

## REVIEW

by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Ani Hristova Epitropova

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on the dissertation submitted for the award of the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in the field of higher education: 1. Pedagogical Sciences, professional field 1.2. Pedagogy, Doctoral program "Theory of Education and Didactics"

Author: Ilitsa Georgieva Daskalova

Title: STUDENT LEADERSHIP IN THE INITIAL STAGE OF PRIMARY EDUCATION

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### **1. General overview of the procedure and the doctoral candidate**

By Order No. 1177 dated 19.05.2025 of the Rector of Plovdiv University "Paisii Hilendarski," I was appointed as a member of the scientific jury for the procedure of defending the dissertation entitled "STUDENT LEADERSHIP IN THE INITIAL STAGE OF PRIMARY EDUCATION" for the award of the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in the field of higher education: 1. Pedagogical Sciences, professional field 1.2. Pedagogy, Doctoral program "Theory of Education and Didactics."

The set of materials submitted by Ilitsa Daskalova, both in paper and electronic format, is in full compliance with the Rules for the Development of the Academic Staff and includes all the necessary documents.

### **2. Relevance of the topic**

The topic of student leadership in the initial stage of primary education is highly relevant as it reflects contemporary pedagogical trends that place the student at the center of the educational process. The theoretical section of the dissertation emphasizes the role of leadership as a key 21st-century competence that fosters social, emotional, and communication skills essential for successful realization in today's dynamic educational environment.

Especially important is that the development of leadership skills among students not only nurtures active, confident, and responsible individuals but also supports

sustainable behaviors, including decision-making and accountability for one's own actions. This directly aligns with the goals of education for sustainable development, which emphasize activity-based learning and transforming knowledge and skills into concrete actions that benefit the community.

In the context of competence-based education and new curricula, the topic gains further significance as it supports the building of student communities based on collaboration and shared responsibility. The dissertation demonstrates that the issue remains underexplored in the Bulgarian context, particularly at the initial stage, where leadership qualities often remain in the background. In this sense, the dissertation meets current theoretical and practical requirements and holds potential for contributing to the development of innovative methodological solutions in primary education.

### **3. Familiarity with the problem**

The doctoral candidate demonstrates an in-depth understanding of the problem of student leadership, presenting a detailed and analytical review of contemporary interpretations of the concept of "student leadership" in the theoretical section of the dissertation. A historical overview is provided, outlining the key characteristics of the concept in the context of primary education. Special attention is given to the relationship between leadership qualities and the development of sustainable behaviors, as well as to the role of competence-based education in fostering leadership skills among students. The analysis also covers the contribution of leadership to creating a democratic classroom environment and encouraging active student participation in the learning process. The theoretical analysis proposes a well-founded conceptual framework that forms the basis for the author's program to stimulate student leadership through learning activities and methodological solutions suitable for the initial stage of primary education.

### **4. Research methodology**

The research methodology in the dissertation is appropriately justified and aligned with the specifics of the problem of student leadership in the initial stage of primary education. By including a variety of research methods (surveys for school principals, teachers, and students; observation protocols; expert evaluations; and statistical analysis), the study ensures a comprehensive and multilayered perspective on the problem, enabling an in-depth and reliable interpretation of the results. The developed "Model for the Development of Leadership Skills in Students in Grades 1–4" deserves particular attention, as it serves as the basis for the formative stage of the experiment,

providing not only diagnostic value but also practical guidelines for pedagogical impact. The organization of the research encompasses clearly defined goals, tasks, and hypotheses, precisely aligned with the object and subject of the study. All of this contributes to the methodological soundness, reliability, and validity of the results, making the research methodology entirely adequate and appropriate for achieving the objectives of the dissertation.

### **5. Characteristics and evaluation of the dissertation and its contributions**

The dissertation is a thorough and up-to-date study in which the doctoral candidate skillfully combines theoretical analysis with empirical research on student leadership in the initial stage of education. The theoretical contributions include a comprehensive and focused overview of leadership in an educational context that not only systematizes existing research but also offers a new perspective on the issue. The creation and testing of a model for developing leadership qualities among students in the lower grades is a significant contribution that bridges theory and practice and enriches the pedagogical literature. The empirical results are impressive, revealing specific strategies and approaches based on the views of students, teachers, and principals, and outlining opportunities for targeted development of leadership skills.

The practical contributions further highlight the significance of the work by offering materials that can be directly applied in pedagogical practice with children in grades 1 to 4. The flexibility and adaptability of the model make it applicable in different pedagogical contexts, while its potential use as a corrective tool for children with problematic behavior adds value for education professionals. Thus, the dissertation stands out for its relevance, scientific merit, and high practical applicability.

### **6. Assessment of the publications and the personal contribution of the doctoral candidate**

The doctoral candidate demonstrates high scientific productivity, reflected in a series of publications that contribute to the development of the scholarly debate on student leadership in the early years of education. The publication in a refereed scientific journal indexed in internationally recognized databases ("Contemporary Humanities," no. 2/2024, ISSN 1313-9924) attests to her ability to produce academically rigorous and innovative contributions. Publications in peer-reviewed national journals and conference proceedings further attest to her sustained interest and expertise in the topic, consistent with the criteria for awarding the educational and scientific degree "Doctor."

No plagiarism has been detected in the submitted scientific works. The doctoral candidate is the sole author of all publications, which confirms her personal contribution to the formulation, implementation, and interpretation of the research findings. She has presented a series of consistent and original works—from analyses of leadership programs in international and national contexts, through the development of a model for fostering leadership qualities in students, to methodological guidelines for integrating STEAM education. This demonstrates not only in-depth knowledge of the problem but also the ability to propose practical solutions that are highly applicable in educational practice.

## **7. Abstract**

The content and quality of the abstract comply with the current regulations, clearly and coherently presenting the structure, objectives, methodology, and main results of the dissertation. The abstract accurately reflects the scientific contributions and conclusions of the research and fulfills its function in accordance with established academic standards.

Regarding the content of the dissertation, the research conducted, and the accompanying materials, I have no critical remarks or recommendations. All components have been prepared precisely, in accordance with academic requirements and good scientific practices.

## **Conclusion**

In view of the above, I confidently give my positive evaluation of the research presented in the reviewed dissertation, the abstract, the achieved results and contributions, and I recommend that the esteemed scientific jury award the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" to Ilitsa Georgieva Daskalova in the field of higher education: 1. Pedagogical Sciences, professional field 1.2. Pedagogy, Doctoral program "Theory of Education and Didactics."

06 June 2025

Evaluation prepared by:

(Assoc. Prof. Dr. Ani Hristova Epitropova)