

OPINION

by Prof. Dr. Nikolay Sashkov Tsankov, D.Sc.

Faculty of Education, Thracian University - Stara Zagora

on dissertation for the award of the educational and scientific degree "Doctor of Philosophy"

field of higher education 1. Pedagogical Sciences

professional field 1.2. Pedagogy

doctoral program Theory of Education and Didactics

Author: *Ilitsa Georgieva Daskalova*

Topic: *Student Leadership in the Primary Education Stage*

Research Supervisor: *Assoc. Prof. Dr. Nikolinka Aleksandrova Atanasova - Faculty of Education, Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv*

1. General presentation of the procedure and the PhD student

This review has been prepared in compliance with the requirements of the Law on the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria, the Regulations for the Implementation of the Law on the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria, the Regulations for the Development of Academic Staff at Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv and in implementation of the Rector's Order No. RD-22-1177/19.05.2025 for the approval of the composition of the scientific jury.

Since 1 March 2022. Ilica Daskalova has been enrolled as a full-time PhD student in the doctoral program "Theory of Education and Didactics" at the Department of Primary School Pedagogy of the Faculty of Pedagogy of Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv by Order RD-21-250 of February 1, 2022. Order RD-22-794 of 28 March 2025 of the Rector of Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv, indicates that the PhD course of studies has been successfully completed with an approval for a pending defense.

After the preliminary discussion of the dissertation project of Ilitsa Daskalova on the topic "Student Leadership in the Primary Stage of Primary Education" with the scientific supervisor Assoc. Prof. Dr. Nikolinka Alexandrova Atanasova at a meeting in the extended composition of the Department of Primary School Pedagogy held on 29.04.2025, the procedure for its public defense before a scientific jury was started. The submitted documentation indicates compliance with the requirements for the procedures for the acquisition of the educational and scientific degree "Doctor".

2. Topic Relevance

The topic of student leadership in the primary stage of education stands out for its significant relevance in the context of contemporary educational and social realities. The development of leadership skills in pupils from an early age is essential for the formation of personal autonomy, social commitment and skills necessary for the successful handling of future challenges. School, as a key factor in a child's socialisation, provides an environment conducive to the development of values, attitudes and behaviours that are sustainably formed through participation in leadership roles. In this context, student leadership is not seen as an isolated pedagogical practice, but as a holistic process that promotes self-initiative, critical thinking, decision-making skills, teamwork and civic responsibility.

The relevance of the topic is reinforced by the need for the education system to meet the demands of contemporary society for prepared, adaptable and morally resilient young people capable of being active participants in social life. The development of leadership competences in the primary stage of education creates a foundation for academic progress, emotional well-being and social integration. The approaches, strategies and technologies that support this process, such as project-based learning, collaborative work and play strategies, contribute to the creation of a student culture in which every child has the opportunity to realize his or her potential, exert influence on the school environment and engage with common goals.

Given all this, the topic of the dissertation research not only responds to the current needs of educational practice, but also offers a strategic orientation towards building sustainable models of leadership development in the earliest school educational stage. The research has the potential to

enrich theory and practice with innovative solutions that support the formation of socially responsible, confident and proactive individuals - a key resource for the future of any society.

3. Knowledge of the problem

The content and structure of the dissertation testify to a thorough and systematic knowledge of the issues related to student leadership in the primary stage of education. The researcher displays a thorough theoretical backgrounds by analyzing the nature and characteristics of leadership, the variety of pedagogical approaches to its development, and the relationship between leadership qualities and students' personality formation. Key concepts such as leadership styles and educational systems are explored, indicating a deep understanding of the scientific and practical framework of the subject. In the process of research, the doctoral student applies methodologically sound tools and approaches, which demonstrates analytical competence and the ability to create and validate an original research model. The empirical part is developed with precision, covering a wide range of participants and using quantitative and qualitative methods for data collection and interpretation. The results presented reflect not only the effectiveness of the strategies implemented, but also an in-depth understanding of the impact of student leadership on children's social and emotional development. The conclusions drawn and recommendations made confirm the ability of the researcher to synthesize information, to make reasoned generalizations and to formulate guidelines with practical applicability, which is unequivocal evidence of competent and critical knowledge of the scientific problem under consideration.

4. Research Methodology

The research methodology in the dissertation is developed with a high degree of scientific precision and systematicity, reflecting a good knowledge of pedagogical reality and research practice. The object and subject are clearly defined, and the aims and objectives outline a logical and functional structure of the research process. The hypotheses are well-grounded and reflect different aspects of student leadership, from the manifestations of personal characteristics to the possibilities for their purposeful development through methodological intervention. This demonstrates a coherent approach to data collection and interpretation in order to reach reliable pedagogical conclusions.

The study is organized in three main stages that trace the process from input diagnosis to the implementation and evaluation of an original model for the development of leadership skills in students. The methods used combine qualitative and quantitative approaches through survey, observation, and expert judgment, which provides data triangulation and strengthens the validity of the results. The diagnostic tools developed - questionnaires, protocols and criterion matrix - are targeted, relevant and tailored to the age and contextual characteristics of the participants. This demonstrates a skill in designing research instruments according to the specificity of the educational setting.

The experimental design is well linked to educational practice and shows the potential for developing leadership qualities in pupils as early as the primary stage, offering concrete strategies, methods and tools for doing so. The combination of a theoretical basis, empirical grounding and practical orientation reveals a high methodological culture and a deep understanding of the problem on the part of the doctoral student.

5. Characteristics and evaluation of the dissertation and contributions

The dissertation is a thorough and systematic study of the subject of student leadership in the primary stage of education, combining theoretical depth with a clearly established and applicable empirical design. The theoretical section is comprehensive and analytically structured, examining leadership in historical, sociocultural and pedagogical contexts. Impressive is the integration of classical and contemporary pedagogical models (Korczak's and Bell-Lancaster's systems, the classroom-learning system, and 21st century concepts) that serve as a framework for understanding student leadership. The author reasonably links the concept of leadership styles and roles of student leaders with appropriate methods for their formation at the primary educational stage.

The second part of the dissertation demonstrates a clearly defined and consistently applied research design. Aims, objectives and hypotheses are well formulated, and diagnostic tools - questionnaires, observations, expert assessments - are adapted to the age of the participants and the specifics of the school environment. The author's model of leadership development has been applied through a pilot experiment in the learning process and has been evaluated through both input and output diagnostics, as well as qualitative and quantitative methods of analysis. Of particular note is

the approach to measuring the manifestations of the Arete value system (based on the "virtue, excellence, or full realization of potential" relation), which adds a philosophical and axiological layer to the study.

The third part contains an analytical presentation of the results with a detailed statistical interpretation and a systematic comparison between the different perspectives of principals, teachers and students. This provides a complete and objective picture of the status and potential of student leadership in primary education.

The dissertation research offers an in-depth and systematic analysis of leadership among primary school students (grades 1-4) based on a tripartite perspective: the views of principals, teachers, and the students themselves. The findings suggest that key leadership qualities such as communication, self-confidence, teamwork and initiative are fundamental to the development of effective young leaders. The findings highlight the need for structured and targeted programmes that develop these skills through interactive and applied methods - workshops, clubs, projects - that are integrated into the learning environment. The importance of the role of teachers and principals as models and creators of a supportive environment is strongly emphasized, with recommendations for specialized training of teaching staff and systematic monitoring of the effectiveness of the initiatives put in place.

Particular attention is paid to the implementation of the Arete unified value system, which integrates the education of moral and social virtues such as honesty, respect, cooperation and responsibility. Student survey data emphasizes the importance of social skills and personal development as the basis for effective leadership. This calls for the development of curricula that intentionally foster collaboration, emotional intelligence, and self-reflection in the classroom. Involving parents as partners and active participants further enriches and stabilizes the educational process, creating a holistic ecosystem for leadership formation.

Piloting the leadership development model among students has shown significant positive effects on children's social dynamics, academic achievement, and emotional well-being. Maintaining and expanding these programs is recommended to ensure sustained leadership development involving an even wider range of students. Findings suggest that a focus on virtues, environmental awareness, and collaboration not only improves personal competencies, but also strengthens the school community as a whole, which is essential to the modern educational paradigm and social integration.

The results achieved confirm the hypotheses and support the effectiveness of the established model. The conclusions are substantiated and supported by data, and the recommendations have high practical value for educational practice.

The dissertation research makes a significant theoretical contribution by producing a comprehensive, rigorous and systematic theoretical review of leadership in educational contexts that enriches the research literature and provides a solid foundation for further research. Within the framework of the study, a model of leadership development in primary school students has been developed and empirically validated, which specifies and systematizes effective strategies and approaches for student leadership development. Furthermore, by analyzing the views of students, elementary teachers, and principals, specific opportunities and conditions for leadership development are outlined, contributing to an understanding of the dynamics and specifics of leadership in elementary education.

The practical contributions of the dissertation are expressed in the creation of applicable materials and tools for the development of leadership skills, adapted for children from first to fourth grade, which can be used effectively in the learning process. The leadership development model is flexible and variable, allowing primary teachers to apply it according to the specific needs of their students and learning environment. The results of the study provide a valuable information base for educators, guidance counselors, school psychologists, and principals, assisting them in their practical work with target groups and in building a supportive leadership learning environment. In addition, the developed model can serve as a basis for conducting remedial activities for children with behavioural difficulties, by focusing on character strengths to achieve a positive effect on their behaviour and social integration.

Thus the dissertation research contributes to the theoretical knowledge of leadership in primary education as well as to the practical implementation of models and strategies that stimulate students' personal and social development. It establishes a foundation for further development of pedagogical

practices and policies aimed at building sustainable leadership competencies that are crucial for students' success and adaptation in the contemporary educational environment.

6. Evaluation of the publications and personal contribution of the PhD student

The PhD student Ilitsa Georgieva Daskalova presents a thorough and systematic research in the field of student leadership in the primary stage of school education. Her publications address both the theoretical foundations of leadership as a complex of virtues and skills, and specific models and methodologies for the development of leadership qualities in students. Her research focuses on the integration of leadership into the educational process, while taking into account the views of key educational stakeholders - students, teachers and principals.

Research papers include the development and validation of models that are applicable in practice particularly for students in grades one through four. Particular attention is given to innovative approaches, such as the inclusion of STEAM learning as a means of improving leadership skills, which highlights the interdisciplinary and cutting-edge nature of the research. The publications form a complex image of leadership as an educational phenomenon, supported by empirical data and practical recommendations.

Personal engagement is reflected in the systematic research, development, and testing of specific programs and approaches to developing leadership qualities among students. This emphasis on practical application and relevance to the context of the educational environment contributes to enhancing the effectiveness of pedagogical practices and promotes a more holistic development of students, responding to contemporary demands for quality education.

7. Abstract

The abstract reflects the substantive highlights of the dissertation research, the empirical results and the conclusions drawn on the basis of the implemented research program, sufficiently well structured and the fruit of the implementation of the doctoral student's overall research program.

8. Recommendations for future use of the dissertation contributions and results

In order to expand her research program and achieve international recognition through publications in journals with Impact Factor (IF) and Impact Rank (SJR), Ilica Daskalova should focus her efforts on research in the areas of leadership and emotional intelligence in education, inclusive education and the development of leadership skills in children with diverse learning needs, as well as the role of digital technologies and STEAM approaches in the formation of leaders. Additionally, it is recommended to consider cross-cultural aspects of leadership and social skills in multicultural classroom environments, as well as psychosocial development and the impact of leadership on students' academic achievement and motivation. These areas will allow not only for the expansion of the scientific profile, but also the establishment of international collaborations and publication in prestigious scientific journals included in the Web of Science and SCOPUS databases.

CONCLUSION

The dissertation submitted for review contains scientific and applied results and shows that the PhD student has theoretical knowledge and abilities for independent scientific research, which is in line with the requirements of the Academic Staff Development Act and its implementing regulations.

There are sufficient grounds to propose with sufficient conviction to the members of the esteemed scientific jury that Ilitsa Georgieva Daskalova be awarded the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Studies, professional field 1. Pedagogy on the basis of a defended dissertation on the topic "Student Leadership in the Primary Education Stage".

5-th June 2025

Prepared by:

Prof. Dr. Nikolay Tsankov, D.Sc.