

REVIEW

from: **Georgi Ivanov Shopov, PhD**

Professor at the Economic Research Institute - the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences,

Guest Professor at Plovdiv University "Paisii Hilendarski"

on a PhD thesis for the award of the educational and scientific degree "Doctor"

in: High Education Field "3. Social, Economic and Legal Sciences";

professional field: "3.4 Social Activities";

Doctoral Programme "Social Policies and Social Work".

Author: **Ekatherina Georgieva Uzikanova.**

Subject: "Social work with children and families in support of early childhood development"

Scientific supervisor: **Associate Professor Ludmila Pavlova Vekova, PhD** - Plovdiv University "Paisii Hilendarski".

1. General Overview of the Presented Materials

By order No. ПД-21-121 from 20.01.2023 of the Rector of University of Plovdiv "Paisii Hilendarski", I was appointed as a member of the scientific jury to hold a procedure for the defence of a dissertation work entitled: "Social work with children and families in support of early childhood development" for obtaining the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in the above-mentioned field of higher education, professional field and doctoral programme.

Author of the doctoral thesis is Ekatherina Georgieva Uzikanova – a PhD student in full-time studies at the Department of Social Works –University of Plovdiv "P. Hilendarski", Faculty of Pedagogy.

The set of materials presented on paper by Ekatherina Uzikanova is in accordance with Art. 36 (1) of the Regulations for the Academic Staff Development of PU, and includes the following documents: - an application to the Rector of PU to open the procedure for the defence of the dissertation thesis; – curriculum vitae (European format); – minutes from the department council reporting the preparedness to open the procedure and preliminary discussion of the dissertation work; – dissertation work; – abstract; – a list of scientific publications on the subject of the dissertation; – copies of scientific publications; – declaration of originality and authenticity of the attached documents.

2. Brief Biographical Data for the PhD Student

Ms. Uzikanova holds a bachelor's degree in social activities (acquired at TU - Gabrovo) and a master's degree "Manager of social organizations" (acquired at the PF of PU "P. Hilendarski"). During the period March 2019 - March 2022, she was a full-time doctoral student in the Department of "Social Activities" under the doctoral program "Social Policies and Social Work", awarded with the right of defense. All of Ms. Uzihikanova's professional experience, gained after 2003, is in the field of social activities. A predominant part of it is related to children and families, and since the end of 2016 she has been the manager of the Centre for Early Childhood Development (CECD) - Asenovgrad. From October 2022, she is also an assistant in the "Social Activities" department at the Faculty of Arts of the PU. In addition, the candidate has serious experience in the implementation of social projects financed by national and international institutions. All this is a solid basis for the accumulation of theoretical and practical knowledge, skills and experience in social activities in general, and in particular in social work with children and families, which are the focus of the peer-reviewed dissertation work.

3. Relevance of the Subject and Adequacy of the Purpose and Tasks

From a scientific and scientific-applied point of view, this actuality stems, in my opinion, from several more important circumstances: (1) the focus of the research are problems related to the provision of integrated support for early childhood development; (2) this support is most closely related to the offer and provision of social services in the community, which fits into the policy for the implementation of social work outside specialized institutions and corresponds to the professional direction of the dissertation; (3) the study contributes to the confirmation of early childhood development as a potential and investment in success, security and stability at the individual, family, and community level; (4) the dissertation offers the author's vision and recommendations for the development and use of methods and approaches in social work for integrated support of early childhood development at the individual, national and institutional level, which is in response to an indisputable societal need ; (5) from a scientific point of view, the PhD thesis poses research challenges discussed in the literature and related both to the clarification of key concepts and to methodological issues in the creation of a model for integrated support of early childhood development, helping social workers in their activities with children and their families.

The relevance of the problem developed in the research is argued in its introductory part and the arguments presented there do not cause any objections. The relevance of the topic finds its place and expression in the objective and specific tasks set and developed in the dissertation.

4. Problem knowledge

The PhD student demonstrated a very good knowledge of the state of the problem. It stems both from her many years of professional practical experience as a social worker, incl. 6 years as manager of the Centre for Early Childhood Development (CEDC), as well as from her work with national strategic and regulatory documents and scientific publications related to the development of dissertation work. In the first and second chapters of the dissertation, where the theoretical aspects predominate, she shows knowledge of the institutional framework and the essence of social activities with children and their families, as well as the ability to evaluate the literary material by systematizing the opinions and views of others authors, but also to present them through my own eyes. The design of the empirical study and the interpretation of its results also reflect a deep knowledge of social work with children and families.

5. Research Methodology

The chosen research methodology allows achieving the scientific goal and obtaining adequate answers to the tasks set in the dissertation. For this purpose methods such as: a study of literature sources, strategic and normative documents of the Republic of Bulgaria and the EU; analysis of statistical data and of documentation and processes of the pilot project of the CEDC-Assenovgrad, in which the author participated; own empirical sociological research (ESR), including a survey with a standardized questionnaire for professionals working in different social services (quantitative research/method) and semi-structured interviews with managers of social services in the country (qualitative research/method). The processing of the answers of the respondents in the survey was carried out using the standard statistical product SPSS, and the analysis and interpretation of the results is the expert work of the author. Synthesis as a used method allows the formulation of generalizations and conclusions related to the goal and tasks of the study.

6. Characteristic and Evaluation of the PhD thesis

The dissertation is constructed and implemented along "traditional" axes:

- *Introduction* - with a clearly formulated object, subject, goal and tasks, hypotheses and methodology of research (p.6). The goal and the 6 tasks presuppose the logical structure of the work, which is aimed at their achievement.

- *Theoretical part* presenting the theoretical basis and institutional framework of the study. This part encompasses the first and second chapters, dedicated respectively to: present the understanding of the nature, periods and importance of early childhood development and the possible key areas for its support through social work (first chapter); the nature and content of the social work with children and families in support of early childhood development (second chapter).

This first part was developed by systematizing the views of many Bulgarian and foreign authors. This reflects the in-depth work with numerous scientific and institutional publications (WB, UNICEF, UNESCO, WHO, MLSP, ASA), on the basis of which the author's point of view on the issues under consideration is also presented, e.g. on early child development (p. 8), on the role of the family as an unchanging factor in the child's life (p. 18), on good parenting skills and responsible parental behaviour (p. 18 et seq.).

The main results and conclusions in the first part can be summarized as follows: offering own definitions of early childhood development (p.8-9) and responsible parenting (p.19); the defence of the concept that early childhood development is not only related to the support of the child in this period, but is also decisive for his/her future realization as a full-fledged person (p. 13); the priority role of the family and the social environment for the development and support of the child (p. 14; the author's fig. 1 on p. 16); the general conclusions regarding the role of early childhood development in an individual and social aspect, and of the family environment as a key factor in early childhood, affecting the child's abilities in adulthood (the notorious "first seven years of child rearing" - p. 21); the structure of the level of impact of social work on children and the family (presented in the author's fig. 2 on p. 25), which also determines the choice of appropriate methods to work with them; the structured description of the roles of social services (preventive, protective, mediating, reintegrating, integrating, complementary, auxiliary), presented in the author's fig.5 on p.66; the structure and examination of the factors and actors for the development of an adequate policy in support of early childhood development (author's fig. 6/p.68 and fig.7/p.70); the adopted understanding of a complex approach to the needs of users, which must unify in a single framework the professional competences of many specialists (p.67), as well as the structuring of resources for positive parenting (both internal for the parent and the family, and external for the family), among which are health, educational and social services (p. 34), laid down in the model proposed further down as components of integrated support. This last one is an illustration of the *logical construction and consistency of the development*.

- *Empirical part* (third chapter, item 1 and item 2), containing: a separate short methodological part (in point 1. Organization and methodology of the study); approbation of the methodology by conducting a "real" field ESI; analysis and summarization of the results of the surveys (containing 27 questions) of 104 specialists from all over the country, working in various social services, **as well as** semi-structured interviews, including 5 questions to 9 managers of social services in the country (in point 2 Analysis and summarization of the results of the conducted research, with two subsections - 2.1. Research of a pilot project - Centre for early childhood development - Assenovgrad and 2.2. Research of social work practices to support early childhood development in active social services on the territory of the country).

The survey of 104 specialists is not representative in nature, but its results, as well as the interviews, enable to summarize information needed for the creation of a new model of social work. The model is essentially aimed at overcoming *the identified in the empirical research deficits in social work supporting early childhood development*, such as: insufficient focus on parent training activities, prenatal support and mobile work. (p. 112); the weak, and in some places, missing integration, coordination and interaction between the key partners from the individual sectors - social, educational and health (p.113); the lack of resources, such as fi-

nancial, educational, supporting practice, supervision (p.113); the weak advocacy and the lack of support for one of the most important groups of children from 0 to 3 years (p.114), etc.

The development of the ESI toolkit and the analysis of its results were carried out by the colleague Uzikanova and are subordinated to one of the key tasks of the dissertation - constructing an author's model of social work for early childhood development. This is also an *illustration of the logical structure and consistency of the development*.

- *Prescriptive "constructive" part* (third chapter, point 2.3), the focus of which is the proposed by the author new model of social work for early childhood development, integrating social, educational and health support. The model is guided by the idea of combating the child poverty and social exclusion, and was created with the "understanding that the needs of communities are related to planning in the context of satisfying individual needs, mainly realized in the practice of social services that are relate to individuals, groups and communities". The model specifies the conceptual scheme of integrated support presented by the author (fig. 9/p.79), including five groups of interconnected social, health and educational services to meet the diverse needs of clients of the Centre for Early Childhood Development – the interconnectedness, the complementarity, along with the interchangeability, are characteristics of service complexity in the broad sense of this notion as offering, providing and consuming services.

The model includes four main elements: objectives, target group, structure and main activities (p. 122 and the following ones.), and the author's vision is summarized in the Scheme 1 (p. 126).

This section also provides specific recommendations on social policy for children and families related to the activity of institutions with a responsibility and role in supporting children and their full development (p.129 - p.131) - e.g. to state institutions implementing child protection policies, to educational, social and health institutions at local and regional level.

- A *conclusion* that summarizes the main results and assumptions from the research. It also contains assessments confirming the initial research hypotheses (p. 136-137).

The material on which the results, conclusions, assessments and contributions of the dissertation work are based leave no doubt in their authenticity and credibility as a consequence of the conscientious research work of the author. The research goal and objectives stated in the introduction have been achieved. It should be noted that the COVID 19-pandemic directly affected the duration of the empirical work (September 2020 - March 2022), but does not negatively concerned the quality of the information obtained, serving as a basis for the construction of the proposed model of social work for early child development, integrating social, educational and health support.

The dissertation presents the PhD student as an *author who can organize and conduct independent scientific research* (which is one of the goals of any doctoral program) *and with good academic writing skills*.

7. Contributions and Significance of the PhD thesis for Science and Practice

In the previous section of the review, the main results and achievements contained in the different parts of the thesis was already highlighted. These results and achievements are of both a scientific nature (achieved most notably in the first two chapters) and an applied scientific nature (in chapter three and especially in chapter four). More specifically:

(a) The scientific contributions are expressed in:

- The justification with own arguments of the necessity and importance of social work with children and families in support of early child development as a scientific, but also a practical, problem with an evident relevance and in need of targeted additional scientific research.

- The upgrading of scientific knowledge through: systematization of existing concepts and on this basis - offering own definitions for key definitions for the dissertation such as e.g. "early childhood development", "responsible parenting"; highlighting the factors and actors for the development of an adequate policy in support of early childhood development; the connection of this development with the support of the child in this period, but also with his/her future realization as a person; the offering of classifications and structures of objects and processes from the field of research - e.g. the levels of impact on children and families of social work with them, the structuring of resources for positive parenting, the justification of the need for a complex approach to the needs of children and families related to early childhood development and the application of this understanding in the construction of a model for social early childhood development work, integrating social, educational and health support.

(b) The scientific and applied contributions are mainly in the proposed model of social work for integrated support of early childhood development to combat child poverty and social exclusion - prepared on the basis of a theoretical study and analysis of the results of its own ESI, carried out using the author's methodology. This model has grounds for application and development in practice, and the results of the dissertation can be useful for inclusion in the curricula of various disciplines and in extra-academic forms of teaching on the integrated support of early childhood development.

8. Assessment of Publications

The PhD student has submitted full copies of 4 of her individual publications in collections of reports from scientific conferences, of which 1 international and 3 national ones. All publications are in Bulgarian and are from 2021 and 2022, i.e. - from the period of the doctoral study. They are on the topic of the dissertation, and in such a way, intermediate results of it have received publicity among scientific circles. It is noteworthy that some of the publications (e.g. "Development and perspectives of the social service model - Centre for early childhood development") present parameters from the work of the doctoral student at the CECD - Assenovgrad, aimed at its optimization as a place to present an integrated social service. These questions have also found a place in the dissertation.

All reports are published in edited collective volumes, which meets the national criteria. With the submitted 4 publications (carrying 40 points) and with the submitted peer-reviewed dissertation (50 points), the candidate meets the minimum national requirements for the ESD "Doctor/PhD" (80 points).

9. Personal Contribution of the PhD Student

My assessment is that the peer-reviewed dissertation is an outcome of the PhD student's own conscientious efforts, and that the results contained in the dissertation are to her personal merit. The literature and other sources used are correctly cited and clearly distinguished from the author's text, and I have not noticed any elements of plagiarism.

10. Abstract

The abstract correctly presents the structure of the dissertation; it synthesizes the main highlights of the research, reflects the achieved results, as well as the contributions proposed by the author. As a technical inaccuracy, I would point out that, unlike the content in the dissertation itself, the detailed structure of the introduction mentioned in the abstract is redundant. In the abstract, the research methods are presented in a better and more structured manner.

11. Critical Remarks and Recommendations

I have no comments on the set of materials. My critical comments and recommendations are as follows:

- The scientific discussion in the review and systematization of opinions and evaluations of other authors could be even more clearly expressed and deepened through broader personal opinions/arguments on the issues under consideration.
- Statistical data and official documents from more distant years are used in some places in the dissertation, e.g. various Action Plans, Strategies (for the de-institutionalization of child care), Reports of the MLSP and ASA (see p.47-51). On the one hand, this is normally related to the stage at which the relevant text was worked on during the doctoral study (started in 2019), but – on the other hand, it affects the relevance of the assessments at the time of the present defence. E.g. on p. 36 data from an opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee from 2011 on children at risk of poverty or social exclusion is given, but no more recent data (which show an improving trend) from the Monitoring of Social Inclusion and Living Conditions (SILC) of NSI or Eurostat are used.
- There are some technical shortcomings in the paper, e.g. (a) on p. 109 a text is repeated which is already given on p. 85 (about the structure of the respondents in the survey); (b) in the arrangement of the titles in "Literature", the normative documents should be at the beginning, followed by the titles of the Bulgarian publications and of the foreign publications; (c) a table with the abbreviations used, which is missing now, would be useful for the reader.
- In the analysis of the results of the survey, the basic ("null") distributions of the respondents' answers were used, but no analyzes were made of the so-called "cross – distributions" of the answers to at least two questions, which makes possible to draw more specific characteristics and conclusions - for example, crossing answers to some of the questions from 1 to 24 with answers to some questions from 25 to 27 of the questionnaire for specialists (Appendix (1)).
- As I indicated above, interconnectedness, mutual complementarity, along with interchangeability, are characteristics of service complexity in the broadest sense of the term. The question of whether the integrated support model allows and "anticipates" interchangeability of the services in it has been left out of the author's attention. The difference between "complex" and "integrated" services also needs further clarification.
- In the short part about financing (p.117-118), it is noted the possibility of providing integrated support according to the proposed model to be financed primarily as a "delegated state activity" (i.e. - based on the current financial standards, with their shortcomings), but "mixed financing" is also not excluded, without clarifying what exactly it means - whether it is state + municipal financing or whether it is state financing + private resources (along the public-private partnership-which is mentioned on p.118). In this context, regardless of the fact that financing is outside the research tasks, it would be useful to clarify which of these forms has the greatest advantages and whether it can be "preferred" in this case; also - do fees paid by users have a place in this "mixed financing".
- The goals and target groups as elements of the "Model of social work for integrated support of early childhood development" (see Scheme 1 on p.126) are clearly described, while the structure and main activities are only mentioned, without some discussion/description in the main text, which disrupts the logical link with the integrated support scheme in fig.9/p.79.

12. Personal impressions

My personal professional impressions are related to the Uzikanova's participation in departmental meetings and discussions about her work during the annual attestations in the course of her doctoral study, as well as from consultations related to the preparation of the dissertation. My impressions are of a conscientious researcher, demonstrating a desire and ability the academic work to be combined and enriched by practical work as a social worker and head of a unit of social services for children and parents.

13. Recommendations for Future Use of the Dissertation Contributions and Results

The suggested social work model for integrated support of early childhood development to alleviate child poverty and social exclusion can be used by social workers in practice. Results of the dissertation may be useful for inclusion in the curricula of university departments of social work and in extra-academic forms of training in integrated support of early childhood development.

In her future work, Ms. Uzikanova could focus her efforts on additional development of the model from point of view of the content of the activities and services included in the model, the management and financing of the integrated support in the context of the national and local policies. Also, to the extent that the issue of integrated social support of early childhood development is valid for other countries as well, the colleague could look for opportunities to publish articles in reputable journals, incl. in foreign editions. I would also recommend that she continue to work on her academic writing style by clearing the text of details unrelated to the goals and objectives and by simplifying individual phrases as much as possible, and to avoid redundant, parasitic words and phrases.

CONCLUSION

The dissertation thesis contains scientific and applied results, which become an original contribution to science and meet all the requirements of the Academic Staff Development Act in the Republic of Bulgaria (ASDA), the Regulations for the Implementation of ASDA and the relevant Regulations of Plovdiv University "Paisii Hilendarski".

The dissertation proves that the PhD student Ekatherina Georgieva Uzikanova possesses in-depth theoretical knowledge and academic professional skills, demonstrating – by her hereby assessed work, abilities for independent conduct of scientific research.

On this basis, I confidently give my *positive assessment* of the conducted research, presented by the above-reviewed dissertation work, abstract, achieved results and contributions, ***and I propose to the honorable scientific jury to award the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" to Ekatherina Georgieva Uzikanova*** in High Education Field "3. Social, Economic and Legal Sciences" professional field "3.4 Social Activities", Doctoral Programme "Social Policies and Social Work".

22.02.2023

Reviewer:

prof. Georgi Shopov, PhD