

REVIEW

of a dissertation on:

"SOFT SKILLS DEVELOPMENT IN THE HOME EDUCATION PROCESS: AN INTERNATIONAL COMPARATIVE STUDY"

by Gergana Antonova Sakarski

Reviewer: Assoc. Prof. Maya Lyubenova Tcholakova, PhD

1. Procedure details

The procedure for public defense of the dissertation meets the requirements of the Act on the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and the Regulations on the Terms and Procedure for Acquiring Scientific Degrees and Holding Academic Positions at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski". Gergana Sakarski has submitted all the necessary documents for the procedure: CV, dissertation and abstract, declaration of originality and authenticity and a certificate of compliance with the scientometric indicators according to the minimum national requirements for the field of higher education 1. Pedagogical Sciences.

2. Biographical data

Gergana Sakarski graduated from the French Language School "Antoine de Saint Exupery" in Plovdiv. She holds a Bachelor's degree in Economics and Management, a Master's degree in Corporate Strategies and International Development from the University of Sofia-Antipolis in Nice, France, and holds a Global Career Development Facilitator certificate (Job Tiger, Sofia, Bulgaria). She is fluent in French, English and Italian and has many years of work experience and solid international experience in the field of career counseling and training and project management. For the last three years she has been a full-time doctoral student in a doctoral program in professional field 1.2. Pedagogy (Comparative Education).

3. Relevance of the dissertation topic

The topic of the dissertation reflects a contemporary and significant problem related, on the one hand, to the dominant orientation of education in the 21st century towards the formation

of "transferable" competences, in other words, skills for life and successful realization in different professional fields and roles, and, on the other hand, to the possibilities for their development not only in "traditional" but also in alternative conditions, that is, in the conditions of home education. The issue is certainly understudied both in Bulgaria and in an international comparative context, which gives the dissertation research a certain original and innovative character.

4. Structure and content of the dissertation

In terms of formal parameters, the dissertation submitted for review meets the requirements for such a type of scientific work, as it is arranged on 185 pages, divided into an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion, and contains all the other necessary "requisites" - appendices, which include an interview questionnaire, links to a questionnaire (online), lists of names of 45 figures and 13 tables that can be found in the text of the dissertation, as well as preliminary results of a survey with 13 home-educated individuals, on the basis of which the questionnaires used in the study were developed. The list of literature contains 136 sources, of which 117 are in Latin and 19 in Cyrillic, including scientific publications, regulatory documents, reports, websites, etc. It is noteworthy that the majority of the used and cited scientific publications are from after 2010, and among them those from the last 10 years predominate.

In terms of content evaluation, the overall impression of the entire dissertation is of a well-reasoned, thoughtful, implemented and presented international comparative study, which demonstrates the author's scientific research culture, as well as her skills in presenting a scientific text in a clearly arranged, comprehensible, impressively illustrated and easy-to-perceive form.

Logically, in the introduction, the doctoral student presents her motivation for choosing the topic, tied to its significance and relevance, as well as the chosen approach to its development. Gergana Sakarski sets herself the goal of "studying and comparing the development of soft skills acquired or developed in the process of home education in the studied countries" (p. 9), along with three sub-goals and tasks for each of the latter, as well as four research questions, the answers to which are sought with the help of relevant scientific and methodological tools.

The first chapter is devoted to an analysis of the "home education phenomenon" and its regulatory framework in countries selected by the author, providing a comparative analysis according to certain parameters. In the first paragraph, tracing terminological variations and

conceptual manifestations of home education in different national conditions, Gergana Sakarski makes an attempt to summarize and systematize essential and, in this sense, universal characteristics of the phenomenon under study. Its clarification also includes an interpretation of the motivation for choosing this educational alternative, as well as existing approaches, styles and practices of home education, and also offers her own generalizations and classifications of the above according to various criteria. The conclusion is made that the success of home education is due to the “possibility of rapid adaptation and change of approach according to the individual needs of each child” (p. 38), which is also one of its advantages. It seems that the listed “practices” are also not mutually exclusive, since the focus in all or most of them is also, in a certain sense, on their capacities for individualization. A place is given to the socio-emotional aspects with priority attention to the social ones, sharing the thesis that home education does not represent a barrier to successful socialization, as well as to the professional realization of home-educated individuals. The challenges in scientific research of the phenomenon are well reflected. The second paragraph of the first chapter is dedicated to an overview and analysis of the normative framework of home education, and I find the comparisons between the normative frameworks, as well as between the level of centralization in the management of school systems and the degree of regulation of home education by the control bodies in the respective countries studied particularly convincing (pp. 72-74). The summaries and conclusions in this first chapter are relevant and balanced and leave no doubt that Gergana Sakarski knows well and correctly interprets the issues that are the focus of the research interest.

Chapter Two discusses the concept of soft skills through their various definitions and groupings, and presents the author's own list (categorisation) of 50 soft skills, divided into 10 main groups, which are the subject of study in the empirical part of the research, along with the main challenges, or in other words limitations, of such research, in this case, hers. Both the general argumentation and the selection of specific soft skills are based on reports of international organizations on the "most in demand" ones on the labor market, as well as on the doctoral student's own professional practice and, accordingly, her assessment, which together allowed her to build her proposal. The above largely answers the question of why these and not other transferable competencies were selected, as well as subsequent questions related to the justification of the criteria for their assessment according to the groups outlined in the author's list. The approaches and practices launched to build and develop them are additionally based on relevant theories, such

as that of David Kolb, and others. The author's interpretation of each of the groups of skills under study is presented, along with possible strategies, practices, and approaches to their formation in the home education setting.

Particularly interesting is the third chapter or the empirical part, in which the doctoral student presents the design, purpose, stages, methods, instruments, and results of the study, all of which are provided in both narrative and illustrative form. The aim of the empirical study is “to outline a picture of the soft skills of homeschoolers from different countries and to draw conclusions based on the international comparative study conducted among homeschoolers and parents practicing homeschooling” (p. 129). This aim is addressed through interviews with homeschoolers, a questionnaire survey with homeschoolers and homeschooling parents, and a comparative analysis of the results between several countries, with the data processed using appropriate methods. Both the content of the instruments and the stages of the study are described and presented in a logical sequence and completeness. In the same way – in detail and as illustrated as possible in a series of figures and tables, the results of the empirical study are presented and analyzed. The subjectivity of the assessment, which the author correctly and in advance points out among the challenges, as well as the social desirability of such studies should be taken into account when analyzing the data and drawing conclusions. In this sense, it seems to me more appropriate to consistently speak of a comparison not of soft skills, but of assessments and self-assessments of soft skills, since the data only give us an idea of the latter. Of particular interest, at least for me, is the comparison of assessments of soft skills by country. It seems to me that some findings need additional clarification, such as the one that “a dependence related to cultural differences in assessment can be found in general” (p. 157). The same applies to the conclusion that “no dependences are found between the soft skills of home-educated individuals in the four countries...” (p. 158) in the direction of what dependences are sought. The highest and lowest values found in the assessment and self-assessment of specific soft skills by respondents in all countries provide scope for further analysis in terms of an outlined trend.

The conclusion synthesizes findings from the theoretical and empirical research and recommendations for practice and future research in the field of home education, which are logically derived based on the results and their analysis.

5. Scientific-theoretical and practical-applied contributions

The contributions mentioned by the doctoral candidate are largely relevant to the achievements of the dissertation. Among the scientific and theoretical contributions I would highlight the introduction of the problem of home education in an unambiguous way in the Bulgarian pedagogical and socio-pedagogical context, as well as the substantiation of the relationship between the development of soft skills and home education on the basis of an international comparative study of the problem. In addition, an indisputable contribution is the developed own toolkit for the assessment and self-assessment of soft skills with the potential for use in future international studies. As for practical and applied contributions, I believe that the dissertation contains prerequisites for the applicability of the proposed activities for the development of soft skills in the diverse practice of home education. However, I do not believe that an evaluation model has been established, nor are there references to one in the dissertation text itself.

6. Abstract

The abstract meets the requirements, corresponds to the structure and presents in a synthesized form the content of all components of the dissertation.

7. Publications on the topic of the dissertation

Five own publications on the topic of the dissertation in the period 2022-2024 are indicated, which fully satisfies, if not exceeds, the requirements for admission to defense. The publications are in collections of reports from scientific forums, most of them refereed and indexed in international databases of scientific information, and correctly reflect the results and stages of the dissertation research.

8. Personal impressions

My personal impressions of the doctoral student are entirely positive. I believe she possesses the qualities of a good researcher.

9. Notes, recommendations and questions.

As a reviewer in the internal discussion of Gergana Sakarski's dissertation project, I should note that she has correctly and to the greatest extent possible taken into account the comments and recommendations made to the draft dissertation at this preliminary stage. In this regard, I have no

additional comments, but I would like to ask the doctoral student how she sees the establishment of a credit system for validating the knowledge and skills of home-educated individuals and what specific recommendations she would make in this regard to the educational authorities in Bulgaria.

10. Conclusion

Gergana Sakarski's dissertation possesses the necessary qualities and scientific contributions that allow me to evaluate it **positively** and to propose to the esteemed scientific jury to award **Gergana Antonova Sakarski the educational and scientific degree of "Doctor" in the field of higher education 1. Pedagogical Sciences, professional field 1.2. Pedagogy (Comparative Education).**

Reviewer:

(Assoc. Prof. Maya Tcholakova, PhD)