

REVIEW
**of the dissertation “Competency approach to human resource management in
kindergartens under crisis conditions”**

Author: PhD Candidate Elena Ivanova
Professional Field 1.1. Theory and Management of Education

1. Information about the doctoral candidate

Elena Nenkova Ivanova was enrolled as a part-time doctoral student in the Department of “History of Pedagogy and Management of Education” at the Faculty of Education, Sofia University, on March 1, 2021. She was granted the right to defend her dissertation in March 2025. She has more than 18 years of experience as a kindergarten teacher and, since 2017, has served as a kindergarten principal in Sofia. Her professional trajectory and accumulated managerial experience naturally led her to complete a Master’s program in Educational Management at the Faculty of Education in 2019. In 2020, the candidate also obtained a professional qualification in Psychology.

Her interest in the dissertation topic was prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic and by the potential for more effective human resource management in times of crisis through the application of a competence-based approach.

2. Information about the dissertation

The submitted dissertation impresses with its highly specific topic and research scope. In recent years, educational management has been focused primarily on schools as key educational institutions responsible for the education, upbringing, and development of young people. Kindergartens often remain in the background, perceived mainly as places for care and early upbringing, although their role in quality early childhood development is indisputable, and the scope of compulsory preschool education continues to expand. In this context, the topic of the dissertation not only presents a new paradigm in human resource management but also enhances knowledge and understanding of kindergarten management as a specific and fully-fledged educational institution.

The dissertation is structured into an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion, and appendices. Its total length is 236 pages, of which 206 pages are the author’s own text. The

reference list comprises 179 scholarly sources, more than 100 of which are in English. The breadth and depth of the literature consulted demonstrate the candidate's commitment to the research topic.

The **Introduction** outlines the rationale for the chosen topic, the research scope, and its relevance and significance. The candidate systematically presents the object and subject of the research, its aims, and tasks. The formulations are clear and precise, providing a solid basis for the overall research design. Sub-hypotheses 1 and 2 could be refined to strengthen their explicit connection to the general hypothesis and the research aim.

Chapter One presents a literature review on the competence-based approach as a specific paradigm not only in education but also in management science, and its application in human resource management (HRM) in the specific context of kindergartens. The candidate skillfully outlines the parameters and development of HRM and the essence of the competence-based approach, revealing their interrelation. Particularly noteworthy is the final section of the chapter, where the author's practical experience and sound understanding of managerial work allow her to highlight both the specifics of HRM in kindergartens and the potential application of the competence-based approach in this process.

Chapter Two examines the specifics of crisis and crisis management, providing a smooth and effective transition to crisis HRM and the possibilities for integrating a competence-based approach within it. Drawing on contemporary sources, the candidate consistently addresses the nature and characteristics of organizational crises, outlining their impact on organizations, people, and processes, and thereby establishing a solid foundation for linking "crisis management – human resource management." With the insight of an experienced manager, she emphasizes the significance of the competence-based approach for HRM in crisis situations and clearly demonstrates the need for developing both general and specific competence profiles for staff to support the kindergarten's functioning in adverse conditions.

The third chapter presents an extensive empirical study, employing a variety of research methods:

- Focus groups
- Surveys among principals, teaching, and non-teaching staff in kindergartens
- Interviews
- Analysis of kindergarten crisis plans

The empirical findings are presented thoroughly and accurately. However, the abundance of tables and graphs, while informative, somewhat burdens the text and complicates the interpretation and synthesis of the research results.

As a logical culmination of the study, the final part of Chapter Three presents a model for applying the competence-based approach in HRM in kindergartens during crises. This model is grounded in a robust theoretical framework incorporating a set of concepts related to the crisis competences of leaders, the competences of teaching and non-teaching staff, and the competences of kindergarten principals. The model is elaborated in great detail, specifying general and specific crisis competences, along with the procedures for their assessment, development, and application. The model underwent expert evaluation according to six clearly defined criteria and received high scores across all of them.

It is commendable that the end of Chapter Three includes a section summarizing the conclusions of the theoretical and empirical research, making a direct connection to the competence-based approach and the dissertation topic. The competence sets identified for principals, teaching, and non-teaching staff as a result of the empirical study provide a solid basis for future research and for building mechanisms to develop these competences in kindergarten HRM. Since crises occur cyclically, preparing kindergarten staff to anticipate, address, and manage the challenges they bring is of critical importance for this type of educational institution.

The Conclusion addresses the research aims and hypotheses in detail. It affirms the positive role of the competence-based approach in HRM during crises. The candidate convincingly demonstrates the degree to which the hypotheses and sub-hypotheses are confirmed, presenting empirical evidence to support her conclusions.

The author's abstract reflects the dissertation's structure and content objectively and accurately.

The candidate meets the scientometric requirements for the award of the PhD degree by presenting four publications in the field of educational management, all published in peer-reviewed journals and edited volumes. These publications objectively disseminate parts of the dissertation research and testify to the candidate's active engagement and development in the academic field.

Question to the candidate:

As a result of the comprehensive theoretical and empirical research on the competence-based approach and its application in HRM during crises, could you briefly outline the key conclusions you have drawn for your own managerial practice as principal of a large kindergarten?

3. Scientific Contributions of the Dissertation

The doctoral candidate identifies both theoretical and practical-applied contributions of the dissertation. I consider the stated theoretical contributions to be consistent with the quality of the candidate's scholarly work and with the content presented in the dissertation. Particular attention should be paid to the delineation of crisis leadership competences, which could be integrated into future training programs and processes for the development of educational leaders.

From a practical-applied perspective, the primary contribution of the dissertation lies in outlining the overall picture of crisis human resource management within the specific context of kindergartens. The proposed practical model is functional, although it requires more effective operationalization in order to be applied successfully in kindergartens operating in diverse contexts.

4. Remarks and Questions

I have several remarks for the doctoral candidate:

- In certain sections, the dissertation text would benefit from refinement to fully reflect the depth of the theoretical research conducted.
- While the illustration of quantitative research data is necessary, it is somewhat overloaded, which fragments the analysis and hinders the reader from gaining a comprehensive understanding of the process of developing, implementing, and synthesizing the empirical work.
- The link between the competence-based approach and human resource management in kindergartens during crises could be described in greater depth and with more clarity, which would highlight the significance of this approach.

Question:

As a result of the comprehensive theoretical and empirical study of the competence-based approach and its application in human resource management in crisis conditions, could you

briefly outline the main conclusions you have drawn for your own managerial practice as principal of a large kindergarten?

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the presented dissertation demonstrates both theoretical and empirical merits. It objectively and convincingly reflects the candidate's ability to plan, conduct, and synthesize theoretical and empirical research in the field of educational management, and it deserves to be disseminated. Therefore, I will vote in favor of awarding the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in Professional Field 1.1. Theory and Management of Education to Elena Nenkova Ivanova.

15 August 2025

Prepared by:
/assoc. prof. Dr. Yonka Parvanova/