

REVIEW

by Assoc. Prof. Lilyana Ivanova Rusanova, PhD

for the award of the educational and scientific degree "Doctor"

Higher education field 3. Social, economic, and legal sciences

Doctoral Programme: „*Social policies and social work* “

Autor: *Ekaterina Georgieva Uzhikanova*

Title: „*Social work with children and families in support of early child development* “

Scientific supervisor: *Assoc. Prof. PhD Ludmila Vekova, Paisii Hilendarski*

University of Plovdiv

1. General description of the submitted materials

By order № ПД-21-121 dated 20.01.2023 г. of the Rector of Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv (PU) I was appointed as a member of the scientific jury to hold a procedure for the defence of a dissertation thesis entitled „*Social work with children and families in support of early child development*” for the acquisition of the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in the field of higher education 3. Social, economic, and legal sciences, professional field 3.4 Social activities, PhD Programme: „*Social policies and social work* “.

The author of the dissertation work is Ekaterina Georgieva Uzhikanova – full time PhD student at the Department of Social activities with scientific supervisor Assoc. Prof. PhD Ludmila Vekova from Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv.

The set of materials presented by Ekaterina Georgieva Uzhikanova is in accordance with Art. 36 (1) of the Regulations of the Academic Staff Development at PU, and includes the following documents:

- a request to the Rector of the PU to open the procedure for defence of the dissertation thesis.
- curriculum vitae (European format);
- minutes from the department council reporting of the readiness to open the procedure and a preliminary discussion of the dissertation.
- dissertation thesis.
- abstract.
- a list of the publications on the topic of the dissertation.
- copies of the scientific publications.
- declaration of originality and authenticity of the attached documents.

The PhD student has attached four publications related to the topic of the thesis that meet the minimum national requirements under Art. 2b, par. 2 and 3 of the Law on Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and, respectively, Art. 24, par. 1 of the Implementing Regulations of the Law on Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria (for the educational and scientific degree "Doctor ").

The described materials that accompany the dissertation thesis meet the requirements of the Regulations of the Academic Staff Development at PU.

2. Brief biographical data for the doctoral student

In 2002 Ekaterina Uzhikanova obtained the Bachelor educational qualification degree in “Social activities” programme and continues his education in the Master educational qualification degree by building up his competences in the field of management of social organizations. From 2019 she was enrolled as a full-time PhD student in the Department “Social activities” in Doctoral programme „Social policies and social work” and from 2022 he holds the academic position of "assistant".

The autobiographical data shows persistence in the development of the doctoral candidate in the field of social activities and the orientation of the doctoral thesis is a logical consequence, both accumulated competencies and theoretical knowledges acquired during the training, and of the professional skills acquired as an expert in different social organizations.

The professional experience of the doctoral student is also entirely related to social work and social institutions, and more specifically to the overall management of the activities of social work organizations, direct social work with parents and children, implementation of educational activities, supervision, team management in organizations working with children and families. The impressive professional experience of the candidate and the achieved results testify to serious motivation, commitment and clearly emphasized professional interest in the field of early childhood development support. The biographical data of Ekaterina Uzhikanova show an exceptional symbiosis between acquired education and professional path, testify to a thorough knowledge of the research problem, which undoubtedly affects the effectiveness of the presented dissertation work.

3. Relevance of the topic and appropriateness of the set goals and tasks

The problem field, in which doctoral student`s research is oriented, is aimed to clarifying the importance of early support for children and families, which requires the identification of appropriate forms of support for parenthood, child development and the prevention of risks of health, emotional development, social performance, and future development. The dissertation research is dedicated to a significant and relevant social and scientific problem. On the one hand, the timeliness of the topic is dictated by the fact that preventive social practices to support early childhood development in Bul-

garia are very limited and the focus is on children who have already been identified as at risk and preventive, early informative support to parents is minimally advocated. On the other hand, there is a lack of in-depth theoretical and empirical research in Bulgaria which explain to existing practices and to argue the need for new approaches, methods, and actions in order to increase the quality of services. Given these arguments, I find the dissertation research timely and relevant, as it focuses on a significant problem of social practice and at the same time enriches existing theory. As a result of the collected empirical and theoretical information, a model for integrated support, accounting all elements of its management (providers, funding, control system, accountability and coordination, efficiency, and outcomes) is presented. All this transforms the model into a comprehensive vision, containing a new view, structure, and organization of support for children and families. Based on the idea that social practice needs enrichment, I find the dissertation work to be a serious and thorough, complex study of an understudied problem that can improve the effectiveness of the support provided to children and families.

4. Knowing of the problem

The overall dissertation work is distinguished by the obvious priority to clarify the importance of the early childhood development, periodization, and the role of the paternity, through the prism of leading theoretical concepts. The theoretical analysis is enriched by following of the Bulgarian practice, the system of social services for children and families which operated in Bulgaria, the legislative, and political approaches, as well as the levels of impact of social work. A significant contribution for the full representation of the problem is not only the in-depth reflection of the doctoral student on social practice and her activity as a manager of various social organizations, but also the capably chosen research methods. The knowledge of the individual processes in the implementation of social work, as well as the provision of social services through document processing, information on work procedures, monitoring of the case and its reporting has been studied and presented in detail. The chosen methodology for carrying out the empirical research also deserves credit for the overall design of the dissertation thesis. The theoretical analysis, the doctoral student's analytical approach of, the tools used, the recommendations made, and the justified model demonstrate a very good knowledge of the problem, an ability to substantiate essential conclusions both in terms of existing theories and in relation to practical reality.

5. Research methodology

I would especially like to emphasize the merit of Ekaterina Uzhikanova for the toolkit with which an in-dept study is realized, which highlighting the real deficits in social work with children and families, as well as summarizing the positive social practices and challenges for professionals.

Within of the dissertation a questionnaire for the implementation of a survey among 104 participants who conduct social services is development. The developed toolkit contains 27 questions that purposely seek empirical information about current approaches and methods which support early childhood development and the role of families. The questions are clearly formulated, tailored to the profile of the respondents, and correspond to the previously set goals and objectives of the dissertation work. The selected respondents also contribute to the quality of the information obtained, as they are experts with experience in the field of social services provided. Open questions are also provided, through which additional information on the problem can be generated. The author's research is supported by in-depth interview with experts with practical and administrative experience in the fields of conducting social services, managing teams, and evaluating the effectiveness of the support provided to children and families. Supplementing the questionnaire with the application of the qualitative method allows establishing the personal position of the respondents and contributes to the subsequently developed model for integrated support for early childhood development. The selected toolkit, as well as the collected empirical information, allow the realization of a thorough analysis and, most importantly, reasoned conclusions and recommendations. The developed toolkit meets on the one hand, the main objective of the dissertation, and on the other hand the collected empirical information is a sufficiently reliable basis for justifying a model for integrated support of early childhood development. In this way, the study has a scientific and practical-applied character and can be used to develop new approaches, methods, and activities to improve the effectiveness of social work with children and families.

6. Characteristics and evaluation of the dissertation work

The dissertation contains an Introduction, three chapters, conclusion, and appendices with a total volume of 161 pages, illustrated with 41 figures and 1 diagram. In the introduction, a thorough justification of the importance of the research topic is made, and even here the author's personal professional interest in the research problem can be clearly visible. There is a comprehensive, clearly defined, and well-structured conceptual framework - purpose, tasks, object, subject, reasonably selected research approach with relevant research methods and main hypotheses. The main components of the framework are precisely distinguished, which contributes to the good organization and implementation of the research such as design, procedure, and methodology.

In the first chapter, doctoral student Uzhikanova conceptually clarifies several definitions and concepts through the leading theoretical concepts and logically summarizes the importance of early childhood development and the family environment as factors for the development of the future potential of the personality. The theoretical analysis is enriched in the second chapter by tracing the Bulgarian practice, risk groups and protection in the field of social work with children and families,

the development of the social services system, preventive activities, and future priorities. The realized theoretical review refers to 105 sources of which 81 in Cyrillic and 24 are in Latin. In the third chapter, the author's conceptual-methodical part is presented, including a developed toolkit, methods of collecting the information, analysis of the accumulated information. The empirical data allow highlighting the challenges facing professionals, as well as deficits in the field of providing early support. Based on the analysis, a model of social work for integrated support of early childhood development was created.

Through the model and the overall dissertation thesis, the previously stated intentions of the PhD student to propose new approaches, methods, and activities to improve the effectiveness of social work with children and families are met. The model also corresponds to the working hypotheses of the research and allows to argue several recommendations to the state institutions involved in child protection policies and to the real service providers in their entirety - educational, social and health institutions at the local and regional level. The dissertation is well structured, the exposition is connected and logically coherent, each part ends with adequate conclusions and reflects the author's approach to the interpretation of the exposition. The conclusion reflects the achieved results of the overall research work. All this gives me reason to note that the dissertation work is a serious, consistent, in-depth and well-realized research with contributions to the enriching the existing theory and rethinking of the concept and vision of children and families support in Bulgaria.

7. Contributions and significance of the dissertation for science and practice

The topic of the dissertation has not been the subject of in-depth scientific research, and at the same time it acquires particular relevance in the context of the reform of social services, as well as the ongoing debate about the quality and effectiveness of services for children and families. In the dissertation, 5 contributions are indicated, which can be referred to the group of scientific-applied and contributions with practical applicability. Accepting fully the contributions formulated by the PhD student, I would highlight the following:

- Comprehensive follow-up of the existing theories and concepts for the early childhood development, procedural approaches in social work, practical activities to support children and families. The author's derived definitions enrich existing theories and concepts and can be used by professionals, theorists, and experts in the field.
- Systematic and in-depth analysis of the developed procedures, documents and practices in Bulgaria in the field of supporting children and families, which gives the opportunity to expand and enrich the scientific field in the field of social work and build an objective assessment of the current policies.

- A significant weight in the PhD student's search is the realized research. By design and selected methods, the research allows to draw significant conclusions regarding to the existing practice and to formulate applicable recommendations for its improvement.
- Similar research has not been conducted in Bulgaria so far, but they are necessary to shed light on the current problem of the importance of early childhood development and highlight the main challenges in practical social work in this area. Based on the collected empirical information, the realized analysis is a proposed model for integrated support of early childhood development with a high degree of applicability.

8. Evaluation of publications related to the dissertation work

The dissertation is accompanied by 4 scientific reports published at international conferences in Bulgaria, which are the author`s personal work of and reflect the main points of the dissertation work. I accept as correctly and convincingly formulated conclusions and main highlights in the presented publications.

9. Personal participation of the doctoral student

The dissertation presented for discussion is the personal work of the doctoral student, and the tools used to realize the purpose and prove the research hypotheses are distinguished by originality.

10. Abstract

The abstract is 32 pages volume and correspond to the content of the dissertation, meets the requirements for its preparation and adequately, comprehensively, and correctly presents the results of the conducted research on the topic of the dissertation.

11. Critical remarks and recommendations

The dissertation presented for discussion has indisputable merits. The overall research shows the doctoral student's professional commitment to the researched issues and significant research capacity. An overall reading of the dissertation leaves an impression of conscientious, coherent and ambitious work.

12. Personal impressions

I don`t personally know PhD student Ekaterina Uzhikanova, but in general reading of the dissertation one gets impression of a conscientious, consistent, and ambitious colleague.

13. Recommendations for future use of dissertation contributions and results

The dissertation presents empirical data, analysis, summaries, recommendations, and the author's model for integrated support, which have not yet been studied in Bulgaria. Given the merits of

the dissertation research and the contributions formulated, I recommend the promotion and wide dissemination of the dissertation work for the benefit researchers, practitioners, and experts.

CONCLUSION

The dissertation work submitted for discussion and defence was realized through a precisely conducted research, the results of which are of significant *scientific, scientific-applied and applied contributions*. The dissertation meets all the requirements of the Law on Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria, the Regulations for the Implementation of the Law on Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria, and the Regulations of the Academic Staff Development at PU. The dissertation shows that the doctoral student Ekaterina Georgieva Uzhikanova possesses in-depth theoretical knowledge and professional skills and demonstrates qualities and skills for independent conduct of scientific research.

In view of everything that has been said so far, I confidently give my positive assessment of the conducted research and I propose to the honourable scientific jury to award Ekaterina Georgieva Uzhikanova with the educational and scientific degree "doctor" in the field of higher education: 3. Social, economic, and legal sciences, professional field 3.4 Social work.

Gabrovo 01.03. 2023

Reviewer:

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/ Assoc. Prof. Lilyana Rusanova, PhD/