

STATEMENT

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member of a scientific jury for awarding the educational and scientific degree "doctor" in a professional
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Dissertation title: *“Indirect interventions in the therapy of children with autism spectrum disorders”*

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Scientific supervisors: Assoc. prof. Margarita Stankova
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Tsveta Kamenski was enrolled as a full-time doctoral student at the New Bulgarian University by order of the Rector of NBU No. 3-PK-53 on November 8, 2018 in Professional field 2.1. Philology and transferred to the doctoral program in Logopedics in Professional field 7.4. Public Health by order of the Rector of NBU No. 3-PK-156 on 6.03.2020. By Order No. 3-PK-74/29.11.2024 of the Rector of New Bulgarian University, based on Art. 14, para. 3 of the Regulation on the Development of NBU and the decision of the Faculty Council at the Master's Faculty (No. 12/26.09.2024), I have been appointed as a member of the scientific jury in the procedure for the defense of a dissertation on the topic "Indirect interventions in the therapy of children with autism spectrum disorders". The author of the dissertation is Tsveta Asenova Kamenski, a full-time doctoral student, enrolled with the right to defend in the doctoral program "Logopedics" in the Professional field 7.4. Public Health. The materials provided for the defense can be accepted as a basis for the Scientific Jury to hear and evaluate the candidate for the acquisition of the educational and scientific degree "doctor" by the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff of the Republic of Bulgaria and Regulations for its implementation.

1. Significance of the research problem in scientific and applied terms

Autism spectrum disorders are among the most common disorders in recent decades. The evidence of their increasing prevalence poses a challenge to specialists in terms of their diagnosis and treatment. The complex nature of the demonstrated deficits in social skills, communication, and language competences requires a multifactorial approach when working with children. Therapy is a long period of impact, in which parents play an active role. Involving parents is not a process in itself. It requires a structured approach in which they must be advised and trained to apply specific strategies and methods of intervention to develop and stabilize the language and social skills of their children. In our country, such programs are not yet well developed. The choice of the topic of Tsveta Kamenski's dissertation on the application of indirect interventions in the therapy of children with autism spectrum disorders can be defined as relevant and significant from a scientific and practical aspect. Proving the applicability of a program to address communicative and behavioral deficits in children with autism and the ability to track its progress enriches speech therapy theory and practice. Through it, speech therapists and parents



can support the development and socialization of children, which improves the quality of life for both them and the entire family.

2. Structure and content of the dissertation work

Structurally, the dissertation meets all the requirements for technical design and is evenly distributed in the individual parts. The bibliography includes 237 literary sources, mainly in English. The studied literary sources correspond to the topic of the dissertation. Considering the presented literary review, I can confirm that doctoral student Tsveta Kamenski demonstrates high skills in selecting scientific literature and correct citation in the analysis, interpretation and generalization of literary sources. The orientation of the clarification of the etiology towards the modern interpretation of the neurobiological component of the causal factors can be defined as a valuable element of the dissertation. The search for the connection between the world and Bulgarian experience in clarifying the etiology, the characteristics of children with ASD, the diagnostic and therapeutic procedures makes a good impression. This fact is evidence of knowledge of the studied problem. The detailed study of global achievements and the existing practice in our country gives Tsveta Kamenski reason to develop and implement a therapy program for children with ASD, which summarizes conventional and highly effective speech therapy methods and practices.

The purpose of the scientific research in the second chapter is clearly stated, and the tasks are subordinate to it and are tied to the stages of development and conduct of the experiment. Four hypotheses are formulated, of which the third overlaps the first two. The contingent of the study is selected correctly. The inclusion of children with normal neurocognitive development of the same age as a control group and the exclusion of another type of therapy during the experiment is the basis for the objectivity of the applied methodology. The methodology of the scientific research is presented in detail and is subordinate to the purpose and tasks of the dissertation work. The criteria for monitoring the progress of therapy are clearly defined, through the application of the tests CAST (Childhood Asperger Syndrome Test, Autism Research Centre-University of Cambridge), CBCL (Child Behaviour Checklist for Ages 1.5-5, Achenbach & Rescorla, 2000) and FOCUS (Focus on the Outcomes of Communication Under Six, Thomas-Stonell, N., Oddson, B., Robertson, B., Walker, J., & Rosenbaum, P., 2012). My remark to this part is that it is not necessary to indicate in detail the standardization of FOCUS by the authors. A valuable and contributing element is the description of the stages and the essence of the adaptation of the test in Bulgarian. The procedure for proving the reliability of the scales is evidence of the doctoral student's high skills in handling data and proving dependencies based on objectivity. The fact that the difficulties related to the linguistic selection of words based on the peculiarities of the Bulgarian language are also presented is a pleasant impression. It would be good to indicate and justify in the second chapter the methods for statistical processing of data from the therapy carried out.

Chapter Three presents the results and their analysis from the scientific study. There is a wealth of empirical material, which is presented correctly and clearly in many tables, figures and diagrams, followed by their detailed interpretation. There are statistical data for multiple correlations to prove the hypotheses set. A positive element of the presentation of the results can be defined as directing attention to single specific cases, compared with the general ones for the group. The doctoral student's ability to compare the values from the application of individual items and to look for a relationship between them



stands out. This leads to the opinion that the Speech and Receptive Language/Attention scales show the greatest progress after the implementation of the therapeutic program. Evidence of Tsv. Kamenski's critical thinking is also the reporting of a lack of dynamics from the applied therapy in some of the children studied regarding speech, speech intelligibility, children from the surrounding, expressive language, pragmatics, independence, etc. I highly appreciate the summary in the cluster analysis, where despite the overall positive results obtained from the therapy, based on empirical data, the author divides the children into three groups:

- Children with high input values but insignificant changes
- Children with low input values but significant positive dynamics
- Children with similar input and output values.

Valuable for practice are the results obtained from the supervision of parents. The feedback on the gaps in the implementation of the therapy gives grounds for important conclusions related to the need for continuous counseling of parents to achieve the desired results. An important emphasis for the effectiveness of the therapy is the developed feedback survey after the end of the program. This gives the author grounds to analyze both the positive and negative aspects of the program in all aspects: consistency, materials, complexity, interaction, etc.

As a summary of the presented results and their analysis, it can be confirmed that Tsveta Kamenski possesses skills in interpreting data from scientific research and in skillfully handling methods for their statistical processing. The interpretation of the data is supported in places with data from the scientific literature in order to answer research questions arising from the obtained results.

3. Scientific and applied scientific contributions of the dissertation work

The dissertation represents a significant contribution in both theoretical and practical aspects, especially in the field of speech therapy theory and practice in Bulgaria. The applicability of a program for indirect intervention for children with autism spectrum disorders has been proven, which in the conditions of a pandemic was one of the main options for therapy. Although it was developed during the COVID-pandemic, such a type of therapy is low-cost from a financial point of view and can be used in this aspect as well. The main contributions can be summarized in the following order:

- Translation and validation in Bulgarian of the FOCUS tool
- Developed an author's program for indirect intervention for children with autism spectrum disorders
- Application of pilot training of parents, based on mastering basic skills for working with children with developmental problems.

4. Dissertation abstract

The dissertation abstract correctly and accurately reflects the content of the dissertation work, with the emphasis on the results obtained from the scientific research. Four scientific publications in specialized journals and proceedings, referenced in the global database, are presented, which fully cover the minimum scientometric indicators for acquiring the scientific and educational degree "Doctor" in area 7. Health and Sports.



5. Personal qualities of the author

I know Tsveta Kamenski personally and I can define her as a scientist who stands out for her initiative and innovation. She knows how to work in a team, as evidenced by her participation in projects and co-authored publications. During the period in which she has worked at the New Bulgarian University, she has developed her potential and has consolidated her position as a scientist and lecturer.

6. Opinions, recommendations and notes

Considering the merits of the dissertation work on the topic "Indirect interventions in the therapy of children with autism spectrum disorders", I would recommend that the proof of the hypotheses be highlighted more categorically in the presentation of the results. The rich empirical material allows for a more comprehensive interpretation to explain the dependencies and search for similar achievements in the scientific literature.

Conclusion

The dissertation on "Indirect interventions in the therapy of children with autism spectrum disorders" presents an up-to-date scientific study. The doctoral candidate demonstrates a thorough knowledge of the scientific issues and the necessary scientific research skills. The required publications are available. The dissertation work and the submitted documents meet the basic technical and regulatory requirements for the acquisition of the educational and scientific degree „Doctor" under the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff of the Republic of Bulgaria and Regulations for its implementation, and the Internal regulations for development of the academic staff of New Bulgarian University. I recommend that the respected Specialized Scientific Jury award the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" to Tsveta Asenova Kamenski in the professional field 7.4. Public Health (Logopedics).

03 March 2025

Assoc. Prof. Miglena Simonska-Tsatsova