

REVIEW

by **Assoc. Prof. Silvia Tsvetanska, PhD.** – Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski"

of a dissertation **on the topic: "Trust in pedagogical communication between teachers and parents - determinants and development strategies"**

for the acquisition of the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in the field of higher education 1. Pedagogical Sciences, Professional field 1.2. Pedagogy (Theory of Education and Didactics - Pedagogical Communication)

Doctoral student: Gergana Traycheva Kateva

Scientific supervisor: Assoc. Prof. Bistra Mizova, PhD.

Biographical data about the doctoral student

Gergana Kateva was born in 1987 in the city of Sliven. In 2006, she completed her secondary education at the "Z. Stoyanov" Western Languages High School - Sliven with a French and English profile. From 2014 to 2020, she was a student at the Faculty of Pedagogy of the Thracian University, Stara Zagora, successively acquiring a "Bachelor" educational qualification degree with a qualification as a kindergarten and primary school teacher and a "Master" in Pedagogy with the same qualification. Gergana Kateva purposefully develops her profile as a specialist and has successfully realized herself professionally as a teacher at the "Mak" Kindergarten in the city of Sliven for the last ten years. Her enduring interest in preschool pedagogy and working with parents is visible both in her career path and in the choice of a topic for her dissertation research. The accumulated professional experience is projected in an effort to understand pedagogical issues through scientific work and subsequent training in a doctoral program. Since February 2022, G. Kateva has been enrolled as a doctoral student at the Department of Didactics of the Faculty of Pedagogy of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", and in 2025 she was enrolled with the right to defend.

The documentation submitted for the procedure fully complies with the requirements of the Act on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and the Regulations on the Terms and Procedure for Acquiring Scientific Degrees and Holding Academic Positions of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski".

Analysis and evaluation of the dissertation work

The dissertation work of doctoral student Gergana Kateva impresses with its relevance, good structuring and homogeneity of content. The chosen issue is as traditional for pedagogical research as it is contemporary in its sound and practical focus. I mean that recently, research on the process of communication in a pedagogical environment has been growing significantly, mainly under the influence of the need to master behavioral and other problems between participants in pedagogical interaction. In her interpretation of the topic, Gergana Kateva has managed to avoid clichés and the massified idea of communication, focusing on connections between individual components, analyzed at different levels. I find the presented sections of pedagogical communication in the context of trust between teachers and parents at the level of interpersonal communication, at the level of school organization and at the level of the educational system to be one of the most essential advantages of the work. The work shows a completely new approach as a research perspective and method of implementation. The dissertation research is built on a well-founded conceptual framework. A high degree of internal coherence has been achieved between the object, subject, goals, objectives, and research questions.

The main objective of the study is to identify and analyze the determinants of trust and, on this basis, to develop strategies for its sustainable development. To achieve this goal, the paper focuses on answering the following key research questions:

- What factors in parent-teacher relationships help or hinder the building of trust?
- How do school practices and organizational culture influence the level of trust?
- How do societal attitudes and educational context reflect on expectations and actual relationships?
- What strategies can be proposed for developing and sustaining trust?

These questions outline a clear and logical direction for the research and state intentions for in-depth exploration at various levels.

The diverse thematic content is appropriately structured into an introduction, two chapters, a conclusion, and appendices. Each chapter has its own well-founded internal structure, so as to clearly distinguish the theoretical and empirical dimensions of the issue.

The first chapter sets the theoretical framework of the problem under study. It makes the necessary conceptual clarifications about the essence and the author's position regarding

the basic concepts - communication, pedagogical communication, communicative competence of the teacher and models of parental participation in the interaction between teachers and parents. The in-depth presentation of trust as a key concept from the point of view of different research paradigms is particularly successful. The author accepts trust as the foundation for effective pedagogical communication and defines it as "a social and professional resource that creates conditions for openness, cooperation and shared responsibility". A valuable aspect of the analysis is the understanding that building trust is a two-way communication process that can be managed and its quality depends on all participants in the process. Strategies for developing trust in pedagogical communication are proposed, which are correlated with the three levels of manifestation of communication - interpersonal, organizational and systemic. The strategies are united in the so-called. reference framework, which also contains the goals towards which each of the strategies is oriented.

The theoretical framework is not just a routine review of previous publications and existing theses, but an active tool for conceptualizing the overall theoretical-empirical research. The use of Bentele's (2008) model for the levels of trust (interpersonal, organizational, systemic) becomes a basic analytical scheme that is evident in the structuring of the goals, objectives, empirical part, and also the proposed strategies. This creates a strong logical connection between the theoretical and empirical parts. The theoretical overview in the first chapter builds the analytical framework, which is visibly projected into the empirical research. The definitions, levels of analysis (micro, meso, macro) and key concepts introduced in the theory become the basis for constructing the toolkit and interpreting the results. The considered logical connection argues the conclusion that the empirical research is purposefully bound to the theory.

I would especially like to note the high scientific value of the empirical study described in the second chapter. It is both specifically oriented on the parameters set in the theoretical part of the selected problem area and at the same time is broad-ranging – provoking reflections, conclusions and questions beyond the direct relationship between trust and communication in a pedagogical context. The methodology and design of the study are clearly described. Complementary research methods have been precisely selected, ensuring a combination of quantitative and qualitative dimensions of the studied phenomenon. For the purposes of the study, an adequate toolkit has been developed, which includes author's questionnaires for the two target groups – teachers and parents. The methodological approach is exemplary and corresponds to the complexity of the studied phenomenon. The mixed design (quantitative and qualitative) allows not only to measure trends, but also to reveal the

“subjective meaning and experiences related to trust”. The high quality of the study is proven by the attention paid to the validity and reliability of the toolkit. The author does not simply construct instruments but provides solid statistical evidence for their qualitative side. For example, the internal consistency (Cronbach's α) of all subscales is reported as "good to very good" (with values between 0.789 and 0.959), and exploratory factor analysis confirms that the instruments measure exactly what they are intended to measure, explaining between 66% and 72% of the variation in the data.

The most powerful methodological advantage of the research work is the achieved “triangulation”. The results of the surveys, focus groups and interviews do not simply exist in parallel, but complement and enrich each other. For example, the quantitative data show that communication is the least valued aspect ($M = 1.70-1.90$), and the qualitative analysis of the interviews concretizes this with the position of the parents that not enough is said about what students do well, and behavior is commented on only when it is bad. This mutual confirmation and deepening significantly increases the confidence in the scientific objectivity of the conclusions. Triangulation gives density to the study by intersecting and comparing the data on the three research questions in order to correlate it with the theoretical framework – the already mentioned model of Bentele (2008), through which the three levels of trust are defined – interpersonal, organizational and systemic.

I congratulate doctoral student Gergana Kateva for her efforts to plan and implement the empirical research, to reach a sufficient number of respondents and to deepen the analysis through appropriate processing of the data from the interviews and focus groups. The doctoral student demonstrates research precision, scientific competence and high-level research skills. This is evident both in the selection of methods and in the internal coherence of the overall design of the study.

The positive impression of research competence is also confirmed by the qualitative analysis of the results and the conclusions drawn from them. The analysis of the results is systematically organized according to the three theoretically established levels, which provides great clarity and persuasiveness.

- At the interpersonal level, a clear hierarchy of determinants is identified: parents value professional competence the most ($M=4.21$), followed by openness ($M=4.05$), while credibility and authority are the most vulnerable ($M=3.68$). This reveals a critical point for development – the need for greater transparency and consistency.

- At the organizational level, the biggest deficit is revealed: the almost unanimous dissatisfaction with communication, which is perceived as “one-way” and “problem-

oriented.” This emphasizes that trust cannot be built through personal efforts alone, but requires systemic school policies.

- At a systemic level, the study outlines the influence of broader societal attitudes, such as "the abdication of parents from their educational role" and "the pragmatic reduction of education to a diploma."

- At the practical-applied level - relevance of the conclusions and practical strategies. The conclusions are strictly justified by the presented empirical data. On their basis, specific, detailed and practice-oriented strategies for developing trust at each of the three levels have been developed. These strategies - such as "structured openness", "code of relations", "inclusive communication" - directly arise from the identified problems and good practices.

Based on the well-founded results, G. Kateva offers an extremely valuable and applicable set of strategies. They are not general narratives, but specific mechanisms addressed to current problems:

- For the interpersonal level, "structured openness" and "positive dominance" are proposed, which directly respond to the need for a balance between accessibility and professional boundaries.

- For the organizational level, a "code of relations" and "transparency of assessment" are recommended, which target the identified missing institutional order.

- The systemic level concerns the development of teachers' communicative competence, which is a logical response to the challenges they point out in their qualitative statements.

In the aforementioned aspects of the analysis of the research results, I find clearly expressed contributions of the dissertation work.

Achievements and scientific and applied contributions in the dissertation

I share and support the four groups of contributions formulated by the doctoral student, designated as theoretical-methodological, methodological, empirical and practical-applied contributions. In theoretical terms, the developed comprehensive conceptual framework for studying trust in pedagogical communication, which integrates various scientific perspectives, has a contribution character. It brings together socio-psychological, pedagogical and organizational approaches and represents a valuable theoretical basis for future research.

In terms of methodology, I find a contribution in the created and validated solid toolkit (questionnaires, interview scripts and focus groups), specifically adapted for the Bulgarian

educational environment. The combined methodology with triangulation can serve as a model for researching other socio-pedagogical phenomena. The validated The toolkit is a valuable resource for future pedagogical and interdisciplinary research.

At the empirical level, the dissertation offers a rich set of up-to-date empirical data that reveal the state and determinants of trust in the context of teacher-parent interaction – specific to the school reality. The analysis of the data points to specific areas of achievement and deficits that can be used as a starting point for planning evidence-based strategic measures.

As the most significant and clearly visible, I could define the contribution of the dissertation, oriented towards pedagogical practice. The proposed strategies provide an algorithm for action for teachers, school teams and educational managers. They are oriented towards specific actions and are structured so that they can be implemented in stages.

The dignity and strength of the dissertation work is its relevance and multifacetedness. It sets a modern standard for the interpretation of complex interdisciplinary phenomena, interesting even beyond strictly pedagogical issues.

Questions and recommendations

The quality of the dissertation work is also evident in the discovery of opportunities for deepening the research work on the chosen issue. What Gergana Kateva has achieved is interesting and has the potential to expand and build on in different directions. I would like to recommend to the doctoral student some guidelines for continuing her research and popularizing the results, if she finds meaning in such engagement:

- Continuing the research on the strategies - implementing and verifying the effectiveness of the proposed strategies in real school practice;
- Focus on the student perspective – integrating the student perspective as a party in the teacher-parent-student interaction;
- Tracking differences in the manifestation of trust in pedagogical communication depending on factors such as the size of the settlement; type of school (primary, secondary, vocational, private); transition between educational levels, etc.

In connection with The multifactorial determination of trust in pedagogical communication is also my question to the doctoral student: How does the introduction of electronic forms of communication with parents through electronic diaries, applications and social networks affect753 of trust in teacher-parent interaction?

Abstract and publications on the topic of the dissertation

The abstract corresponds to the structure of the dissertation work, correctly reflecting its content in essence. It includes synthesized information about the main ideas and the achieved research results.

On the topic of the dissertation, the doctoral student has published 4 publications (3 independent and one co-authored), which exceeds the minimum national requirements for such procedures.

Conclusion

The dissertation work, presented by doctoral student Gergana Kateva, I assess as significant from a scientific point of view, precisely developed as authorship and demonstrated skill of the doctoral student in organizing and conducting scientific research. I have no doubts in its originality and high scientific and applied value. Strongly focused on the Bulgarian educational context, it emphasizes little-studied, but important connections between trust and pedagogical communication, which contribute to optimizing interaction with parents at school.

With full conviction, I give my positive assessment and propose to the esteemed members of the scientific jury to award the educational and scientific degree "doctor" to Gergana Traycheva Kateva in Professional Field 1.2. Pedagogy (Theory of Education and Didactics - Pedagogical Communication).

Sofia, 15/12/2025

Reviewer:

(Assoc. Prof. Silvia Tsvetanska)