

REVIEW

by **Prof. Katerina Karolova Karadzhova, PhD**
of **Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”**

of a doctoral thesis submitted for the award of the educational and scientific degree of **Doctor** in Higher Education Area 1. Educational Sciences, Professional Field 1.2. Pedagogy, Doctoral Programme in Special Education.

Author: Krasimira Stoilova Ivanova

Title: Personalised Learning as a Predictor of the Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs

Supervisor: Prof. Zhana Atanasova, DSc (Education), of University of Plovdiv “Paisii Hilendarski”, Faculty of Education.

1. General Description of the Submitted Materials

By Order No. RD-22-890 of 27 April 2026 issued by the Rector of University of Plovdiv “Paisii Hilendarski”, I have been appointed as a member of the Scientific Jury established to conduct the procedure for the defence of the doctoral thesis entitled **Personalised Learning as a Predictor of the Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs** for the award of the educational and scientific degree of Doctor in Higher Education Area: 1. Educational Sciences, Professional Field: 1.2. Pedagogy, Doctoral Programme in Special Education.

The author of the PhD thesis is Krasimira Stoilova Ivanova, a full-time doctoral candidate in the Department of Pedagogy and Educational Management at the Faculty of Education, under the supervision of Prof. Zhana Atanasova, DSc (Education), of Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv.

The set of printed materials submitted by Krasimira Stoilova Ivanova complies with Article 36(1) of the Regulations for the Development of the Academic Staff of Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv.

2. Brief Biographical Information about the Doctoral Candidate

Ms Krasimira Stoilova Ivanova has completed one Bachelor's degree programme and three Master's degree programmes at Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv. The education she has attained provides a sound foundation for her professional and scholarly development. The experience she has acquired as a resource teacher and as a specialist in marketing and advertising has enabled her to embrace positively both the concept of inclusive education and the opportunities afforded by personalised learning.

All of this constitutes a prerequisite for the implementation of a substantial, in-depth, and highly engaging research study.

3. Relevance of the Research Topic and Appropriateness of the Aims and Objectives

In recent years, the system of contemporary educational policy has increasingly embraced an educational concept associated with the inclusion of children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) through the utilisation of digital technologies within mainstream educational settings. Within educational theory and practice, an approach associated with personalised learning has become firmly established. In this regard, significant changes may be observed within the Bulgarian educational system. These changes are related to the affirmation of new values, the acquisition of additional competences, and the creation of an appropriate environment that maximally stimulates the learning and development of children with SEN within the mainstream classroom.

New strategies, new resources, and new educational models are emerging. To a considerable extent, this is associated with the widespread digitalisation of education and the implementation of inclusive processes within a model of digitally inclusive education.

In a well-motivated and thoroughly substantiated manner, Ms Krasimira Ivanova also presents the priorities for change within the educational system, placing particular emphasis upon the principal predictor of inclusion through inclusive education. The relevance of the research problem under investigation is primarily associated with the theoretical conceptualisation of personalised learning within the context of the inclusion of children with SEN.

The PhD candidate's decision to focus on this highly topical issue renders the thesis exceptionally innovative and timely. With competence and professionalism, she substantiates the possibility of applying strategies that improve the quality of support and socialisation of students within the framework of inclusive education.

The fact that, in recent years, the number of pupils with SEN included in mainstream schools has increased substantially gives rise to the need for contemporary theoretical and practical solutions capable of optimising the processes of learning and inclusion.

From this perspective, both the selected topic and the PhD thesis as a whole are significant and possess numerous practical applications.

4. Knowledge of the Research Problem

The doctoral thesis comprises 290 standard computer-typed pages. It follows a classical structure, consisting of an introduction, four chapters, findings, a conclusion, a bibliography, a list of legal and regulatory sources, statements of contribution, and an appendix.

In the introductory section, the PhD candidate directs attention to the lack of sufficiently effective measures for the full inclusion of children with SEN during the current period of extensive digitalisation of education.

Already at this stage, emphasis is placed upon the need for a transformation commensurate with the new educational concepts emerging within the Bulgarian educational system. In this sense, personalised learning, as an innovative approach, emerges as a predictor of the meaningful inclusion of pupils with SEN within mainstream educational settings.

The first chapter contains an analysis of authors and theoretical interpretations relevant to the doctoral thesis. A comprehensive theoretical analysis is undertaken of issues relating to inclusive education as a philosophy, as a human right, as a process, and as both a contemporary perspective and a future direction.

The following important aspects of the thesis are presented and interpreted in a clear, concise, and precise manner:

- The evolution of the concept of inclusion through inclusive education;
- Approaches to inclusive education;
- The synergy between inclusive education and inclusion;
- Inclusive education in Bulgaria;
- The objectives of inclusive education.

On the basis of an in-depth theoretical analysis of scholarly authors, regulatory instruments, declarations, educational strategies, and approaches, Ms Ivanova advances the concept of “digital inclusion” through the use of digital tools, electronic resources, and digital platforms.

The models relating to the dimensions of inclusive education are presented competently and professionally, with particular emphasis placed upon the conceptualisation of inclusive education in both its broad and narrow senses.

The second chapter is likewise theoretical in nature. Here, an analysis is undertaken of the concept of personalised learning, with the PhD candidate focusing attention upon the evolution, definition, components, and characteristics of personalised learning.

In a thorough and comprehensive manner, the author examines personalised learning as a factor facilitating the inclusion of pupils with SEN. The principal conclusion formulated in this section of the thesis is the assertion that personalised learning optimises inclusive education because it ensures both “access and accessibility” for all children.

As a positive aspect, I would note the fact that this section conceptualises strategies for personalised learning that are linked to the educational profiles of students with SEN.

The third chapter presents the design of the experimental study. The study is structured, carefully planned, and oriented towards the digitalisation of personalised learning. The object, subject matter, aim, and objectives have been defined correctly and appropriately, while the hypotheses (both substantive and null) follow from them in a logical manner. The emphasis here is placed upon the characteristics and components of personalised learning that function as predictors and significant factors of inclusion. The formulated research objectives provide a concise presentation of the course of the entire research study, while the hypotheses demonstrate the lines of inquiry and expectations associated with the research problem under review. The hypotheses are forward-looking in nature and are very closely aligned with the topic of the doctoral thesis. In this section (the organisational section), the doctoral candidate develops very skilfully the idea that personalised learning constitutes a reliable factor for the inclusion of students with SEN within the educational environment.

The conception, organisation, and implementation of the experimental study, considered in their entirety, provide further evidence of the PhD candidate’s conscientiousness, competence, and motivation.

5. Research Methodology

The methodology employed is well selected and appropriate to the formulated aim, objectives, and hypotheses of the study. The PhD candidate analyses and systematises the methods used into three groups, describing in detail the activities implemented through them. The systematic progression of the experimental study through successive stages makes it possible to conduct a comprehensive qualitative analysis, while the proposed adapted assessment instrument and, in particular, the statistical and mathematical methods enable quantitative interpretations. A favourable impression is created by the extensive and heterogeneous selection of research participants: teachers, parents, university students, and pupils with SEN.

A positive aspect of the thesis is the research toolkit that has been developed. It is original, adapted, and oriented towards the individual target groups relevant to inclusive education.

I am firmly of the view that the experimental methodology employed is appropriate to the stated aim, objectives, and hypotheses of the study.

6. Characteristics and Evaluation of the Doctoral Thesis

One of the most valuable aspects of the PhD thesis is the fourth chapter, in which the results obtained are analysed. The analysis is carried out with regard to the individual items in the questionnaires. The primary data concerning the individual variables are illustrated by means of tables and figures, which makes it possible to visualise the experimental interpretations. In the course of her scholarly-theoretical and experimental work, the author formulates and proposes new concepts of digitally inclusive education and its application in inclusive digital practices. The promotion and wider uptake of these concepts will contribute to improved school achievement and enhanced motivation for learning among pupils with SEN.

I consider that the questions in the questionnaires are informative and appropriately selected, and that the results could be used as a point of reference in the implementation of personalised learning or as a factor in inclusive education. This necessitates taking into account the strengths and potential of pupils in the context of the pervasive digitalisation of education.

In the course of the experimental study and the subsequent analyses, all three formulated hypotheses are confirmed, while the null hypothesis is rejected. Through the hypotheses thus proven, the role of personalised learning as a principal factor in the inclusion of students with SEN in mainstream settings is affirmed.

7. Contributions and Significance of the Doctoral Thesis for Scholarship and Practice

I accept the validity of the contributions described. Ms Krasimira Ivanova distinguishes them into two groups: contributions of a scholarly-theoretical nature and contributions of a scholarly-applied nature. They are presented in a summarised form, yet they delineate the contours and benefits of personalised learning through the application of digital technologies.

I shall attempt to analyse some of the contributions mentioned, which, in my view, demonstrate the maturity and significance of the PhD thesis under review.

1. The comprehensiveness and heterogeneity of the analyses. This includes:
 - A substantive and comprehensive analysis of the information relevant to the problem developed;
 - An in-depth and professional interpretation of the concept of personalised learning as a learner-centred approach to teaching;
 - A scholarly substantiation of the idea that personalised learning is a factor of inclusion;
 - Successfully proposed strategies for the implementation of personalised learning;
2. The diversity and richness of the methods, which allow for both qualitative and quantitative interpretations.
3. A rich diagnostic toolkit aimed at confirming or rejecting the formulated hypotheses;
4. In the process of descriptive statistics, the idea is confirmed that reflection upon personalised learning is an important factor in the implementation of inclusion;
5. Proposals for personalised learning with artificial intelligence. They could serve as a factor stimulating inclusive education;
6. Appropriate conclusions and recommendations of practical value in a future-oriented perspective;
7. The experimental study conducted and the subsequent analyses are directed towards changing the value system of all those involved in the implementation of inclusive education and provoke the formation of an optimally functioning supportive environment;
8. The possibility of publishing a methodological guide to support the inclusion of children with SEN in mainstream settings.

8. Assessment of the Publications Related to the Doctoral Thesis

The doctoral candidate has three sole-authored scholarly publications and two co-authored publications. They are directly related to the subject matter of the PhD thesis. The submitted publications enrich the theory and practice of Special Education and optimise the structure and functions of the inclusive educational environment. In terms of both number and content, they meet the requirements for admitting the author to a public defence.

9. Personal Contribution of the Doctoral Candidate

It is my view that the organisation and conduct of the experimental study were carried out by the doctoral candidate. The in-depth theoretical preparation and extensive practical experience of Ms Krasimira Ivanova constitute an essential prerequisite for the writing of the work under consideration. I consider that the scholarly contributions envisaged in the thesis are her personal achievement and merit.

10. Abstract of the Doctoral Thesis (Autoreferat)

The abstract of the PhD thesis has been developed over 32 pages and presents the thesis in a concise yet precise form. It has been prepared in accordance with the requirements and accurately and objectively reflects the results described in the PhD thesis.

11. Critical Remarks and Recommendations

I have no critical remarks. I shall, however, allow myself to make one comment. It concerns the formulated substantive and alternative, or null, hypotheses.

There are three substantive hypotheses, which, in the course of the experimental interpretations, are fully proven. There is one null hypothesis. In my view, there should be full correspondence between the number of substantive and null hypotheses. Through the PhD candidate's proof of each substantive hypothesis, the alternative, that is, the null hypothesis, is automatically rejected.

12. Personal Impressions

Ms Krasimira Ivanova is an established resource teacher with considerable experience in working with children with SEN.

The PhD thesis developed reflects the author’s scholarly-theoretical pursuits and her desire for these to be materialised in practice. I consider this to be a long-standing work with serious applications in a future-oriented perspective.

13. Recommendations for the Future Use of the Doctoral Thesis Contributions and Results

I would recommend that Ms Krasimira Ivanova should pursue the wider dissemination the findings of her PhD thesis.

CONCLUSION

The doctroal thesis contains scholarly and scholarly-applied results that constitute an original contribution to science. It meets all the requirements of the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria Act, the Regulations for the Application of the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria Act, and the relevant Regulations of University of Plovdiv “Paisii Hilendarski”. The theoretical analyses and experimental interpretations presented fully correspond to the specific requirements of the Faculty of Pedagogy and Educational Management.

For this reason, I confidently give my positive evaluation of the doctoral thesis under review, as well as of the submitted PhD abstract (autoreferat), summarised conclusions, and contributions.

On the basis of everything set out in my review, I PROPOSE THAT THE ESTEEMED SCIENTIFIC JURY AWARD THE EDUCATIONAL AND SCIENTIFIC DEGREE OF “DOCTOR” to Krasimira Stoilova Ivanova in the higher education area of “Pedagogy”, professional field “Educational Sciences”, PhD programme “Special Education”.

6 October 2026

Reviewer:

Prof. Katerina Karadzhova, PhD