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Dissertation review

Assessment of the Ph.D. dissertation submitted by Fani Alezra titled “The Professional Image of the Kindergarten Teacher in Israel” written under the supervision of Prof. UAM Dr. hab. Sylwia Jaskulska

Ms. Fani Alzera’s dissertation concerns the issue of the professional image of kindergarten teachers in Israel. This image has been determined based on the opinions of students, the teachers themselves, and the parents of children attending kindergartens. On the one hand, this topic is under-researched, but on the other, it has great significance for the position and prestige of kindergarten teachers. A negative social image of teachers, including kindergarten teachers, is significantly shaped by the media: “the massmedia present a negative image of teachers, describing cases of fraud or trade union protests. Newspaper articles mostly refer to such problems as redundancy, the imperfections of the educational system and teacher training. Information about ‘super-teachers’ or finalists of best teacher competitions is presented less frequently”¹. To a large extent, the media shape the beliefs and social attitudes towards various professions, including such important ones as teachers. Thus, examining the actual image of this profession among the individuals most closely related to it is a very cognitively interesting topic. It also represents notable input in the development of pedagogical thought, as it refers to the social image of a profession which is very important for the development of the youngest generation of citizens on the one hand, and socially unappreciated on the other. The Author underscores the social significance of teachers, writing that “... the profession of kindergarten teacher is among the most important professions in the world, if not the most important one. Kindergarten teachers are responsible for the shaping of the young generation at the most critical age, when the child is a subject to shaping and influence” (p. vi). The Author also notes the low social significance of this profession. Her study represents an attempt to examine the determinants of this phenomenon.

¹ M. Smak. D. Walczak, The prestige of the teaching profession in the perception of teachers and former teachers. *Edukacja. An interdisciplinary approach* 2017, 22-40, doi: 10.24131/3724.170502

The Ph.D. dissertation comprises 176 pages, out of which the main text is 151 pages long. The main text is composed of an introduction and four chapters. The dissertation also contains a list of tables, a list of figures, the abstract, the reference list, and the appendix.

The dissertation is divided into three main parts. The first is the introduction and a theoretical chapter, which comprises four subsections. The introduction is a summary of the contents of the subsequent parts of the dissertation. It lacks an explanation of why the topic undertaken by the Author is important from the point of view of pedagogy and the social sciences. It is worth noting that such an introduction is included in the abstract. In the theoretical part, the Author introduces the reader to the dissertation topic. The first subsection, titled "Education for Early Childhood" presents the specific context of early education in Israel and its status in Israeli society. The Author presents the state of kindergarten education in Israel with reference to data from other countries, which I consider a very good decision. The next subsection presents the specifics of the profile of kindergarten teachers in Israel. The Author presents the formal requirements regarding this profession outlined by the Ministry of Education in Israel as well as the informal ones. The Author points out that "In all content in which the preschool teacher engages in the preschool, she must promote knowledge, skills, and values" (p. 16). Additionally, the kindergarten teacher should be a manager, who should possess the abilities of planning, organizing, operation, coordination and budgeting (p. 20) However, „some note that this is a role for which the preschool teacher was not trained for" (p.21). An important aspect of this profession also involves caring for small children and the ability to fulfill their psychological needs. The second subsection presents a complex picture of the role of the kindergarten teacher, who, in order to carry out their job, must not only possess appropriate education and knowledge, but also personal competences and predispositions. In the third subsection, the Author presents the image of early education teachers referring to their self-image, self-identity, and professional identity and the relationships between them. The Author also highlights the importance of media presentations in the aspect of shaping the social image of a given profession. In this subsection, the Ph.D. Candidate also compares the social images of early education teachers in different countries, underscoring the fact that the low social status of this profession may be due to the people applying for it, namely, students who chose the teaching profession because they did not have other options due to their mediocre grades. This situation leads to worse levels of teaching quality by future teachers. In turn, in the fourth subsection, the Author discusses in greater detail the issue of the influence of mass media on the professional image of kindergarten teachers in Israel. The Author points to a lack of

reliable studies on this topic and to the fact that the media rather presents negative information related to teachers, including kindergarten teachers.

Summarizing the introduction part of the dissertation, it is worth noting that it is coherent and concise. The Author guides the reader through subsequent important theoretical aspects of the topic undertaken in her research project. This testifies to Ms. Alezra's selective and analytical competences.

The second part of the dissertation is the methodological chapter, which is divided into seven subsections where the Author presents the subsequent stages of the research process. The object of the study and the research questions are derived from and justified by the approaches assumed in the theoretical chapters. However, there is a lack of specificity with respect to the aim of the studies the Author carried out, which is a limitation of this part of the dissertation. The very large number of detailed questions, 37 in total, also raises concerns. In my view, this level of detail is excessive and introduces disorganization. Additionally, the main problem, "What is the image of the kindergarten teacher in Israel society and what affects it?" (p. 65) is a question about two variables: the image of the kindergarten teacher in Israel and the factors differentiating it. In my opinion, the dissertation should be centered around two main problems. The disorganization with respect to the detailed questions is also visible in the 16 hypotheses put forward by the Author (p. 67-68). Interestingly, they only refer to the factors that may potentially differentiate the image of the preschool teacher. In the next part of the methodological chapter, the quantitative approach to the study assumed by the Author is clearly presented. Next, the dependent and independent variables of the current research project are appropriately listed. However, I think that the variable of "1.2.10 Differences between student groups: academic year and academic track" (p. 72) should be divided into two separate variables, as "academic year" is one variable, while "academic track" is another one. The method, techniques, and instruments used in the project are adequately selected with respect to the object of the study. However, the description of an instrument on page 73 reads "The answers are ranked on a Likert scale of six ranks. The scores (according to the Likert scale of six classes) range from 1- very low, 2- low, 3 – rather low, 4 – rather high, 5 – high, 6 – very high...", although the questionnaire included in the Appendix lists only five ranks: "extremely, very much, moderately, slightly, not at all" (p. 173), while the tables in Chapter III presenting the distributions of the data additionally contain the rank of "very slightly" (see e.g., p. 83, 85, 87, etc.). Thus, there is a certain inconsistency here. It is worth noting that the questionnaire developed by the Author was validated, which is rarely done in pedagogical works. This chapter is concluded with a description of the study sample, which is very concise. More detailed

characteristics of the sample are given at the beginning of Chapter III, Pages 76-80. However, the first two paragraphs of this description on page 76 are identical to those on page 75. This redundancy could have been avoided if the sample description was placed in only one part of the dissertation, for example, the methodological part.

In sum, the methodological chapter is written properly. The Author knows the basic elements of the research process and can derive research questions from the literature. The approach taken to the study and the method were selected appropriately with respect to the topic.

In the third part of the dissertation, the Author presents and analyzes the results of her study. I would like to highlight that the method of presenting the results is very clear and logical. The Author presents the distributions of responses on kindergarten teachers fulfilling various roles: manager, educator and educational leader, caregiver, counselor, and teacher. In the first part of the analysis, the Author presents the opinions of all participants on the distinguished roles. Next, data on the roles broken down into the parent, student, and teacher subsamples is presented. This allowed for comparing the image of kindergarten teachers in three groups of respondents. Next, data on the motives of choosing the profession of the kindergarten teacher in the three aforementioned groups is presented. The Author then proceeds with the analysis of the data in terms of the participants' sociodemographic variables. The analysis of data in terms of gender raises my concerns. As the distribution of this variable shows, 181 women and 16 men participated in this study. These groups are not equal, and the group of women was much larger than the group of men. Unfortunately, the dissertation contains no information as to whether a test of distribution normality and homogeneity of variance was carried out, which are the necessary conditions for carrying out Students' *t* tests. In the next part of the dissertation, the Author presents the image of the kindergarten teacher, including its differences in the context of various variables. Analyses of the motives of young people to select this profession are also presented. Here, it is worth noting the Author's disappointing observation that „...only 25.4% of all respondents would want their child to be a kindergarten teacher to a great or very great extent...” (p.141). It may serve as a stimulus for further cognitive explorations of this attitude in the participants.

Summing up the analytic part of the dissertation, I consider it to be written very well. The Author displays skill in carrying out statistical analyses and presenting and discussing their results. However, I would like to suggest the inclusion of information about normality tests for the individual variables before choosing specific statistical tests. This is important for choosing the appropriate test and does not raise any doubts from the readers. In this part, the Author also

shows competence in employing the literature cited in the theoretical part to discuss the obtained results.

The Ph.D. dissertation is concluded by Chapter V, titled “Conclusion.” It consists of the “Summary”, “Conclusions”, and “Recommendations for Future Research”. I consider this division to be unnecessary and unjustified. However, the contents of the chapter are typical for final chapters of research works. The Author concisely summarizes the most important results of her study and presents their theoretical and practical implications. She also points to further areas of research. One of these areas is the need to carry out studies on the ultra-orthodox communities in Israel (p. 151), in which kindergarten teachers are exclusively men. This would undoubtedly serve to complement the image of the kindergarten teacher in Israel.

Summing up, the content of the current Ph.D. dissertation represents a high level of quality. The structure is clear and well-organized, which allows for following the Author’s argumentation. The dissertation is written appropriately and contains all the elements typical for research works. This testifies to the Author’s methodological and scientific awareness. Ms. Alezra has also displayed scientific insightfulness and significant knowledge of the studied topic.

I appreciate the scientific and organizational merits of the current dissertation. However, I also have several comments which, in my view, the Author should consider:

- The abstract is excessively detailed and more closely resembles the Introduction in terms of structure. The abstract should contain concise information about the study problem, its significance for a given domain of knowledge, the object and aims of the study, a brief description of the methodology, and the most significant results. However, in the current dissertation, the abstract is five pages long (p.vi-x). It also contains a list of all the study hypotheses, which is inappropriate.
- I suggest using more inclusive language, which is required in scientific works and recommended by the European Parliament. Writing about teachers, the Author frequently uses the pronoun “his” (see e.g., p. 10, 14, 15, 37), while writing about early education teachers, the Author uses the pronoun “she,” which, in this case, may be due to the feminization of this profession.
- I suggest including information about carrying out a test of normality before describing the tests in the methodological part. This is important in the context of selecting an appropriate parametric or nonparametric test.

- In several parts of the dissertation, the Author presents information about partial confirmation and partial disconfirmation of given hypotheses. For example, page IX reads: „The main research findings are that the first hypothesis was partially confirmed and partially disconfirmed”. I would like to remind that hypotheses can be either verified or falsified.
- The subsection 3.7. on the image of teachers in Poland appears unnecessary in the context of the image of early education teachers in Israel, which is the topic of the dissertation. This subsection does not contribute any significant information to the dissertation, is very surface-level, and is based on outdated literature.
- I suggest expanding future studies by including qualitative analyses of media messages in the context of the phenomenon analyzed in the current dissertation. It would serve as an excellent complement to the topic undertaken by the Author.

Summing up, I appreciate the significance of the current Ph.D. dissertation for the development of pedagogical knowledge in the context of the social image of early education teachers. Despite some weaknesses, Ms. Alezra, provided convincing and valuable study findings. It must be highlighted that the interpretation reached a good scientific level. Therefore, I can state that the Ph.D. dissertation of Fani Alezra, written under the supervision of prof. UAM dr. hab. Sylwia Jaskulska, meets the requirements for dissertations contained in Art. 187 paragraph. 1 and 2 of the Law on Higher Education and Science form July 20, 2018 (Journal of Laws 2018, item 1668, as amended). I am applying for admission of Ms. Fani Alezra to further stages of the procedure.

Anna Babicka-Hirkus