

## **REVIEW**

by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Bozhidara Iskreva Kriviradeva, lecturer at Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”, Faculty of Education on the dissertation submitted for the award of the educational and scientific degree “Doctor” in Professional Field 1.1. Theory and Management of Education

**Author:** Elena Nenkova Ivanova

**Title:** The Competence-Based Approach in Human Resource Management in Kindergartens in Crisis Conditions

**Scientific Supervisor:** Prof. Dr. Dinko Gospondinov, lecturer at Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”, Faculty of Education

### **1. Relevance of the Topic**

The topic of the dissertation research is extremely relevant, especially after the crisis situation that arose during the period of COVID-19. This crisis was particularly special for the educational system and in particular for kindergartens. If for children from the 2nd grade up to the end of secondary education the distance form of learning was to some extent acceptable, for kindergartens it was a serious challenge. Crises in human resource management, especially in this specific educational environment, occur constantly and are not episodic phenomena. The question here is how the educational institution, and in particular the kindergarten, overcomes them, whether anything is being done in the direction of crisis prevention, and whether the employees of the organization are trained to cope in crisis situations. That is why I consider the topic to be relevant and insufficiently researched, both from a scientific and practical-applied perspective.

The topic of the dissertation research is directly related to a key problem in the educational system, namely the possibilities for applying the competence-based approach in human resource management in educational institutions, and in particular in kindergartens in a period of crisis. I express my admiration for the choice of topic for the dissertation study, since regardless of the many studies conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, no empirical studies were carried out in Bulgaria precisely in this aspect. For this reason, I believe that the dissertation submitted for discussion possesses the necessary qualities to be called both relevant and significant, since it raises a number of questions related to the possibilities of applying the competence-based approach in the process of planning, preparing, and managing the teaching and non-teaching staff of kindergartens in a period of crisis.

## **2. Knowledge of the Problem**

From the text of the dissertation it is evident that the doctoral candidate is sufficiently familiar with the educational system and in particular with the management of the specific educational institution such as the kindergarten, and that in a period of crisis. This statement is also confirmed by the biography of Mrs. Elena Ivanova, since from 1999 to 2017 she worked as a teacher in two kindergartens, and since August 2017 she has held the position of kindergarten principal in Sofia. In the text of the dissertation the doctoral candidate has attempted to clarify basic concepts directly related to the theoretical-empirical study such as competence, competency, key competences, competence-based approach, competence models, competence profile, policies and strategies for human resource management, crises, organizational crisis, crisis management, crisis human resource management. In the theoretical part the doctoral candidate competently clarifies the main directions of the competence-based approach both in education itself and in human resource management, having very successfully explained the place of the competence-based approach in HRM in kindergartens and the possibilities for its application.

It is noticeable that the author of the dissertation is well acquainted with the literature on the problem, with normative documents, and skillfully weaves them into the text. In her attempt to present all existing concepts related to the competence-based approach in HRM and its application in crisis HRM in kindergartens, at places the impression remains that this has already been read and that the same information is repeated several times. In summary, it can be said that the author of the dissertation as a whole is sufficiently familiar with the researched problem.

## **3. Research Methodology**

The methodology of the empirical study is well described in Chapter Three of the dissertation. In this chapter the doctoral candidate very thoroughly describes the researched groups (principals, teaching and non-teaching staff, and experts) and the methods (focus group, survey, interview, study of kindergarten documents related to crisis plans) which she used in carrying out the empirical research.

Through the organized focus group, which included: a university lecturer in crisis management; a project manager from a large company, expert in crisis management and staff training for work in crises; a principal of a large kindergarten in Sofia; a principal of a small kindergarten from the provinces; an HR expert in a large international organization, the doctoral candidate attempted to achieve the four set objectives, namely to identify: the main competences of teaching and non-teaching staff that are decisive for successful crisis response;

the personal qualities of teaching staff for coping with crises; the basic competences of teaching staff without which coping in crisis is impossible.

On the basis of the results obtained from the focus groups, the doctoral candidate structured the survey questionnaires for principals, teaching, and non-teaching staff of the kindergarten. I think that the presentation of the results of the empirical study would have benefited if a criterion-based principle had been used, showing a connection between the analysis of individual questions, instead of following the sequence of the questions and analyzing the results question by question.

The presentation of the results from the questionnaires (principals, teaching and non-teaching staff) could be illustrated with tables and diagrams, but when conducting qualitative analysis of empirical research results, it is not always necessary to illustrate, especially where options for giving two answers are provided. At the end of the analysis of the results from the questionnaires for all three target groups, there is a lack of qualitative synthesis and conclusions.

In the empirical part of the dissertation many methods are used, but the qualitative analysis requires serious reworking, since it needs more precision. The data from each method should serve to prove the objectives and tasks, but at present some of the methods are described in such a way that it is not clear why they were used and the information obtained is not convincing.

For example, on page 135 the doctoral candidate writes that teaching and non-teaching staff have several common questions, starting from question 7 to question 19, but in the table it is seen that the common questions are from 7 to 20. More importantly, there is a lack of qualitative analysis of the common questions for the two groups, whose results are close, and once again summaries and conclusions are missing.

An attempt has been made to present the results of studying the influence of demographic factors on the survey responses of principals, teaching and non-teaching staff, but the results are presented separately for each group, and again summaries and conclusions are missing.

In the statistical part of the study, for testing statistical significance of factor influences, ANOVA variance analysis was used through the James-Howell test, and significance of factors was tested through Fisher's F criterion.

The analysis of the results from the interviews with 15 kindergarten principals is once again presented question by question. The doctoral candidate attempts a generalization beginning with the statement: "The results of the interview show the actual state of the self-

assessment of the kindergarten principals regarding knowledge, skills, competences, and preparedness for working in crisis situations” (p. 164). Here arises the question: is it possible to generalize the obtained results from 15 interviewed kindergarten principals, or are they valid only for those who took part in the empirical study?

Overall, the qualitative analysis of the quantitative data is rather scarce and there is a lack of summaries and analyses. On the other hand, it is not clear what the connection between the individual studies is and how exactly they were carried out. At the beginning of the empirical study the doctoral candidate writes that the questionnaires were conducted via the internet, but the selection process of respondents is not explained. It is also unclear whether there is a connection between the respondents in the survey, those interviewed, and the kindergartens whose preliminary crisis plans were analyzed.

The analysis of the preliminary crisis plans is done at a good and acceptable level, with a successful synthesis. The results from the training of teaching and non-teaching staff for general crisis competences are well described. However, in almost the entire text of this part of the dissertation, the doctoral candidate uses the expression “training education” (тренингово обучение), as for example several times on page 168, including in the title of a table, and on page 171 she uses the expression “trainers of skills”. The text would benefit from using either training or education, since the combination is not accepted in academic literature. The same applies to the expression “trainers of skills”.

In this part of the dissertation the doctoral candidate describes the model for a competence-based approach in HRM in kindergartens in crisis conditions. Here she gives a brief description of the model itself, then describes the theoretical framework on which it is structured, and presents it in terms of content. Overall, it is evident that the doctoral candidate has undertaken extensive work in creating and implementing the model for a competence-based approach in HRM in kindergartens in crisis conditions.

The dissertation contains a successful analysis of preliminary kindergarten crisis plans. The interviews with kindergarten principals are well described and analyzed. The developed practical model for crisis HRM in kindergartens could be applied, and it would perhaps be good for the doctoral candidate to popularize the results of her empirical research.

#### **4. Evaluation of Publications and the Candidate’s Contribution**

During her doctoral studies and dissertation writing, the candidate produced four publications. Two of them were published in the Bulgarian Journal of Education, one in Pedagogical News, and one in the proceedings of an international scientific-practical conference.

The publications submitted in the doctoral procedure correspond directly to the topic of the dissertation, and authorship is evident, as they reflect results from the candidate's theoretical-empirical research.

### **5. Author's Abstract**

The presented abstract accurately reflects the main results of the dissertation. In the abstract the candidate has adequately summarized the main findings of the theoretical-empirical study. She has described the scientific contributions of the dissertation and included the list of publications related to the dissertation topic, in accordance with the requirements set out in the normative documents regulating the preparation and writing of dissertations for the award of the educational and scientific degree "Doctor."

### **6. Recommendations and Questions to the Candidate regarding the Theoretical-Empirical Study**

- The text would benefit from being corrected for grammatical and stylistic errors. For example, on page 167 it says "the functional dynamics of for which was mentioned".

- The use of abbreviations in chapter, section, or paragraph titles is generally not accepted.

- On page 88 the dissertation states: "The principal maintains an up-to-date dossier of all competences acquired or in the process of being acquired and improved – for each employee in the kindergarten." The candidate uses the word "dossier". In line with modern requirements, and given that in recent years the term portfolio has been actively used in both academic literature and regulatory documents related to educational management and the competence-based approach, the word portfolio would be more appropriate. The word dossier carries a somewhat archaic and negative connotation.

- The survey would have been stronger if there had been more identical questions across the three groups (principals, teaching and non-teaching staff). Designing questionnaires is a complex and difficult process, and how the questions are formulated largely determines the model.

- The analysis of the survey results would have been more complete if each group's analysis concluded with a brief synthesis and several key findings.

- The presentation of results from the content analysis of interview responses (p. 162, Table 3.75) would be clearer if the questions themselves were written in the table, not just their numbers. The attempt at qualitative analysis is mostly descriptive rather than interpretative.

- On page 150 it is written: "The results of the study of the influence of demographic factors on the responses of teaching staff are presented in the following Tables 3.67, 3.68, 3.69,

3.70.” But the analysis of the results of the non-teaching staff starts from Table 3.69 and continues to Table 3.71. Also, in the text it says “teaching staff,” while one sentence above it refers to “non-teaching staff.” These are likely technical errors, but there are several such mistakes.

- On page 156 the candidate concludes: “The group with 1 to 3 years of experience was particularly vulnerable to the restrictive measures, while the group with more than 20 years of experience probably struggled due to fatigue associated with advanced age.” My question: could you suggest an explanation of why these two groups encountered difficulties, in a way that avoids age-based discrimination?

- The dissertation does not explain the criteria for selecting the 15 interviewed kindergarten principals. Question: on what principle were they selected and included in the empirical study?

- It is not clear whether the 15 kindergartens whose preliminary crisis plans were analyzed are the same kindergartens whose principals were interviewed. It would be preferable to specify this, as it affects interpretation of the results and their use in developing the competence-based HRM model.

## **7. Recommendations for Future Use of the Contributions and Results**

The conclusions and recommendations presented in the dissertation and abstract can be applied in the practical work of kindergarten principals managing human resources. Some of the empirical results should be published in book form and used in practice for HRM in kindergartens in times of crisis. The developed practical model and the conducted training sessions have high value and can be applied in practice.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I can state that the dissertation contains applied scientific results that represent a contribution to science and meet all the requirements of the Law on the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria, its regulations, and the corresponding regulations of Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski.”

The dissertation shows that the doctoral candidate Elena Nenkova Ivanova possesses theoretical knowledge and professional skills in Professional Field 1.1. Theory and Management of Education, and demonstrates qualities and skills for independent scientific research and adequate interpretation of results.

As a result of everything stated above regarding the dissertation, I give my positive evaluation of the conducted theoretical-empirical research presented in the dissertation and the abstract, and I propose to the esteemed scientific jury to award the educational and scientific

degree “Doctor” to Elena Ivanova in Professional Field 1.1. Theory and Management of Education.

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