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OPINION

From

Prof. Dr. Mayiana Milcheva Mitevska Plovdiv University "Paisii Hilendarski", Department of Psychology, scientific direction of my last habilitation: "Psychology"

on the scientific works submitted for participation in a competition for the academic position of Professor in the field of higher education 3. Social, Economic, and Legal Sciences, professional direction 3.2. Psychology (Psychology of Early Childhood) for the needs of the "Developmental and Health Psychology" section at the Institute for Population and Human Studies - BAS, announced in the State Gazette, issue 58 from 09.07.2024, with candidate Assoc. Prof. Dr. Maria Petrova Trifonova.

I. Research (creative) activity and results.

1. Evaluation of the monographic work, creative contributions, or other publications equivalent to monographic work, including an evaluation of the author's scientific and applied-scientific contributions. The evaluation of the monograph by Maria Atanasova-Trifonova *"Movement and Exploration of the World by the Child (from birth to the first year)"* shows significant scientific, applied-scientific, and methodological contributions.

- **Scientific contributions**: The author offers new empirical studies on the links between motor achievements and exploratory activity in children up to 12 months. Models of interaction between these aspects of early development are drawn, which are applicable in research and interventions, especially in the context of atypical development.
- **Applied-scientific contributions**: The author demonstrates the importance of the developmental cascade approach to understanding the links between motor and cognitive development in children, as applied in specific research projects with proven validity.
- **Practical contributions**: The work provides guidelines for the development of intervention programs, exploring how motor development can be used as a tool to stimulate cognitive and language development.
- **Methodological contributions**: The work presents an innovative methodology for studying exploratory behavior and motor skills in young children, which includes long-term observations and experimental studies that can be used in future research in the field of child development.

The publications of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Maria Atanasova-Trifonova, as presented in the documents, demonstrate significant contributions in various fields of psychology related to child development and the educational environment. The key areas in which the publications make significant contributions include:

- Research on the quality of the educational environment in kindergartens, with a special focus on inclusive education, exploring factors such as the number of children in groups and the professional experience of teachers.
- Research on the socio-emotional and cognitive development of children, including studies on the imitation of actions and its influence on children's language development.

- Psychometric studies, including the validation of screening tests for assessing the development of three-year-old children, providing reliable tools for early intervention.
- Theoretical and empirical studies on early childhood categorization and children's biological knowledge.

The publications demonstrate a balanced approach between theoretical research and practical applications, which can be used to improve pedagogical and diagnostic practices in child psychology.

2. Evaluation of the contributions in other submitted publications (creative works) made after being appointed to the academic position of "Associate Professor." It also includes the evaluation of the requirement for peer-reviewed publications. The evaluation of the publications and creative works of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Maria Atanasova-Trifonova, made after her appointment to the position of Associate Professor, shows significant contributions in both the scientific field and applied practice.

- **Scientific contributions**: The publications demonstrate in-depth research on children's cognitive and socio-emotional development, as well as their exploratory activity. Empirical studies are included that examine the relationship between children's motor and cognitive development up to 12 months, and factors such as the social environment and parental support influencing this development.
- **Applied-scientific contributions**: The publications also address important topics related to the assessment of the quality of the educational environment and inclusive education in kindergartens, with recommendations for improving pedagogical practices and structuring the learning environment.
- **Methodological contributions**: The works include the development and adaptation of new methods for measuring psychological constructs, such as screening tests for early childhood development, which play a vital role in early diagnostics and intervention.
- **Evaluation of peer-reviewed publications**: Regarding peer-reviewed publications, the main works are published in international and national scientific journals that are peer-reviewed, which demonstrates the validity of the research and the quality of the presented results. For example, publications in the *European Journal of Special Needs Education* and the *International Journal of Early Years Education* are part of internationally recognized peer-reviewed scientific journals.

In summary, the contributions in the field of child psychology, pedagogical practice, and research methodology in the publications after the appointment of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Atanasova-Trifonova as Associate Professor reflect high scientific and practical value, as well as compliance with the peer-review requirements.

3. Citations by other authors. According to the provided citation report, the scientific publications of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Maria Atanasova-Trifonova have been cited in numerous scientific journals, both international and national:

1. **Citations in scientific journals, indexed in globally renowned databases**:
    - *Publication*: Trifonova, M.P. (2022). *Quality of education and care in kindergartens and their readiness for inclusive education in Bulgaria* has been cited by:
        - Mithans et al. (2023) in *Journal Didactica Slovenica - Pedagoška obzorja*.

        - Scanlon et al. (2022) in *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*.
    - *Publication*: Trifonova, M., Peneva, L. (2021). *Exploring the quality of early childhood education and care environment in Bulgarian kindergartens* has been cited by:
        - Czepil et al. (2023) in *Sodobna pedagogika/Journal of Contemporary Educational Studies*.
2. **Citations in monographs and collective volumes with peer-review**:
    - *Publication*: Trifonova, M. (2001). *The construction of number in the concept of J. Piaget in the context of modern cognitive-psychological models* has been cited in the works of Zamfirov (2019), as well as by other authors studying cognitive development in children.
    - *Publication*: Atanasova-Trifonova et al. (2015). *Development and learning in early childhood* has been cited in the works of Krasteva (2024) and Ujikanova (2021).
3. **Citations in non-referenced peer-reviewed journals**:
    - *Publication*: Atanasova-Trifonova et al. *Standards for early childhood development and learning* has been cited by Andonova (2023) and Tsochaeva-Gencheva (2022).

These citations highlight the significance of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Trifonova's scientific contributions in the field of early childhood development and education.

4. Evaluation of the results from participation in research and creative projects and the application of the results in practice. Assoc. Prof. Dr. Maria Atanasova-Trifonova has participated in numerous research and creative projects as a leader and participant, whose results have significant practical application:

1. **Age validation of early childhood development standards (2012-2014, contract with UNICEF)**: The project focused on developing early childhood development standards, which were used to improve educational programs and assess the development of children in preschool age. These standards have been applied in practice for early childhood diagnostics and intervention.
2. **Selection of a screening test and training of speech therapists and psychologists (2013, Ministry of Education)**: The aim of this project was to develop and implement screening tests for the assessment of language and cognitive problems in young children. The training of speech therapists and psychologists contributes to more effective identification of developmental problems and early intervention.
3. **Analysis of teachers' attitudes and assessment of the quality of the educational environment (2016-2017, UNICEF and Ministry of Education)**: This project provides baseline information for the implementation of interventions for inclusive education. The project results have been used to improve conditions in kindergartens, aiming to provide equal opportunities for children with special needs.
4. **Screening test for three-year-old children (2018, contract with UNICEF)**: The development of a short-form screening test for three-year-old children provides an effective tool for identifying developmental risks. This test is applicable in kindergartens for early detection of cognitive and learning difficulties, supporting early intervention processes.
5. **Project "Active inclusion in the preschool education system" (2019, Ministry of Education)**: This project focuses on the inclusion of children from vulnerable groups

in preschool education. The results have been applied to improve inclusive education and provide greater support for at-risk children.

In conclusion, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Trifonova's participation in these research and creative projects has led to the development of valuable methodologies and tools widely applicable in early childhood development, diagnostics, and education.

5. Scientific contribution, originality of the presented works, and reliability of the presented scientific data. Assoc. Prof. Dr. Maria Atanasova-Trifonova declares that the presented scientific works, data, and results included in the competition for Professor are original and not borrowed from other research or publications in which she did not participate. She also confirms the reliability of the information presented in the documents and publications, ensuring that they were prepared in accordance with academic standards.

- **Scientific contribution**: Dr. Trifonova's works contribute significantly to the field of early childhood psychology, inclusive education, and cognitive development. She develops new models and methods for assessing children's development, which have direct applications in educational and diagnostic practice.
- **Originality**: Her research focuses on the links between children's motor and cognitive achievements, the application of concepts such as Jean Piaget's theories in modern practice, and the development of screening tests for early diagnosis of learning difficulties. These studies are distinguished by their innovative approach and methodology.
- **Reliability of scientific data**: All presented data were collected through empirical research conducted in accordance with scientific methodologies. The results were published in peer-reviewed journals, ensuring their validity and reliability.

II. Teaching and educational activities. Assoc. Prof. Dr. Maria Atanasova-Trifonova has extensive experience in teaching activities related to child development psychology and cognitive psychology, both in Bulgaria and internationally.

Teaching activities:

1. **New Bulgarian University (2004 - 2019)**: Dr. Trifonova was a part-time lecturer, teaching courses on:
    - **Cognitive Development**
    - **Children's Theories of the World and Conceptual Change**
    - **Dynamic System Approach in Developmental Psychology**.
2. **South-West University "Neofit Rilski" (1991 - 1993)**: She taught courses on:
    - **Introduction to Psychology**
    - **Cognitive Psychology**.
3. **Participation in specialist training**: Dr. Trifonova has participated in training sessions for educational specialists and psychologists on the use of screening tests for the diagnosis of preschool children. The training included early identification of developmental risks and learning difficulties, conducted within various projects funded by the Ministry of Education and UNICEF.
4. **Supervision of PhD students**: As head of the Department of Psychology at the Institute for Population and Human Studies at BAS, Dr. Trifonova supervises PhD students who work on dissertations in cognitive and child psychology. For example, during the period

2020-2024, she supervised Radostina Stoyanova-Shiryaev, together with Assoc. Prof. Dr. G. Petkov.

5. **Teaching materials and publications**: Dr. Trifonova is the author of numerous publications and teaching materials that contribute to the education of students and specialists in the field of early childhood psychology. Some of these include:
    - *"Movement and Exploration of the World by the Child"* (2024)
    - *"Early Screening Assessment and Guidelines for Stimulating the Development of Three-Year-Old Children"* (2023)
    - *"Research on the Psychometric Properties of the Screening Test for Three-Year-Old Children"* (2021).

In conclusion, Dr. Trifonova's teaching and educational activities are significant both in the academic field and in the practical preparation of specialists involved in child development and inclusive education.

III. Administrative and public activities. Assoc. Prof. Dr. Maria Atanasova-Trifonova has significant experience in administrative and public activities: Dr. Maria Atanasova-Trifonova is the head of the Department of Psychology at BAS and the "Developmental and Health Psychology" section. She participates in scientific projects with UNICEF and the Ministry of Education. She is a member of the Bulgarian Psychological Society and actively participates in scientific conferences and public initiatives related to psychology and education. These activities demonstrate her active role both in the academic sphere and in public life.

IV. Fulfillment of the requirements for holding the academic position. Assoc. Prof. Dr. Maria Atanasova-Trifonova has met all the requirements for holding the academic position of Professor in the field of psychology. The submitted documents include:

- Monographic work.
- List of publications, citations, and applied-scientific results.
- Documents certifying the fulfillment of BAS minimum requirements.
- Declaration of originality and reliability of scientific data.

V. Personal impressions of the candidate (if any). Competent, committed, and proven expert in child psychology. A leader with organizational skills, managing a department at BAS. Responsible, with high academic standards and strict adherence to scientific ethics.

VI. Opinions, recommendations, and comments on the candidate's activities and achievements. Assoc. Prof. Dr. Maria Petrova Trifonova has significant scientific achievements in the field of child psychology, focusing on inclusive education and early diagnostics. Her research and development of screening tests have wide practical application. She leads successful projects with international partners and is recognized for her contributions to the scientific community.

Conclusion I give my positive evaluation of the academic activities of the candidate and propose that Assoc. Prof. Dr. Maria Petrova Trifonova be admitted for selection by the academic council.

Date: October 14, 2024 Signature: ……

Prof. Dr. Majana Mitevska