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UNIVERSITY OF PLOVDIV
FACULTY OF EDUCATION**



DEPARTMENT OF PRIMARY SCHOOL PEDAGOGY

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**STUDENT LEADERSHIP IN THE PRIMARY STAGE
OF BASIC EDUCATION**

ABSTRACT

of a dissertation for the award of the educational and scientific degree **Doctor**

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The dissertation titled "Student Leadership in the Primary Stage of Basic Education" consists of: a title page, table of contents, introduction, three chapters, conclusion with a declaration of originality, bibliography, and appendices. The total length of the dissertation is 259 pages, of which 223 pages comprise the main text, 13 pages contain the bibliography, and 23 pages are appendices. A total of 177 sources have been used in the research.

The public defense of the dissertation will take place on June 26, 2025, at 1:00 PM, in Seminar Room 405, New Building, 4th floor, at Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv.

All materials related to the dissertation defense are available for review at the library of the Faculty of Education, Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv, 236 Bulgaria Boulevard, Plovdiv.

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Structure and Main Content of the Dissertation

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INTRODUCTION

In the early stage of primary education, the development of leadership qualities among students plays a crucial role in shaping active, initiative-driven, and responsible citizens. Student leadership not only fosters the personal development of children but also contributes to the creation of a positive learning environment by promoting cooperation, empathy, and autonomy. "Leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal" (Northouse, 2018, p. 5). This definition highlights the importance of leadership skills not only in professional contexts but also in the educational domain. Nurturing leadership abilities in students during the initial years of schooling lays the foundation for their future growth as confident and responsible individuals. In today's rapidly changing world, where the expectations placed on young people are constantly evolving, the early development of leadership competencies is becoming increasingly significant. Student leadership in the early stage of primary education is not an end in itself, but rather a means of cultivating critical thinking, independence, and a sense of responsibility in children. Why is student leadership important?

1. Development of social skills: Through participation in leadership roles, students learn to communicate effectively, work in teams, and resolve conflicts.
2. Enhancement of self-confidence: Leadership initiatives help children build trust in their abilities and cope with various challenges.
3. Support for academic achievement: Leadership fosters active engagement in the learning process, which often leads to improved academic performance.
4. Fostering Civic Responsibility:

Students engaged in leadership activities develop a sense of responsibility toward society and the environment. Investing in student leadership at the early stage of primary education is an investment in the future of our children and society. By supporting leadership initiatives, we not only develop individual skills and qualities but also lay the foundation for a better and more successful society. Significance of the Dissertation Topic:

1. Preparation for the Future: One of the greatest advantages of encouraging leadership in children is preparing them for future challenges. Developing leadership skills from an early age provides a foundation for future success in school, the workplace, and personal life.

Enhancement of Academic Achievement: Students involved in leadership activities often demonstrate higher levels of motivation and engagement in the learning process. This leads to better academic outcomes and greater confidence in their abilities.

2. Development of Social Skills: Leadership in early school years cultivates essential social skills such as effective communication, teamwork, and conflict resolution. These skills are vital not only for academic success but also for building healthy relationships in the future.

3. Formation of a Sense of Responsibility and Ethics: Students engaged in leadership roles develop a strong sense of responsibility toward themselves and others. They learn to make ethical decisions and take accountability for their actions.

4. Encouragement of Innovation and Creativity: Leadership programs often include projects that stimulate creativity and innovation. Children learn to think outside the box, propose new ideas, and find solutions to problems.

5. Support for Mental and Emotional Well-being: Participation in leadership activities can enhance children's mental and emotional well-being. The confidence, self-esteem, and sense of belonging that come with leadership roles help them cope with the challenges and stresses of school life.

The introduction also outlines the research objectives and provides a summarized overview of the content of the dissertation's three chapters.

CHAPTER ONE

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE PROBLEM

1.1. Leadership as a Concept

Leadership is defined as a process through which an individual influences a group of people to achieve a common goal. In this context, leaders not only guide and manage but also inspire and motivate their followers to reach high objectives and outcomes. Within the educational context, leadership is viewed as a mechanism for influencing and directing group processes toward the achievement of shared goals. The phenomenon of leadership holds significant importance not only for organizations and societies but also for the individual, as the human nature inherently includes the desire for self-expression and influence over others. A lack of interaction and the inability to express personal interests may lead to feelings of failure and dissatisfaction. In the modern world, an individual's success largely depends on their competencies and qualities, such as the ability to make quick decisions, analyze information, demonstrate social engagement, and achieve optimal results.

1.1.1. The History of Leadership

The understanding of leadership has evolved throughout history. In antiquity, Plato described the ideal leader as a "philosopher king," while Aristotle explored the qualities that make a leader effective. During the Middle Ages, leadership was often associated with the feudal system, knighthood, and religious structures. The Renaissance began to emphasize the individual qualities of leaders, with Machiavelli proposing a pragmatic approach focused on maintaining power. In the Age of Enlightenment, thinkers such as Rousseau and Montesquieu examined leadership within the context of democratic governance and the social contract. With the Industrial Revolution, leadership increasingly became associated with the management of large organizations and the pursuit of efficiency.

1.1.2. Leadership Theories

There are various theories of leadership that offer diverse perspectives. The behavioral theory of leadership focuses on the actions of leaders and asserts that leadership behaviors can be learned. Transactional leadership is based on a system of rewards and punishments, where the leader clearly defines tasks and expectations. Transformational leadership inspires followers to achieve exceptional results and fosters their personal development through vision and role modeling.

The Great Man Theory posits that leaders are born with inherent traits. Charismatic leadership, as described by Max Weber and Kendra Cherry, relies on extraordinary personal qualities and magnetic appeal that inspire followers and create a strong emotional connection. The servant leadership theory, defined by Robert K. Greenleaf, prioritizes the leader's desire to serve others above all else.

1.1.3. Janusz Korczak's System of Children's Self-Governance

Janusz Korczak was a Polish educator and author renowned for his contributions to the development of democratic and humane education. His educational system emphasizes the importance of key principles grounded in respect, autonomy, and participation. Dr.

Janusz Korczak found his true calling in working with children. From an early age, he demonstrated a strong interest in supporting children in disadvantaged situations. In his diary, he noted that at the age of five he wished to help less fortunate children. At twenty, he wrote that he sought the company of children to ease his suffering when life "bared its teeth." The voices of children resonate clearly throughout his writings, which are devoid of patronizing or didactic tones. Korczak followed a long and complex path as an educator. He began his career tutoring and voluntarily gathering children to play with them. Between 1904 and 1908, he worked in children's summer colonies (camps), where he "learned the alphabet of educational practice." In 1907–1908, Korczak published his work *The School of Life* in progressive journals, presenting an imaginative vision of a new kind of school. Each step in his professional journey led to the establishment of his most significant project — the *Orphan's Home (Dom Sierot)*, which marked his transition from utopian ideas to practical application. There, he prepared older children for adult life by placing them in good foster families and teaching them to live independently in designated apartments. Janusz Korczak was a pioneer in child-centered pedagogy and a staunch advocate for children's rights. He is known for his innovative pedagogical ideas and his humane approach to child upbringing. His educational concept is based on four key principles. Alongside the Bell-Lancaster system, Korczak's pedagogical model laid the foundations of democratic education and student self-governance, demonstrating the potential for successfully cultivating leadership qualities in children.

1.1.4. The Bell–Lancaster System

The Bell–Lancaster system, as an educational model, demonstrates potential for successfully cultivating leadership qualities in children. Its primary objective was to reduce punishments, labor, and educational costs. The structure of the system was based on grouping students according to their level of knowledge rather than by age. A key feature of the system was the use of *monitors*—more advanced students who taught their less advanced peers. Teachers would instruct the monitors, who in turn taught the rest of the students. This method encouraged the academic growth of the advanced students through teaching and enabled the teacher to focus on guidance and supervision. The system employed strict discipline maintained through a structured set of rewards and punishments. Some of the early forms of public shaming used by Lancaster as disciplinary measures were later abandoned as inappropriate. The system was mainly applied in the teaching of basic subjects such as reading, writing, and arithmetic. According to various sources, the Bell–Lancaster method provided a unique opportunity for students to develop leadership skills through their role as monitors. The main drawbacks of the system included the lack of pedagogical training among the monitors and the implementation of harsh disciplinary practices, including corporal punishment. In the Bulgarian context, the educator Vasil Aprilov reviewed the *mutual instruction method* in 1841. He sought support for the establishment of a new Bulgarian school and emphasized the willingness of Neofit Rilski to teach using this method and to prepare educational materials in the Bulgarian language.

1.1.5. The Class-Lesson System

The class-lesson system is a pedagogical model that emerged from the need to expand education during the transition from feudalism to capitalism. It proved to be more economically efficient than individual or small-group teaching methods and gained widespread application in schools across Europe and America. Wolfgang Ratke contributed to its establishment by formulating key principles such as maintaining silence by the teacher, requiring students to remain seated, and discouraging punishment for academic failure. However, the most significant contribution came from John Amos Comenius, who strongly supported the system and emphasized the importance of consistent grouping of students into classes. He believed that a single teacher could educate a large number of pupils, with the help of older and more advanced students. Comenius advocated for universal education, asserting that all children, regardless of their social background, should be admitted to school. Johann Friedrich Herbart also contributed to the development of the system. His pedagogical framework introduced the concept of "formal steps" in instruction—clarity, association, system, and method—which represented essential phases of the learning process. Advantages of the class-lesson system include: The ability to educate large groups of students with a limited number of teachers; The school as a social environment that supports the integration of children into public life. The collective school experience promotes self-awareness, self-improvement, and self-discipline among students.

Criticisms and disadvantages of the system:

Its focus on the "average student" neglects individual learning needs and differences. The system often fosters rigid relationships between teachers and students, lacking emotional connection. There is a risk of alienating children from their families and exposing them to negative influences. The main contradiction lies in the dominance of whole-class instruction versus the inherently individual nature of student cognition and learning. This contradiction began to manifest at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries when elementary education based on this model became a barrier to further educational development. The system has faced strong criticism for its excessive standardization of methods and forms, insufficient consideration of students' curiosity and individual interests, and the absence of genuinely democratic and humane relationships. Nevertheless, it is acknowledged that these shortcomings can be minimized through a rational and thoughtful organization of the teaching process.

1.1.6. The Contemporary Educational Paradigm of the 21st Century

The contemporary educational paradigm is shaped by the transition toward an information society and is influenced by the globalization of economic, social, and political processes. In this context, the main goal of the school is to achieve a new quality of education. This quality is realized through the provision of universal knowledge and skills—key competencies—that enable students to thrive in the future. Education is viewed as a tool for empowering individuals and helping them learn to “live together” in a world characterized by pluralism and diversity. The central aim of education in modern society is to create the conditions for personal self-actualization. In the 21st century, a multicultural educational environment has emerged, encompassing elements that reflect the vital influences on learners with different capabilities and interests. The

pedagogy of diversity has developed as a field in response to the limitations of traditional pedagogy in organizing and operating within such a multicultural setting. Diversity among children is not seen as a problem, but as a resource to be utilized in the educational process. It fosters warm and friendly relationships. Modern education strives to move from activity-centered to learner-centered pedagogy. This includes student-focused learning, active memory engagement, the use of teacher-mediators, and the integration of both school-based and out-of-school educational resources. Contemporary education must respond to the demands of pluralism, tolerance, and individualized learning pathways. Students in the information age have diverse needs, and the teacher is no longer the sole source of information. This transformation redefines the role of the teacher in the learning process. Today's educational system must create opportunities for the development of leadership skills through collective activities. Encouraging student self-governance and leadership practices is essential for building a more effective and democratic educational system. Success in the modern world depends on competencies such as decision-making, information analysis, social engagement, goal achievement, self-education, and risk-taking. The competence-based approach stems from democratic educational philosophies, including constructivism, progressivism, and others. The contemporary educational paradigm also incorporates elements of: The postmodern paradigm – emphasizing the rejection of universal truths, a focus on diversity and pluralism, critical thinking, and interdisciplinary approaches; The sociocentric (holistic) paradigm – emphasizing social interaction, collective learning, social integration, and community values; The individualistic (egocentric) paradigm – focusing on personal development and autonomy. Interactive group work and project-based learning align well with the consensus and harmonization paradigms and are essential for creating a positive educational environment. In summary, the contemporary educational paradigm differs significantly from older models, such as the class-lesson system. It emphasizes individual development, the acquisition of key competencies, democratic and humane relationships, tolerance for diversity, and preparing students to live in a dynamic, information-rich, and multicultural society.

1.2. Leadership in Education

Leadership in education can be defined as the process of engaging and directing the abilities and energy of all members of the school community toward the achievement of shared educational goals. It is the art of inspiring others. Leadership is also understood as a process in which an individual influences a group of people to achieve a common objective. In an educational context, leadership is viewed as a mechanism for influencing and guiding group processes in order to reach collective goals. It represents a process of internal socio-psychological organization and the management of communication within a group. The primary purpose of leadership is the attainment of set objectives. Within educational institutions, leadership manifests on three levels:

The leadership team level (principal and vice-principal), The teacher level (particularly the homeroom or class teacher), and The student level (class leader or student representative).

Educational institutions play a vital role in shaping the younger generation, and therefore contribute significantly to the development of the nation and society. One of the key responsibilities of the school is to educate and nurture a mentally and emotionally healthy and resilient younger generation.

1.2.1. Principal Leadership as Management of the Educational Environment

Principal leadership is essential for managing the educational environment. The modern principal is more than an administrator — they are both a manager and a leader. Key aspects of their role include continuous professional development, a strong understanding of the economic aspects of education, effective use of material resources, and demanding high standards of themselves and the team. The principal must be an innovator who envisions long-term development and is uncompromising toward shortcomings in the educational and upbringing process. Well-executed management ensures the proper functioning of the school and the efficiency of both teaching and non-teaching staff. Principals are expected to seek new opportunities and foster collaboration. Successful leadership requires skills in working with people and applying an effective leadership style that builds group spirit, morale, and cohesion. Professionalism, sensitivity, and the ability to unite and motivate people become more important than rank or position. Leadership can be viewed as influencing a group of people to achieve a common goal. The principal, combining formal authority with personal charisma (earned through personal qualities), can inspire and guide the staff toward achieving tasks and objectives. An effective combination of formal and personal power enables the principal to motivate people to embrace ideas for the school's development as their own. Successful principals combine the behavior of a manager and a leader. Understanding the different aspects of leadership is key to organizational success. In the school context, principal leadership that merges management skills with the ability to inspire is vital for creating an effective and supportive learning environment.

1.2.2. Teacher Leaders, the Influence of Class Teachers, and Classroom Design

Teacher leaders and class teachers play a key role in the educational system. The effectiveness of management approaches and practices is important for the successful development of educational institutions. Leadership in the school environment is a complex endeavor that involves the competencies and skills of those in charge, the outcomes of applied leadership styles, and effective interaction with students. The personal characteristics of teachers also influence their leadership decisions. Teachers face challenges in managing students and communicating with parents in the 21st century, and they believe their leadership styles need modernization to inspire and be good listeners. The modern teacher must develop emotional and digital competencies and has the complex task of establishing authority in early education while considering the particularities of early childhood. Mentoring junior teaching staff is an important practice in Bulgaria, supporting their retention, adaptation, comfort, and relationships within the teaching team. Leadership is viewed as a process of social influence. Teacher leaders inspire and motivate both students and colleagues. They create an environment where students feel supported in developing their skills and talents. Effective teacher leaders demonstrate high ethical standards and serve as role models. Class teachers have

significant influence over students as they are the primary link between students, parents, and the school. They play an important role in creating a positive school culture and help students achieve academic and personal success. Class teachers also support the development of social skills and positive peer relationships. Classroom design is an important aspect of the learning process that can affect students' motivation and concentration. Appropriate colors and decorations can create a stimulating learning environment, and technologies support interactive learning. Providing rest areas helps students relax. Teacher leaders and class teachers who pay attention to design can create a more effective and motivating learning environment. Effective classrooms are well-equipped, spacious, organized, and clean. The teacher should be able to reach every student and see all from their workstation. Students who need extra help should be seated near the teacher. Group work requires organization to avoid disruption, ensure access to materials, control students, and manage noise. Material organization aims for maximum accessibility with minimal damage, and school facilities require care. Periodic cleaning together with students is recommended. Before the school year begins, the teacher can prepare the room, including bulletin boards, centers, and materials. Leadership style can be defined as a set of traits and methods or preferences and values, and it should be adaptive and flexible.

1.2.3. Leadership among Students

Leadership qualities are not inherent to every individual. Only a few are capable of occupying leadership positions, organizing the work of people, and managing this work. In this regard, leadership qualities are an important component of personality formation. This allows the younger student to develop as a person and to achieve significant results, so that in the future their activity contributes to solving societal problems (T. V. Bendas, O. V. Evtikhov, I. N. Logvinov, A. Meneghetti, B. D. Parigin, L. I. Umansky) (Ermilova, 2020, p. 4). Currently, the presence of leadership qualities in younger students is one of the mechanisms for resolving the contradiction between the child's need for self-actualization and the possibility of fulfilling a given process. A child in primary school age who possesses leadership qualities occupies certain positions in the team and has the opportunity to realize themselves in different kinds of activities within and outside the educational space, which means that they will improve as a person, leading to their development (E. M. Dubovskaya, R. L. Krichevski, O. B. Krushelnitskaya) (Ermilova, F., M., 2020, pp. 4–5). The structure of modern school education allows effective resolution of this contradiction within the current educational system. The development of leadership qualities in children of primary school age is more effective when working collectively than individually, as children are guided by the environment. They have the opportunity to compare the qualities inherent to them with the qualities of the immediate environment. Developed leadership qualities can be considered the key to the child's success in future life, since they can be applied in any field of professional activity.

1.3. Leadership in the Early Years of School Education

Leadership in the early years of school education plays a crucial role in the development of future citizens of our society. The development of leadership skills from an early age not only supports academic success but also builds important social competencies. The

cultivation of leadership abilities in early childhood helps children acquire fundamental social and communication skills that are foundational for their future. According to Cowen (2020, p. 22), leadership in children fosters self-confidence and effective communication. Moreover, the early development of leadership skills prepares children for future leadership roles and responsibilities (James, 2020, p. 34). Students engaged in leadership activities often demonstrate higher motivation to learn and better academic performance. Smith's (2018, p. 45) research shows that students involved in leadership roles achieve superior academic results. According to Green's (2021, p. 56) studies, children exhibiting leadership qualities at an early age are more likely to participate actively in the learning process. Through participation in leadership activities, students acquire skills in organization, planning, and taking responsibility. Johnson and Howe (2019, p. 67) assert that involvement in leadership initiatives fosters a sense of responsibility and ethics in children. Leadership encourages children to take accountability for their actions and decisions (Brown, 2021, p. 78). Leadership projects and initiatives motivate children to think outside the box and propose innovative solutions to problems. Carter (2017, p. 89) emphasizes that leadership nurtures creativity and critical thinking among students. These skills are essential for the children's future development and success (Kim, 2023, p. 101). Leadership in the early school years aids children in developing social and emotional skills necessary for successful interaction with peers and adults. According to Williams (2022, p. 112), student leadership supports the development of emotional intelligence and emotion management skills.

1.3.1. Roles of Student Leaders

The issue of leadership and leaders within student teams is one of the most pressing and relevant challenges in contemporary schools. The class leader serves as a support to the class teacher and assists in organizing educational activities. Leaders are students who naturally organize their peers and contribute to the establishment of socially significant values and orientations. Without the influence exerted by leaders, any team—including a team of children—cannot be effectively aligned to achieve the goals essential to the group. Leaders are not born; they become leaders, and in the process of developing and strengthening leadership qualities, other specific traits in the child also emerge.

1.3.2. Methods for Developing Student Leaders in the Early Primary Education Stage

Methods for training leaders in children's and youth social organizations are approaches aimed at achieving objectives and solving tasks related to the formation and development of leadership qualities, abilities, knowledge, and skills among the members of these organizations who are already leaders or have the potential to become leaders. In the present study, this concept will be applied to the class/classes in the early stage of primary education (Minova, 2018, p. 44). According to the classification of educational methods by V. A. Slavenin, methods for training leaders in children's and youth social organizations can be divided into four main groups (Minova, 2018, p. 44):

1. Methods for forming personal consciousness;
2. Methods for organizing activities and developing experience in social behavior;
3. Methods for stimulating and motivating activities and behavior;
4. Methods for control, self-control, and self-assessment.

Methods for developing the leader's personal consciousness are used to impart knowledge about leadership, its essential aspects, and manifestations to the individual. They aim to form ideas and concepts about leadership activities within children's and youth social organizations. These methods include narration, discussion, lecture, explanation, example, dialogue, persuasion, and interactive techniques (Minova, 2018, p. 44).

1.3.3. Approaches to Developing Student Leadership in the Early Stage of Primary Education

In order to develop and nurture leadership qualities, abilities, knowledge, and skills among children, adolescents, and young people, educational institutions and youth social organizations employ various technologies and methodologies. Each technology or technique is applied over a long period of time and involves a comprehensive impact on different aspects of the leader's personality: cognitive, motivational, practical-effective, and reflective (Minova, 2018, p. 54). Within these technologies and methodologies, various methods are used to form and develop leaders' knowledge, ideas, concepts, motives, skills, and abilities, as well as to organize practical leadership activities (Minova, 2018, p. 54). Technology for training leaders – children and youth: Social organizations utilize a set of tools, methods, and forms based on an algorithm for organizing the process of working with leaders (identification, training, activity organization, pedagogical support, and mentoring) (Minova, 2018, p. 54). The methods for training children's and youth leaders include a set of tools, methods, and forms that ensure the achievement of the goals and tasks of the leadership training process (Minova, 2018, p. 54). The main difference between technology and technique is that technology is based on an algorithm – a clear sequence of actions (stages, phases, steps) to achieve the intended goal. It is recommended to use technologies and techniques that contribute to the formation, development, and application of leadership qualities and abilities, such as:

- ✓ Collective Creative Deed (CCD) technology;
- ✓ Interactive learning technologies;
- ✓ Technologies for forming social activity and initiative;
- ✓ Methodology for forming moral value orientations;
- ✓ Leadership training technologies such as "Climbing" and "Achievements";
- ✓ Technologies for communicative games and game techniques (Minova, 2018, p. 55)

SECOND CHAPTER

DESIGN OF THE EMPIRICAL STUDY

2.1. Object of the Scientific Research

Leadership among students in the primary stage of school education.

2.2. Subject of the Scientific Research

Development and cultivation of leadership skills and formation of leadership qualities among students in the primary stage of basic education.

2.3. Research Objectives

1. To investigate the primary conditions for the manifestation of leadership among students in the primary stage of school education and the role of leadership within the educational institution and classroom.
2. To examine the primary leadership qualities among students in the primary stage of basic education, to define their personal profiles and development.
3. To explore the initial manifestations of the unified value system Arete among students in the primary stage of school education.
4. To create a methodological system of forms, methods, and tools for developing leadership skills and competencies among students from grades 1 to 4.

2.4. Research Tasks

1. To conduct a theoretical study of the researched problem.
2. To carry out a survey to identify the role of student leaders in school, according to the opinions of school principals.
3. To investigate student leadership in the early grades as an element of classroom design, based on the perspectives of primary school teachers.
4. To monitor the presence and manifestations of the unified Arete value system among students from grades 1 to 4, as well as relationships in resolving various situations that imply the exhibition of leadership behavior.
5. To construct questionnaires aimed at determining the role of leadership in students aged 1st to 4th grade for teachers and principals.
6. To design a questionnaire for assessing the presence and manifestation of the Arete value system among primary school students.
7. To develop a model of methods, techniques, and methodological materials through which primary education students can lay the foundations for developing leadership qualities.
8. To construct a questionnaire for baseline diagnostics of students participating in the implementation of the leadership development model.
9. To develop observation protocols as tools for analyzing the overall application of the model.
10. To collect data from expert evaluations by primary school teachers to assess the pedagogical application of the leadership development model among students from grades 1 to 4.

11. To conduct a pedagogical experiment with students from grades 3 and 4 in the primary education stage, implementing the developed original model for forming leadership skills and qualities.
12. To formulate conclusions and recommendations from the conducted research for pedagogical practice.

2.5. Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: It is assumed that manifestations of various leadership qualities are already present among students in the primary stage of basic education.

Hypothesis 2: It is assumed that students in the primary stage of school education exhibit personal characteristics aligned with the unified value system Arete.

Hypothesis 3: It is presumed that the formation of leadership qualities among students in the primary stage of basic education will be facilitated if a methodological system of forms, methods, and tools for developing leadership skills and competencies is created.

Hypothesis 4: It is accepted that situations requiring different decisions will provoke the manifestation of diverse leadership qualities among students from grades 1 to 4.

2.6. Organization and Methodology of the Research

The aim of this research is to collect data and analyze the presence of leadership among students in the early grades of schools in Bulgaria. Additionally, the study seeks to develop an educational model and methodological materials through which leadership qualities can be cultivated in students from grades 1 to 4, thereby contributing to the formation of an adaptive student leader personality that meets contemporary societal demands.

2.7. Participants

2.7.1. School Principals

The study included 43 schools across the country. A questionnaire-survey was provided to the principals of educational institutions located in geographically diverse areas. The selection of schools was carried out according to specific criteria, some of which included: schools situated in regions at the four corners of Bulgaria, encompassing both Southern and Northern Bulgaria. Some of the institutions were primary schools, while others were secondary schools. Additionally, attention was paid to the ethnic composition within the educational institutions, with the study focusing on both schools with a homogeneous ethnic population and those with a multicultural environment.

2.7.2. Teachers of Grades 1–4

The study involved 80 teachers who instruct students from grades 1 to 4, from four different localities. The questionnaire-survey was provided to primary school teachers as well as to teachers responsible for all-day preparation activities. The selection of educational institutions was carried out according to specific criteria, including: schools located in areas of a large city, a medium-sized city, a small town (which is a municipal center), and a village. The institutions comprised both primary schools and secondary schools. Attention was also given to the ethnic composition within the educational

institutions, with the study focusing on schools with both homogeneous ethnic populations and multicultural environments.

2.7.3. Students in Grades 1–4

The study included 118 fourth-grade students from four different localities. The questionnaire-survey was administered to fourth-grade students from territorially diverse areas. The selection of educational institutions was based on specific criteria, including the schools being located in areas of a large city, a medium-sized city, a small town (serving as a municipal center), and a village. The institutions consisted of both primary and secondary schools. Particular attention was also paid to the ethnic composition within the educational institutions, with the study encompassing schools with both homogeneous ethnic groups and multicultural environments.

2.7.4. Descriptive Statistics of the Socio-Demographic Characteristics of the Participants:

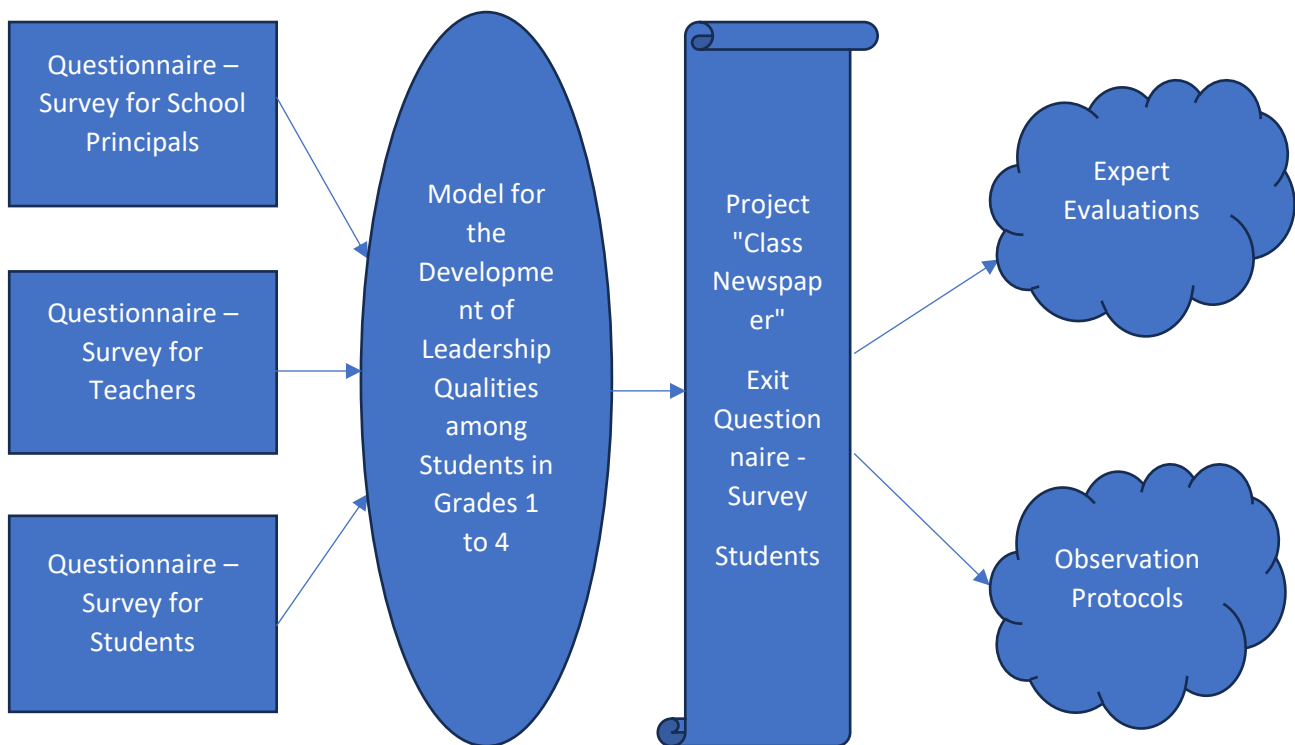
For the current analysis, the questionnaire-survey (for directors) was completed predominantly by women, comprising 60.46%, and men accounting for 29.53%, who serve as school principals across the country. Regarding location and type of settlement, data was collected from educational institutions situated within urban areas (regional or municipal centers) – 88.37%, and from small settlements (villages) – 11.63%. In the constructed study, at the stage of initial diagnosis, primary school teachers were included, with women representing 100% of this group. Concerning location, the data was collected based on specified characteristics covering different types of settlements: large city, medium-sized city, small town serving as a municipal center, and village. For the constructed analysis, the questionnaire-survey (for students) was completed by a nearly equal number of girls – 52.94% and boys – 47.06%, who are fourth-grade students at their respective schools.

2.8. Research Design. Research Methods

2.8.1. Diagnostic Methods:

The instruments used in the overall study are designed, on the one hand, to investigate the opinions of school principals and teachers within educational institutions and to assess the extent to which the issue of student leadership is relevant to them, as well as to identify their attitudes toward creating specific school activities that contribute to the development of leadership qualities among students. On the other hand, the instruments explore students' opinions to analyze the degree to which the core traits of a leadership personality, according to the unified value system "Arete," are observed in them. The next instrument represents a pilot model for the practical acquisition of knowledge, skills, and attitudes among students related to leadership and the development of leadership personality. This model is connected to the three stages of leader development – individual, personality, leader – through knowledge of virtues, skills for cultivating inner strengths, and fostering leadership qualities. The third instrument includes the creation of a project by the students, which is a structured model through which students develop skills for role allocation and assuming specific leadership roles, ultimately aiming to achieve a final goal (product). The final instrument focuses on

gathering expert evaluations from primary school teachers and analyzing observation protocols.



2.8.1.1. Questionnaire for School Principals

The questionnaire designed for school principals to assess the presence of leadership among students in grades 1 through 4 consists of 22 questions. For questions 1 to 16, respondents answer using "Yes/No/Unable to judge" options. Questions 18 to 22 are aimed at eliciting the principals' personal views on the research problem, as well as collecting demographic and institutional data such as gender, type of educational institution, number of students, ethnic composition, and location. The questions are formulated as statements intended to capture the principals' perceptions regarding manifestations of leadership qualities among students in the primary education stage. The questionnaire is structured to examine several aspects of the research topic, moving from general to more specific issues.

2.8.1.2. Questionnaire for Teachers

The questionnaire for primary school teachers, aimed at determining the presence of leadership among students in grades 1 to 4, is a component of the study designed to identify and explore teachers' opinions regarding the manifestation of leadership qualities among their students. The questionnaire addresses whether leadership has a role in classroom management and whether students' leadership skills can contribute to better educational and developmental outcomes. The questionnaire consists of 21 questions. For questions 1 through 14, respondents answer statements with "Yes/No/Unable to judge." Questions 15 and 16 are open-ended, intended to collect opinions and personal viewpoints on the topic. Questions 17 through 21 gather demographic and contextual information such as the teacher's gender, the grade they teach, the location, the type of educational institution, and the number of students in the class.

2.8.1.3 Questionnaire for Students

The questionnaire for students assessing the manifestation of the unified value system "Areté" consists of 26 questions. Every two questions correspond to a different level of the value system: First level: The Star of Individual Virtues — Individual virtues include Faith, Defense, Love, Labor, and Authority. Questions 1 to 12 cover this level (1–2: Faith, 3–4: Defense, 5–8: Love, 9–10: Labor, 11–12: Authority). Second level: The Square of Inner Strengths — Reason, Will, Feelings, and Morality. Questions 13 to 20 cover this level (13–14: Feelings, 15–16: Morality, 17–18: Will, 19–20: Reason). Third level: The Triangle of Leader Qualities — Inspiration, Idea, and Impulse. Questions 21 to 26 cover this level (21–22: Idea, 23–24: Inspiration, 25–26: Impulse). Respondents answer the questions with "Yes/No/Unable to judge" and also provide information about gender, educational institution, grade, and place of residence.

2.8.2. Model for Developing Leadership Qualities among Students in Grades 1 to 4

The design of the model for developing leadership qualities among students in grades 1 through 4 involves several distinct stages. The structure of activities represents an integrated system of methods and techniques, organized into different subcategories. These subcategories aim to progressively accumulate, through practical application, specific knowledge about virtues, inner strengths, and leadership qualities. This accumulated knowledge is intended to eventually transform into attitudes and motivation for positive interpersonal relationships.

Methods for Developing the Virtues of the Individual: *Techniques for Building Trust:* "Catch (Me When I Fall," "Let's Share Our Stories," "Understand How I Learn," "Discover My Strengths," "Let's Speak the Truth"); *Techniques for Building Tolerant Attitudes:* ("Be Respectful," "Know Yourself," "Help Others Grow," "Be Vulnerable"); *Techniques for Developing Good Habits:* Student's Good Habits Diary; *Techniques for Increasing Motivation:* ("Showing Appreciation," "Try to Listen Carefully," "Create a Culture in Your Classroom," "Rely on Goal Setting," "Choose Autonomy.")

Methods for Developing Inner Strengths: "Accept Negative Experiences as Learning Opportunities"; "Strength Comes from Discipline"; "Respect All Living Things, Observe the Beauty in Everything"; "Always Keep Fresh, Harmonize with Nature."

Methods for Forming Leadership Qualities: "The Class Newspaper."

2.8.3. Interpretation of the Formative Stage of the Experiment Related to the "Model for Developing Leadership Qualities in Students from Grades 1 to 4"

The implementation of the pilot methodological model for developing leadership qualities among students in grades 1 to 4 was conducted with the participation of 118 fourth-grade students from four schools. In each school, the model was applied over a two-week period during the "Interest Activities" classes. Prior to the actual implementation, parental consent was obtained through an informed consent declaration provided to the parents of the participating students. This document outlined the purpose, objectives of the methodological study, and a brief overview of the practical activities. Parents were asked to express their consent for their children's participation and for the use of anonymized data and photographic materials for the purposes of this dissertation research.

2.8.4. Exit Questionnaire for Students in Grades 1 to 4

The exit questionnaire for students in grades 1 to 4 aims to analyze the extent to which the implemented pilot methodological model for developing leadership qualities has enhanced their readiness and awareness related to virtues, inner strengths, and leadership qualities based on the developmental stages — individual, personality, and leader. The questionnaire consists of 17 items, with responses in a Yes/No/Unable to Judge format. Questions 1 through 17 provide information on the degree to which the methodological model has influenced the students' personal development and changes in interpersonal relationships. Additionally, the questions are designed based on specific methods and techniques to assess their applicability and effectiveness for students in this age group.

2.8.5. Observation Protocols and Expert Evaluations

Observation holds a pivotal role within this model, as it aims to contribute to the creation of an analytical database and to foster critical thinking skills. Observation in this context has a dual aspect: on one hand, it involves the teacher's analyses, and on the other hand, the conclusions that students derive as a starting point for their personal development and collaboration with peers. In some techniques, observation is conducted primarily by the teacher, serving as a behavioral corrective tool and as support for students' activities. In other techniques, students themselves are required to observe their own behavior, as well as that of others and their surrounding environment. This process assists them in evaluating various academic and life situations in depth, enabling them to engage in effective interactions. Such self-analyses also serve as a form of reflection, which subsequently provides answers to questions related to their personal self-actualization. During the pilot implementation of the three methodological modules within the model for developing leadership qualities among students in grades 1 to 4, observation protocols included the use of a **Criteria Matrix**. This matrix summarizes the overall performance of students in the classroom throughout the activities, allowing a structured and comprehensive assessment.

2.9. Statistical Methods

The Sign Test is a non-parametric method used to compare two related samples or paired observations. This test is applied when the data are measured on a nominal scale and do not follow a normal distribution, making parametric tests such as the t-test inappropriate. The fundamental principle of the Sign Test is to determine whether there is a significant difference between two groups by counting the number of positive and negative differences between the corresponding paired observations.

2.10. Procedures for Conducting the Study

The study was conducted from March 2024 to December 2024. The research was carried out in five stages.

CHAPTER THREE

RESULTS, ANALYSIS, AND INTERPRETATION OF DATA FROM THE EMPIRICAL STUDY

3.1. Analysis and Interpretation Related to the "Questionnaire for School Principals to Determine the Presence of Leadership Among Students in Grades 1-4"

The results of the study provide clear and significant evidence that leadership skills can and should be developed from an early age. Students at the primary education level possess the potential to exhibit leadership qualities that are important not only for their personal growth but also for the effectiveness of the educational process and the social dynamics within the classroom. Support for such initiatives from educational leaders is crucial for their successful implementation.

Questions 15 and 16 are designed to allow principals to express their personal opinions in a more open-ended format regarding what they believe contributes to the manifestation of leadership among students in grades 1-4, and in which situations particular types of leadership most often emerge. Some principals provided responses to these questions, while others chose to leave them unanswered. This can be analyzed as indicating that those principals who have observed clear leadership roles among students in this age group in specific situations are more able to provide definitive statements in this regard. Conversely, those who left these questions unanswered were also the ones who responded with "cannot assess" to the question of whether one or more leaders in the classroom would contribute to better outcomes. This suggests that if specific activities and situations emphasizing leadership qualities among primary students were more consistently implemented, a clearer consensus could be formed among school leaders regarding the situations that give rise to leadership manifestations and the reasons behind these expressions.

In summary, regarding Question 15: "What do you think contributes to the manifestation of leadership among students in grades 1-4?", the responses can be synthesized as follows:

- ✓ Personal qualities, behaviors, and traits such as confidence, desire to lead or command, ability to gain popularity, create a positive atmosphere, and organize;
- ✓ The school environment reflects group dynamics similar to those observed among adults. This means that all conditions exist to observe leadership among students. School leaders are typically those children who organize the class for various school events, collect money for gifts for the teacher, and offer ideas. They easily attract positive attention from both classmates and teachers;
- ✓ A clear vision of desired future outcomes and the means to achieve them;
- ✓ Character traits;
- ✓ Personal and character-specific features, alongside objective conditions that allow these qualities to manifest;
- ✓ Experience and self-belief, coupled with the desire to express themselves;
- ✓ Charisma, communication skills, and collaboration abilities.

In summary, regarding Question 16: "In which situations does a particular type of leadership most frequently manifest among students in grades 1-4?", the answers can be summarized as:

- ✓ Participation in competitions, organizing games and celebrations, managing recess, individual initiatives, conflict resolution, and expressing opinions on given topics;
- ✓ Leadership most frequently emerges when there is a need to accomplish a specific task. It also manifests during teamwork or group work in the educational process;
- ✓ Interpersonal relationships in the learning environment, teamwork, sports activities, informal communication;
- ✓ Leadership is evident in everyday activities, especially during group or team work;
- ✓ When students want to take a leading role in the class and direct their energy and creativity toward this goal;
- ✓ Situations that require organizing other students, team activities, projects, and crisis situations;
- ✓ Conflict and problem situations.

3.1.1. Statistical Interpretation of the Data from the "Questionnaire for Principals to Determine the Presence of Leadership Among Students in Grades 1-4"

Low p-values (typically below 0.05) indicate that there is a significant difference and that the results are unlikely to be due to chance. In particular, very small p-values (such as 10^{-13}) demonstrate strong statistical significance. Questions 1 to 10 and 13-14 have very low p-values, indicating strong statistical significance. This provides compelling evidence that students exhibit leadership qualities, form communication groups, assist teachers, and so forth. Questions 11 and 12 also have low p-values, though not as low as the others, which still points to a significant difference. Based on these p-values, we can conclude that students in grades 1-4 do indeed demonstrate leadership qualities, and these qualities depend both on internal factors (such as temperament and character) and external factors (such as family environment and ethnicity/religion). The results of the conducted survey among school principals regarding the presence of leadership among students in grades 1-4 offer significant insights that can serve as a foundation for future initiatives and programs within the educational system. The high statistical significance of the p-values reflects clear trends and established opinions among the respondents.

Presence of Leadership Qualities: The first four questions of the survey indicate a convincing consensus that students can manifest leadership qualities even at an early age. This suggests that leadership is not solely related to older age groups; rather, the beginning of the school career is an appropriate time to identify and encourage these skills. **Social Dynamics and Group Formation:**

The question related to the formation of communication groups reveals that social structure and dynamics play an important role in classrooms. This implies that students at an early age tend to socialize and form groups, which is a natural process in the development of social skills and leadership qualities. **Benefit to Teachers and the Educational Process:** Responses to questions concerning assistance to teachers and the formation of leadership groups within the classroom show that the presence of leaders among students can significantly facilitate the educational process. Students with leadership skills can take on some responsibilities and tasks, thereby reducing the workload on teachers and improving the effectiveness of the learning process. **Nature of Leadership Qualities:** The questions addressing innate versus developed leadership qualities reveal diverse opinions among respondents. While there is significant support

for the notion that leadership skills can be developed, some responses reflect a belief in the innate nature of leadership. This underscores the importance of educational programs aimed at fostering these skills. **Support for Initiatives and Programs:** The results indicate strong support for initiatives directed at developing leadership skills among students. This provides a solid basis for planning and implementing programs designed to nurture leadership at an early age. Respondents are willing to support such activities in their schools, which is highly encouraging for the future of the educational system. **Influence of External Factors:** The final questions, related to family environment, ethnicity/religion, temperament, and the situations students face, reveal the complex nature of leadership. Leadership qualities are not isolated from external influences; rather, they are shaped and developed under the impact of multiple factors. This highlights the need for an integrated approach when designing programs for the development of leadership skills, taking all these aspects into account.

3.2. Analysis and Interpretation Related to the “Questionnaire for Teachers to Determine the Presence of Leadership Among Students in Grades 1-4”

The data from the questionnaire clearly show that primary school teachers recognize the importance of leadership qualities among students and strongly believe in the necessity of their development. The strong support for various aspects of leadership emphasizes the need for integrated programs and initiatives aimed at fostering leadership skills from an early age. Teachers perceive the value of these skills not only for the individual development of students but also for improving the learning process and social dynamics within the classroom. Based on these conclusions, we can affirm that the development of leadership qualities is not only possible but also essential for building successful and confident individuals.

The responses to questions 15 and 16 aimed to allow primary school teachers to express their personal opinions in a free-text format, reflecting their views on the causes of leadership manifestation among students in grades 1-4, as well as the most common situations in which specific types of leadership emerge among them. Most respondents provided answers in this regard, while some chose to leave these questions unanswered. This suggests that primary school teachers who positively identify leadership positions among students in this age group, and who support such expressions, can more comprehensively articulate their opinions and formulate key principles on this matter. Teachers who left these questions unanswered were often those who answered “I cannot judge” to the question of whether there is room for leaders among students in grades 1-4. This indicates that if specific activities and situations related to leadership qualities in primary school students were more regularly integrated into their teaching practice, a more definitive consensus could be formed among teachers regarding which situations most frequently give rise to leadership manifestation and the underlying reasons for these occurrences.

Summary of Question 15: “What do you think is the cause of leadership manifestation among students in grades 1-4?”

The responses can be synthesized as follows:

- ✓ Upbringing and values at home;

- ✓ Personal qualities, family environment, and intellect;
- ✓ A combination of personal qualities, family environment, social interactions, and the teacher's role;
- ✓ A strong desire to be approved and followed, which may originate from early childhood experiences of positive reinforcement such as hearing "You are the best!";
- ✓ Struggle for dominance;
- ✓ Development of leadership skills beginning in early childhood within the family;
- ✓ Personal traits, family upbringing, and experience in social interaction with peers;
- ✓ Environment, innate leadership qualities, and self-confidence;
- ✓ Diligence and effort;
- ✓ Innate qualities, upbringing, and living environment;
- ✓ A high level of responsibility, better planning of their day, and focus on tasks and goals;
- ✓ Appropriate support from the teacher.

Summary of Question 16: "In which situations does a specific type of leadership most often manifest among students in grades 1-4?"

The responses can be synthesized as follows:

- ✓ During conflicts;
- ✓ While working in teams;
- ✓ When assigned responsibilities or working on team projects;
- ✓ Group tasks, games, competitions, helping in the classroom, resolving conflicts, extracurricular activities, and organizing spontaneous games during breaks;
- ✓ In play;
- ✓ Choosing games;
- ✓ Group or team work, organized games during physical education classes;
- ✓ Conversations and play;
- ✓ Resolving conflicts in class, assigned project tasks (teamwork), setting class goals, motivating classmates;
- ✓ Organizing and conducting class events, celebrations, games, etc.;
- ✓ During teamwork, breaks, and leisure time;
- ✓ During lessons, games, and project activities.

3.2.1. Statistical Interpretation of the Data from the "Teacher Questionnaire for Determining the Presence of Leadership among Students in Grades 1–4"

The results of the conducted study among teachers regarding the presence of leadership among students in grades 1 to 4 provide significant insights that can serve as a foundation for future initiatives and programs within the educational system. The high statistical significance of the p-values indicates clear trends and established opinions among the respondents. **Presence of Leadership Qualities:** The first question of the survey demonstrates a convincing consensus that students in the early grades can exhibit leadership qualities. This suggests that leadership is not exclusively associated with older age groups; on the contrary, the beginning of the school career is an appropriate time for identifying and fostering these skills. **Social Dynamics and Group Formation:** The question related to the formation of communication groups reveals that social structure and dynamics play a vital role in classrooms. This implies that students at an

early age tend to socialize and form groups, which is a natural process in the development of social skills and leadership qualities. **Benefit to Teachers and the Learning Process:** Responses to questions concerning assistance to teachers and the formation of leadership groups in the classroom indicate that the presence of leaders among students can significantly facilitate the learning process. Students with leadership abilities can take on some responsibilities and tasks, thereby reducing the teachers' workload and improving the overall effectiveness of the educational process. **Nature of Leadership Qualities:** The examined questions regarding innate versus developed leadership qualities reveal divergent opinions among respondents. While there is considerable support for the notion that leadership skills can be cultivated, some responses reflect a belief in the inherent nature of leadership. This underscores the importance of educational programs aimed at developing these competencies. **Support for Initiatives and Programs:** The results demonstrate strong support for initiatives aimed at fostering leadership skills among students. This provides a solid basis for planning and implementing programs designed to nurture leadership from an early age. The respondents expressed willingness to support such activities in their schools, which is highly positive for the future of the educational system. **Influence of External Factors:** The final questions related to roles and activities indicate that leadership qualities may manifest in various contexts. This highlights the flexibility of leadership and the need for diversity in tasks and responsibilities assigned to students. Overall, the study's findings offer clear and significant evidence that leadership skills can and should be developed from an early age. Students at the primary education level have the potential to exhibit leadership qualities that are important not only for their personal growth but also for the effectiveness of the learning process and social dynamics within the classroom. Teacher support for such initiatives is crucial for their successful implementation. These data clearly emphasize the importance of targeted programs and initiatives aimed at developing leadership skills among students. The development of these skills is not only possible but also necessary for cultivating successful and confident individuals.

3.3. Analysis and Interpretation Related to the “Student Questionnaire on the Manifestation of the Unified Value System ARETE among Students in Grades 1–4”

The results of the student questionnaire indicate that students in the early stages of their education possess well-developed social and personal skills that support them in the learning process and the social dynamics within the classroom. The significant p-values across most questions highlight clearly expressed trends and beliefs among the surveyed students. These findings can serve as a foundation for the development of programs and initiatives aimed at supporting the personal and social development of students.

3.3.1. Statistical Interpretation of Data from the “Student Questionnaire on the Manifestation of the Unified Value System ARETE among Students in Grades 1–4”

The study conducted among students in grades 1–4 regarding the manifestation of the unified value system ARETE reveals several important aspects of their social and personal lives. The data indicate clear trends and beliefs among the students, which can serve as a foundation for the development of future initiatives and programs within the

educational system. The high statistical significance of the p-values confirms the robustness of these conclusions. **Autonomy and Peer Support:** Questions related to autonomy and peer support show a high degree of self-confidence and independence among the students. They also perceive strong support from their peers, which is crucial for building a positive and supportive learning environment. **Social Skills and Group Work:** Students clearly prefer working in groups and enjoy socializing with multiple classmates. This underscores the importance of social interactions and skills developed through group activities. Students feel respected and also respect the opinions of others, which forms the basis for effective teamwork. **Leadership and Personal Qualities:** The results demonstrate that students exhibit leadership qualities, being responsible for their tasks and fulfilling their commitments. They also show interest in new activities and demonstrate patience when necessary. These qualities are key for the development of confidence and a striving for achievement. **Attitude toward School and Novelty:** Students perceive school as beneficial and enjoy discovering new things. They express ideas that differ from others and demonstrate innovation and originality. This highlights the importance of fostering creativity and curiosity in students. **Social Sensitivity and Role Models:** Students seek approval from others and have role models who inspire them. This is important for building positive self-esteem and motivation. Additionally, some students respond strongly in conflicts, indicating a need to develop skills in conflict management and emotional regulation. The results of the study provide clear and significant evidence of the development of important social and personal skills among students. They show that students in the early stages of their education have the potential to develop autonomy, leadership qualities, and social sensitivity. These skills are important not only for their personal growth but also for enhancing the learning process and social dynamics within the classroom. The development of targeted programs and initiatives aimed at supporting these skills is essential for the successful realization of students' potential. The educational system should continue to encourage creativity, curiosity, and social support to create a positive and stimulating learning environment.

3.4. Analysis and Interpretation Related to the “Exit Questionnaire for Students in Grades 1–4”

The questions included in the exit assessment aim to evaluate, based on the collected data, whether the conducted practical activities have contributed to an increase in students' knowledge of virtues, their ability to utilize inner strengths, and the development of specific leadership qualities. The questionnaire reveals significant positive changes in students' knowledge and attitudes regarding various virtues such as trust, tolerance, and respect, as well as increased motivation for teamwork and collaborative projects. Questions such as “Have you learned more about what trust means?” and “Do you think discipline is important?” show widespread agreement among students, indicating successful communication and internalization of these key concepts. Some areas, such as mutual trust among classmates, still show signs of uncertainty, suggesting a need for continued focus and development. Overall, the results of the questionnaire demonstrate a positive impact on students and substantial progress

in their understanding and practice of virtues—an essential step toward their personal development. There remains potential for further work in certain areas to reinforce and sustain the achievements already made.

3.4.1. Statistical Interpretation of Data from the “Exit Questionnaire for Students in Grades 1–4”

The survey conducted among students in grades 1 through 4 provides valuable insights into their perceptions and understanding of various social and personal virtues. The analysis of the results indicates that the model aimed at developing leadership qualities in students at this educational stage has had a significantly positive impact.

Key Findings:

1. Knowledge of Virtues: Students demonstrated a marked improvement in their understanding of virtues such as trust, respect, tolerance, and good habits. This is supported by a high percentage of positive responses and very low p-values, indicating a statistically significant difference.

2. Emotional and Social Development: The responses show that students have developed a better appreciation for the importance of discipline and respect toward others. Additionally, they recognize that mistakes can serve as valuable learning experiences, which is essential for their personal and academic growth.

3. Collaboration and Teamwork: Students highly value collaborative projects, such as the “Class Newspaper.” They expressed satisfaction with their roles within the team and viewed the work as both meaningful and enjoyable. This suggests that the project successfully fostered teamwork and increased motivation for future cooperative efforts.

4. Environmental Awareness: The high rate of affirmative responses to questions related to nature preservation indicates that students have developed strong environmental consciousness. They strive to protect the environment and have cultivated an appreciation for its beauty.

5. Overall Satisfaction and Future Intentions: Students reported high levels of satisfaction with the activities and expressed a strong desire to participate in similar future projects. This reflects the positive impact of the program and its ability to engage students meaningfully.

Conclusion: In summary, the questionnaire results demonstrate that the model has been successful in promoting knowledge of virtues, emotional and social development, collaboration, and environmental awareness among primary school students. These positive outcomes underscore the importance of such educational initiatives and the need for their continuation and further development.

CONCLUSION AND FINDINGS

Student leadership plays a vital role in shaping active, initiative-taking, and responsible citizens from the early stages of primary education. It fosters the personal development of children by encouraging autonomy, collaboration, and a sense of responsibility. Developing leadership skills at an early age provides a strong foundation for future success in school, the workplace, and personal life. Students who are actively engaged in leadership activities often demonstrate higher levels of academic achievement and overall school involvement.

1. There is a strong consensus among school principals that students in the early grades are capable of demonstrating leadership qualities. The findings support the notion that the presence of student leaders in the classroom contributes to improved academic outcomes. The survey conducted among principals reveals strong support for initiatives aimed at developing leadership skills within the school environment.
2. Leadership qualities are not isolated from external influences; rather, they are shaped and developed under the impact of multiple factors. This highlights the necessity of an integrated approach when designing leadership development programs—one that takes all these aspects into account. The findings of the study provide clear and substantial evidence that leadership skills can and should be cultivated from an early age. Schools that have implemented student self-governance systems tend to achieve better outcomes in the social adaptation of their students.
3. Teachers have reason to believe that students in the early school years demonstrate leadership and are capable of forming certain social groups. There is unanimous agreement among teachers that student leaders would assist them in managing the classroom. However, some teachers express some uncertainty about the presence of student leaders, yet they still acknowledge the positive influence of these qualities on overall classroom functioning. Most teachers believe that leadership qualities in their students can be developed. Teachers unanimously agree that knowledge of virtues would provide a solid foundation for developing leadership qualities in their students. There is full consensus among teachers that students who possess knowledge of virtues, as well as skills to harness their inner strengths and potential, would achieve a higher level of personal development. The majority of teachers think it is not necessary for there to be only one student leader in the classroom. They also firmly believe that different roles provoke different types of leadership qualities and that collaboration and teamwork foster the development of these skills. Most teachers consider that the manifestation of leadership largely depends on the role and activities of the students. There is complete agreement among teachers that they should allocate time to cultivate the leadership qualities of their students.
4. The analysis of the collected data confirmed that students participating in leadership initiatives demonstrate better social skills, higher motivation for learning, and improved academic performance. Teachers who employ strategies to encourage leadership in the classroom report better discipline and increased student engagement. Empirical evidence shows that even at an early age, children exhibit leadership behaviors such as the ability to organize group activities, take responsibility, and make decisions. The development of leadership skills at this stage is closely linked to natural social interactions and the roles students assume within the learning environment. It has been

found that students who actively participate in group projects and discussions display more pronounced leadership qualities compared to their peers.

5. The concept of Arete, which encompasses virtues such as trust, tolerance, justice, and wisdom, can be observed in students' behavior, especially when they engage in social and ethical situations. The data indicate that students who are given opportunities for independent choices and role-playing develop a sense of justice and cooperation. This supports the thesis that the moral and ethical aspects of leadership can be cultivated from an early age through purposeful pedagogical methods. Practical results demonstrate that programs incorporating interactive teaching methods, project-based learning, and student self-governance lead to significant improvements in students' abilities to lead, communicate effectively, and make decisions. Empirical evidence shows that students involved in such programs exhibit increased confidence, initiative, and engagement in the learning process. Therefore, the deliberate development of a methodological framework can be an effective tool for fostering leadership qualities at the primary school level.
6. The results indicate that students exhibit different leadership qualities depending on the context and type of tasks they face. For example, during competitive and group activities, some students demonstrate strategic thinking and decision-making skills, while in role-playing games and creative projects, others display creativity and empathy. This confirms that leadership qualities are not static but dynamically develop in response to the specific social and educational environment.
7. The conducted analysis demonstrates that all hypotheses formulated in the study are confirmed based on theoretical models, empirical data, and practical observations. The development of leadership skills in the primary school stage is a complex but achievable process, which can be supported through the creation of methodological approaches, targeted strategies, and a suitable school environment. The current findings contribute to a better understanding of early-age leadership and can be utilized to improve educational practices related to the formation of future leaders. This work substantiates the significance of student leadership in the primary education stage and proposes concrete strategies and approaches for its development. Through analysis and synthesis of the existing theoretical framework, as well as empirical research involving students, teachers, and school principals in Bulgarian schools, several important conclusions have been reached.

In conclusion, the development of student leadership is crucial for shaping future active and responsible citizens. Cultivating leadership skills during the primary education stage is an investment in a better and more successful future for society as a whole. The topic of student leadership in early school age remains open for further research, which could focus on the long-term effects of early leadership development and on refining pedagogical approaches in this field.

Leadership in education is not merely a managerial process but a means of building active citizens capable of contributing to societal development. This study demonstrates that the formation of leadership skills begins in school and continues throughout life. In this context, promoting student self-governance and leadership practices within the educational process is not only advisable but also a necessary condition for building a more effective and democratic educational system.

SCIENTIFIC CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE DISSERTATION RESEARCH

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

1. A comprehensive, precise, and targeted theoretical review of leadership within the educational context has been developed;
2. A model for the development of leadership qualities among students in the early stages of schooling has been created and piloted;
3. Specific strategies and approaches for fostering student leadership have been empirically investigated;
4. Opportunities for the formation and development of leadership skills and qualities have been outlined, based on the perspectives of students, primary school teachers, and principals.

PRACTICAL AND APPLIED CONTRIBUTIONS

1. Materials designed to develop leadership skills and qualities among students in the primary education stage (grades 1–4) can be utilized effectively with children in these grades;
2. The developed model for cultivating leadership qualities in early grade students can be flexibly and variably applied by primary school teachers;
3. The obtained results can serve as valuable resources for educators, educational counselors, psychologists, school principals, and other specialists working in the field of education.
4. The developed practical activities model can be employed as a means of implementing corrective interventions for children with behavioral issues, where strengthening character strengths positively influences problematic behavior.

LIST OF SCIENTIFIC PUBLICATIONS ON THE TOPIC OF THE DISSERTATION BY ILITSA GEORGIEVA DASKALOVA

A) Scientific publications in journals indexed and refereed in international databases: – without Q ranking:

1. **Daskalova, I., 2024**, Student Leadership as a Set of Virtues – Internal Strengths and Qualities among Students from Grades 1 to 4, In: *Contemporary Humanities Journal*, Burgas Free University, Issue 2/2024, pp. 52-62, ISSN 1313-9924.

B) Scientific publications in journals indexed and refereed outside the Scopus and/or Web of Science databases:

2. **Daskalova, I., 2022**, Analysis of Research on Leadership among Primary School Students and Popular Leadership Programs in the USA and Bulgaria, In: *Proceedings of the Eleventh Student Scientific Forum*, Plovdiv, Plovdiv University Press, Vol. I/2022, pp. 84-92, ISSN 2738-8859.
3. **Daskalova, I., 2023**, The Leader Approach as a Transposed Element in the Development of Educational Institutions in Small Bulgarian Communities, In: *Doctoral Research, Scientific Journal for Doctoral Students at the Faculty of Education, Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv*, Plovdiv University Press, Issue 7/2023, pp. 77-87, ISSN 2367-7309.
4. **Daskalova, I., 2024**, Student Leadership in Primary Grades from the Perspective of School Principals, In: *Proceedings of the Sixth Scientific-Practical Conference “Current Policies and Practices in Education: Teaching and Learning for 21st Century Skills”*, organized by the Pedagogical College – Pleven, 26-27 April 2024, VTU, Pedagogical College – Pleven, pp. 307-313, ISBN 978-619-91255-9-5.
5. **Daskalova, I., 2024**, Model for the Development of Leadership Qualities in Students from Grades 1 to 4, In: *Proceedings of the Interdisciplinary Scientific Conference “40 Years of the Faculty of Education – Tradition and Innovation”*, Plovdiv, 22 November 2024, Plovdiv University Press, pp. 425-438, ISBN 978-619-7768-12-1.
6. **Daskalova, I., 2024**, Methodological Developments for the Development of Leadership Qualities through STEAM Education in Students from Grades 1 to 4, In: *Proceedings of the XI International Scientific Conference “Pedagogical Education – Tradition and Modernity”*, Veliko Tarnovo, 22-23 November 2024, VTU “St. Cyril and St. Methodius”, Faculty of Education, pp. 414-420, ISSN 2534-9317.