

REVIEW

by Prof. Dr. Julieta Ivanova Savova

on the dissertation of Radina Mladenova Mladenova entitled:

"IMPROVING PEDAGOGICAL COMMUNICATION IN CRISIS MANAGEMENT IN SCHOOLS"

for the award of the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in professional field 1.2.
Pedagogy (Theory of Education and Didactics – Pedagogical Communication)

PhD Candidate: Radina Mladenova Mladenova

Academic Advisor: Assoc. Prof. Dr. Silvia Tsvetanska

1. INFORMATION ABOUT THE DOCTORAL CANDIDATE

Radina Mladenova's professional biography is rich and impressive, demonstrating a long-standing interest and systematically acquired experience in the fields of education, business, and scientific research, with a focus on pedagogical communication in crisis situations.

Her educational development is interdisciplinary and includes successful graduation from the 9th French Language High School "Alphonse de Lamartine," Sofia, with a profile in French language and literature (1993). In 1999, she earned a Master's degree in History from Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski." In 2011, she obtained an MBA in Business Administration and Management from the Institute of Business Administration, Nantes, France.

Additionally, her credentials include participation in short-term educational initiatives, training, and projects aimed at management personnel: the Institute for the Qualification of Higher Education Personnel (IH2EF), Poitiers, France (2011); Columbia University, New York (ELTP), USA (2014); and the Center for Human Resources Development (HRDC), Varna, Bulgaria (2015). Throughout this period, Radina Mladenova has performed teaching and project coordination roles at the 18th Secondary School "William Gladstone," Sofia.

Professionally, since 2016, she has served as Deputy Principal at the same school, integrating managerial, administrative, teaching, project coordination, and academic coordination functions, including exam administration – DELF, TOPIK, and JLPT.

Radina Mladenova's transition into interdisciplinary research fields has been smooth and systematic, grounded in her prior educational achievements. Her exploration and discovery of relatively new niches in the research domain of Bulgarian education, particularly in improving pedagogical communication in crisis management, are noteworthy. The anticipated challenges, though diverse, have not deterred her path to success.

2. PUBLICATIONS AND PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITIES

Between 2021 and 2024, Radina Mladenova authored six publications related to her dissertation research, two of which are forthcoming. Four of the publications are single-authored, and two are co-authored. All are in Bulgarian. Three publications, including one forthcoming, were issued by the University Publishing House of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski." Five publications are articles, one of which is in an electronic edition. The publications are evenly distributed over the years: one in 2021, two in 2022, two in 2023, and one in 2024. The educational manual "Communication in Crises," co-authored by Mladenova, serves as a guide for school leaders and was published in 2023 by the same university publishing house.

Radina Mladenova's publications correspond with minimal requirements for awarding with educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in professional field 1.2. Pedagogy (Theory of Education and Didactics – Pedagogical Communication)

Her professional activities between 2011 and 2023, including her doctoral studies, extend beyond the school institution she represents. These include training and mentoring activities at the French Institute of Bulgaria, the America for Bulgaria Foundation, external evaluation of project proposals, participation in a world congress (FIPF – Morocco, 2015), among others.

Since 2006, her project activities have been impressive: coordinator of four projects, participation in two scientific and research projects, auditor for one project, assistant in two projects, member of an advisory board, and co-author of methodological resources for teachers.

3. INFORMATION ABOUT THE DOCTORAL PROGRAM

By order of the Rector of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" – RD 20-1271 dated July 5, 2021, Radina Mladenova was enrolled as a doctoral student in self-preparation in the doctoral program in professional field 1.2. Pedagogy (Theory of Education and Didactics – Pedagogical Communication) at the Department of Social Work, Faculty of Pedagogy at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski." The doctoral program's duration was from July 15, 2021, to July 15, 2024, with Assoc. Prof. Dr. Silvia Tsvetanska assigned as her academic advisor.

Radina Mladenova has timely fulfilled her obligations under the individual plan and has successfully realized all other responsibilities arising from the doctoral program.

Her dissertation, "Improving Pedagogical Communication in Crisis Management in Schools," was discussed at an internal meeting of the Department of Social Work at the Faculty of Pedagogy, Sofia University, leading to the initiation of a procedure for official defense. The first jury meeting has been held, and the official defense is scheduled for January 24, 2025.

4. INFORMATION ABOUT THE DISSERTATION AND ABSTRACT

Dissertation thesis focuses on a relatively unexplored topic in Bulgaria at the research level required for a PhD degree. The identified research niche, related to management in educational institutions and pedagogical communication during crisis management, is of significant importance to both theory and practice in scientific research and effective management. As with other dissertation studies on pedagogical communication, the significance of the results and recommendations from the research can be assessed on at least three levels: institutional (school), regional and national, and European.

The research proposal and its justification by Radina Mladenova are impressive in their potential and prospects. The importance of the reviewed dissertation is substantial, and the expected scope of applicability, considering the dynamic times we live in, the complexity of conflicts and crises at global, regional, and institutional levels, and the need for timely and adequate pedagogical communication in crisis contexts, is potentially enormous. This importance is further underscored by the complexity of crises that affect societies, institutions, and both collective and individual participants.

The dissertation comprises 233 pages, with an additional 158 pages of appendices. The bibliography includes 161 sources, 54 in Cyrillic and 107 in Latin. The work is structured into an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion, and contributions. The appendices, in a separate volume, contain four appendices, numerous tables, graphs, and figures, which aid in a more analytical perception of the work and the interpretation of results. The literature used is contemporary, demonstrating the author's good international awareness and successful integration of reliable and modern sources. Some deficits are noted in the area of publications in Cyrillic, which could be leveraged for interdisciplinary analyses.

The introduction is well-structured, effectively justifying the need for the dissertation topic. Advantages and disadvantages of existing research on communication in crisis situations are well considered and presented. The object and subject of the research are appropriately formulated, reflecting a successful connection with the set goals and tasks. The object is defined as "pedagogical communication in the professional activity of school managers," while the subject

focuses on "improving the pedagogical communication skills of school managers in crisis management."

The object and research subject presented in the introduction (object - "pedagogical communication in the professional activity of the school manager", while the subject of the research is related to "improving the skills for pedagogical communication of school managers in crisis management in schools") are adequately formulated, successfully reflecting the connection with the set goal and defined tasks. The goal is focused on "the specific manifestations of pedagogical communication in crisis management in school organizations from the perspective of the needs of school principals for the development of skills for pedagogical communication in crises."

The same positive observation can be made regarding the research hypothesis. Despite the sense of verbosity, the hypothesis convincingly outlines the connection with the thesis. The definition of the main concepts used by the author makes a very good impression. However, I do not find specifically pedagogical ones among them.

The introduction does not include a summarized picture of the research methodology. I do not want this to sound as a negative connotation, as every author of a dissertation has the freedom to make research decisions. I believe that the work would gain even more and have an even broader impact on the perception and attitudes of the reader if a summarized picture of the research methodology were included, i.e., not only what will be researched but also how.

Overall, the introduction convincingly introduces the research priorities included in the dissertation study.

The first chapter is titled "Theoretical Coordinates of the Research". It is structured into 3 sections (paragraphs): The Role of Pedagogical Communication in School Management; The Role of Pedagogical Communication in Crisis Management in Schools; European Standards for Communication in Crisis Management in Schools. The content included in this chapter shows the author's awareness and ability to select significant publications, concepts, approaches, normative and other solutions relevant to her dissertation research.

Each of the subparagraphs in the first chapter leads to narrowing, clarifying, and specifying those aspects of communication that are important for both the management of the school as an educational institution and pedagogical communication in crisis conditions.

Radina Mladenova demonstrates a contemporary level of awareness, knowledge of national and international policies and standards, existing practices, perspectives, and expectations in this field. She outlines the significance of communication as a social phenomenon, as well as its peculiarity in the school environment. Logically, she focuses on the specifics of communication in crisis conditions and the management of crisis processes and phenomena in schools, linking them to the need to consider significant aspects of so-called "crisis leadership".

My conceptually focused recommendation in this context is to speak and write about leadership in crisis situations rather than crisis leadership, and to distinguish leadership from management. Not every leader becomes and is a manager, and not every manager/director becomes a leader. If the interest in leadership, including in crisis situations, remains high, it should be well conceptually and theoretically justified and defended. Probably for this reason, the author prefers the term "school manager".

In this chapter, the author's constructive-critical attitude towards the existing Bulgarian normative framework (Law on Pre-school and School Education, Ordinance 15, and relevant applications to the dissertation topic) also makes a very good impression. She not only shows knowledge of the normative frameworks but also convincingly presents important "vulnerable" points in them. The good knowledge of the competency framework of the school principal/deputy principal and the professional analysis of the different groups of competencies in this profile help Radina Mladenova identify serious deficiencies both in the preparation and qualification of school principals and in the practices of managing schools in crisis situations and the related skills for pedagogical communication.

In this context, there is another important point in this chapter that should also be appreciated. Alongside the discussed functions of pedagogical communication in crisis conditions and the necessary significant communication skills, the author also highlights the importance of prevention.

In the first chapter, Radina Mladenova also presents part of the European experience related to Francophone countries (France and Belgium) and the United Kingdom and Ireland. She also dedicates a special place to the Bulgarian discourse, seen through the prism of specific skills from the competency profile of the school principal. This chapter also includes not only the peculiarities of communication in crisis management but also significant communication strategies for crisis management in school institutions.

The second chapter is dedicated to "Empirical Research on Attitudes towards Pedagogical Communication in Crisis Management in Schools." It is structured into two main sections/paragraphs: "Methodological Guidelines of the Study" with 8 subparagraphs and "Results of the Empirical Study" with 4 subparagraphs.

This chapter includes significant components such as: building a conceptual framework for the study, developing the research methodology, and defining the research stages. The research tools are adequately selected, appropriately presented, and professionally used.

In this chapter, the definition of the research subject, as well as the presented methodological framework and design of the study, make a very good impression. The well-formulated specific research goals and tasks deserve positive evaluation. Not every dissertation includes the important topic of ethical norms and standards concerning the research process, which is another added value of the work. The author is clearly aware that the sample of 99 people and the research tools used will not provide sufficiently representative results to be extrapolated to other

larger populations. However, this does not lead her to the idea of "freezing" or artificially (i.e., at any cost) expanding the sample, but rather motivates her for in-depth analyses, seeking and proving various types of correlations based on the analyses and statistical processing of the obtained real results. This in itself is also evidence of a striving for research precision, ethics, self-criticism, and constructiveness.

The empirical study is staged, starting in 2021. The frameworks of the pilot phases are also outlined. The combination of qualitative and quantitative methods used (partially standardized interviews and surveys) is well justified. The obtained results are processed with the help of mathematical-statistical methods and procedures (Chi-square and correlation coefficient).

I positively evaluate the author's clear vision regarding the levels and interconnection of the goals (content-related and instrumental). To construct a conceptual framework for "targeted development of skills for pedagogical communication in crisis situations," which is done in Chapter 3, it is necessary to diagnose perceptions, attitudes, needs, and to realistically assess the communication skills possessed by the studied individuals.

The second section/paragraph is appropriately structured and reflects the essential research-empirical work. The methodology of analyzing the obtained results presented in the second section/paragraph of this chapter, as well as the discussion on the results themselves, show maturity, contain reliable interpretations, lead to well-founded generalizations and relevant conclusions. The established correlations, which are presented in detail and find their well-founded interpretations, serve as a reliable basis for formulating conclusions and recommendations and are markers for developing the author's ideas in the next Chapter 3. The established significant and moderately positive correlations and the discussions on them are of substantial importance for the author's next research steps.

The third chapter focuses on "Improving Skills for Pedagogical Communication in Crisis Management in Schools as Part of the Continuing Qualification of Pedagogical Specialists." The chapter is structured into 3 sections/paragraphs: Priority Areas for Improving Communication Skills in Crisis Situations through Targeted Training; Conceptual Framework for Structuring Training in Communication in Crisis Management in School Management; Evaluation through Debriefing: Key Areas for Improving Crisis Management Training.

In the first section/paragraph, I would suggest swapping subparagraphs 1 and 2 to better link the conceptual framework for communication skills training with the needs for developing pedagogical skills for crisis management in schools.

Section two can also be improved in terms of structure and conceptual accuracy. The phrase "educational managers" can be replaced with a more appropriate term, although an informed reader would understand what is meant. The repetition in the titles of two of the subparagraphs in this section also needs to be removed ("conceptual framework").

The second section presents the "conceptual framework for structuring training in communication in crisis management in schools." The complex relationship between knowledge and skills as part of managerial competencies is of significant importance for the emphasis in this framework. The foundational knowledge is well outlined, and all identified significant skills in this knowledge-skills relationship (a total of 15) are transversal.

I believe that the attempt to taxonomize the approach to training and qualification of managerial staff through the prism of the interconnection between goals, tasks, content, and expected results (knowledge and skills) deserves high evaluation. Essentially, the most significant author contributions are found in this final chapter.

Overall, in Chapter 3, the established priority areas for improving the communication skills of principals related to effective crisis management and the conceptual framework for training in communication skills in crisis management in schools are very well linked.

The abstract meets the basic requirements and presents the content of the work. In terms of further improvement its content could be better edited.

Accepting the main contributions stated by the author in the dissertation, I would like to add:

1. **In the scientific-theoretical aspect:**

- The theory of pedagogical communication is enriched by including insufficiently developed questions about the peculiarity and significance of pedagogical communication in crisis management in schools;
- Interdisciplinary connections and grounds are used to construct an innovative approach to the theoretical-conceptual foundations of pedagogical communication;
- Significant communication skills of educational management personnel, playing a key role in crisis management in educational institutions, are substantiated;
- A taxonomized approach to the training and qualification of management personnel aimed at improving pedagogical communication in crisis management is proposed;
- A model for training management personnel in education, oriented towards improving skills for pedagogical communication in crisis management in schools, is proposed.

In the practical-applied aspect:

- A working approach for improving the regulatory framework concerning the preparation and qualification of management personnel for the needs of education is proposed;
- The necessity of a model for training management personnel in education, aimed at improving skills for pedagogical communication in crisis management, is empirically proven;
- A specially constructed author's training program, convincingly built on the basis of the results of conducted empirical research and practically applicable, is presented.

Recommendations:

- To eliminate conceptual inaccuracies, and typographical and grammatical errors in the text;
- To intensify publication activity, to more intensively popularize the proposed model, and to expand the scope of target groups that can apply it;
- Based on the obtained evidence, to undertake initiatives and actions for changes and improvement of the regulatory framework related to the status and qualification of management personnel in education.

Questions:

- Elements of AI (Artificial Intelligence) were used in the preparation of the work. What advantages and limitations of AI does the author of the dissertation see in the process of its application?

In conclusion: The proposed dissertation thesis by Radina Mladenova Mladenova possesses the necessary scientific qualities, presents multifaceted evidence of the importance of pedagogical communication, and successfully formed skills for its effective use in crisis situations in educational institutions. The dissertation contains and substantiates important contributory points required in such procedures. The work convincingly shows that the PhD student is professionally familiar with the chosen research territory at both theoretical and practical levels, taking into account its interdisciplinary nature. Radina Mladenova is not affected by interpretative stereotypes. Her academic and professional training is interdisciplinary, and comprises and integrate knowledge and competencies from different fields. This allows her to competently highlight, research, analyze, systematize, summarize, and convincingly formulate evidence for her thesis in interdisciplinary research territories. She seeks both their specific practical projections and outlines perspectives for future research in this field.

Positively evaluating the dissertation, the achievements of the author, and supporting the stated contributions, I propose to the esteemed jury to award the educational and scientific degree "DOCTOR" to Radina Mladenova Mladenova.

Prof. Dr. Julieta Savova

17.12.2024