



УНИВЕРСИТЕТ „ПРОФ. Д-Р АСЕН ЗЛАТАРОВ“

Катедра „Педагогика и методика на обучението“

STATEMENT OF PROFESSIONAL OPINION



Dissertation Title:

**DEVELOPING EMPATHY IN PRIMARY SCHOOL AGE THROUGH
DESIGN THINKING**

PhD Student: Avi Abner

Form of Education: *Self – study format*

for the awarding of the educational and scientific degree “**doctor**”

Field of Higher Education 1. Pedagogical Sciences

Professional Field 1.2. Pedagogy

Specialty: *Preschool and Primary School Pedagogy*

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(by the order № UD - 201 of 28.05.2024 of The Rector of the University “Proff. Dr.
Asen Zlatarov”)

1. Characteristics of the dissertation work

The dissertation is structured in an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion, a list of references and 7 appendices. The main text is 156 pages, and the bibliography includes an impressive number of 422 titles, of which 12 are in Bulgarian and 410 in English. The structure of the dissertation research corresponds to the requirements for this type of scientific work.

In the **Introduction**, the doctoral student has argued the choice of the research problem through the need for alternative and innovative pedagogical approaches to enrich and diversify the educational environment in order to develop the key competences for the 21st century in students. Educational systems and policies around the world are increasingly oriented towards a socio-emotional focus in the learning process, and empathy is crucial for building healthy social relationships and for the general emotional well-being of students. On the other hand, the innovative and still not well-known process of design thinking in the Bulgarian educational space implies an understanding of the perspective of others. Through projects and assignments that require creativity, analytics, collaboration and problem solving, students not only learn



to work together, but also to be empathetic and responsible citizens of tomorrow. The age of the 3rd - 4th grade is adequately selected as it is a sensitive period for the development of empathy. The introduction also outlines the main elements of the concept and methodology of the dissertation research and convincingly substantiates the relevance of the problem, its pedagogical significance and the need for its deeper study in Bulgaria.

The First Chapter presents the theoretical foundations of the dissertation research. It examines in detail the two main concepts of the topic - the essence and pedagogical projections of empathy and design thinking as an educational perspective. The impressive number of scientific titles and cited authors, as well as the clear and orderly organization of the text, reflect the awareness and ability of the doctoral student to analyze scientific sources, to structure the content according to the logic and significance of individual components, and to draw main conclusions. The limited bibliography in Bulgarian on the subject, especially in relation to design thinking, once again confirms the relevance of the issue.

Chapter Two provides the conceptual framework of the study. Key concepts are defined at the beginning of this part of the dissertation. The main elements of the concept /goal, tasks, object, subject, hypothesis, scope, organization of the research/ are defined correctly, precisely and competently. The research approaches are explained, the instrumentation, criteria and indicators, the methodology for quantitative and qualitative analysis of the obtained data, the stages of the research are described. The variety of methods for input and output diagnostics and mathematical-statistical data processing convincingly guarantee the results and benefits of applying the didactic model for introducing design thinking in the 3rd and 4th grades from the initial stage of education.

In **Chapter Three**, the results of the empirical research are consistently and thoroughly described and interpreted. They are visualized through tables and figures. Quantitative and qualitative analysis was carried out precisely. The empirical data are sufficient in scope and the sample is more than representative. The doctoral student's ability to interpret the data clearly, reasoned and organized is impressive. They have served to draw convincing main conclusions. The adaptation of the model to introduce design thinking into the learning process at the initial stage is remarkable. The modification of the elements, considering the age characteristics of the students and allowing the teacher to regulate the process, guide the students, and indirectly control the environment, is theoretically justified and effectively implemented in practice. The explanation of the pedagogical activities in each phase of the implementation of the model is particularly valuable.



The Conclusions are drawn step by step after the analysis of the results of the ascertaining, formative and control experiment are concrete, tied to the practical applicability of the model and the possible variations in its implementation. Increased levels of empathy were reported across all three types – cognitive, social and cultural. Statistical hypotheses were tested. The value of the didactic model for introducing design thinking as an alternative, innovative and avant-garde variant of the learning process has been proven. **The conclusion** synthesizes the achieved results in a theoretical aspect: the thorough analysis of empathy and its pedagogical projections and the perspectives of design thinking in the educational space. The highlights of the respectful empirical work – testing, validation, modeling – are presented. The doctoral student's engagement with the topic and the intellectual efforts invested are reflected in the authorship of individual sections and complete methodologies. The possibilities for developing and upgrading the model by enriching the methodological tools are outlined.

The overall impression of the dissertation work is much more than positive, considering the solid theoretical basis, the well-argued concept, detailed methodology, the significant qualitative and quantitative analysis of the results.

2. Characteristics of the abstract

The abstract accurately and fully reflects the content of the dissertation and presents it clearly and convincingly.

3. Scientific contributions

Theoretically: a broad theoretical overview of the literature on the problem, especially foreign literature; a new theoretical framework that combines the concepts of empathy and design thinking in the context of primary education.

Scientific applied aspect: adapted, developed and validated methodological tools for the assessment of empathy in 3rd and 4th grade students. Application of innovative methods and techniques for the integration of design thinking in the educational process and in social-emotional learning. Creating practical guidelines for applying design thinking in a school environment that can be used by teachers and education professionals. An empirical study distinguished by originality, scale and high value for practice; developed and tested model with relevant materials and resources for introducing design thinking in 3rd and 4th grade at the initial stage of education to develop students' empathy.



4. Publications and participation in scientific forums

The presented publications on the subject of the dissertation work are 6 - 3 independent and 3 co-authored. They have been published in authoritative publications and reflect both the different research stages of the PhD student's work, as well as his ability to work collaboratively and focus on details. All of them meet the requirements and are related to the topic of the dissertation. The doctoral student participated with a report in the XIV Scientific and Practical Forum "Innovations in Education and Cognitive Development", Burgas.

5. Critical notes, recommendations, questions

In the dissertation work presented for defense, I find hope and opportunities for positive and innovative change in the learning process in the initial stage of education and assigning a deserved place in it to social and emotional skills. I recommend that the dissertation be published as a stand-alone book to promote both the extensive theoretical research and the methodology developed. I think it has potential for building on and continuing, and the dissertation's recommendations for practice could be widely used.

Questions for the doctoral student: 1. For the development of which other social and/or emotional skills, in your opinion, would the model be suitable? 2. Based on the research conducted, what do you think is the biggest advantage of applying design thinking in elementary education?

6. Conclusion

The proposed dissertation work on the topic "**DEVELOPING EMPATHY IN PRIMARY SCHOOL AGE THROUGH DESIGN THINKING**" with author **Avi Abner** meets the requirements of the law on RASRB and the Regulations for its application.

I propose to the respected members of the Scientific Jury to award the educational and scientific degree "**Doctor**" to **Avi Abner** in the Field of Higher Education **1. Pedagogical Sciences**, Professional Direction **1.2. Pedagogy**, specialty **Preschool and primary school pedagogy**.

17.06.2024
Stara Zagora

Member of the scientific jury: .
(Assoc. Prof. Veneta Uzunova, PhD)

Подпис заличен
Чл.2 от ЗЗЛД