

STATEMENT

by Assoc. Prof. Marina Pironkova, PhD,

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dissertation for the award of the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in the field of higher education 1. Pedagogical Sciences, professional field 1.2. Pedagogy (Comparative Education)

on the topic:

Development of Soft Skills in the Process of Home-schooling: An International Comparative Study

Author: **Gergana Antonova Sakarski**

Scientific supervisor: **Prof. DSc. Nikolay Popov**

1. Compliance of the procedure with the current legislation.

The statement was prepared on the basis of an order of the Rector of the Sofia University № РД-38-641/ 18.11.2024 г. on the procedure for conducting the defense for the award of the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" of a dissertation on the topic: "Development of soft skills in the process of Home-schooling: an international comparative study" of Gergana Antonova Sakarski, regular PhD student in professional field 1.2. Pedagogy, PhD programme "Comparative Education", with scientific supervisor Prof. DSc. Nikolay Popov.

2. General biographical presentation of the candidate.

Gergana Sakarski graduated in 2008 with a Bachelor's degree in Economics and Management from the University of Sofia-Antipolis in Nice, France, where she also completed a Master's degree in Corporate Strategies and International Development in 2009. She has more than ten years of experience as a consultant and coordinator of career seminars.

3. Relevance of the dissertation topic.

Homeschooling is an issue that affects a limited number of children and families, but its features and possibilities are relevant to make sense of the diversity of education in the changing modern world, and soft skills are a relevant topic in the present, marked by strong dynamics not only in terms of scientific knowledge, but also in the field of work and social processes.

4. Structure and content of the dissertation

Structurally, the dissertation follows the established practice of unfolding the research in an introduction, three chapters and a conclusion, which are followed by a declaration of originality, scientific contributions, references /sources/, acknowledgements and 5 appendices - 185 pages in total.

In the introduction the author justifies the interest in the topic and its relevance. Although it concerns a very small part of children and young people - not only for Bulgaria, but also for other countries in different parts of the world, home education and its possibilities for the development of human abilities is a topic that deserves in-depth research. The methodological part is set out in the introduction and the aim, objectives, object and subject of the study are defined. The theoretical and empirical methods of the study are presented to meet the purpose of the study.

The first chapter explores the issue of home schooling, focusing on its definition, the motives for choosing home schooling in the presence of an affordable public school. The author examines in the relevant national context concepts such as home education and home schooling, homeschooling, home education, instruction dans la famille, unschooling, analysing nuances reflecting essential features.

Parents' motivation for choosing home education in the presence of, and even in the presence of, compulsory schooling is an important aspect of the problem of home education and D. Sakarsky explores it in its historical and contemporary context. Key motivations related to personal experience, distrust of the school environment, religious beliefs, etc. are highlighted and Kunzman & Gaither's (2020) finding "Motivation is a highly dynamic element that can change over time..."(p.20). The approaches, styles and practices of home educating parents are analysed with a focus on home education styles (Lovette 2021). Gergana Sakarski also offers her own classification of home education approaches based on parents' teaching methods and goals. An important question related to the topic of this dissertation is that of the social and emotional aspects of home education, a question that does not receive a clear answer in 1.1.4. The author demonstrates scientific honesty by outlining the specifics of home education research and its limitations - inability to form a representative sample, case study orientation, instances of researcher bias. In the last part of the first chapter, 1.2, a comparative study of the normative framework of home education in 6 countries: England, Bulgaria, Canada, USA, France and South Africa is implemented. The analysis highlights considerable variation in regulation, reflecting the influence of tradition and culture. F. Sakarsky finds a direct link between the degree of centralization of education and the regulation of home schooling.

The second chapter is devoted to the problem of defining soft skills and the possibility of their development in the context of home education. The author draws on a wide range of sources in exploring soft skills - economic, political, pedagogical - and proposes a set of 50 skills divided into 10 groups: adaptability, communication skills, creativity and creative thinking, critical thinking, interpersonal skills, leadership, problem solving, teamwork, time management skills, and ethics. The author clarifies the importance of the ten groups of soft skills and suggests pedagogical approaches for their development in the home education setting. And here, as in

the previous parts, G. Sakarski creates tables and graphs to illustrate the analysis and to present in a summarized form the author's ideas.

The third chapter presents the results of an international comparative study of soft skills in home educated individuals. The individuals studied were from 7 countries which included Bulgaria, Canada, Namibia, France, South Africa, Spain and the USA. The empirical study includes a series of interviews with home educated individuals, surveys with home educated individuals and with parents of home educated individuals. Those surveyed by interview evaluated their practice as home educators and the soft skills they acquired. The survey of home educated individuals included 33 respondents from 5 countries who rated the 50 soft skills outlined by G. Sakarski, on a 5-point scale. The highest rated soft skills in the respondents' self-assessment were "learning and growth mindset," "logical reasoning," "empathy" and "responsibility," "written communication skills," and "imagination," which in the analysis are associated with the family's capacity to educate in the home environment. On pp. 149 the author notes the presence of respondents who would not choose home education for their children - 15%. Is there a relationship between these data and the country from which the respondents are from?

The research focus of the third chapter is comparison, which is carried out in two ways: comparison of soft skills self-assessment according to the countries in which the research participants live; and comparison of soft skills assessments according to the parenting approach and educational approaches used by parents. The first strand of comparison includes Bulgaria, Canada, the USA and South Africa. The author found similarities in the assessment of most soft skills development across the four countries, but also some country-specific differences. In the second strand, research evidence unequivocally points to the moderately structured approach in the countries studied (with the exception of France) and the authoritative parenting style as leading the way.

The conclusions and recommendations in the conclusion reflect the analysis of the topic in the theoretical and empirical part. The author raises as a recommendation the issue of developing soft skills more broadly as part of the activities of educators, social workers, etc. I also accept the recommendation to validate the knowledge and skills of home educated persons in Bulgaria.

5. Scientific-theoretical and practical-applied contributions.

The contributions are seven and without being grouped as scientific-theoretical and practical-applied reflect correctly what has been achieved in theoretical and empirical research.

6. Abstract.

The abstract meets the requirements and reproduces the dissertation in terms of structure and content. The volume of the abstract is 37 pages and is well formatted.

7. Publications on the dissertation topic.

The publications of G. Sakarski are written by a single author and reflect the dissertation topic in terms of content. They are 5 in total, 3 of them are in English and are in books from

international forums on comparative education. The other two are in the books of the FNOI conferences of 2022 and 2023.

8. Notes , recommendations, questions.

In relation to the recommendations in the conclusion, I would like to ask a question: What should be the training modules for home educating parents, taking into account the diversity of motivations, approaches and practices identified?

9. Conclusion

The dissertation has the necessary qualities, it is well formatted and meets the requirements of the Academic Staff Development Act and the Regulations of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" for the acquisition of scientific degrees and titles. The topic is important, the author has demonstrated skills in conducting scientific research in the field of comparative education, in analyzing and interpreting research results, in forming a scientific text. The scientific value and contributions of the dissertation are significant and contribute to the enrichment of knowledge about Home-schooling as a successful practice in countries of different continents.

On this basis, I give a positive assessment of the dissertation and propose to the esteemed scientific jury to award the degree of Doctor of Education and Science to Gergana Antonova Sakarski in the field of higher education 1. Pedagogical Sciences, professional field 1.2. Pedagogy (Comparative Education).

23.01.2025

Assoc. Prof. Marina Pironkova, PhD