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OPINION

by

Assoc. Prof. Elka Georgieva Goranova, Ph.D., Department of Speech-Language Pathology, Faculty of Public Health, Health Care, and Sports, Professional Field 7.4. Public Health, for the award of the academic degree of “Doctor” in Professional Field 7.4 Public Health, with candidate Elisavet Leonidas Tsimplidou, New Bulgarian University, Department of “Health Care and Social Work,”

on the topic: A Study of the Relationships Between Communication Skills and School Performance in Children with Hearing Impairments and Teachers’ Competencies in Implementing Differentiated Instruction in an Inclusive Learning Environment

Research Advisor: Assoc. Prof. Katya Dionisieva, Ph.D.

1. Significance of the Research Problem from a Scientific and Applied Perspective

This dissertation addresses a current and significant issue in the field of inclusive education for children with hearing impairments, examined in relation to their communicative functioning, academic performance, and teachers’ professional competencies.

The significance of the study stems from the need for an inclusive educational environment to ensure not only physical access for students with hearing impairments to mainstream schools, but also full access to communication, instructional content, and social interaction. In this context, differentiated instruction is viewed as a pedagogical approach for adapting the educational process to students’ individual needs and abilities.

The research interest of this study stems from the desire to examine, in an interrelated manner, the communication skills and school functioning of students with hearing impairments, on the one hand, and teachers’ training and practices in implementing differentiated instruction, on the other.

The scientific and practical significance lies in the possibility of using the results to improve the training of educators, plan differentiated educational strategies, and more systematically identify educational risks among students with hearing impairments.

2. Rationale for the Objectives and Tasks of the Dissertation

The main objective of the empirical study is to examine the application of the principles of differentiated instruction among students with hearing impairments in relation to the specialized teacher training provided by the Institute of Educational Policy of the Greek Ministry of Education.

The specific research objectives and hypotheses are aimed at determining the extent to which differentiated pedagogical practices are applied, the influence of teachers’ professional characteristics, and an analysis of the educational functioning of students with hearing impairments.

I commend the doctoral candidate’s effort to examine the issue at two interrelated levels—**the teacher’s professional training and pedagogical practices, and the student’s educational**

functioning. This lays the groundwork for a comprehensive interpretation of the factors that support the inclusion of students with hearing impairments.

The stated goals and objectives are, on the whole, logically linked to the research problem and are reflected in the structure of the empirical study.

3. Alignment Between the Selected Research Methodology and the Set Objectives and Tasks

The methodological approach largely corresponds to the stated objectives and tasks and allows for the examination of both pedagogical practices and specific aspects of the school experience of students with hearing impairments.

A questionnaire, developed on the basis of an existing validated instrument and adapted to the specific research context, was used to analyze differentiated instruction. The study examined key components of differentiated instruction, including content, process, instructional resources, outcomes, assessment, and classroom management.

Of particular practical value is the adaptation of the instrument to the specific linguistic and educational context—**S.I.F.T.E.R. (Screening Instrument for Targeting Educational Risk)**—which assesses five areas of school functioning: academic skills, attention, communication, participation in class, and behavior.

The quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and statistical methods for hypothesis testing and identifying significant differences and correlations. The inclusion of a semi-structured interview complements the quantitative results with information regarding teachers' professional perceptions and practices.

Overall, the selected methodological tools provide the necessary empirical basis for analyzing the research problem, although the limitations of the research design should be taken into account when interpreting and generalizing the results.

4. Scientific and Applied Scientific Contributions of the Dissertation

The dissertation contains findings of scientific and, in particular, applied scientific value.

A significant contribution is the comprehensive study of the interaction between teachers' professional training, the application of differentiated pedagogical practices, and specific indicators of the academic, communicative, and social functioning of students with hearing impairments.

The use and adaptation of SIFTER to the specific educational context as a structured tool for identifying educational risk has scientific and applied value. The results regarding the application of various components of differentiated instruction—adaptation of instructional content, process, resources, assessment, and organization of the learning environment—are also of practical significance.

Another contribution is the comparative study of students' school performance in relation to their teachers' training. The results provide an empirical basis for discussing the importance of specialized training for educators in implementing inclusive educational practices.

The original aspect of this study lies in **the integration, within a unified research framework, of teacher training, differentiated pedagogical practices, structured assessment of educational risk, and the performance of students with hearing impairments in the specific Greek educational context.**

The contributions of this study have the potential for application both in the initial and continuing professional development of teachers and in planning support for students with hearing impairments in an inclusive educational setting.

5. Evaluation of Publications Related to the Dissertation

Two independent scientific publications by Elisavet Leonidas Tsimpilidou have been presented on the topic of the dissertation, which are directly related to the main areas of the dissertation research.

The first publication examines the academic performance of students with hearing impairments, as assessed using the S.I.F.T.E.R. scale, in relation to teachers' training in differentiated instruction. The article was published in 2026 in **Ezikov Svyat* (Orbis Linguarum)*, 24(2), 46–60. The list provided indicates that the journal is peer-reviewed and indexed in Scopus, EBSCO, DOAJ, Index Copernicus, and ERIH PLUS.

The second publication is from 2025 and focuses on the study of differentiated pedagogical practices for students with hearing impairments in relation to teacher training. It was published in *the *International Journal of Educational Innovation**, 7(4), 92–102.

The publications are thematically related to the dissertation and present essential aspects of its empirical focus. Sole authorship allows for a clear identification of the doctoral candidate's research contribution.

6. Opinions, Recommendations, and Comments

Alongside the positive qualities of the dissertation, some comments and recommendations can be formulated that do not diminish its scientific and applied value but rather outline opportunities for methodological refinement and future development of the research.

1. The dissertation is characterized to some extent by a non-traditional organizational structure. The presentation of the empirical results, their interpretation, and their comparison with data from previous studies are at times intertwined, rather than being clearly separated into distinct structural sections. A clearer distinction between methodology, results, and discussion would improve the logical sequence and make it easier to trace the connection between the empirical data obtained and their scientific interpretation.

2. The title focuses on the relationship between communication skills and academic performance, while the empirical framework is largely oriented toward teacher training and the implementation of differentiated instruction. In future research, it would be useful to supplement SIFTER (a teacher screening tool in which communication is one of the assessed areas) with **direct, standardized speech-language pathology assessment methods for evaluating receptive, expressive, and pragmatic communication skills**. This would achieve an even clearer conceptual alignment between the title, the main objective, the research questions, and the hypotheses.

3. It is recommended to provide a more consistent justification for the chosen level of statistical significance. Results with $p > 0.05$, defined as significant at $\alpha = 0.10$, should be interpreted with caution, especially when the sample size is small and there are numerous statistical comparisons.

4. Regarding the formatting of references, the following technical and bibliographic notes may be made:

- on p. 13, in the citation of (Schick et al., 2007; Hall et al., 2017), “executive functions” is written instead of “executive functions”;
- on page 60—“assistive technologies” instead of “assistive technologies”;
- On page 88, “inclusive schools” instead of “inclusive teaching in these schools”;
- the number of participants with a doctoral degree is 1–10% ($n = 10$), not 10;
- a fully consistent principle has not been applied in the presentation of foreign-language literature—some authors' names and titles have been transliterated or translated into Bulgarian, while others have been retained in the original language. There are also isolated inaccuracies in the bibliographic data of the cited publications. It is recommended that the bibliography be standardized in accordance with a selected internationally recognized standard and that individual entries be verified against the original publications and their DOIs.

Conclusion

The presented dissertation addresses a current and significant scientific and applied research problem related to the inclusive education of students with hearing impairments. The study combines an analysis of teachers' professional training and differentiated pedagogical practices with an assessment of important aspects of students' school performance.

The empirical study provides results of practical value for improving differentiated instruction and identifying educational risks. The scientific publications presented are directly related to the topic and reflect essential aspects of the dissertation research.

The comments and recommendations formulated primarily concern the limitations of the methodology used and the interpretation of some of the results; **they do not diminish the overall positive assessment of the dissertation and its scientific and applied value.**

Based on the relevance of the problem addressed and the scientific and applied contributions, I give a positive evaluation of the dissertation by Elisavet Leonidas Tsimplidou and propose that the esteemed Scientific Jury award the doctoral candidate the academic and scientific degree of "Doctor" in Professional Field 7.4 Public Health.

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