

## **REVIEW**

**By Assoc. Prof. Diana Minkova Dimitrova, PhD**

Plovdiv University 'Paisii Hilendarski' of the thesis for awarding the educational and scientific degree of 'Doctor' Higher Education Area 1. Educational Sciences,  
Professional Field 1.2. Pedagogy,  
Doctoral Programme "Theory of Education and Didactics"

**Author:** Ilitsa Georgieva Daskalova

**Topic:** "Student leadership in the primary stage of basic education"

**Academic Supervisor:** Assoc. Prof. Nikolinka Aleksandrova Atanasova, PhD, Plovdiv University 'Paisii Hilendarski'

### **1. General Description of the Submitted Materials**

By Order No. RD-22-1177/19.05.2025 of the Rector of Plovdiv University 'Paisii Hilendarski' (PU) I am appointed as a member of the scientific jury for ensuring a procedure for the defense of a dissertation on the topic "Student leadership in the primary stage of basic education", for the purpose of acquiring the educational and scientific degree of 'Doctor' in the field of higher education 1. Educational Sciences, Professional Field 1.2. Pedagogy, Doctoral Programme of Theory of Education and Didactics.

The materials submitted by Ilitsa Georgieva Daskalova in paper format comply with Article 36 (1) of the Rules for the Development of the Academic Staff of PU and include the following documents:

- a request to the Rector of PU for initiating the thesis defence procedure;
- a curriculum vitae in European format;
- protocols from the department council regarding readiness to initiate the procedure and preliminary discussion of the thesis;
- a thesis;
- an abstract;
- a list of scientific publications on the thesis topic;
- copies of scientific publications;
- declaration of originality and authenticity of the attached documents.

The doctoral candidate has attached six publications

### **2. Brief biographical Information about the Doctoral Candidate**

Ilitsa Georgieva Daskalova was born in 1985 in the city of Plovdiv. She graduated from the National School of Music and Dance "Dobrin Petkov" in Plovdiv in 2004. During her studies at the school, she gave numerous solo concerts in the country and abroad and participated in international and national competitions. In 2000, she received an award for high creative achievements - "Ambassador of Peace" from UNESCO in Basel, Switzerland, personally presented to her by Kofi Annan, Secretary-General of the UN. She continued her studies at the Academy of Music, Dance and Fine Arts "Prof. Assen Diamandiev" - Plovdiv in two faculties. Simultaneously graduated with a degree in "Pedagogy of Music Education" and a degree in "Performing Arts - Piano" in the class of Prof. Georgi Kanev.

She was awarded, for excellent success and creative achievements: "Rector's Award" in 2007 and an annual scholarship from "Round Table Bulgaria" in 2008. She held positions as Deputy Chair of the Student Council and Assistant Editor of the academic publication "Art Spectrum". Since 2013, she has been actively developing her teaching activities, starting work at the "Malina" Kindergarten in Plovdiv, the "My Childhood" Private Kindergarten, and the "Little Mermaid" Private Kindergarten.

In 2015, she took part in a project at Plovdiv University - "Better Teachers, Better Education" in her role as a mentored young teacher and was invited to take part in the final conference. In 2017, she graduated with a master's degree in Educational Management, at the Faculty of Pedagogy of Plovdiv University with excellent rating.

From 01.03.2022. Ilitsa Daskalova has been enrolled as a full-time doctoral student at the Department of Primary School Pedagogy - Faculty of Pedagogy of Plovdiv University "Paisiy Hilendarski" with Order RD-21-250 of 01.02.2022. , in the doctoral program "Theory of Education and Didactics". She was enrolled with the right to defend her thesis by Order RD-22-794 of 28.03.2025, of the Rector of the "Paisiy Hilendarski" University.

She studied at the doctoral school of the Faculty of Pedagogy and successfully passed the exams in the mandatory and specific disciplines from the framework and individual curriculum.

Since 2023, she has been appointed as an assistant professor at the Department of Primary School Pedagogy of the Faculty of Pedagogy of the University of Plovdiv. Her teaching activities include exercises in the disciplines: Primary School Pedagogy, Interactive Learning in NE, Didactics, Docimology and Theory of Education, with students of the Bachelor's Degree, full-time and part-time forms of study. The doctoral student Ilitsa Georgieva Daskalova takes an active part in the activities of the faculty, as follows:

- Participation in trainings, seminars and conferences;

- Participation in courses organized by Academia Iuventutis;
- Participation in expert groups at NEAA and expert groups for ESG;
- Participation in clubs "Young Pedagogue", "Leadership in Education".

### **3. Topic Relevance and Appropriateness of the Goals and Objectives Set**

The topic of the dissertation is relevant and significant for modern education, as it presents specific research related to student leadership in the initial stage of primary education, as a valuable factor in forming an effective and supportive learning environment that contributes to the personal development of children. The relevance of the topic is undeniable, as it critically seeks an answer to the basic research question: *How can leadership skills in students be most effectively developed and how can educational systems support this process?*

The author convincingly proves the thesis that student leadership plays an essential role in the formation of active, proactive and responsible citizens even in the initial stages of primary education. It stimulates the personal development of children. Developing leadership skills from an early age provides the foundation for future success in school, the workplace, and personal life. Students engaged in leadership activities often exhibit higher levels of academic achievement. In this line of thought, students engaged in leadership roles develop a strong sense of responsibility to themselves and others. They learn to make ethical decisions and take responsibility for their own. Another aspect that emphasizes the relevance and significance of the dissertation is that student leadership in the early stages of primary education is not an end in itself, but a means to build critical thinking, independence and responsibility in children. Supporting student leadership is an investment in the future of our children and society.

Through analysis and synthesis of information, the dissertation research justifies the importance of student leadership in the initial stage of primary education, proposes specific strategies, and approaches for its development.

The emphasis in the work is the importance of school leadership for the development of social and communication skills in students.

### **4. Familiarity with the Problem**

The theoretical part of the dissertation is developed with an understanding of the issues under consideration and demonstrates the ability to critically evaluate leadership in the educational context. The conceptual foundations, historical development, and significant pedagogical systems related to the formation of student leadership are examined. A historical overview is provided outlining the evolution of leadership theories – from the classical

philosophical views of Confucius, Socrates, and Plato, through the pragmatic approaches of Machiavelli and Rousseau, to contemporary pedagogical models. Emphasis is placed on the systems of Janusz Korczak and Bell-Lancaster, which laid the foundations of democratic education and student self-government.

The text is readable, logically and critically constructed, and points to possible empirical verifications and applied aspects of the analyzed theoretical constructs. The literary sources are used correctly.

## **5. Research Methods**

The research is precisely planned and conducted, and the empirical information is qualitatively processed and analysed using adequate statistical filters. The model of the doctoral student's own research logically originates from the analyses in the theoretical part of the dissertation. I assess the design of the empirical research as optimal for the purpose of the research and the verification of the hypotheses set, and the analyses of the own research as in-depth, adequate and related to the hypotheses.

Overall, the planning of the empirical research, its conduct and the analyses of the information obtained are evidence of the good research culture of the doctoral student and a thorough, systematic understanding of the research problem.

*The objectives of the study are:*

"1. Research into the primary conditions for the manifestation of leadership among students at the initial stage of school education and the place of leadership in the educational institution and the class.

2. Research on primary leadership qualities among students from the initial stage of primary education, shaping their personality profile and development.
3. Research into the primary manifestations of the unified system of values ARETE, among students at the initial stage of school education.
4. Creation of a methodological system of forms, methods and means for the development of leadership skills and competencies in primary school students (grades 1–4)

The subject of the dissertation is related to the building and development of leadership skills and the formation of leadership qualities among students in the initial stage of primary education.

According to the leading hypothesis, it is assumed that the formation of leadership qualities among students at the initial stage of primary education will be facilitated if a methodological system of forms, methods and means for developing leadership skills and competencies in students is created. The research tasks correspond to the set goal, subject, object, and hypotheses.

Diagnostic research methods are presented specifically and informatively, as well as the selected statistical methods that will show the numerical expression of the displayed results. Competently selected diagnostics that provide the most in-depth answers to the questions posed in the dissertation and cover the three main groups of participants in the educational process.

Appropriately used tools: "Questionnaire for principals to determine the presence of leadership among students in grades 1-4", "Questionnaire for students for the manifestation of the unified value system ARETE among students from grades 1-4", "Questionnaire for teachers for determining the presence of leadership among students from grades 1-4" and "Exit Questionnaire for Students in Grades 1-4" were constructed entirely for the needs of this study.

The three-module model for developing leadership qualities in students from grades 1 to 4 is a purposeful development based on the competency-based approach in education, through which to achieve comprehensive personal development in students, which will subsequently grow into leadership competence.

A rationale is presented for each question included in the surveys, defining the purpose and what information and analysis each question is aimed at. The model for developing leadership qualities in students from grades 1 to 4 is described in detail, with specific activities and resources that are necessary for its application. The final product is also indicated as an expected result of applying the model, through the creation of a "Newspaper of the class".

The formative stage of the experiment is presented in detail with a detailed description of the practices carried out, supported by examples and photographs. A criterion matrix for the observation protocols has been created to synthesize the information about the activities carried out. The stages in the research procedure are described, outlining: the implementation period, the characteristics of the educational institutions and the participants in the study, which is motivated by the need for comprehensiveness and diversity in the sample of respondents.

## **6. Characteristics and Assessment of the Thesis**

The dissertation is 237 pages long. It consists of an introduction, three chapters, a summary and conclusions, a list of references, and appendices, which include the questionnaires used and tables from the statistical analyses.

The **first chapter** examines leadership as a concept, its history, and various theories of leadership. Pedagogical systems related to the development of student leadership are derived and presented, such as the system of children's self-government of Janusz Korczak and the Bell-Lancaster system, as well as the classroom system and the modern educational paradigm of the 21st century. At the end of the first chapter, methods for forming student leaders in the initial stage of primary education are indicated, such as the use of examples, persuasion and interactive methods. It ends with in-depth and correctly drawn conclusions that summarize the theoretical framework of leadership in the educational context.

The analysis is distinguished by its analytical and critical nature and demonstrates the excellent skills of the doctoral student in working with scientific text.

The **second chapter** of the dissertation presents the design of the empirical study. The main goal is formulated precisely, clearly and briefly. The doctoral student has successfully implemented the research tasks related to the implementation of the goal of the development, following their logical sequence. The choice of methodology includes a wide range of validated tools. The selection of participants in the study – principals, teachers and students from 1st to 4th grade from different settlements and schools with different ethnic composition – was precisely implemented, which creates conditions for the implementation of the tasks set in the dissertation research.

The dissertation presents and describes an author's model for the formation of leadership skills and qualities. The formative stage of the experiment includes a detailed description of the practical techniques and activities carried out to develop the virtues and inner strengths of students, as well as to increase their motivation. A criterion matrix of the observation protocols is presented informatively. The stages and procedure of conducting the study are correctly described.

The conducted study is structured, analysed correctly, and in-depth. Its scope corresponds to the requirements for this type of scientific work.

The **third chapter** of the dissertation presents the analysis of the results of the empirical research conducted. The answers to the questionnaires of the respondents participating in the study are analysed. The results show the presence of leadership qualities in primary school students and a positive impact of the applied methods on their emotional, social development and cooperation skills. The results are summarized in terms of acquired knowledge about virtues, motivation for teamwork and environmental awareness. In the analysis and interpretation of the obtained data, the doctoral student develops his research potential,

demonstrating competence and professionalism, deserving an undoubtedly positive assessment. The generalizations made are relevant to the obtained results and have practical applicability.

The dissertation ends with conclusions that confirm the importance of student leadership in the initial stage of education, the role of pedagogical systems and teachers in its development, as well as the effectiveness of the applied methodology. Possibilities for practical application of the developed strategies and directions for future research are outlined. The in-depth analysis of the obtained results and the derived contributions are evidence of the exceptionally good knowledge of the researched problem.

The list of used literature includes 177 sources in Bulgarian, Russian and English. Regarding the requirements for citation and correct reference to authors, the work fully meets the criteria and meets the standards.

## **7. Contributions and significance of the study for science and practice**

**In a theoretical aspect, the following scientific contributions can be found:**

- A comprehensive, precise and targeted theoretical review has been developed, which is distinguished by an extensive analysis of specialized scientific literature, most of which covers the last ten years.
- An author's model for the formation and development of leadership qualities in students at the initial stage of school education has been created and tested;
- An original empirical study was conducted in the scientific field of the researched issue, examining specific strategies and approaches for developing student leadership. The results of the study after the application of the author's "Model for the Development of Leadership Qualities in Students from 1st to 4th Grades" include an analysis of significant factors in promoting knowledge of virtues, emotional and social development, cooperation and environmental awareness among students, which is an important step towards their personal development;
- Opportunities for the formation and development of leadership skills and qualities have been competently outlined, based on the opinions of students, primary teachers and principals.

**In an applied aspect, the following scientific contributions can be found:**

- Materials for the development of leadership skills and qualities in students at the initial stage of school education are presented in an informative and adequate manner;

- The created model for developing leadership qualities in primary school students is described in a comprehensive manner and can be applied flexibly and variably by primary school teachers;
- The results obtained may be useful for educators, pedagogical advisors, psychologists, school principals and other specialists working in the field of education;
- The developed model of practical activities can be used as a way to implement corrective activities for children with problem behaviour, in which, by strengthening character strengths, problem behaviour can be positively influenced.

## **8. Assessment of publications on the dissertation work**

The presented list of 6 publications on the topic of the dissertation meets the requirements for obtaining the ONS "doctor". All of them are independent articles by Ilitsa Georgieva Daskalova and are in Bulgarian. Their publication in prestigious journals is a guarantee of professionalism. Their depth and quality are unquestionable.

## **9. Personal participation of the doctoral student**

I believe that the dissertation research conducted is the personal work of the doctoral student Ilitsa Georgieva Daskalova. Her participation in the planning, implementation, analysis, summary and interpretation of the results obtained from the theoretical and applied research is undeniable. Professionalism and precision have been demonstrated in the individual stages. The formulated contributions correspond to the achieved results and are her personal merit.

## **10. Abstract**

The abstract of the dissertation that presented is of an appropriate length of 31 pages, is structured according to the objectives and organization of the research and adequately presents its main theses, results and conclusions. Essential highlights is placed on the significance and scientific novelty of the study, whose methodological foundations are adequately stated. The structure also includes the author's self-assessment of the theoretical and practically applied contributions of his work.

## **11. Critical remarks and recommendations**

I have no critical remarks that could influence the review.

## **12. Personal impressions**



The presented dissertation demonstrates the excellent theoretical and practical preparation of the doctoral student on the researched problems, as well as her ability to process, interpret, analyse and summarize results of the conducted research. The development is balanced and well structured. I have known Ilitsa Georgieva Daskalova, I hold a positive opinion of her. She is responsible, organized, and loyal in her work.

### **13. Recommendations for Future Use of Thesis Contributions and Results**

I recommend that Ilitsa Georgieva Daskalova continue to work as hard as ever in the field of Pedagogical Science. I also recommend publishing scientific articles and a monograph on the topic, in order to popularize the issues under consideration.

### **CONCLUSION**

The dissertation work contains scientific, scientifically applied and applied results that represent an original contribution to science and meet all the requirements of the Act on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria (ADSRB), the Regulations for the Implementation of the ADSRB and the Regulations of the Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv.

The dissertation shows that doctoral student Ilitsa Georgieva Daskalova possesses in-depth theoretical knowledge and professional skills in the scientific specialty "Theory of Education and Didactics", demonstrating qualities and skills for independently conducting scientific research.

Due to the above, I confidently give my positive assessment of the conducted theoretical and applied research, presented in the above-reviewed dissertation, abstract, achieved results and contributions and I propose to the esteemed scientific jury to award the educational and scientific degree of "doctor" to Ilitsa Georgieva Daskalova in the field of higher education: 1. Educational Sciences, 1.2. Pedagogy, Doctoral programme "Theory of Education and Didactics"

05.06.2025

Reviewer: .....

(Assoc. Prof. Diana Minkova Dimitrova, PhD)