REVIEW

of the dissertation work of Anet Marinova Marinova-Mitova on the topic „Students' Personal Development in the Context of School Practices" for the award of the scientific and educational degree 'doctor', professional direction and field of higher education 3.2. 'Psychology'

by Prof. Dr. George Aleksandrov Madjarov, member of the scientific jury (St. Cyril and Methodius University of Veliko Tarnovo)

The dissertation and the educational program for the doctorate are coordinated by the Psychology Department of the Institute for Population and Human Research of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, with scientific supervisor Prof. Dr. Katia Georgieva Stoycheva. The dissertation was discussed at a scientific seminar of the Department of Psychology on June 5, 2024. A positive review of the dissertation was prepared by Assoc. Dr. Anna Alexandrova-Karamanova with a proposal to submit it for defense, accepted by a full majority.

(1) General characteristics of the dissertation - volume and structure

The submitted dissertation is 308 pages in length, structured in an introduction, three sections, a conclusion, references, and three appendices, in a proportional ratio. The dissertation meets the criteria for a complete research study, and conforms to the requirements and traditions for the formatting of a dissertation. It contains 32 tables in the main text and 17 tables in the appendices. Tabular and graphical layout is good. The abstract corresponds to the content of the dissertation and presents it's most important points.

The dissertation is dedicated to clarifying the existence of two elements of the professional competence of educators and psychologists working in schools, regarding the personal development of students: (1) their assessment of the properties of the mind, representing the essence of development, and (2) the application of them in of development-supporting pedagogical, diagnostic, correctional, medical and administrative actions prescribed legislatively in the Bulgarian Preschool and School Education Act (Article 178).

The dissertation research is based on the idea that the essence of the personality at any given moment is a set of multiple available to some extent its properties (i.e. traits; abilities; peculiarities). These properties change with time, as the personality changes. This change is personality development, when the most significant properties, called 'personality development

indicators', increase in size. The PhD student has compiled an extensive list of these 'indicators' (both presumed and recorded with some credibility), diligently searching for them in the most widespread explanations of modern psychology: in the works of Freud, Adler, Jung, Rogers, Maslow, Kelly, Skinner, Bandura, Allport, Sullivan, Erikson, Horney, Reynolds, et al. Briefly, they are: interest in one's spirituality and its realistic self-evaluation; overall adequate idea of reality and oneself in it; adaptability to reality; confidence in one's abilities; low anxiety; good self-esteem; activity; independence; originality; creativity; self control; ability to overcome setbacks and stress; striving for knowledge acquisition and professional growth; ability to empathize; adequate understanding of the viewpoints of others and the relationships between them; striving for cooperation with others and creating friendly relations with them; striving for a high esteem of self from others; ability to assume diverse roles in relationships with others; resilience of actions; healthy lifestyle.

Among the many 'indicators', author has selected the ones most consistent with Yuri Bronfenbrenner's 'ecological systems theory', arguing affect on personal development of each of the four layers of the social environment: (1) micro-environment (the immediate environment – family, school, neighbors); (2) meso-environment (the relationships between elements of the microenvironment, for example, the child's home and school); (3) exo-environment (the external social environment that indirectly affects development, for example, parents' workplace); and (4) macro-environment (global civilizational social, economic, cultural realities). The author included the selected 'indicators' in his research methodology: the three-part Personal Development and School Practices Questionnaire. Parts one and two contain the same 21 questions (containing the selected 'indicators'), answering which the professionals surveyed - teachers, school psychologists and pedagogical advisors - judged their importance and presence in the students, through which the doctoral student measured their judgement of them. With the third part of the methodology, which is a list of the legally prescribed forms to support personal development (Bulgarian Preschool and School Education Act, Article 178), the author measured the use of these forms by the specialists in their daily professional activities. This measurement also contains an interview with some of the specialists.

The dissertation research is 'exploratory' (p. 93), i.e. an initial exploratory phase providing guidance for upcoming more in-depth research into a new problematic that is not yet clearly defined and has not been studied in depth so far (https://research-methodology.net/research-methodology/research-design/exploratory -research; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Exploratory_research/). The dissertation has no formulated hypothesis. The goal is orientation in the problem area of 'assessment of the pedagogical staff for the personal development of the students, and their application of the legally prescribed

forms to support this development'. The research looks for dependencies between (1) the pedagogical staff's assessment of personal development and the skills to support it, and (2) characteristic features of this staff such as: professional specialization; age; duration of presence in the profession; age group of the students with whom the professional activity is carried out; size of the settlement where the professional activity takes place.

Although conclusive evidence is not expected from an exploratory study, the statistical processing of the information collected by the author registered the following regularities with statistical probability accepted as standard evidence of significance:

1. Teachers in large cities attach more importance to students' pursuit of knowledge and skills compared to their colleagues from smaller cities (argued on p. 117, p. 122, and p. 128).

2. The teachers' assessment of the importance of individual 'indicators' for personal development does not depend on the age group of students they teach (argued on p. 118).

3. Older teachers rate lower the importance of traits representing personal development and are more likely to think that the school has a weaker influence on them (weaker compared to the established idea about the magnitude of this influence; reasoned on p. 123).

4. Teachers understand to a greater extent the role of the supportive environment at school and its influence on the personal development of students than school psychologists and pedagogical advisors (argued on p. 128). The assessment of school psychologists and pedagogical advisers about the importance of indicators for personal development is similar (argued on p. 125).

5. Teachers rate higher (compared to school psychologists and to pedagogical counsellors) both the importance of social relations in the school environment and its influence on personal development (argued on p. 131).

(2) The candidate's literary awareness and theoretical background

196 publications have been cited, representing a reasonably comprehensive body of knowledge from psychology on students' personality development. The doctoral candidate has familiarized himself with the current status and available research in the area of his dissertation research. He has drawn from them a rationale for his ideas, which indicates a thorough theoretical background and literature awareness.

(3) Methodological approach

The selected area is studied with an original (constructed by the author) methodology for registering the professional knowledge and skills of specialists working in schools about the development of the child's personality and the forms of its support. The research methodology was a questionnaire, the data collected with which was supplemented with those from an

interview, after which the trends were measured with the standard statistical techniques, finding sufficiently reliable similarities and differences between the variables in the data. The methodological approach is consistent to the research aim and objectives.

(4) Significance and cogency of the results, interpretations and conclusions

I consider the obtained results, interpretations and conclusions to be sufficiently convincing and significant.

(5) Critical notes on the dissertation

1. Typing the dissertation topic into the network search engine illustrates the strong research, social, and even commercial interest in it. There is also a periodical with almost the same title as the dissertation: "Personal development of students in modern education": a scientific and methodical journal, published by the Faculty of Pedagogy of the Southwest University "Neofit Rilski" - Blagoevgrad (ISSN 1314-1996). These facts imply that the subject of the dissertation is formulated wider than its content, which hints at an unconscious impulse to project its inflated significance.

A dissertation topic traditionally should not be formulated as the title of a broad voluminous research field or as a journal title (by the way the dissertation title is equal to 'students' personal development'). In my opinion, specific formulation would be more correct. For example, the dissertation topic could be the stated by author ‘aim’ of the research (p. 93), somewhat 'Understanding of educational staff (teachers, school psychologists, pedagogical advisors) about the personal development of students, and the implementation of regulated forms of support', which the thesis reveals enough comprehensively. Of course, traditions are not a 'sacred cow', and at university websites we find a good number of dissertations whose topics are the titles of entire scientific fields. Therefore, the wording of the dissertation topic could be thought as a ‘feature, not a bug’ (more on the wording of a dissertation topic for those interested: Мавродиева, И., Й.Тишева. Академично писане за докторанти и постдокторанти. София, Университетско издателство „Св. Климент Охридски”, 2014, с. 17–25. ISBN 978-954-07-3798-0; Mavrodieva, I., Y.Tisheva. Academic Writing for Doctoral and Postdoctoral Students. Sofia, University Publishing House "St. Kliment Ohridski, 2014, pp. 17-25. ISBN 978-954-07-3798-0).

2. Reference to other publications could also be a bit more traditional in accordance with the region. All the citations in the thesis are authorial retellings and authorial interpretations of ideas from the publications referred to, without exact citation and without location of the reference in the publication, i.e. without the pages describing the argument of the idea for which the author referred to a particular article (except for the only one full citation

on p. 11). References from multiple publications without location pages occur in many places in the dissertation. For example, in order to argue for the idea that adolescence is the most favorable period for the study of personality development, the author has referred to 35 publications at once, 14 of which are quite voluminous books (p. 54). A reader determined to familiarize himself with the reasoning behind this idea would need to read them in their entirety. By the way, this style of referencing, somewhat widespread in scientific publications and probably considered by the author as an encouraged modern trend, also could be thought as a 'feature, not a bug' of the dissertation (more about referencing: Мавродиева, И., Й.Тишева. Академично писане за докторанти и постдокторанти. София, Университетско издателство „Св. Климент Охридски", 2014, с. 35–36. ISBN 978-954-07-3798-0; Mavrodieva, I., Y.Tisheva. Academic writing for doctoral students. "St. Kliment Ohridski" Publishing House, 2014, pp. 35-36. ISBN 978-954-07-3798-0).

The above remarks are not essential, are subject to elementary and quick correction in subsequent publications and research of the author, and do not reduce the scientific and applied-practical significance of the dissertation research.

(6) Scientific contributions

The main scientific contribution is original: on the basis of the current state of the problems of personality development in modern psychology, the author has formulated a set of personality properties, called by him 'indicators of personality development of students', representing most fully and most comprehensively the essence of development; measured the knowledge and judgment of pedagogical specialists, and their ability to use the recommended forms for personality development support. These contributions have scientific significance: the regularities of a specific problem area have been identified, complementing the knowledge of mind, and orienting the directions of its forthcoming study (also with conclusive research, too)).

Although exploratory studies usually do not argue for practical solutions, the dissertation, as well as its promoting publications, still have applied-practical significance: supplement the knowledge of the specialists working in the school, creating potential for their more successful professional career activity. The reference to scientific contributions presents them correctly.

(7) Publications meeting the national requirements for the degree of 'PhD'

The PhD student has submitted three published articles and one accepted for publication on the topic of the thesis. The articles present the results of the different phases of

the dissertation research: the current state of the researched problems; methods of researching these problems; results and conclusions of the research carried out by the doctoral candidate.

In the article "Inclusive Education in Bulgaria: Some Selected Moments in School Practices", author summarizes the implementation of inclusive education in our country, the difficulties and successes in its implementation, and demonstrates his impressive experience in its organization (as an advisor to the Ministry of Education and Science in the field of inclusive education; as a leader of a group for the development of the State Educational Standard for Inclusive Education; as a coordinator of national projects on "Inclusive Education" and "Support for Equal Access and Personal Development"). The doctoral student's in-depth understanding of the essence of inclusive education is realized in the dissertation as a study of all aspects of the assessment, assimilation and practice by the pedagogical staff of the legislatively recommended forms to support the personal development of students. By the way the genesis of these forms originates from the field of inclusive education (prevention of learning difficulties; additional work with students with special educational needs; additional training in academic subjects; additional consultations outside regular school hours; additional modules; speech therapy; team work of pedagogical specialists with different professional specialization with individual students) (Bulgarian Preschool and School Education Act, Article 178).

The presented publications are of high quality and testify to the PhD student's ability to present and promote his scientific ideas.

(8) Independence of the dissertation research

The research part of the dissertation has been carried out independently by its author. This refers to the Personal Development and School Practices questionnaire, the interview, the empirical material collected with them and its analysis. On the web I found no data on the existence and use of a similar questionnaire, interview and research results neither in Bulgarian nor in English, German and Russian. The independence of the research carried out in this dissertation is evidenced above all by the fact that the dissertation was admitted for presenting to the scientific jury by the 'Psychology' Department of the Institute for Population and Human Research of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, which means that it passed the mandatory authenticity check among the widest database of available publications.

(9) Conclusion

This dissertation "Students' Personal Development in the Context of School Practices" provides an objective view and analysis of a specific problem area in psychology. The dissertation proves the ability of its author to plan and organize a study; her competency to

apply experimental techniques for collecting and processing empirical data and subsequent analysis. I believe that Anet Marinova-Mitova is a well-rounded researcher, able to carry out serious scientific research in psychology. I estimate positively the dissertation, and I will vote for awarding the scientific and educational degree 'doctor' to Anet Marinova Marinova-Mitova.

Sofia,
September 2, 2024

Prof. George Madjarov,
doctor of psychology _____