

OPINION

by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Aksenia Borislavova Tileva
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on the dissertation thesis for awarding the educational and scientific degree "Doctor"
in the field of higher education 1. Pedagogical Sciences
Professional field 1.1. Theory and Management of Education
Doctoral Program "Management of Education"

PhD Candidate: **ELENA NENKOVA IVANOVA**

**Topic: "COMPETENCE-BASED APPROACH IN HUMAN RESOURCES
MANAGEMENT IN THE KINDERGARTEN IN CONDITIONS OF CRISIS"**

Scientific Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Dinko Gospondinov,

Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski"

Faculty of Education, Department of History of Pedagogy and Management of Education

1. General presentation of the procedure and the PhD candidate

By Order RD-38-317/01.07.2025 of the Rector of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" I was appointed as a member of the scientific jury for the defense procedure of the dissertation entitled "Competence-based approach in the management of human resources in the kindergarten in conditions of crisis" for the acquisition of the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in the field of higher education 1. Pedagogical Sciences, professional field 1.1. Theory and Management of Education, doctoral program "Management of Education".

The author of the dissertation is Elena Nenкова Ivanova, part-time PhD student at the Faculty of Education, Department of History of Pedagogy and Management of Education, with scientific supervisor Prof. Dr. Dinko Gospondinov. The set of materials presented by the PhD candidate includes the following documents: Curriculum Vitae in European format; dissertation thesis; abstract – in Bulgarian and English; list of publications on the topic of the dissertation; four articles.

Data on the PhD candidate:

Elena Ivanova holds a Bachelor's degree in Preschool Pedagogy and a Master's degree in Educational Management. Since 2017 she has been the Director of Kindergarten No. 178 "Silver Hoof" in Sofia.

The entire professional biography of the PhD candidate is in the field of preschool education, with a focus on the management of an educational institution. The high expertise she possesses is successfully projected in her publication activity, and the accumulated research and practical experience provide excellent opportunities for her

development as an expert and manager and contribute decisively to the implementation of the present study, related to the competence-based approach in human resources management in the kindergarten in conditions of crisis.

2. Relevance of the topic

The research is dedicated to a problem of high theoretical and practical significance – human resources management in the kindergarten in conditions of crisis, viewed through the prism of the competence-based approach. The author argues its relevance with the fact that crisis situations (economic, social, health) place the heads of educational institutions in front of serious challenges requiring high managerial competence and adaptability. The topic is timely and fits within the strategic priorities of Bulgarian education, related to improving the quality of management and the sustainability of institutions.

3. Knowledge of the problem

The doctoral student has long-standing expert and managerial practice and demonstrates excellent knowledge of the researched issue. Ivanova draws generalizations, makes conclusions, and convincingly presents arguments showing the role of the competence approach in the management of human resources (HRM) in the Bulgarian preschool system, emphasizing the lack of specialized teams in this field. As a result of this gap, it is emphasized that the competence of the kindergarten director acquires critical significance for the effective functioning of the institution, especially in conditions of crisis. The text discusses the main managerial activities related to HRM – selection, induction and mentoring, performance evaluation, training and development, as well as staff motivation. They are presented as key areas in which the competence approach provides a structured toolkit for analysis and for the realization of strategic change. This corresponds to international trends, in which HRM is seen not merely as an administrative function, but as a strategic resource for the sustainable development of the organization. Particularly important is the conclusion that the effectiveness of the competence approach depends not only on the definition of competence profiles but also on their dynamic updating according to:– the needs of the organization;– the specifics of the staff;– the specific conditions of crisis.

In this way, the approach is considered not as a static model but as a flexible managerial framework capable of reflecting changes in the external and internal environment. The final conclusion is that the competence approach supports the building of a proactive organizational culture, increases adaptability and sustainability in management. This places the discussion in a broader context – linking human resource management not only with staff effectiveness but also with the strategic sustainability of the institution as a whole.

The scientific-research aim of the proposed dissertation research is to study the specifics of applying the competence approach in the management of kindergarten human resources during a crisis and to develop an innovative model for the use of this competence approach..

4. Research Methodology

The chosen research methodology corresponds to the theoretical-empirical character of the dissertation. The study is focused on human resources in the kindergarten in conditions of

crisis (object) and on the application of the competence approach in their management (subject). In this way, a clear distinction is achieved between the system as a whole and the analytical perspective from which it is considered. The choice of object and subject is well-founded and corresponds to the current challenges in educational management, especially in the context of social, health, and economic crises.

The aim is ambitious and combines two dimensions – theoretical (study of the specifics) and practical (development of a model). This emphasizes the applied character of the dissertation. The tasks are precisely formulated and create logical sequence: from review and analysis of the literature, through empirical study of the state of HRM in kindergartens, to the development and approbation of an innovative model.

The good structuring is impressive – the tasks are divided into theoretical, empirical, and practical-applied, which demonstrates systematicity and methodological precision.

The formulated research questions fit into the contemporary discourse on crisis management and HRM. They emphasize: the role of competences for effectiveness in crisis conditions, the identification of specific competences required of kindergarten staff.

The hypothesis and sub-hypotheses are clear, verifiable, and logically linked to the aim of the study. Particularly valuable is the emphasis on the role of the director, on pre-crisis preparation, and on the effect of the innovative model. This allows empirically substantiated conclusions with practical value to be drawn.

The author correctly defines the scope of the research by indicating limitations regarding: the chosen approach (focus on the competence approach), the thematic scope (HRM, and not the whole crisis management), the territorial and temporal scope. This clarity is a strong side of the study, as it shows a realistic scale and academic integrity in outlining the validity of the results.

The methodological toolkit is rich and combines qualitative and quantitative approaches: theoretical analysis, document analysis, surveys, interviews, focus group, modeling, expert evaluation, statistical processing.

The use of different respondent groups (directors, pedagogical and non-pedagogical staff) ensures triangulation of the data and increases the reliability of the conclusions.

The toolkit is purposefully developed (questionnaires, focus group scenario, expert evaluation sheet), which is an indicator of depth and precision of the research work.

The presented methodological framework demonstrates a high degree of academic maturity in the definition of object, subject, aims and tasks; an adequate and diverse research toolkit, consistent with the nature of the problem; clearly formulated hypotheses and limitations, which ensure the reliability and validity of the research. A possible weakness could be the limited territorial sample, which hinders broader generalization of the results. Nevertheless, the study has potential for future expansion and further development.

5. Characteristics and Evaluation of the Dissertation and Its Contributions

The dissertation consists of 232 standard pages, including an introduction, 3 chapters, conclusion, references, and appendices. The bibliography includes 184 titles excluding online resources, of which 70 are in Bulgarian, 6 in Russian, and 108 in English.

In the introduction, the grounds for the choice and development of the dissertation topic are clearly formulated and substantiated. The author unfolds their research logic, where very precisely formulated object and subject of the dissertation, aim, tasks, and research hypothesis stand out. The main research methods are presented.

The structure of the dissertation is logical, complete, and corresponds to the academic requirements for research leading to the educational and scientific degree of “Doctor.” The content clearly outlines the transition from theoretical foundations, through empirical research, to the development and evaluation of a model. This demonstrates methodological consistency and stability of the research framework.

Chapter One – Theoretical Framework of the Competence Approach

This chapter lays the conceptual-theoretical foundation by defining the key terms, examining the essence and development of the competence approach, as well as its application in human resource management (HRM). A well-structured progression is followed: from conceptual apparatus through historical development to specific application in kindergartens. The link between the general theory of HRM and the specific context of preschool education is strengthened, which is a strong point. I consider that Chapter One provides the necessary academic depth and demonstrates critical knowledge of contemporary scientific literature.

Chapter Two – The Competence Approach and Crisis Management

This chapter focuses on crisis management and crisis HRM, making a connection with educational institutions. Types of crises, management strategies, and specifics of crisis HRM are discussed. The need for a competence approach as an instrument for overcoming crisis situations in kindergartens is outlined. It can be concluded that Chapter Two serves as an intermediate bridge between theory and empiricism. It positions the research within the broader framework of crisis management while simultaneously showing its peculiarities in the educational environment.

Chapter Three – Empirical Research

This is the most extensive and detailed chapter. It includes: research design (formulation, methods, toolkit); a variety of data collection methods: surveys, interviews, focus groups, document analysis, simulations, expert evaluation; presentation of results from different instruments, with attention given to different respondent groups (directors, teachers, non-teaching staff). After data processing, a model for the competence approach in HRM under crisis conditions is presented, which passes through: brief description, theoretical framework, content, application procedure, expert evaluation. Chapter Three impresses with its depth, diversity of tools, and rich empirical base. The presented model is the central

contribution of the dissertation, substantiated both theoretically and empirically. The proposed competence model has high practical value for kindergartens, as it clearly distinguishes the roles of directors, pedagogical and non-pedagogical staff. For directors, competences are identified for pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis periods, which enables targeted preparation and sustainable leadership. The inclusion of skills such as crisis communication, team management, and emotional intelligence is particularly important for working with parents and staff. For pedagogical specialists, general competences (planning, communication, stress management) ensure the preservation of the quality of education and care for children in difficult conditions. Specific competences (initiative, substitution, prosocial skills) support adaptation in cases of staff shortage and increased workload. The inclusion of non-pedagogical staff in the model is a valuable contribution, as this group usually remains outside such developments, but in reality they are key to maintaining the daily rhythm and children's safety. Their general and specific competences provide opportunities for effective teamwork and mutual support in crisis situations. Practical benefit also comes from the planned training through methodologies such as CrisisEDU, role-playing games, and simulations, which provide realistic preparation. Thus, the model becomes a tool for internal qualification and assessment of staff readiness. The most important contribution is the systematic approach that involves the entire educational community and supports the building of a resilient organizational culture capable of proactively responding to crises.

The conclusions synthesize the results from the three chapters and emphasize the scientific and practical contributions.

The conclusion contains a summarized evaluation and recommendations for practice.

The appendices are significant and demonstrate transparency of the research process – they include all tools and materials used in the study. This is an important indicator of scientific accuracy. The structure of the dissertation is academically sound, logically consistent, and methodologically substantiated. It allows for tracing the smooth transition from theory to practice, culminating in an original contribution – the development and expert evaluation of a model for human resource management in kindergartens under crisis conditions.

The listed contributions of the dissertation are distinguished by a clear separation between theoretical and practical-applied results, which emphasizes the systematic nature of the study. The theoretical contributions are of significant value as they summarize and systematize the competence approach in HRM, adapting it to the specific context of kindergartens. Particularly important is the distinction drawn regarding the characteristics of crisis HRM and their manifestation in preschool institutions, which contributes to expanding existing scientific understandings in the field. Additional value comes from the emphasis on leadership crisis competences, which are a key factor for managerial effectiveness.

The practical-applied contributions reinforce the importance of the dissertation for real practice. The empirical study provides a comprehensive picture of crisis management in kindergartens, with results that can be used to improve management practices. Particularly valuable is the developed and expert-evaluated model for crisis HRM, which combines theoretical frameworks with applicable solutions. The formulation of specific lists of

competences for managerial, pedagogical, and non-pedagogical staff demonstrates a high degree of practical usefulness and creates prerequisites for a multiplying effect in the preschool education system. Thus, the dissertation not only contributes to scientific knowledge but also offers tools for real change and for strengthening the resilience of kindergartens in times of crisis.

6. Evaluation of Publications and the Doctoral Candidate's Personal Contribution

The scientific publications of Elena Ivanova are related to the subject matter of the dissertation research. Both the topics and titles, as well as the content of the publications, are competently formulated, based on serious analyses, and clearly highlight her authorial position. The number of publications is four (one in 2021, one in 2022, one in 2023, and one in 2025) and corresponds to the requirements for the acquisition of the educational and scientific degree "Doctor."

The dissertation is the work of the author. It is distinguished by a scholarly style, appropriate for this type of research, while at the same time characterized by accessibility and readability. The structure of the dissertation project is well organized, and the conclusions are supported by carefully derived theoretical and empirical evidence.

7. Author's Abstract

The author's abstract meets the requirements, as it concisely and adequately reflects the content of the dissertation. No doubts arise concerning its originality.

8. Recommendations for Future Use of the Dissertation Contributions and Results

The decision of the author Elena Ivanova to engage in this research field and to propose a procedure for the application of a model for the competence approach in crisis HRM in kindergartens deserves serious attention and high evaluation. In this respect, I recommend:

That the dissertation be published in an appropriate format for wide use by pedagogical specialists, heads of educational institutions, and educational experts.

Given the scientific and practical value of the proposed model, it should be applied as an innovation within the framework of the existing legislation, and on this basis the impact of applying the competence approach in crisis human resource management should be evaluated not only in kindergartens but also in school education institutions. The analysis and evaluation of the applied model should be used to optimize and update the regulatory framework and management theory and practice.

Conclusion

The dissertation contains theoretical and practical results, which represent an original contribution to science and meet all the requirements of the Law on the Development of

the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria, the Rules for the Implementation of the Law, and the relevant Regulations of Sofia University. The presented materials and dissertation results fully comply with these specific requirements.

The dissertation shows that the doctoral candidate possesses profound theoretical knowledge and professional skills, demonstrating qualities and abilities for independent scientific research.

For the reasons stated above, I confidently give my **positive assessment** of the conducted research, presented in the dissertation, the author's abstract, the results achieved, and the contributions, and **I propose to the scientific jury to award the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" to ELENA NENKOVA IVANOVA**, field of higher education: 1. Pedagogical Sciences, professional field 1.1. Theory and Management of Education, doctoral program "Management of Education."

18.08.2025

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Aksenia Tileva
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Prepared by: ...

(Assoc. Prof. Dr. Aksenia Tileva)