OPINION

By: Assoc. Prof. Dr. Rositsa Racheva
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Regarding: Public defense of PhD dissertation for the award of the educational and scientific degree "Doctor", Area of higher education: 3. Social, Economic, and Legal Sciences; Professional field 3.2. Psychology, doctoral program "Educational and Developmental Psychology"

Doctoral candidate: Vanya Stanislavova Slavova

Dissertation title: "Positive Development of Adolescents in the Context of the School Environment in Public and Private Schools"

Scientific jury member's opinion is prepared following Order No РД-6-187, 29.04.2026 of the director of IPHS-BAS

The submitted dissertation is a comprehensive, well-structured, and conceptually sound scientific study dedicated to a current and socially significant problem—the positive development of adolescents in the context of the school environment. The topic is clearly justified as significant, given the growing risks to mental health during adolescence and the role of the educational system as a key factor in prevention and development.

The work is distinguished by its logical structure, which includes an introduction, a theoretical section, a methodologically sound empirical study, an in-depth discussion of the results, conclusions, a discussion, limitations of the study, and the contributions of the dissertation. The total length of the work is 192 pages, including the bibliography. There are also 4 appendices. There are a total of 277 references, of which 13 are in Cyrillic and 264 in Latin, with a significant portion of them from recent years. There are 52 tables and 6 figures.

The theoretical section of the dissertation is well-structured and logically coherent, covering the main constructs related to the topic—positive psychology, positive adolescent development, and the role of the school environment. It examines the emergence and development of positive psychology as an integrative approach to human functioning. Leading theoretical models of positive development are presented, including the models of Learner, Benson, and Catalano, as well as concepts such as social-emotional learning and co-vitality. The theoretical framework fully aligns with the research objective, which is focused on investigating the social-emotional health and well-being of adolescents. The theoretical review leads to the development of a conceptual model that serves as the foundation for a reliable and valid empirical study.

The empirical part of the dissertation is clearly structured and includes research design, methodology, results and discussion. The research framework formulates the main objective, specific research tasks, and hypotheses aimed at investigating the relationships between the school environment, co-morbidity, and the academic and psychological functioning of

adolescents. The research approaches used are described in detail—a mixed-methods design combining qualitative and quantitative research, which enhances the validity of the results.

The study sample (266 students from public schools and 384 students from private schools), the instruments used, and the procedures for data collection and processing are also presented. A semi-structured interview was used to collect qualitative data, and six research instruments were used to collect quantitative data, two of which (for studying co-morbidity and adolescents' expectations for the future) were adapted to Bulgarian conditions by the candidate. The study would be more comprehensive if the research plan included a more detailed description of the sample and the selection procedure (criteria for participant inclusion and exclusion, method of contacting schools, and the representativeness of the sample).

The results are presented accurately, consistently, and in accordance with the research logic. Their discussion is thorough and compares them with the existing scientific literature, confirming or supplementing previously established relationships. The main emphasis is placed on the significant correlations between adolescents' positive development, their school engagement, academic success, and mental well-being. The role of a supportive school environment and socioeconomic status as significant factors in adolescents' development is highlighted. The presentation of the results could be optimized by highlighting implicit "hypothesis → result" relationships, including more visualizations and interim summaries that emphasize the key findings.

The conclusions are logically derived from the presented results and are consistent with the empirical data. The study tracks which relationships are confirmed, while maintaining a connection to the main research objective. The dissertation would be further enriched if alternative explanations for the identified relationships were explored in greater depth. The contributions are clearly formulated and can be summarized in several main areas: expanding of the theoretical framework, empirical evidence of the links between the school environment and mental functioning, adaptation of contemporary instruments, and formulation of practical guidelines. The limitations are correctly identified - important factors such as the type of sample and the limitations regarding the generalization of results are noted.

The summary of dissertation accurately reflects its structure and content. Three articles related to the topic of the dissertation have been published, including theoretical and research articles.

Conclusion: The presented dissertation entitled "Positive Development of Adolescents in the Context of the School Environment in Public and Private Schools" is distinguished by significance of the subject matter, theoretical review relevant to the topic, excellently structured and appropriate research design, significant number of presented, discussed and summarized interrelationships, significant scientific contributions to the theory, methods, and practice of educational and developmental psychology.

The dissertation fully meets the requirements for the award of the academic degree "Doctor," and I recommend to the distinguished academic jury to confer the academic degree "Doctor" in Educational and Developmental Psychology to Vanya Stanislavova Slavova.

May 26, 2026

Sofia Assoc. Prof. Dr. Rositsa Racheva