REVIEW

by Prof. **Tsveta Yordanova Zafirova,** PhD, University of Economics - Varna
of PhD thesis for obtaining an educational and scientific degree "Doctor"

in the higher education field 3. *Social, Economic and Legal Sciences*, professional field 3.7 *Administration and Management*, a doctoral program in Organization and Management outside the Field of Material Production

Author: Kristiyana Georgieva Ivanova
Topic: LEADERSHIP POTENTIAL OF PEDAGOGICAL SPECIALISTS IN VOCATIONAL HIGH SCHOOLS AS CENTERS OF EXCELLENCE

Scientific supervisor: Prof. Velislava Nikolaeva, PhD
Basis for writing: Order №623/ 1.10.2026 of the Rector of VSU

1. Brief information about the PhD candidate

Kristiyana Ivanova was born in 1966. She graduated bachelor`s and master`s degrees in 1994 at SHU „Bishop K. Preslavski", specialty „Bulgarian philology ". In 2017 became an agronomist engineer at AU-Plovdiv in „General agronomy. " She was a Bulgarian language teacher and director in various primary schools in the country until 1993. In 1998 became the director of the Vocational High School of Agriculture „T. Rachinski" city Gen. Toshevo. She has received numerous awards, honorary distinctions, and certificates of recognition from the Ministry of Education and Science, the Agricultural University of Plovdiv, the Municipality of General Toshevo, and other institutions for her contributions to the development of education. She has participated in 18 projects funded by the Ministry of Education and Science and the European Union. She is the author of five high school textbooks focused on leadership, as well as the magazine "Educational Paths" (Obrazovatelni Pateki). She is also actively involved in seminars and training programs within this field.

2. Relevance and significance of the dissertation topic

The dissertation convincingly demonstrates the relevance and significance of the research problem addressed, both from a scientific and a practical-scientific perspective.

The contemporary environment in which young people learn and develop demands a new type of pedagogical professional - one who actively cultivates their competencies, adapts their behavioral patterns, and remains responsive to a turbulent environment. The doctoral candidate identifies the relevance of the dissertation topic as stemming from the interplay of five concurrent processes: the rapid evolution of professions and competencies; the establishment of sustainable systems within the knowledge base of vocational education; digital transformation; the institutional development of Centers of Excellence in Bulgaria (comprising 28 vocational high schools, one in each administrative region); and a fundamental shift in the understanding of the nature and content of the teaching profession.

These arguments establish the significance and relevance of the chosen topic. The lack of similar research and practices in Bulgaria, combined with the author's extensive experience in numerous educational projects and programs within the school environment, has provoked her interest in seeking viable solutions and working effective, functional models for the development of vocational high schools.

3. General characteristics and evaluation of the dissertation thesis

The dissertation spans a total of 217 pages and is structured to include an introduction, a main body consisting of three relatively balanced chapters, a conclusion, and a bibliography comprising 122 sources. It is richly illustrated with 38 figures, 11 tables, and 4 appendices. The individual sections (chapters and subsections) are presented in a logical sequence, with their content serving the stated objective: "the development of a model for the formation and development of the leadership potential of pedagogical specialists." Drawing upon her expertise and experience, Kristiyana Ivanova demonstrates an excellent grasp of the research problem and its three dimensions - theoretical, methodological, and applied as

evidenced by her clearly formulated and substantiated research thesis, as well as the overall structure and content of the dissertation. The chosen approach and methodology enable the achievement of the research objective and the fulfillment of the tasks set out in the dissertation, within the framework of six defined limiting conditions.

The introduction outlines the framework of the study and contains all necessary elements, which are formulated correctly and precisely. The thesis statement and the two sub-theses guide the logic behind the clarification of the research problem.

In the **first chapter**, Kristiyana Ivanova provides a theoretical clarification of the key concepts related to leadership, as well as its place and role in the practice of educational professionals. The author examines the concept through the lens of management theory - a perspective essential for both researching and understanding the subject. Of particular interest is the comparison and distinction drawn between the concepts of "leadership potential" "leadership competence" and "leadership behavior." The nature and content of leadership are clarified - a necessary step, given the frequent conflation of an official job position with a leadership role. The author logically and consistently traces the various manifestations of leadership, ranging from setting a personal example to the capacity to inspire and motivate others toward development.

The argument is put forward that, within the school environment, the principal has limited scope, yet teachers without administrative positions can also assume leadership roles - a point that serves as an important argument in substantiating the central thesis.

The literature review is comprehensive. It demonstrates in-depth knowledge of both classical leadership theory and contemporary sources in the field. The subject is also examined from a pedagogical perspective - a point of particular significance for educational practice, as this field focuses not on a tangible end product, but rather on changes in knowledge and skills.

Leadership theories and models are systematized and classified, a comparative analysis is provided, accompanied by the author's own perspective, with a focus on three specific approaches: the trait approach, the behavioral approach, and the situational approach. Regarding the practical implications for educational professionals, Kristiyana Ivanova examines their leadership as an integral component of modern management processes within vocational schools. She defines this leadership as "an influence on learning, student development, the professional community, and institutional change," further noting that educational professionals in vocational schools fulfill additional functions, including engagement with communities external to the school environment.

The foundational framework established in the first chapter is well-chosen, as the subject of the research is logically connected to the object of study. The author has engaged with a substantial body of specialized literature, offering well-founded critical insights into the issues under investigation. Drawing upon both her theoretical knowledge and personal experience, she presents significant conclusions and generalizations relevant to the dissertation's topic.

Chapter Two is dedicated to the specific features of Centers of Excellence within the secondary vocational education system. It analyzes the institutional environment in which pedagogical leadership acquires concrete substance. The chapter provides a retrospective overview of the EU's role and its policy regarding excellence in vocational education through the development of Centers of Excellence. It outlines their specific characteristics and how they differ from traditional vocational high schools, with a focus on the linkages between the business sector, higher education, and secondary vocational education. Based on this, the doctoral candidate proposes a working definition of Centers of Excellence in secondary vocational education, drawing upon their own experience and expertise in the field. Key characteristics are systematized across three dimensions: socio-psychological, managerial, and pragmatic. This facilitates the practical management of these centers

by conceptualizing them as multi-component organizational systems. The approach adopted by the doctoral candidate highlights the evolving role of pedagogical professionals within these centers - shifting from a traditional role to one of leadership, thereby justifying the need to develop leadership potential.

The analysis and assessment of the material and educational infrastructure at the "T. Rachinski" Vocational High School of Agriculture in General Toshevo, serving as a Center of Excellence in the Dobrich region, indicate that it is well-suited for innovative, sustainable, and practice-oriented training. The study identifies key challenges faced by pedagogical staff within the transformed educational environment of such Centers of Excellence, emphasizing the interplay between this environment and the training process. This interdependence forms the basis of the model developed by the author, along with the toolkit designed for its implementation.

Chapter Three presents a conceptual model for developing the leadership potential of pedagogical staff within Centers of Excellence, with the "T. Rachinski" Vocational High School of Agriculture in General Toshevo serving as the site for its pilot implementation. The model is structured as a cyclical system that links the organizational environment with the training and professional development of pedagogical staff. The factors determining the model's effectiveness are also identified. The proposed methodology for training and developing leadership potential offers significant practical value. The model is operationalized through its pilot implementation, scheduling, specific learning and cognitive tasks, and established criteria for credibility, reliability, and validity. Furthermore, a toolkit has been developed to monitor outcomes at the individual, pedagogical, and institutional levels.

The empirical study, conducted independently by the doctoral candidate, examines the extent to which leadership potential depends on the formation of professional habits among various educators. It also addresses the dynamics of key components of these habits in relation to the functions of the Centers of Excellence. The author demonstrates an ability to present research findings in a logical and clear

manner, draw generalizations, and provide well-substantiated practical recommendations. She exhibits an excellent command of the methodological tools required for conducting such research.

The model developed and presented by the author facilitates the development of leadership skills, their practical application, and the monitoring of leadership potential. The multi-stage field study yielded results that support the model's practical applicability. Drawing on her expert experience, the author outlines the model's utility as a tool for developing leadership potential within these centers complete with all necessary documentation, while emphasizing the importance of regularly updating this documentation as part of standard organizational routine. Leadership among educational professionals in these centers is defined as an evolving system of capabilities and actions that manifest within a specific organizational environment.

The Conclusion presents a summary of the theoretical and methodological findings of the dissertation, as well as their practical significance for vocational schools.

The conclusions and summaries provided at the end of each section and chapter demonstrate Kristiyana Ivanova’s ability to analyze and synthesize key findings derived from theoretical frameworks and their application within a specific context - the vocational school. Furthermore, the smooth transitions between chapters highlight the author’s skill in logically structuring her research results and her capacity to identify and emphasize the most essential aspects. The writing style of the dissertation is clear and maintains a high scholarly standard.

In summary, Kristiyana Ivanova’s dissertation constitutes a comprehensive scientific study addressing a topical and significant issue within the context of Bulgarian educational management, specifically concerning vocational high schools (functioning as Centers of Excellence).

4.Assessment of the scientific and applied contribution in the dissertation thesis

The main contribution of dissertation can be defined as scientific and applied. Scientific and practical contributions identified by Kristiyana Ivanova, which can be summarized as follows:

A. Scientific contributions

- The scientific knowledge of vocational education management has been enriched through new original perspectives, classifications, and systematizations of concepts related to leadership and leadership potential, as well as their application within the Centre of Excellence.

- The necessity of developing the leadership potential of pedagogical staff within a changing organizational environment has been demonstrated.

B. Scientific- applied contributions

- A three-component conceptual model of the leadership potential of pedagogical specialists has been developed and pilot-tested, demonstrating its practical applicability.

- A methodological toolkit for diagnosis, assessment, and development within the context of continuous professional development has been proposed and pilot-tested in a specific setting.

C. Applied contributions

- The application of the proposed conceptual model in other Centers of Excellence, vocational high schools, and other educational institutions is justified.

- Recommendations have been formulated, both methodological and practical, along with specific measures for developing leadership potential within Centers of Excellence.

In summary, it can be stated that the main contributions of the doctoral student's dissertation are the enrichment of existing knowledge and the application of scientific achievements in practice.

5.Assessment of the publications on the PhD thesis and personal participation of the author

The author has attached copies of 5 publications – articles published in scientific publications. The attached publications reflect the results achieved in the PhD thesis and are related to the research problems.

The author has also attached the declaration of originality of the results required by the Regulations for the Application of the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria.

The doctoral candidate proves (with the list of publications) compliance with the minimum national requirements 100 points (with 80 required) in the field of 3. *Social, Economic and Legal Sciences*, Professional Field 3.7*Administration and Management*, according to the regulations of the Law on the Development of Academic staff in the Republic of Bulgaria -they are not only met, but exceeded.

The thesis and abstract content confirm that they are the author`s work. No plagiarism was found in the dissertation.

6. Evaluation of the abstract of the PhD thesis

The abstract is 40 pages and corresponds to the content of the PhD thesis. It presents accurately and in a synthesized form the study and the achieved results.

7. Critical comments, recommendations and questions

No significant theoretical, logical and methodological errors were found in the dissertation submitted for review. Some non-essential, mostly of a technical nature, typical of this kind of research have been admitted. They do not diminish its high quality and indisputable merits.

I recommend that the author, if possible, disseminate the results of the dissertation by organizing a seminar for the directors of all Centers of Excellence in Bulgaria, focused on developing leadership potential, during which the developed model and the toolkit for its application could be presented.

I have the following a question for the PhD candidate:

- Do you have information regarding international experience in developing the leadership potential of educational professionals?

CONCLUSION

The presented dissertation is a completed study of an actual problem of the Bulgarian practice in the field of school education. Based on the overall assessment made in this review, I believe that it meets all the requirements of the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria, the Regulations for the Application of ZRASRB and the relevant Regulations of the VFU "Chernorizets Hrabar".

The dissertation shows that Kristiyana Ivanova possessed in-dept. theoretical knowledge in the scientific specialty “Organization and Management outside the Field of Material Production”, demonstrating skills for conducting scientific research.

Due to the above, I confidently give my positive evaluation and I propose to the honorable scientific jury to award Kristiyana Georgieva Ivanova the educational and scientific degree “Doctor” in the field of higher education *3. 3. Social, Economic and Legal Sciences, professional field 3.7 Administration and Management, scientific specialty “Organization and Management outside the Field of Material Production”.*

1.11.2026

Reviewer:.....

(Prof. Tsveta Zafirova, PhD)