

STANDPOINT

**By Prof. Veselina Nikolaeva Ilieva, Ph.D.
Konstantin Preslavsky – University of Shumen**

of a dissertation for awarding the educational and scientific degree "**doctor**"
by: field of higher education 3. *Social, economic and legal sciences*
professional direction 3.4. *Social activities*
doctoral program *Social policies and social work*

Author: *Ekaterina Georgieva Uzhikanova*

Topic: *SOCIAL WORK WITH CHILDREN AND FAMILIES IN SUPPORT OF EARLY CHILD DEVELOPMENT*

Scientific supervisor: *Assoc. prof. Ludmila Pavlova Vekova, Ph.D., Plovdiv University "Paisii Hilendarski"*

1. General presentation of the procedure and the PhD student

By order No. PD-21-121 dated 20.01.2023 of the Rector of the Plovdiv University "Paisiy Hilendarski" (PU), I have been appointed as a member of the scientific jury to ensure a procedure for the defense of a dissertation work on the topic "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 direction 3.4. Social activities doctoral program Social policies and social work. The author of the dissertation is Ekaterina Georgieva Uzhikanova - a full-time doctoral student at the Department of Social Activities, with supervisor Assoc. prof. Liudmila Pavlova Vekova Ph.D. from Plovdiv University "Paisiy Hilendarski".

The set of materials presented by Ekaterina Georgieva Uzhikanova is in accordance with Article 36 (1) of the Regulations for the Development of the Academic Staff of the PU.

The doctoral student has attached 4 publications.

Ekaterina Uzhikanova was born in 1979. In 2002, she graduated with a degree in "Social Activities" at TU - Gabrovo, OKS Bachelor, and in 2018 she graduated with a Master's degree at PU "Paisiy Hilendarski", with the professional qualification "Manager of Social organizations". During the period March 2019 - March 2022, he is a doctoral student in the Department of Social Activities at Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv.

Her professional biography is impressive. From 2003 to the present moment, she has been developing her competences in the social sphere, which is evident from the rich and detailed curriculum vitae according to the current procedure for acquiring the ONS "doctor".

2. Actuality of the topic

Presenting early childhood development as a complex process, there are many possibilities for it to be supported, even if there is no "visible" or "registered" need by the professionals. The more complete the acquisition of knowledge and skills in early childhood, the more qualitative and complete will be the child's handling of more complex tasks with increasing age, which also determines the importance of the need for support for children and families. This development is supported by the parents, the environment, the community and depends on their understandings, resources, capabilities and limitations. The relevance of the dissertation work is determined by the fact that the review of the available literature on the stated problem shows that empirically it is not

sufficiently developed and no comprehensive studies can be found in Bulgaria that directly examine the practice in relation to social work in support of early childhood development. These prerequisites also determine the need to define a unified understanding of the importance of early support for children and families, as well as to indicate suitable forms of support for parenting, child development and prevention of health risks, emotional development, social performance and the future development of children.

3. Knowing the problem

The PhD student knows the main theoretical aspects of the problem very well. This allowed her to systematically and multifacetedly clarify all issues on the subject and to present her own views and constructive solutions. The development is at the necessary scientific level. The style and language are durable.

4. Research methodology

The chosen research methodology allows achieving the set goal and obtaining an adequate answer to the tasks solved in the dissertation work. The research methods correspond to the objectives of the dissertation and the following methods were used in the course of the work:

- *Documentary method* - Study of basic normative documents related to the support of child development and parenting, with the aim of analyzing their action and determining strategic priorities and challenges.
- *Survey method* - Through it, the practice regarding the support of early child development in active social services on the territory of the country is studied.
- *Qualitative method – Interview*. The information obtained is a basis for summarizing important points in the direction of the dissertation goal and the task of developing a model of social work for integrated support of early childhood development.
- *Statistical methods* - Collected primary information was checked, coded and entered into a computer database for further statistical grouping, recoding and analysis. SPSS 17.0 software product for statistical processing and data extraction of information was used for data processing, and MS Office Excel 2007 was used for graphic analysis. Appropriate statistical analyzes were used in relation to the obtained results.

The choice of the specified methods shows the high scientific awareness in the field of empiricism of both the doctoral student and her supervisor.

5. Characterization and evaluation of the dissertation work and contributions

The dissertation has a volume of 161 pages and consists of an introduction, three chapters, summary, conclusions, recommendations for practice, as well as a list of cited literature - 105 titles, of which 81 are in Cyrillic and 24 in Latin. The dissertation contains 41 figures and one diagram.

Structurally, the dissertation is at the required level. The plan is drawn up in accordance with the set research goal and the doctoral student's desire to explore the problem as fully as possible. There is balance and logical connection between the individual chapters.

As already stated, the content of the dissertation is available in an introduction, three chapters, summary, conclusions, recommendations for practice.

In the *Introduction*, the doctoral student presents child development as a complex process - the more complete the assimilation of knowledge and skills in early childhood, the more qualitative and complete the child's handling of more complex tasks will be when he is older. Here, the object, subject, chapters and tasks of the dissertation are correctly defined. The research methodology is presented, focusing on the research methods themselves.

The first chapter is a detailed scientific analysis of *early childhood development - meaning and perspectives for support*. Here, early childhood development is presented in depth, in the context of the periods and importance of early childhood development. The problem of child development - needs and responsibility - is deepened. Early years and environment dependence are analyzed. In this sense, it centers on the fact that early childhood development is a new field of research, which is defined as "a new science, thanks to which we now know how important the early years are and the dependence on the environment - early experiences and the environment, as well as the child's interaction with adults. The attention of the reader of the dissertation is also directed to the effects and support of early childhood development - those of the family.

The second chapter focuses on *social work with children and families to support early childhood development*. Contemporary understandings of social work with children and families are indicated here. The thesis is advocated that social work with children and families becomes an important component of social policy and contributes to maintaining citizens' trust in the state. The state's child support policy as a complex system of strategies and programs, legal regulations and structures oriented towards their realization is an important component of the general social policy. Mainly, social work with children and families covers the risk target groups that need protection, help and support. The risks that have occurred for the child and the family determine the methods, approaches and knowledge necessary for impact and protection. The risks for children and 31 families are many - social, health, educational and others. Services and activities aimed at overcoming risks are at the core of social work with children and families. Social services and practices for supporting children and families are analyzed in detail.

The third chapter presents an *empirical study of existing social work practices in support of early childhood development*. Documentary method, survey, interview and statistical methods were used. A leading factor in analyzing the data is the inclusion of the defined number of users according to their support needs. The data on the consumption of the individual services and results indicated in the respective years represent the indicative role of the project in meeting the needs of the wider community. This approach fully responds to the understanding of the meaning and importance of social politics and social work, associated with the creation of conditions and the achievement of positive social change.

Practices of social work in support of early child development in active social services throughout the country have been studied. The research was carried out through a survey of specialists working in social services on the territory of the country. The research focuses on existing social services related to early childhood development support. The results of the study summarize information about the need to create a new model of social work for early childhood development - integrating social, educational and health support.

An extremely reliable analysis of the recorded empirical information was made, which once again brings honor to the doctoral student and her supervisor. On the basis of this analysis, reliable conclusions and generalizations are also realized.

A model of social work for integrated support of early childhood development was built.

In the *Conclusion*, it is deeply emphasized that despite the available forms of impact on the risks for children's development and opportunities for support, the issues of building safe communities, the focus of which are children, especially vulnerable groups of them, are also connected with the creation of practices that favor a change in the understanding of the meaning of child development. The needs of children and families create prerequisites for implementing one or another form of support.

This is my analysis regarding the presented content in the dissertation development.

As for the scientific and scientific-applied achievements in the dissertation work. Characterization of the main achievements. Here, the construction of a *Model of social work for*

integrated support of early childhood development should be placed in the first place. The model presents a new view, a new structure and organization for integrated support, which in practice is interconnected from the point of view of meeting the complex needs of the child - health, education and social. The presented model for integrated support of early child development also takes into account the influence of the environment on the child, his preparation for the important events in life, the passage through the individual stages of child development - from birth to the age of 7, and the importance of parenting. Integrated support in each stage of child development has its important priorities, which are discussed in detail in the dissertation.

I agree with the scientific and applied contributions of the dissertation work formulated by the doctoral student: they correspond to the justification of a new scientific problem, which is early child development. Theses in the dissertation are proven with new means, significant new aspects of the existing scientific problem and theories in the field of early childhood development are shown, modern research methods are used in this proof. The dissertation development has its great significance for the development of science and the field of social activities, as its conclusions, summaries and recommendations can be easily implemented in the real practice of social work.

6. Assessment of the PhD student's publications and personal contributions

The list of publications of doctoral student Uzhikanova includes 4 articles published in 2021. All of them correspond to the topic of the dissertation development and are independent, without the participation of other colleagues. The results of the publications - as well as those of the dissertation work can be used in the real theory and practice of social work.

My assessment of the personal participation of the doctoral student in the conducted dissertation research is as follows:

1. According to my general impression, the dissertation has been prepared at a high professional level with adequate orientation and reference to sources related to the epistemological issues of demography. It shows the extraordinary presence of the personality of the doctoral student.
2. It is fresh, written in clear language and with clear statements. No room is left for linguistic misunderstanding and hence for discussion based on misunderstandings. Logical precision impresses, and in some places gives real pleasure.
3. The dissertation is a well-structured and logically arranged scientific work, which opens the doors of students to serious knowledge, which shows the true high scientific level of the doctoral student.

7. Abstract

The abstract reflects the main points in the dissertation. In terms of structure and content, it has been developed according to the requirements.

8. Recommendations for future use of dissertation contributions and results

I have no questions or criticisms. I have the following recommendation: in order to popularize the dissertation work, I recommend that it be published as a monograph, as it will be useful to those working in the social sphere.

CONCLUSION

The dissertation *contains scientific, scientific-applied and applied 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 (ZRASRB), the Regulations for the Implementation of ZRASRB and the relevant Regulations of PU "Paisiy Hilendarski".

The dissertation shows that the doctoral student Ekaterina Georgieva Uzhikanova possesses in-depth theoretical knowledge and professional skills in the scientific specialty of *Social policies and social work*, demonstrating qualities and skills for independent conduct of scientific research.

Due to the above, I confidently give my *positive assessment* of the conducted research, presented by the above-reviewed dissertation work, abstract, achieved results and contributions, ***I propose to the honorable scientific jury to award the educational and scientific degree "doctor"*** to Ekaterina Georgieva Uzhikanova in the field of higher education: 3. Social, economic and legal sciences, professional direction 3.4. Social activities, doctoral program Social policies and social work.

08.03.2023

Prepared the standpoint:

(sign)

Prof. Veselina Nikolaeva Ilieva, Ph.D.