

REVIEW

Of the dissertation thesis of Raya Stoyanova Georgieva for awarding the educational and scientific degree PhD in Professional Field 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Culture Studies (Sociology – General Sociology)

Dissertation Theme: **“Digital Technologies and Educational Inequalities in Secondary Schools in Bulgaria”**

Department of Sociology

“St. Kliment Ohridski” University of Sofia

Supervisor: Prof. D.Sc. Pepka Boyadjieva

Reviewer: Prof. D.Sc. Milena Iakimova, department of sociology, “St. Kliment Ohridski” University of Sofia

The set of materials submitted by Raya Georgieva are in compliance with the national and Sofia University’s Regulations on Academic Staff Development and contains all required documents. They show that the application is legitimate and the National Minimal Requirements for the academic position ‘professor’ are met.

The applicant has submitted original dissertation work and three academic publications in the thematic area of the dissertation.

The abstract describes the thesis as consisting of 190 pages of text and 20 pages of appendices. In fact, the volume is larger if the BDS is followed. The structure of the thesis is classical: introduction, three chapters, conclusion, bibliography and appendices (interview and focus group guides, consent forms, anonymised information on field research participants). The bibliography comprises 161 titles in Bulgarian and English. Some of the Bulgarian titles are actually acts of the Council of Ministers and the Ministry of Education.

Relevance of the dissertation topic

The dissertation research connects two themes of sociological analysis: the relationship between education and social inequalities, on the one hand, and the changes in educational spaces and processes arising from the introduction of digital technologies, on the other. Each of the two themes is topical, although, as the dissertation notes, there is already a good deal of research on them. The innovativeness of the proposed dissertation lies in placing the two themes in relation to each other: “Linking the role of ICTs to the impact of social inequalities in education” (p. 4).

Characteristics of the thesis, main contributions and issues

How the introduction of digital technology affects and is affected by social inequalities and their relationship to educational inequalities: this central question of the thesis focuses on “the use of electronic diaries and their effects in education” (p. 29) and their relationship to inequalities in the system, understood as the impact of the family environment on educational achievement.

The first part of the dissertation sketches the crises and global risks of present day modernity, some of which are naturally related to and stem from digital technologies. The second part

systematizes the theoretical perspectives through which the research inquiries are formulated (mainly actor network theory through Bruno Latour and the capital-habitus pair through Pierre Bourdieu). The part ends with a very helpful summary of data from international comparative studies relevant to the topic. The third part presents the empirical studies and the analysis of their results. Here, first the set of legal documents and regulations in the implementation of e-journals and related communication platforms (Shkollo, Admin Plus, Ciela, NEISPUO) in Bulgarian schools is analysed, and the following paragraphs - the most interesting and contributory in the work - present and interpret the data from the field research. The method is defined as a case study, the cases are three different schools (defined as catch-up, secondary and lagging) visited between October 2021 and October 2022. Principals, teachers, students between 9th and 11th grade, and parents of such students were interviewed in the three schools (p. 104).

The first of the three cases is of a lagging rural school in northwestern Bulgaria. It is a borderline case between inequality and exclusion. Through it we can clearly see that the actor network theory, while very productive when heterogeneous systems, interactive processes and technological innovations are studied, is quite helpless in the analysis of marginalization and exclusion. In case 1, education itself is somewhat a side feature of the school, whose principal struggles by underhand means against inequality and the effects of extreme poverty in order to preserve the school ("the principal tries to facilitate by hiring an extra car and driver to provide transportation for the students," p. 112).

Case 2 - an average-performing school in a large city in southeastern Bulgaria - most clearly highlights the direct reproduction of social inequality as educational. Moreover, in the comparison between this case and Case 3 (a school of the type publicized as 'elite'), the electronic diaries are also seen as an instrument of power that contains the implicit, veiled privileging of certain types of habitus. It is in relation to this that the two most valuable contributions of the thesis research are made: 1) the formulation and operationalization of an understanding of "technical capital" and 2) the convincing argumentation of the thesis that differences in resources and capitals make it so that the introduction of digital technologies not only does not help to overcome inequalities but, on the contrary, functions as "a mechanism for transforming social inequalities into educational ones and thus for legitimizing them and also for the emergence of new digital inequalities" (p. 170).

Along with the scientific and applied contributions listed in the abstract, I would like to note as a contribution the public policy-related thesis that any reform of the education system cannot counteract educational inequalities unassisted by a change in social and economic policies targeted against social inequalities. Moreover, in the absence of targeted social and economic policies, changes in the education system can, if not amplify, at least legitimise existing inequalities.

Along with its merits, the work is also marked by some problems. Despite editing after internal defence, there remain unreflected mixtures of administrative and academic language and thought styles in places. There is also a lack of reflection on the values in which contemporary Bulgarian schools are socializing the students. And it is through the habitualized assimilation of value orientations that inequality is taken for granted, becomes legitimate through its very invisibility. Unfortunately, the field research tools themselves do not include indicators of status characteristics of the interviewed students and parents, so that no analysis can be made of the relationship between their opinions and the volume and structure of capital disposed by the family.

I have two questions for the PhD student. Firstly, is it worth distinguishing in the research key of the dissertation research between inequality on the one hand and marginalisation and social exclusion on the other? If not, why not, and if so, what would it be?

Second, I note with pleasure that, following the internal defence, the normative principle of effectiveness, embedded in virtually all normative documents relating to schooling, is not accepted beyond question. Does not this principle itself play a role in legitimising inequalities, taking them for granted, and in some cases ethnicising them?

In conclusion: The dissertation thesis contains original scientific and scientific-applied contributions and meets the requirements of the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria Act, its Implementing Regulations, and Sofia University's Regulations on Academic Staff Development. Considering that, I confidently support awarding Raya Stoyanova Georgieva the educational and scientific degree of PhD in Professional Field 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Culture Studies (Sociology – General Sociology).

Sofia

Reviewer:

25 September 2024

(Milena Iakimova)