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REVIEW

By Prof. Margarita Angelova Stefanova-Bakracheva, DSc, St. Kliment Ohridski, Faculty of Educational Studies and the Arts, 3.2. Psychology (General and Developmental Psychology) on the publicatons of Assoc. Prof. Maria Petrova Trifonova, PhD, for participation in the competition 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), announced in State Gazette No 58 / 9th July 2024 by the Institute for Population and Human Studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences

1. Information about the applicant

One applicant, Assoc. Prof. Maria Petrova Trifonova, PhD, Section "Developmental Psychology and Health", Department of Psychology, Institute of Psychology, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, has submitted documents for participation in the competition. Maria Petrova Trifonova graduated from the University of Sofia in 1981 with a Master's degree in Psychology and received her PhD degree in Cognitive Psychology in 1989. She continued her development as a researcher and in a post-doctoral program at the Central and Eastern European Centre for Cognitive Science, Sofia, New Bulgarian University, 2004–2005. Since January 1999, she has been working at the Institute for Population and Human Studies -BAS, where, in addition to research, she also has administrative functions - since 2015 until now she has been head of the section "Developmental and Health Psychology", and since 2022 until now, she has been head of the Department of Psychology of the IPHS-BAS. Assoc. Prof. Maria Petrova Trifonova was a lecturer at the Southwest University "Neofit Rilski", Blagoevgrad, with the courses Introduction to Psychology and Cognitive Psychology and at the New Bulgarian University with the courses Cognitive Development, Children's Theories of the World and Conceptual Change, and Dynamic Systems Approach in Developmental Psychology. Her previous experience includes working as a program Director and Consultant in Human resources

and recruitment. She is fluent in French, English, and Russian. She is involved in the scientific supervision of 1 PhD student. Assoc. Prof. Maria Trifonova has been awarded a Diploma of Scientific and Applied Activity and an award for Significant Contribution in the field of Early Childhood Psychology by the Institute for Population and Human Studies -BAS.

2. Research activity and results

The focus of Assoc. Prof. Maria Trifonova's research is in the field of cognitive psychology, developmental psychology and early childhood development. Assoc. Prof. Maria Trifonova has submitted for review 24 publications, including 1 monograph, 5 chapters of collective monographs and 18 articles, 4 of the publications indexed in world databases. All publications correspond to the topic of the announced competition and represent in-depth research in the field of early childhood psychology. The submitted monograph and other publications are distinguished by significant theoretical, empirical and methodological contributions. They add to the robust study and implementtaion of the results in practice for early screening and prevention in support of comprehensive development, and outline the factors favoring children's cognitive and social development and well-being with a clear delineation of the role of the family and educational setting. The publications submitted for the competition have 28 citations, 6 in indexed journals in world renowned databases, confirming their importance and recognition. The applicant’s project work is in the same field and reflects her extensive expertise in planning and conducting research and managing national and international projects of undeniable relevance and applicability.

3. Evaluation of the monograph

The monograph "The Child's Movement and Exploration of the World," which is central in applicant's scientific production, is a thorough study in the field of early development, which summarizes and systematizes important scientific results. It is dedicated to early child development and makes an undeniable contribution to the understanding of the importance of the first year for the full growth of children, while at the same time highlights an integrative perspective in the concept of development. The publication is extremely

timely in its perspective of shifting the focus to early childhood development, identification, and prevention in the paradigm of inclusive education and supporting families in caring for children to ensure their optimal development.

Motor development is described as intrinsically linked to thinking and cognition rather than as a self-constructing motor skill, which is represented in the monograph by the idea of insight or the emergence of new forms at a particular point in time as a result of the activity of ongoing system processes and multicausality. This provides a new conceptual line in consideration of the motor functions in relation to the development of the central nervous system and as the basis of overall development.

Maria Trifonova skillfully presents research approaches in the period of early childhood, outlining the different patterns that, in an integrative and complex way, form a complex framework and serve to describe development in its entirety. The developmental cascades, on which the author focuses, explore the interrelations across developmental domains from a systems perspective, emphasizing their interconnectedness within each time window. This approach makes it possible to trace continuities in development by considering simultaneously the preconditions in each domain that drive the other domains and the importance of the immediate environment. Maria Trifonova systematizes cascades as a research perspective, describing motor development through the interaction of multiple systems, the specific dynamics of early world exploration, and the place of social interactions and patterns in the family. She analyzes the results from empirical studies detailing development over 4 periods, 1-3, 4-6, 7-9, and 10-12 months, with a precisely derived research framework, underlying the categorization. It clearly describes the relationship between movement, language development, and emotional, social, and cognitive development and argues how cascade effect research can contribute to understanding atypical development and optimize timely intervention to limit co-morbidity.

Assoc. Prof. Trifonova substantiates active exploration of the world as action, which gives rise to new forms of child development in the classical settings of constructivist and socio-cultural theory, enriched by the new perspective of ecological psychology and its prism of cognitive, perceptual, and social development, presenting activity as performative and exploratory, tracing the stages, forms, and motives that promote development. Special

attention is given to attachment, which is built on a social foundation, and the importance of the parental figure in the first year of development, directed and shared attention, which are established in the first year.

4. Evaluation of the contributions in the other publications

The applicant’s statement of contributions is fully consistent with the content of the publications. It highlights research and practical contributions that are closely related and that underline both the relevance and the perspectives in the applicant’s chosen field of research. The publications are structured according to all scientific requirements and include own research. No elements of plagiarism were found in the works of Assoc. Prof. Maria Trifonova. The presented scientific works unconditionally characterize Assoc. Prof. Maria Trifonova as a competent researcher with a pronounced interest not only in theoretical analysis and empirical research but also in the effective implementation of the results in practice. I completely accept the list of contributions, categorized by the applicant in five areas.

1. Delineation of the developmental cascade approach, children's motor performance, and secure attachment in relation to children's exploratory activity: The periods of emergence of basic motor forms in the first year of life are outlined, divided into age windows. The author's research reveals the importance of motor development in the early months as a predictor of higher levels of activity in exploring visual stimulation. Particular attention is given to secure attachment in relation to the development of the child's exploratory activity. Developmental cascades have been argued as a new line of research, for which it is important to note that they have been supported as an approach in the study of children's movement and exploratory activity by two longitudinal studies (publications 3; 7.1., 7.13).
2. Research on the quality of the educational environment (at the pre-school level). The focus is on a child-centered approach and positive emotional relations and the role of the teacher in this process. Results of research with teachers are presented, highlighting specific difficulties and challenges (publications. 6.1; 6.2; 6.3; 6.4).
3. The application of psychological knowledge to educational practice: This group of publications analyze the construct of 'learning progressions' as a contemporary

approach to structuring educational content, based on psychological knowledge of the patterns and sequences of children's knowledge construction in subject areas. The fundamental place of the preschool stage is revealed, and the results of contemporary psychological theories on the peculiarities of learning at this age, on the categorization and conceptual change in the structuring of the educational environment, and on the use of the resources of play to stimulate both the cognitive and social and emotional development of children are systematized. The research is supported by the results of a representative survey of teachers describing their interactions with children (publications 7.2; 7.4; 7.8; 7.9; 7.11).

4. Inclusive early childhood education: creating an environment conducive to children's mental well-being: Special attention is given to inclusive environments for all categories of children and to the environmental factors that facilitate and ensure their optimal overall development and mental well-being. Practices for the use of multimodality in the construction of new cognitive schemas, the place of play in a child-centered approach to stimulate cognitive and social development, and the role of family interaction are discussed (publications 7.10; 10).
5. Development, adaptation, and validation of psychological measurement instruments: The research tools developed make a significant contribution to practice and training. A screening test for three-year-olds has been developed and validated to meet the needs of educational practice and to inform educators about the child's general developmental characteristics, areas where there is a risk of problems, and to outline the child's strengths that can be built on to compensate for possible delays in other areas (publications. 7.5; 10). A Stroop test with emotional expressions and endorsement was developed and validated with pupils aged 7-11 years (publication 7.6). The ECERS-3 quality of educational environment scale for preschool age was validated (publications 6.1; 6.2). The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire - Parent Form was adapted for children and adolescents aged 4–16 years with parent endorsement (publication 7.7).

The original scientific and applied contributions contained in the publications, can be summarized as follows:

A framework of interrelated cascading development with a holistic approach to interacting factors, is suggested, which integrates classic approach of cognitive and analytic psychology and new approaches for a comprehensive description of the unfolding of developmental potential and a complex consideration of the supportive role of family and environment in this process. Indicators are derived to track the child's interaction with the environment, outlining the role of parents, family, and teachers and the factors that stimulate optimal development and well-being.

Noteworthy is the practical application of psychological knowledge in educational practice and the tools developed - a particularly relevant perspective, especially in the period of pre-school education and the philosophy of inclusive environments, where screening and prevention of developmental difficulties is a major issue. Instruments and methods that have been developed and validated and are a valuable part of the resources of professionals working with children.

A comprehensive model of development from birth to adolescence is outlined, describing the interrelationships between the stages and the main phases of each stage with construed measurement instruments. In addition to the strictly scientific contributions, I would like to emphasize the practical applicability and contribution to society.

5. Evaluation of the results of participation in research and creative projects and application of the results in practice

An important aspect of Assoc. Prof. Trifonova's work is the applied activity related to the implementation of significant national and international projects. Their aims correspond to the applicant’s main area of scientific and research interest and have important practical outcomes in the field of early development, both in terms of education and family well-being. Assoc. Prof. Maria Trifonova is manager of seven projects, 2 of which are international, carried out under contracts of IHPS and the Ministry of Education and Science and UNICEF: Age Validation of Early Childhood Development Standards Selection of screening tests, training of speech therapists and psychologists, conducting research, and analysis of the results of the activities conducted; Analysis of teachers' attitudes and assessment of the quality of the educational environment as baseline information for evaluating the impact of UNICEF and MES interventions to promote

inclusive education; Creation of a short form of screening test for three-year-old children Validation of a screening test for three-year-old children - a short form to identify risk of developmental and learning problems; Training of kindergarten pedagogical specialists in early assessment of risk of developmental and learning problems in children from 3 years to 3 years and 6 months in kindergarten through screening tests; Active inclusion in the pre-school education system and participation in an OP SESG project Supporting equal access and personal development. The projects have a clear practical focus and open up perspectives in research and implementation in practive.

6. Fulfillment of the requirements for the academic position

The statement on the quantitative indicators with which Assoc. Prof. Maria Trifonova participates in the competition gives grounds to claim that the requirements for the academic position of professor are fully met. There is a monograph, the quantitative criteria in terms of publications exceed the required number of points, and this also applies to the quantitative indicators for the other indicators.

24 publications have been submitted on the subject of the announced competition, of which

1 scientific monograph in Bulgarian

5 chapters in collective monographs in Bulgarian;

4 articles (2 in Bulgarian and 2 in English, 2 authored and 2 co-authored), indexed in world databases;

14 articles in Bulgarian language (5 authored and 9 co-authored)

The statement shows that Assoc. Prof. Maria Trifonova fulfils the minimum national requirements according to the Regulations shall govern the implementation of the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria Act (amendment and supplement SG No. 15 / 19.02.2019, Table 1, Area 3. Social, Economic and Legal Sciences, 3.2. Psychology). Specifically, for groups A, B, and C, indicator 1, indicator 2, and indicator 3, respectively, she has the required 150 points because she holds a doctoral degree, which is 50 points, and also monograph, which gives 100 points. The monograph, which has 212 pages, meets all the requirements and is fully in line with the topic of the competition. Group D of the Regulations sets a publication requirement for a

professor, according to which the candidate must have at least 220 publications. The publications submitted for the competition, give the applicant's score for this indicator 241.64. 28 citations were submitted, giving the candidate 275 out of the required 120 points for Indicator E: 6 in peer-reviewed scientific journals, indexed in world-renowned databases, 15 in monographs and edited volumes with peer review, and 7 in journals with peer review. In Indicator F, the applicant has 185 out of the required 100 points with the management of 2 international projects, 4 national projects, and participation in 1 national project. Thus, the total score is 851.64 points given the required 590 points. This leads me to conclude that Assoc. Prof. Maria Trifonova fulfills the requirements of the Regulations on the Conditions and Procedure for Acquisition of Scientific Degrees and Holding of Academic Positions at the Institute for Population and Human Studies, BAS.

7. Personal impressions of the candidate

My personal impressions of Assoc. Prof. Maria Trifonova are from the period of our joint work at the Institute for Population and Human Studies, BAS. Apart from her precise research work and practical orientation - her professional skills and qualities, which are undoubtedly proven by her publications - Assoc. Prof. Trifonova has a cooperative attitude, innovative spirit, and interest in new trends and succeeds to find scientific and practical gaps. Furthermore, she has good teamworking skills, including in multidisciplinary and international projects; she plans and manages successfully.

8. Conclusion

I believe that in terms of quantity and content the materials submitted for review by Assoc. Prof. Maria Trifonova meet and exceed the requirements of the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria Act and the Regulations on its implementation and the minimum requirements of the IPHS-BAS. Assoc. Trifonova has many years of extensive experience in research practice and introduces and validates new approaches to current development issues with original research and practical contributions. The above-mentioned arguments about the contributions in scientific production, research, and practical activity give me reason for undoubtedly positive evaluation, and I confidently propose to the esteemed scientific jury to support the election

of Assoc. Prof. Maria Trifonova to the academic position of "Professor" at the Department of Psychology of the Institute of Population and Human Studies (BAS).

25.09.2024 Margarita Bakracheva