission on the part of the PhD student (e.g., in the last paragraph on p. 18: (Taylor et al,1999; Farrington et al, 2001; Kaye et al, 2001; Dales et al, 2001; Fombonne et al, 2006; Fombonne and Chakrabati, 2001; Taylor et al, 2002; DeWilde et al, 2001; Makela et al; Madsen

et al, 2002; De Stefano et al, 2004; Peltola et al, 1998; Patja et al, 2000; Andrews et al, 2004), and in the first paragraph on p. 46: (Charlop & Trasoweck, 1991; Ducharme & Drain, 2003; Kaiser et al, 2000; Lerman et al, 2000; Moes & Frea, 2002; Smith, Buch, Gamby, 2000a; Symon, 2005). Also, in places the references in the bibliography are not arranged alphabetically.

I would recommend that the third hypothesis be dropped, as it essentially repeats the first and second hypotheses. I would also recommend that the description of the otherwise correctly stated contributions be streamlined by merging the first and second contributions, as they both concern the literature review on the topic of the dissertation, and merging the fourth, fifth, sixth and seventh contributions, respectively, as they all relate to the developed and validated innovative therapeutic program for indirect (through parents) intervention of children with ASD.

Conclusion

The dissertation on "Indirect therapy interventions for children with autism spectrum disorders" presents an up-to-date scientific study with a significant contribution to the applied aspect of speech therapy. The dissertation meets all the requirements of the Academic Staff Development Act in the Republic of Bulgaria (ASDA).

Tsveta Assenova Kamenski possesses in-depth theoretical knowledge and professional skills in the scientific field of Logopedics, demonstrating qualities and skills for independent scientific research.

The above said, I confidently give my positive evaluation for the PhD thesis and strongly recommend the Honourable Scientific Jury to award the degree of Doctor of Philosophy to Tsveta Assenova Kamenski in the professional field 7.4. Public Health, scientific speciality Logopedics.

01.03.2025 г.

Reviewer:
/Prof. Ivanka Asenova, PhD/