

OPINION

on a dissertation for the award of the educational and scientific degree of "Doctor"

Scientific field: 1. Pedagogical sciences

Professional field: 1.2. Pedagogy (Theory of Education and Didactics – Pedagogical Communication)

Thesis topic: **"TRUST IN PEDAGOGICAL COMMUNICATION BETWEEN TEACHERS AND PARENTS – DETERMINANTS AND STRATEGIES FOR DEVELOPMENT"**

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Scientific supervisor: **Assoc. Prof. Dr. Bistra Mizova**

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Information about the procedure

The dissertation, abstract, and accompanying documents submitted by doctoral student Gergana Kuteva meet the national requirements of the Higher Education Act, the Regulations for its implementation, and the Regulations for the Development of Academic Staff at Sofia University. The dissertation was discussed at the departmental meeting for preliminary defence at the Department of Didactics and, with a decision that it meets the criteria for dissertation-type scientific research and the formal structural and content requirements, was referred for defence.

Relevance and dissertability

Issues related to trust in communication between teachers and parents are of enduring importance. However, most of the existing research studies present general findings without delving deeply into its dimensions and contextual manifestations. The presented dissertation not only goes beyond general interpretations, but also achieves a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions of trust, as well as the cultural, social, and institutional influences on its procedural development. The stated objective of the dissertation research: "to identify, assess, and classify the main determinants of trust in pedagogical communication between teachers and parents, while developing strategies for its development and stabilization" has been convincingly achieved with professional competence by linking **an in-depth, multi-layered analysis** at the theoretical level and **a multi-component**

empirical study. The stated examination of the factors and conditions that play a role in determining trust in pedagogical interactions between parents and teachers and the strategies for its development is reflected in the formulated research questions, which lead to a comprehensive in-depth study and understanding of trust as a multi-component phenomenon. The study of factors at different analytical levels (micro, meso, and macro) and in different contexts of pedagogical communication broadens and deepens the understanding of trust and is significant both for the methodology of scientific research and for the implementation of pedagogically reasoned decisions.

Conceptualisation of the research and theoretical framework

The conceptualisation of the issues of pedagogical communication and trust between teachers and parents, presented in the first chapter of the dissertation, is through a consistent discussion of the essential characteristics of communication as a social phenomenon, the content aspects and dimensions of pedagogical communication between parents and teachers; the specificity of the teacher's communicative competence; the peculiarities of the partnership between teachers and parents and trust as a key theoretical category in pedagogical communication. The analysis of the content and functional characteristics of communication is based on a discussion of authoritative scientific sources and provides an in-depth presentation of its essence and peculiarities in various historical and cultural contexts. The perspectives discussed—informational, regulatory, emotional-value, interpersonal, and reflective—are of particular importance both for understanding the phenomenon and for its empirical study. The in-depth presentation of the characteristics of pedagogical communication, its channels and means of implementation smoothly lead to research dimensions. The discussed features of communicative competence and the roles and functions of the teacher contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the professional profile of the teacher in terms of pedagogical communication. The systematisation of parental expectations of teachers and education, the determinants of parental involvement in cooperation with teachers, and the barriers to it is valuable for understanding educational realities and perspectives. It also provides a basis for deriving indicators for research related to trust. The analyses are based on a rich foundation of theoretical interpretations, supported by results from empirical studies, discussion of models, practices, and ideas presented in scientific publications in Bulgaria and in the US, Switzerland, France, and elsewhere.

A valuable contribution of the dissertation is the conceptual understanding of trust in pedagogical communication. The presentation of socio-psychological, sociological,

pedagogical, and organizational approaches to the conceptualization of trust is not descriptive in nature, but systematically presents the complexity and multi-layered nature of the phenomenon, creating an integrated conceptual framework for its understanding. The discussion of research on trust in education presents key directions for study and research clusters. By discussing **the levels of analysis** (interpersonal; trust in organizations and processes; trust in systems) and the relationships between them, a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon and a theoretical framework for a layered model for empirical research have been achieved. It is complemented by a systematization of the factors of trust. The conceptualisation of issues of trust at different levels of educational interaction provides a reliable basis for the operationalization of variables in empirical research and for the development of the instrumentarium. The review of approaches in leading studies for measuring trust in pedagogical communication between teachers and parents is significant for revealing trends in this field and complements the justification of the methodology of the author's study.

Research methodology and procedure

The study is impressive in terms of methodology and tools, as well as the scope of participants. **A mixed methodology** was chosen, **integrating quantitative and qualitative data**, thereby achieving a high degree of validity and reliability, and a deep understanding of the complexity of the phenomena studied, a comprehensive and richly nuanced analysis of the determinants and strategies for developing trust in all its dimensions, barriers, and successful practices.

Three of the instruments are questionnaires in the form of rating scales. Two of the questionnaires are for parents and one is for teachers. For parents, the questionnaires are about their perceptions of interactions with their children's primary teacher or class teacher and a questionnaire about parents' attitudes, expectations, and perceptions of their interactions with the school and their children's teachers. The questionnaire for teachers examines their perceptions of trust in communication with parents. The statements in each of the scales in the questionnaires are rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale. The surveys were conducted with parents of students from the three stages of education, with 108 parents participating in the first survey and 228 in the second. There were 171 teachers. Qualitative methods included in-depth interviews with 18 parents and focus groups with teachers from the three stages of education in different settlements – a large city and two small towns. The surveys, interviews, and focus groups used in the study were designed with a focus on the context of the Bulgarian education system in an attempt to reflect the cultural, social, and institutional characteristics related to

pedagogical communication in Bulgaria. The research procedure followed all the steps for this type of study. The analysis of the data from the quantitative methods was performed using SPSS (version 23).

The reliability of the scales was verified using *Cronbach's alpha* , which provides information on the internal consistency of the individual subscales, and the results for all subscales show very high and extremely high reliability. The high *Cronbach's alpha* internal consistency values indicate that the instruments reliably measure the characteristics under study and can be used as a model for research in this field. The structural validity of the quantitative instruments was verified through exploratory factor analysis (PCA) with Varimax rotation. The analysis of the three instruments used shows that they are reliable and conceptually valid tools for studying communication and trust between parents and teachers. The confirmed reliability and validity of the constructed questionnaires as tools for research and analysis demonstrate **the research value of the created instrumentarium** for identifying the main content cores on which trust is built. Thus, the research toolkit created is a valuable scientific contribution that is significant not only for Bulgarian conditions but also in a broader context.

The data from the interviews and focus groups were analysed through *thematic analysis*, including three stages of coding: open (identification of primary categories), axial (establishing connections between them), and selective (building generalized themes).

By using a combined deductive and inductive approach in the analysis of qualitative data, the interpretation was linked to the theoretical frameworks and, at the same time, new significant themes introduced by the participants themselves were revealed. The deductive framework includes components from four internationally validated models and original elements, which is an important advantage of the innovative nature of the research toolkit.

Significance of the research results

The research results are valuable from both a theoretical and practical point of view. The substantive details are rich and provide a current view of significant characteristics of trust in communication between teachers and parents in Bulgarian schools. In terms of improving the characteristics of interaction and communication, the revealed determinants of trust and the assessment of trust by parents, areas of stability and success, as well as the identified fluctuations, barriers, and tensions are important. The differences identified by location, stage of education, and type of school reveal additional nuances in the reality of communication that are important for more successful interaction. The results of the teachers' assessments, together with the differences identified depending on the institutional context, professional experience, and characteristics of the school, reveal an even deeper understanding of the factors that

influence the building of trust and those that hinder it. The results of the analyses of the qualitative data from the focus groups and interviews reveal additional details in various perspectives on trust and pedagogical communication, considering the specificities of the interaction between teachers and parents in different school and social conditions.

The results of the study of the "organizational layer" of trust through analysis of data from the questionnaire on parental expectations and perceptions of the school environment, focus groups with teachers, and interviews with parents reveal how organizationally established forms of communication, policies for family involvement, and management strategies of school leadership create conditions for a trusting partnership, but also for fragile trust and can undermine the sense of transparency, equality, and predictability.

Analyses related to the broader social context (public attitudes and the educational context) reveal significant characteristics of trust, projections of value attitudes, social differences, and institutional deficits.

By **integrating quantitative and qualitative data (triangulation)**, mutual validation of the results and a multidimensional understanding of trust as a social and pedagogical phenomenon at the three levels of analysis – interpersonal, organizational, and systemic – have been achieved. The recommendations formulated contain valuable guidelines for improving pedagogical practice in both the short and long term. Overall, the reference framework of strategies for developing trust is the basis for a sustainable system of successful practices.

The abstract reflects the structure, content, and main results of the dissertation research. Four publications are presented, which popularize parts of the dissertation research and testify to the doctoral student's development in the field of scientific research.

Scientific contributions

1. An in-depth analysis of the content and functional characteristics of pedagogical communication has been carried out, revealing its essence in various cultural and historical contexts.
2. The presented integrated conceptual framework of trust in a multi-layered analysis at different levels (interpersonal; trust in organizations and processes; trust in systems) enriches and deepens the understanding of the key determinants, basic characteristics, and barriers to its full achievement.
3. Through a mixed methodology integrating quantitative and qualitative data, a high degree of validity and reliability has been achieved, a deep understanding of the complexity of the

phenomena studied, a comprehensive and richly nuanced analysis of the determinants and strategies for developing trust in all its dimensions, barriers, and successful practices.

4. The constructed toolkit for researching trust has high exploratory value and can be used as a model for research in the field of pedagogical communication.

5. The results of the study are significant not only for achieving a multidimensional understanding of trust, but also in practical terms for improving pedagogical practice in both the short and long term.

Conclusion

The depth of content, the high level of coverage of the characteristics of the phenomena studied, the originality of the research tools, the precision of the research conducted, the significance of the results, and the practical recommendations make the dissertation useful for both researchers and practicing educators. **I highly positively evaluate the presented dissertation and propose that the esteemed scientific jury to award Gergana Kuteva the educational and scientific degree of "Doctor."**

10.12.2025

Opinion prepared by:

(Assoc. Prof. Silvia Varbanova, PhD)