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OPINION

by Prof. Dr. Antoaneta Hristova

IPHS - BAS, member of the academic jury for the academic position of "Professor" in the field of higher education 3. Social, Economic and Legal Sciences, professional field 3.2 Psychology (Psychology of Early Childhood) for the needs of the section "Developmental Psychology and Health"), competition promulgated in State Gazette No. 58 of 09.07.2024 and on the basis of Order No. RD-6-441/ 04.09.2024 of the Director of the Institute for population and human studies at BAS. Only one candidate, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Maria Petrova Trifonova, submitted documents for participation in the competition.

1. Presentation of the candidate

Maria Trifonova linked her career and research development with the field of educational psychology from the very beginning. She started her career as a researcher at the Todor Samodumov Institute of General Education, the Institute of General and Educational Psychology in Moscow, lecturer at South-West University "Neofit Rilski" and New Bulgarian University, Programme Director for the evaluation of educational programmes of the Open Education Centre, to reach all levels of development at the Institute of Psychology at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences and its successor - the Institute for Population and Human Studies, Department of Psychology. Maria Trifonova is currently Associate Professor, Head of the Developmental and Health Psychology Section and Head of the Department of Psychology. Her career development shows consistency and systematicity in her research and teaching career, which defines her as a thorough researcher in the field of child development.

Maria Trifonova is working on 8 projects, of which she is the supervisor. She has two PhDs and has been awarded a diploma for research and an award for significant contribution to the field of early childhood psychology.

Maria Trifonova submitted a total of 20 publications to the current competition. Of these, 1 is a solo monograph and 1 is a co-authored monograph. Of the submitted articles in scientific

journals 16 are in Bulgarian and 2 are in English. 4 of the publications are refereed indexed in world-known databases.

The main scientific contributions of the candidate are in the areas of research of children's cognitive, personal-emotional and psychological development.

I acknowledge her contributions, in particular, in the area of the study of movement and cognitive activity in children up to 12 months, and the relationship with attachment, in the area of quality of the learning environment and inclusive education; she formulated the theoretical basis of the so-called "learning progress". She authored a screening test for three year olds, created the Stroop test and validated it for students aged 7-11. She is actively involved in the professional training of teachers and other educational professionals; parenting practices to stimulate early childhood development.

2. Evaluation of the candidate's scientific production

There are several themes in the candidate's research that can be described. In the monograph „Movement and the Child's Exploration of the World“, Maria Trifonova focuses particularly on the relationships between motor, cognitive and socio-emotional components in infants up to one year of age. Of particular interest are „developmental cascades“, which represent simultaneous changes in the cumulative influence of factors and their interaction from many different developmental domains. The monograph also traces features of infants' social connectedness and their relationships to mother and to other familiar and unfamiliar people. In addition, the monograph offers opportunities to both support the development of children with difficulties in one area of development or another and to further support their strengths.

The Child's Movement and Exploration of the World monograph combines a theoretical synthesis of a vast amount of literature, with an emphasis on the interconnectedness of developmental processes rather than their isolated study, and on the need for active exploration of the world by the infant rather than passive processing of incoming information.

Maria Trifonova is co-author of the collective monograph "Early Screening Assessment and Guidelines for Stimulating the Development of Three-Year-Old Children". This monograph presents a methodology for assessing the development of three-year-old children in different areas:

cognitive; language; emotional, social, motor. It pays special attention to the importance of joint efforts of educators and parents to create a stimulating environment for the child's development.

Assoc. Prof. Maria Trifonova also presents a significant amount of scientific production in the form of articles in prestigious scientific journals. One of the lines of research is on the educational environment in kindergartens. Empirical research shows the importance of teachers' professional experience for the quality of children's education, the importance of the location of kindergartens, and also the negative impact of too many children in a group. Regarding the individual approach of teachers to children, Assoc. Trifonova has published the results of a study focused specifically on play in kindergartens and differences in teachers' understanding of the role of play.

Other publications have traced the role of aligning educational goals with empirically established patterns in child development. Trifonova has also published research results on different attitudes of teachers, in particular towards the draft Regulation on Preschool Education.

The main themes of the monographs of Assoc. Prof. Trifonova, namely the relationship between children's motor and cognitive development, are also developed in her publications in scientific journals. The role of imitation of children's observed actions for their language development is investigated. Children's imitation of movements reflects both their motor development and their socio-emotional skills and mediates the indirect effect of motor skills on various aspects of language development. In another publication by Trifonova traces the correlation between the activity of play interactions between mother and child on the success of children's imitative actions and hence their language development.

The candidate has also worked and published on research on conceptual change in children. The problem that is focused are the factors and mechanisms by which children around 4-5 years of age change their conceptions of the concept of animate and inanimate. An important effort in Maria Trifonova's works is the creation and approbation of instruments for the assessment of children's mental development - a screening test for three-year-old children, and she has thoroughly investigated its psychometric properties, proposing a short version of the test, a test for the study of manifestations of emotional-behavioral problems. The Strengths and Difficulties questionnaire is also for children of a wide age range and represents the initial stage of the adaptation of a widely used worldwide instrument for assessing child development. Publications

from more recent research on age-specificity in relation to the Child Development Standards are presented.

3. Personal impressions

I have known Maria Trifonova since the beginning of her scientific career at the Institute of Psychology of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences and later at the Institute for Population and Human Studies. I can share her extremely high evaluation as a thorough researcher who does not compromise her internal high standards of quality in science. A person who is loyal, open to helping younger colleagues develop and open to new developments in practice and organizational development of the institution.

4. Conclusion

I give a positive assessment of the materials presented by Assoc. Prof. Maria Trifonova. Since the candidate has submitted all the required documents, and they fully meet all the requirements of the Law on the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms and the other regulatory documents, as well as due to the high quality of the submitted materials and their full compliance with the subject of this competition, I confidently recommend the esteemed jury and the Scientific Council of the Institute to elect Assoc. Prof. Maria Trifonova as Professor at Institute for population and human studies – BAN *" in the field of higher education 3. Social, Economic and Legal Sciences, professional field 3.2 Psychology (Psychology of Early Childhood) for the needs of the section "Developmental Psychology and Health")*

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Prepared:

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