

REVIEW

by Prof. Rozaliya Yordanova Kuzmanova – Kartalova, PhD

St. Cyril and St. Methodius University of Veliko Tarnovo

Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria

of a dissertation on the award of the educational and scientific degree "Doctor"

in the field of higher education: Field of Higher Education 3. Social, Economic and Legal Sciences

Professional field 3.4. Social Activities

Doctoral Program "Social Policies and Social Work"

Author: Maria Hristova Sirakova

Topic: Social work and well-being in families of children with disabilities

Supervisor: Prof. Nelly Ilieva Boyadzhieva, PhD, Plovdiv University "Paisii Hilendarski"

1. General Presentation of the Procedure and the PhD Student

By Order No. PD 21-1448 of 12.07.2024 of the Rector of the University of Plovdiv "Paisii Hilendarski" (PU), I have been appointed as a member of the scientific jury for providing a procedure for defending a dissertation on the topic "Social work and well-being in families of children with disabilities" 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 program "Social Policies and Social Work". The author of the dissertation is Maria Hristova Sirakova – a PhD student in part-time education at the Department of Social Activities with a supervisor Prof. Dr. Nelly Ilieva Boyadzhieva from the University of Plovdiv "Paisii Hilendarski".

The set of materials presented by Maria Hristova Sirakova, on which the opinion was prepared, includes the following documents: CV in European format; dissertation; abstract; a list of scientific publications on the topic of the dissertation; copies of scientific publications; Declaration of originality and authenticity of the attached documents.

Maria Sirakova's educational training gives a request for broad competence in the field of humanities and psycho-social support, the skillful combination of which is established in the dissertation. Her basic specialty was acquired in 2004 at the University of Plovdiv "Paisii Hilendarski" with a qualification - Bachelor of Philology and teacher of Bulgarian language, literature and history. In 2008 she graduated with a Master's Degree in Psychology at the University of Veliko Tarnovo "St. St. Cyril and Methodius". In 2011 she acquired a certificate of specialization from the Medical University, Plovdiv in applied psychology and psychotherapy, and in 2016 she received additional qualification as a pedagogue of people with hearing impairments from the University of Plovdiv "Paisii Hilendarski". Since March 2019 she has been a part-time PhD student at the Faculty of Pedagogy of the University of Plovdiv, Department of Social Activities.

Her career path is interesting and dynamic, related to both the educational and social areas of expertise, and one can take into account the purposeful and consistent construction, development and application of specific psycho-social competencies in practice and the acquisition of additional competencies in this direction through various courses, qualification programs, projects, seminars, conferences, etc., namely: from 2003 to 2005 she was a history teacher – lecturer at "Peyo Yavorov" Primary School, Cherven village; From 2004 to 2008 she was an educator at the Tanyu Voyvoda Children's Children's Hospital, Asenovgrad, and in the period 2006 – 2008 she was the Acting Director of the Tanyu Voyvoda Children's Children From 2008 to 2014 she worked as a psychologist at the University of Plovdiv "St. Archangel Michael", Asenovgrad, with a short break in 2011-2012; in 2014 she was a psychologist at the Center for Children's Studies, Asenovgrad; 2014 – 2015 he performed psychological work again at the University of Plovdiv "St. Archangel Michael", Asenovgrad; in 2015 she worked on the project "Provision of integrated social services and services related to children from 0 to 3 years of age and from 3 to 7 years of age" at the Community Center, Asenovgrad, and in 2016 she worked as a psychologist at the Community Center; in the period 2016 – 2020 she worked as a psychologist at the Center for Early Childhood Development, Asenovgrad Municipality, and from 2021 to the present she has been a social assistant at the Municipality of Asenovgrad, while from 2020 to the present she has been a psychologist at SU "St. Sedmochislenitsi", Plovdiv.

In summary, it can be said that her professional and work path are ideologically and practically related to the problems of her dissertation research. It is a logical continuation for combining experience and practice with scientific research, analysis and new field implementations in the field of social services and school work, related to the diagnosis and prevention of various risk factors in children and their families and for intervention in social problems.

The biography of Maria Sirakova shows that the dissertation student is an informed, motivated and professionally prepared person for the implementation of this type of scientific research, with great potential for quality expertise and opportunities for effective proposals for social practice, visible in its scientific results. Another important emphasis and prerequisite for the success of a scientific development is the professional authority and commitment of its scientific supervisor - Prof. Dr. Nelly Boyadzhieva.

Regarding the language competence – Maria Sirakova is fluent in Russian and uses English.

2. Relevance of the topic

The problem of social support for families of children with disabilities is of increasing relevance given the increasing number of such families both globally and in Bulgaria, increasing the risk conditions in which people live and the variety of risk factors influencing this. The lack of sufficient information in the community about effective approaches to minimize the risk of giving birth to a child with a disability and for the realization of a more favorable, predictable and secure life for children and families is a prerequisite for filling this vacuum with new scientific developments proving the need for effective, adequate and timely measures and actions.

Focusing on the family-oriented approach in working with such families, and not only work aimed at covering the needs of the child with a disability, is a necessary and modern way of

caring in such situations, of helping and supporting each family member and of creating conditions for a better quality of life for the entire family infrastructure. The conviction that through the family it is possible to help each family member permanently and qualitatively is of high importance and an urgent need today in professional social practice and a necessary approach to the work of specialists.

The highlighted highlights are just a few strokes, arguing the relevance and significance of the problem under study in theoretical and practical terms - to offer effective approaches to improving the quality of life of such families.

In this sense, in summary: the studied problem is of high scientific and scientifically-applied value, offering analyses of fundamental theoretical statements, concepts and approaches, and modern practices for deriving practices for social assistance and socio-personal support specific to the risk group of families with children with disabilities.

The tasks that are implemented in the dissertation are in the direction of the set goal and cover the problems of research in theoretical, empirical and practical terms.

3. Knowledge of the problem

The literature used in the preparation of the dissertation is modern and up-to-date. The theses are substantiated by classical scientific concepts, adequately selected according to the specifics of the research problem - families with children with disabilities.

The author refers to fundamental and modern scientific sources from Bulgarian and foreign authors - a total of 78 sources, of which 36 are in Cyrillic, 26 in Latin and 16 electronic sources.

The dissertation student has a deep knowledge of the issues she is researching. She bases her research on integrative knowledge of pedagogical, psychological, social and socio-pedagogical settings and concepts. She successfully handles the conceptual apparatus of the social medium, social work and its practical application. The analyses are based on consolidated definitions of social work. She knows the normative regulation in the social area related to families with children with disabilities and successfully interprets it. Analytically derives different opinions of foreign and Bulgarian scientists, building a theoretical basis for research, in accordance with the scientific mechanisms of research, analysis and synthesis of information, examining fundamental theoretical statements for social, pedagogical and psychological support. She argues for the transition from a medical to a social model for caring for families with children with disabilities, as well as the application of family-oriented and resilience approaches in working with this risk group of families. On this basis, she successfully derives the specific profile of a family with a child with a disability – status, needs, problems, which successfully undergoes empirical research and analysis to search for opportunities to improve his quality of life.

The theoretical searches logically lead to the author's decision to study the reflection of social work with families with a child with a disability in social services on the subjective well-being of the family system, as well as to study the attitudes and benefits of applying the family-oriented approach for progressive change in the status of the family with a child with a disability.

4. Methodology of the study

The scientific apparatus of research – object, subject, purpose, tasks, hypothesis, is formulated precisely and sets a clear framework for theoretical-empirical research. The research methodology is adequate to the set goal. Appropriate methods are used for research, analysis and synthesis of information, which allows the achievement of the tasks set in the dissertation and for verification of the hypothesis, namely that: the principles of social work, which focus on the support and resources of families with a child with a disability, significantly affect their subjective well-being and improve their quality of life; It is assumed that the positive impact of working with families with a child with a disability in social services can be increased through the development and implementation of a family-oriented approach.

The contingent of the study is 134 parents whose children with disabilities are users of social services and 23 specialists working in social services - Day Care Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities, Day Care Center for Children and/or Young People with Multiple Disabilities, Center for Early Childhood Development.

The children whose parents participated in the study were diagnosed with: Cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, Sturge-Weber syndrome, Autism, School skills disorder, Concentration and attention deficit.

Peculiar criteria for subjective well-being in a family with a child with a disability are derived, which are a correlative for assessment and progress in work.

A successful pilot and essential study has been conducted. In the pilot study, 18 and 97 parents of children with disabilities who use social services with an author's questionnaire were surveyed, and the socio-emotional well-being of the parents, the socio-emotional well-being of the child, the type and effectiveness of the assistance provided by specialists – psychologists, speech therapists, pedagogues, rehabilitators and therapists were studied. The following have also been implemented:

- an in-depth interview with an author's questionnaire with 19 parents of children with disabilities who attend social support centers, to collect information enriching the existing conclusions from the pilot and actual study, which is of an expert nature to identify the emotions experienced by parents when learning about the child's difficulty, the role of the supportive environment at that moment, going through the phases of grief, as well as for the positive impact of individual and group consultations on the quality of life, respectively on subjective well-being in personal and family aspect;

- Interview with an author's questionnaire with 23 specialists working in social units providing services to children with disabilities and their families, as the attitudes of parents to continue "cabinet" work have been studied, i.e. the work started by the specialists in the social units (psychologist, speech therapist, special pedagogue, rehabilitator) at home with their children and the readiness of parents to participate in individual consultations to improve the emotional state and to further develop parental capacity, as well as in groups for parents and the understanding of specialists regarding the motivation and involvement of parents in the process of work with a key role in determining the individual goals and needs of the child and in finding

appropriate solutions for their achievement, sharing positive experience regarding the family-oriented approach in their practice.

Summary: Theoretical methods are used to study scientific, normative and methodological sources. Empirical methods were applied - surveys and interviews, a structured electronic interview to study the opinion of specialists working in social units and an in-depth interview with parents to enrich the information received from the pilot and actual survey. The data from the survey of parents of children with disabilities using social services were processed using statistical methods – frequency analysis and χ^2 analysis. It can be said that the set of research methods is adequate to the purpose of empirical research - an appropriate complex of quantitative, qualitative and statistical research methods has been applied.

The set of theoretical, empirical, quantitative and qualitative methods of research and statistical data processing allows for in-depth research and empirical assessment of the application and effectiveness of the outlined model of a family-oriented approach in social work to support children with disabilities and their families for the overall functioning of the family system.

5. Characteristics and evaluation of the dissertation and contributions

The dissertation has a volume of 217 pages and is structured in an introduction, four chapters, inferences and recommendations, conclusion, contributions, bibliography from 78 sources, of which 36 in Cyrillic, 26 in Latin and 16 electronic sources and appendices. The text contains 28 figures and 11 tables.

In the first chapter "Theoretical analysis of the current state of the problem and scientific research", on the basis of a reasoned analysis of the state of the problem of "children with disabilities" in our country and around the world and of the problems of the family in raising children with disabilities, a comprehensive and in-depth analysis of the possibilities for help and support for such families through social work is made. Through analytical coverage of the legal and regulatory framework supporting parents and children with disabilities, as well as the nomenclature for social assistance and services for them, the specific characteristics of working with families with children with disabilities are differentiated. The medical and social model in the context of social work with families with children with disabilities is thoroughly examined, and on this basis the effectiveness of the family-oriented approach to this care and support is derived and argued. For the well-being of the family in society, the specific functioning of the family with a child with a disability in society is commented, as well as the role of parental self-efficacy as a way to deal with problems and the resilience approach, as a way for family members to grow and recover in such a situation.

The second chapter "Methodology and Design of the Research" successfully refers to the author's conceptual concept of empirical research – organization and characteristics of the research, methodology and methodology, stages, conduct.

Chapter Three "Statistical Analysis and Analysis of the Results of the Empirical Study and Interviews" duly and reasonably presents the results of the different stages of the study: from the pilot study; from the actual study of the variables related to the influence of social work on the subjective well-being of the family; from the in-depth interview with parents of children

with disabilities using social services; from the interview with specialists working in social units offering services for children with disabilities and their families.

The in-depth research and analyses of theoretical and empirical research are summarized in conclusions in a specially separate fourth chapter.

It can be noted that the scientific and theoretical base, the empirical part of the research done and the results achieved from them, lead to deep, reliable and significant contributions achieved in the dissertation.

Achievements of a contributing nature can be divided into three directions: scientific-theoretical, scientific-practical and practical-applied.

In scientific and theoretical terms: On the basis of the integration of scientific knowledge, theories, concepts and practices from social work, pedagogy and psychology, an author's theoretical-applied model for social support for families with children with disabilities, based on the family-oriented approach and resilience support, has been built and substantiated. By clearly highlighting the conditions and circumstances affecting the well-being of children with disabilities and their families, risk and protective factors have been identified for the successful coping of families with the challenges in raising and educating children with disabilities.

In scientific and practical terms: The role of interaction between specialists and parents for increasing parental competence, on the one hand, and for creating conditions, motivation and realization of shared marital and parental relations in a married couple raising a child with a disability, on the other, has been proven. The role of society in supporting families for a better quality, open and natural life in the community, through the support and encouragement of specialists and the supporting role of society for family inclusion is also argued. In this way, the relationship between the well-being of families and the quality of life of children with disabilities is confirmed through the model of a family-oriented approach in social work.

In practical and applied terms: The connection has been proven - the professional competence of social service specialists working with families with children with disabilities, the motivation of parents for informed care for their children with disabilities and for care and progress in personal, marital and social relationships. In general, the theoretical-empirical study substantiates the relationship: well-being of the family as a system and of each of its members separately – a more balanced, predictable and peaceful life for families with children with disabilities – greater progress in socialization, inclusion and increasing the social and personal skills of children with disabilities.

The reported results for a better quality of life for the whole family, achieved through the family-oriented approach in social work with families with children with disabilities, can favor the argumentation of new policies and practices regarding the care of families with children with disabilities at national level and approaches to working with them.

The results achieved are of a high degree of importance for the scientific knowledge of the developed and researched specific model for working with families with children with disabilities for their inclusion in the social and educational environment, based on the family-oriented and resilience approach. In practical terms, the work is useful and significant with the model for social inclusion of families with children with disabilities, characterized by integrity and care for each family member, which has been tested in social services in Bulgaria, working

with families with children with disabilities and can be a reliable basis for determining national policies and practices in this regard.

6. Assessment of the publications and personal contribution of the PhD student

The publications that the PhD student applies on the topic of the dissertation are four, one of which is under print and one is co-authored. The publications reflect the content of the dissertation and its main results at different levels – national, regional and university. They are both scientific-theoretical and practical-applied in nature. The publications are prepared in academic language, with scientific precision and correctness.

By type, they are as follows: article in a magazine – 2 issues (1 in press); article in a collection of scientific peer review – 2 issues. By place of publication: papers in papers of international scientific conferences in Bulgaria – 2 issues; article in a scientific journal of the Union of Scientists – 1 issue; article in a scientific journal of a university – 1 issue (in press); by language in which they are written: in Bulgarian – 4 pieces, one under seal; by the number of co-authors: individual – 3 issues, one under print; in co-authorship – 1 issue; with one co-author – 1 issue.

Regarding personal participation in the research, PhD student Maria Sirakova has attached a declaration of authorship and originality of the results and contributions to her dissertation research, stating that they are not borrowed from publications and research in which she does not participate.

7. Abstract

The abstract is developed in accordance with the regulatory requirements and reflects the main results achieved in the dissertation. The main theses set out in the dissertation are presented objectively, concisely and analytically. The scientific apparatus of research is correctly reflected. The theoretical justification and the current state of the problem of social work with families with children with disabilities, the methodology and design of the study, the organization and stages of its implementation, the analysis of the results of the study are presented, the conclusions reached by the PhD student are deduced. The contributions to science and practice and the list of publications on the dissertation are attached.

8. Recommendations for future use of dissertation contributions and results

The work in social services to support families with children with disabilities would benefit if the dissertation student Maria Sirakova shared with the wider professional community her results of the dissertation research by publishing them in a book body.

CONCLUSION

The dissertation contains scientific, scientifically-applicable and applicable results that 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 (RARARB), the Regulations

for the Implementation of the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and the Regulations of the University of Plovdiv "Paisii Hilendarski".

The dissertation shows that the PhD student Maria Hristova Sirakova possesses in-depth theoretical knowledge and professional skills in the field of the doctoral program "Social Policies and Social Work", demonstrating qualities and skills for independent scientific research.

In view of the above, I confidently give my positive assessment of the research carried out, presented by the dissertation, abstract, results and contributions analyzed above, and I propose to the honorable scientific jury to award the educational and scientific degree of "Doctor" to Maria Hristova Sirakova in the field of higher education: 3. Social, economic and legal sciences, professional field 3.4. Social Activities, PhD program "Social Policies and Social Work".

10.09.2024

Who prepared the review:

/Prof. Rozaliya Kuzmanova – Kartalova, PhD/