

OPINION

by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Mariela Petkova Todorova-Koleva,

Lecturer at the Department of Pedagogy, Faculty of Education, Veliko Tarnovo
University

on the dissertation entitled

“Development of Soft Skills in the Process of Homeschooling: A Comparative
International Study”

author of the dissertation: Gergana Antonova Sakarski

academic advisor: Prof. DSc Nikolai Popov, PhD

scientific area: 1. Educational Sciences

professional field: 1.2. Pedagogy

scientific specialty: Comparative Education

faculty and department: Faculty of Educational Sciences and Arts, Department of
“Social Pedagogy and Social Work”

1. Compliance of the procedure with the applicable regulatory framework

The materials presented by Gergana Antonova Sakarski regarding the defense of the dissertation are in accordance with the conditions and procedures established by the Law on Higher Education, the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria, and the Rules for the Conditions and Procedures for Acquisition of Academic Degrees and Occupation of Academic Positions at Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”. Upon reviewing the documents, I found no procedural violations or inconsistencies, either during the course of study or at the initiation of the dissertation defense procedure and awarding of the PhD degree.

2. General biographical information about the candidate (education, qualifications, professional experience, etc.)

Gergana Antonova Sakarski possesses impressive international managerial experience. She graduated from the French Language School “Antoine de Saint-Exupéry”, Plovdiv. She holds a Bachelor's degree in Economics and Management and a Master's degree in Corporate Strategies and International Development, obtained in Nice, France, at the “Sofia Antipolis” University. According to her CV,

Ms. Sakarski speaks three languages besides her native one—French, English, and Italian—which enables her to conduct broad international research.

In her professional career, she has worked as a trainer, expert, consultant, organizer of numerous events and seminars, leader of international projects, creator of career development programs for students, evaluator of essential soft skills of students from various nationalities, and developer and organizer of the seminar “Talent Identification and Career Development (TI&CD) Programme” in Europe, which reflects the selection process for young talent programs of Fortune-100 companies, among others.

Her CV clearly demonstrates the doctoral candidate's excellent skills in management, project work, consultancy, and training. Her rich international experience and expertise align with her research activities focused on soft skills and provide a solid foundation for successfully completing her dissertation. Additionally, her active participation in various project activities (three projects at Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”) and academic forums and events (ten participations between March 2022 and July 2024) is evident from the supplementary documentation, as is her sharing of professional experience, which has earned her four awards in competitive procedures: “Student of the Year” at Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” (May 2023) and second place in the “Doctoral Student of the Year” category, Sofia, Bulgaria (May 2023); finalist in the international finals of the “My Thesis in 180 Seconds” competition, Montreal, Canada (October 2022); winner of the audience award and first place, awarded by an international jury, in the national finals of “My Thesis in 180 Seconds” competition, Sofia, Bulgaria (June 2022).

3. Relevance of the dissertation topic

Undoubtedly, the dissertation topic is relevant and significant for pedagogical and social-pedagogical theory and practice for several key reasons: the lack of scientific publications and research related to homeschooling in Bulgaria; the growing interest among various communities in the country in practicing homeschooling; and soft skills as key competencies for the successful personal and professional realization of young people.

4. Structure and content of the dissertation

In terms of structure and content, the dissertation meets the requirements for a dissertation. The content is divided into three chapters, an introduction, findings, and a conclusion. At the end of the dissertation, a declaration of originality, scientific contributions of the dissertation, references, the author's publications, acknowledgments, and five appendices are included.

The total volume is 185 pages, of which 168 are the main text. The bibliography includes 136 sources, 19 in Cyrillic and 117 in Latin (English and French). The text integrates 45 figures and 13 tables.

The dissertation is distinguished by its scientific style, clarity, and readability, and accuracy in referencing various sources. It is logically organized and well-structured. Key concepts are defined with a delineation of their meanings as used in the study.

The first chapter provides a detailed presentation of various aspects of homeschooling, including terminological clarifications, styles and models of application, regulatory frameworks, approaches, and interpretations in different countries—Bulgaria, the USA, England, France, South Africa, and Canada. The comparative analysis is accompanied by a tabular representation of the main points of convergence across countries based on specific indicators. The social and emotional aspects of homeschooling are analyzed, including critical remarks on the subject.

The second chapter focuses on substantiating the key soft skills that are the focus of the empirical study. Based on contemporary international studies in the field, such as the “2021 LinkedIn Workplace Learning Report,” the World Economic Forum's “Future of Jobs Report 2023”, UNICEF's “The 12 Transferable Skills” report, and practical observations from the author's eight years of professional experience, 50 soft skills are identified and grouped into 10 categories. These categories serve as criteria for conducting the comparative analysis. The individual groups are thoroughly described, along with activities for developing these skills in homeschooled students. Numerous examples in this context deserve attention, as they can serve as a guide for families choosing the homeschooling path for their children. The assessment of the challenges in studying soft skills among homeschooled individuals also demonstrates the author's ability to forecast, critically reflect on the research process, and exhibit objectivity and depth in her research.

The analysis of the literature and current research presented in the first two chapters outlines the discussion nature of the research problem and reiterates the relevance of the topic. It also evidences the theoretical readiness of the doctoral candidate to develop the presented topic.

The third chapter presents the international comparative study of soft skills in homeschooled individuals from seven countries—Bulgaria, Spain, Canada, Namibia, the USA, France, and South Africa. The inclusion of seven countries is impressive and deserves positive evaluation. The comparative analysis seeks and presents various correlations, such as educational style, geographical and territorial characteristics, highlighting Ms. Sakarski's research skills and her strive for comprehensiveness in research results. The results are presented through quantitative and qualitative analysis, following the chronology of the research activity. They are illustrated with figures and tables, facilitating their perception.

The conclusions are based on the theoretical analysis of the literature and the conducted empirical research. The recommendations at the end of the text outline new perspectives for the author.

5. Scientific-theoretical and practical contributions

Based on the conducted theoretical-empirical study, the main contributions are formulated in seven points, which I fully accept.

I particularly emphasize the connection between educational and social activities, the opportunities of homeschooling in social services (especially those aimed at specific target groups), and training social workers to recognize homeschooling as an educational form, for which I commend the doctoral candidate.

6. Abstract

The submitted abstract is 37 pages long and corresponds to the structure and content of the dissertation.

7. Publications on the dissertation topic (content and fulfillment of scientometric requirements)

The attached list of publications includes five publications that thematically and substantively correspond to the research topic and exceed the required minimum. Three of the publications are in English and published in sources indexed in secondary databases such as EBSCO, ERIC, and DOAJ (Directory of Open Access Journals). The scientometric indicators meet the requirements for obtaining a PhD degree.

Ms. Sakarski's participation in various seminars and conferences allows for the popularization of the results of the conducted theoretical and empirical research.

8. Personal impressions

My acquaintance with Ms. Sakarski is based on the materials provided for this procedure. However, I would like to note the close connection between the doctoral candidate's professional skills and background and her dissertation, as well as her activity during the training, which underpins the quality of the material.

9. Comments, recommendations, and questions

There are no comments on the dissertation; however, I would like Ms. Sakarski to share her opinion on whether, in addition to the recommendation for “*creating a credit system for validating the knowledge and skills of homeschooled individuals in Bulgaria*” (p. 167), other forms of monitoring by public services and institutions are necessary, and if so, what forms?

10. Conclusion

The presented dissertation entitled “Development of Soft Skills in the Process of Homeschooling: A Comparative International Study” is distinguished by its scientific style. It is well-structured, with logically connected and interdependent parts. The dissertation demonstrates the doctoral candidate's engagement with the researched problem, as well as her skills in conducting in-depth scientific research

and having a clear vision for constructing and implementing the design of a pedagogical study, highlighting the main contributions. All this gives me grounds to express my positive evaluation and recommend awarding the educational and scientific degree “Doctor” to Gergana Antonova Sakarski in the field of higher education 1. Educational Sciences, professional field 1.2. Pedagogy (Comparative Education).

10.01.2025

**Prepared by:
(Assoc. Prof. Dr. M. Todorova-Koleva)**