ASSESSMENT REPORT

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Professional area: 3.2. Psychology

Evaluation of the doctoral dissertation entitled " POSITIVE DEVELOPMENT OF ADOLESCENTS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT IN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SCHOOLS" submitted under the procedure for awarding the scientific and educational degree "doctor" in the professional area: 3.2. Psychology

Doctoral candidate: Vanya Stanislavova Slavova

My overall positive evaluation of the submitted dissertation rests on the following criteria:

(1) Overview of the dissertation – volume and structure

Vanya Slavova has submitted for review a comprehensive work that describes the theoretical and empirical research conducted on the topic of positive development in young people, its connections to their family and school environments, and its effects on their school functioning and mental well-being.

The work is 210 pages long and cites 277 sources, including 13 titles in Bulgarian and 264 titles in English. The text includes 52 tables and 5 figures. The thesis has 4 appendices, which present the instruments employed for qualitative research, the pilot study, and the main study (Appendices 1–3), as well as correlation matrices (Appendix 4).

The work is structured appropriately and effectively into three chapters: the theoretical framework of the study, the methodology of the empirical research, and the description, analysis, and discussion of the results. The presentation is clear and coherent.

The 41-page Summary fully and accurately reflects the structure and content of the dissertation and presents the most important theses and conclusions of the research.

(2) Review of the literature and theoretical background of the study

In its first chapter, the thesis outlines the field of study (positive youth development) within the context of broader research areas (positive psychology and its application in the fields of mental health and education) and argues for its societal significance. It also systematizes the school as an environment for development and the characteristics of a positive school environment. The text demonstrates the doctoral candidate's developed familiarity with the literature in the subject area — students' social-emotional health and its connection to the school environment, their academic engagement, their level of subjective well-being, and their future expectations.

Based on the literature review, a broad theoretical model of the empirical study is formulated, and corresponding parameters for observation are derived.

(3) Methodological approach

The methodology of the dissertation research is relevant to the subject area and appropriate for the chosen research topic. The theoretical rationale for the identified dimensions and the selected methods is clearly explained. The hypotheses of the empirical study, formulated on the basis of literature data, are clearly distinguished from the exploratory analyses.

A comprehensive psychological study was conducted with girls and boys aged 13 to 19 who are students in grades 8–12 at 8 private and public schools. The research work includes three components:

a) an exploratory qualitative study, conducted through semi-structured interviews with school psychologists, educational counselors, and administrative representatives such as principals, vice principals, or owners from eight schools in the capital (four public and four private);

b) a pilot study with 143 students to assess the psychometric characteristics of the instruments used;

c) a main study involving 650 students to analyze the interrelationships among the parameters under investigation.

Significant methodological research work was also conducted to adapt the instruments for measuring and assessing the parameters under investigation. The methods of statistical analysis were appropriately selected and correctly applied.

(4) Significance and strength of the results, interpretations and conclusions

The innovative nature of this work lies in the investigation of significant aspects of adolescents' functioning (both academically and subjectively) in relation to their positive development and the type of school environment - public or private, yielding new, original findings of both scientific and practical value.

These relate to:

a) identifying characteristics specific to the school environment in public and private schools, and differences related to adolescents' participation in various school activities and programs;

b) an analysis of the relationship between the socioeconomic status of adolescents' families and their social-emotional health, subjective well-being, and academic functioning;

c) outlining the interrelationships among the examined parameters of positive development, school engagement and academic success, mental health and well-being, and future expectations among adolescents;

d) to reveal the relative weight of the relation of individual differences in academic functioning, subjective well-being, and future expectations to individual (co-vitality), contextual (school environment), and sociodemographic (gender, age, socioeconomic status) factors among adolescents.

There is a logical progression from descriptive to inferential statistics, from the presentation of results to their discussion in light of existing data from other countries and cultures; from hypothesis testing to research conclusions. The limitations of the study are correctly outlined.

(5) Critical notes to the dissertation

On a positive note, I wish to point that Vanya Slavova has comprehensively incorporated the feedback from the preliminary review. This responsiveness has greatly enhanced the manuscript, demonstrating the research's scientific and practical significance more clearly and convincingly.

The following questions and comments are intended to further validate and explore the value of the theoretical and empirical analyses:

1. The theoretical model (Figure 4, p. 74) should be supplemented with a depiction of the relationships between the dimensions of co-vitality among adolescents and the school

environment and the examined socio-demographic factors. These relationships are addressed in tasks 2a and 2b (pp. 74–75), are set out for testing in Hypothesis 2 (p. 75), and are analyzed based on the empirical data obtained in sections 2.2 and 2.3 of the third chapter of the thesis (pp. 104–111). This will result in a higher degree of consistency between the model and its operationalization in the research design.

2. Since the text (on p. 80) notes the good reliability of the subscales in the pilot study, the data for them should also be included in Table 2.

3. The question remains open: why was student participation in school activities and programs not analyzed as an individual factor in assessing the effects of positive development?

4. The discussion of the findings will undoubtedly be enriched by the advancement of ideas and hypotheses regarding the mechanisms underlying the relationship between adolescent positive development and the parameters of their academic functioning, subjective well-being, and future expectations.

(6) Scientific contributions of the dissertation

I accept the scientific and practical contributions presented by the doctoral candidate Vanya Slavova and their justification in the dissertation.

I would like to highlight, in particular, the scientific value of adapting two questionnaires—new to the Bulgarian context—as research methods: the Social-Emotional Health Survey-Secondary – SEHS) and the Future Expectations Scale for Adolescents (FESA), as well as the confirmed reliability and validity of three other questionnaires: the Mental Health Continuum Questionnaire (short form); Student Engagement in Schools Questionnaire; Agency Engagement Scale. The work conducted provides a solid foundation for further research in developmental and health psychology and expands opportunities for cross-cultural comparisons.

The original findings regarding the relationship between adolescents' positive development and their school engagement and subjective well-being are also valuable to society, as they provide an evidence-based foundation for developing programs and interventions in the fields of education and mental health.

(7) Assessment of the quality of the PhD student's scientific work in relation to meeting the minimum national requirements

Doctoral candidate Vanya Slavova submitted for consideration three publications on the topic of the dissertation, which reflect the main points in the dissertation research. The number and nature of the publications of Vanya Slavova meet the minimum national requirements under the RSASR and PPZRASRB.

(8) A motivated response to the question of whether the research for the dissertation is primarily the candidate's own work

Vanya Slavova was a doctoral student in the "Developmental and Health Psychology" Unit of the Institute for Population and Human Studies (IPHS) at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (BAS), under the academic supervision of Assoc. Prof. Anna Alexandrova-Karamonova, Ph.D. I also know Vanya Slavova as a participant in the "Academic Writing" course I teach at the Education Department of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences.

Based on my observations, the attached report from StrikePlagiarism, and other documents provided, I accept the dissertation research as the author's own work.

CONCLUSION

Vanya Slavova's thesis meets the requirements for a doctoral dissertation for being awarded the scientific and educational degree of "Doctor." New data has been generated with scientific and applied research contributions for measuring the positive development of adolescents and assessing its links to their school context, sociodemographic characteristics, academic functioning, subjective well-being, and expectations for the future. The submitted work demonstrates candidate's in-depth knowledge of the subject, mastered methodological expertise, and wide research practice.

Based on the merits of the research work, I give a positive evaluation to the doctoral dissertation of Vanya Stanislavova Slavova and I propose that she be awarded the scientific and educational degree of "Doctor" in the professional field 3.2. Psychology.

Sofia, 28 May 2026 Signature: *Professor Katya Stoycheva, PhD*