

REVIEW

by **Prof. Ekaterina Nedelcheva Sofronieva, PhD**

Department of Preschool and Media Education

Faculty of Educational Studies and the Arts

Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”

of a **doctoral thesis**

submitted for the awarding of a PhD degree

doctoral programme: “Physical Education in the Educational System”

area of higher education: 1. Pedagogical Sciences

professional field: 1.3. Pedagogy of Education in...

PhD candidate: **Alexandra Kamenova Gencheva-Vasileva**

thesis topic: **A Model for intercultural competence for students at the National Sports**

Academy “Vasil Levski”

thesis supervisor: **Assoc. Prof. Vessela Kirilova Slavova, PhD**

1. Compliance of the procedure with the current regulations

The procedure and the documents submitted comply with the requirements of the existing Law on the Development of the Academic Staff, the Regulations for its Application and the relevant the Ordinance on the Awarding of the Educational and Scientific Degree of “Doctor” at the National Sports Academy “Vasil Levski.”

The PhD thesis contains scientific and applied scientific findings which represent an original contribution to the science of pedagogy.

2. General appraisal of the phd candidate’s education, professional qualifications and experience

Alexandra Kamenova Gencheva-Vasileva has followed a consistent and logical path in her career development. She holds a bachelor’s degree in Business Administration from the University of National and World Economy in Sofia. She holds a master’s degree in “Sports Management” from the National Sports Academy “Vasil Levski” in Sofia. Since 2012, she has worked as an expert in international cooperation and projects at the National Sports Academy

“Vasil Levski”, and from 2021 to the present, she has held the position of “Academic Inspector” at the Academy’s Center for Postgraduate Qualification. The submitted curriculum vitae shows that Alexandra has extensive administrative, managerial, and international experience. She is fluent in English and Spanish. Her active participation in international and national events, as well as her publishing activities, are particularly noteworthy. Alexandra has participated in a total of 16 international and national conferences, 7 international congresses, 14 European projects, and 2 research projects.

Alexandra has a total of 18 scientific publications in Bulgarian and English, three of which are on the topic of her dissertation. Two of them are in English and one in Bulgarian. The articles were published in 2024 and 2025.

All in all, it will be fair to state that Alexandra is a young and active person with knowledge and skills that she successfully applies in her work. She is an independent and inquisitive individual, ready to grow over the years and build upon her experience and knowledge.

3. Relevance of the research problem, structure and content of the doctoral thesis

The PhD thesis “**A Model for intercultural competence for students at the National Sports Academy ‘Vasil Levski’**” succeeds in a very convincing manner in highlighting and demonstrating the significance of the research problem, namely the development of intercultural competence in students which they can apply in their professional practice. This is a highly relevant issue for all students across various university programmes, on which they are being trained as young, future specialists in their respective fields. Particularly innovative, however, is the specific focus on the development of such knowledge, skills, and attitudes in future physical education teachers, which would lead to improvements and support, on the one hand, for the overall learning environment, and on the other - for their academic, athletic, and personal outcomes. A key characteristic of physical education teachers that distinguishes them from all other pedagogical specialists is that, in addition to being educators, they are also athletes, competitors, or coaches who must skillfully combine and balance group and collective achievements with personal and specific accomplishments. The fast-paced nature of our times requires people to collaborate on an international level, and this is even more true for those involved in the world of sports. Effective international collaboration requires people to have developed strong interpersonal, intercultural, language, and communication skills. It is of great importance that future teachers and coaches not only develop such skills but also “transmit them through their pedagogical and educational activities” (p. 5), as the author notes. Building intercultural competence in these professionals, which complements their professional and

personal training, is of paramount importance for the effective and successful development of young people in a diverse and globalized contemporary environment. A number of universities have developed modules and programmes focused on developing students' intercultural competence, but these are often temporary project initiatives with limited scope and funding. In her work, Alexandra Gencheva-Vasileva examines the need for sustainability and systematic implementation of such initiatives and proposes as a solution an original model based on an integrated approach that combines theoretical instruction with interactive methods and practical activities. It can be adapted and used as a universal model for building such competence in the fields of sports, physical education, and public health.

The PhD thesis is 171 pages in total and consists of three main chapters, a summary of contributions, recommendations, and seven appendices. The bibliography includes 114 sources, 58 of which are in Bulgarian. Most of these sources are contemporary, from the last 10 years, while the rest are by well-known authors and researchers.

The literature review examines in detail classic models of intercultural competence (Bennett, 1986; Byram, 1997; Hofstede, 2009; Barrett, 2013, etc.) as well as contemporary models, categorized into five groups according to Spitzberg and Changnon (2009). All of these models represent distinct aspects of the concept. Intercultural competence is discussed both in the strategic policies and existing programmes of the European educational space, as well as in the Bulgarian educational system, as part of these policies. A detailed review of the leading pedagogical approaches and models in contemporary education is provided, highlighting the interaction and simultaneous manifestation of the fundamental didactic principles that are also embedded in the author's proposed experimental model for building intercultural competence among students at the National Sports Academy "Vasil Levski". The role of the competency-based approach in education is also emphasized, as are contemporary trends in education toward the application of interactive approaches such as conversation, debate, discussion, role-playing, research projects, and others. Special attention is given to the contemporary educational context regarding physical education and sports and the role of teachers and coaches. The perspectives presented by a number of authors contribute to a broader understanding of their role and the need for intercultural competence to be recognized as an essential component of these specialists' professional profile. The PhD thesis discusses interesting good practices for building intercultural competence in higher education institutions in Bulgaria and abroad. Examples include programmes implemented among students at the University of Economics – Varna, the National Sports Academy "Vasil Levski", Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski," New Bulgarian University, Trakia University - Stara Zagora, the University of Groningen, the

Netherlands, the University of Kırklareli, Turkey, the University of Padova, Italy, and Kuban State Agrarian University, Russia.

Based on the theoretical analysis which has been conducted, the research hypothesis is stated at the end of Chapter 1.

The style of the literature review is both professionally sound and engaging for the reader. The theories and viewpoints presented are clearly distinguished from the author's interpretation and original contributions. The author demonstrates a high level of skill in systematizing and interpreting the existing literature, with the main points presented both in the text and graphically, using appropriate figures and tables which facilitate and enrich their understanding.

Chapter 2 presents the experimental study conducted to test the pedagogical model for developing intercultural competence among students at the National Sports Academy "Vasil Levski." The aim, objectives, and subject of the study are clearly defined. The methodology and organization of the experimental study are presented in a structured and detailed manner. The three stages—diagnostic, formative, and summative—are described in detail. In addition to the text, the included figures and tables enhance clarity and readability. For example, Figure 9 on p. 65 visually illustrates the pedagogical model, and the process of conducting the study itself is appropriately illustrated in Figure 10 (stages of the experiment). The comprehensive assessment of the functionality of the applied model is systematically presented in detail in Table 10 and Figure 11. Separately, the work also contains seven appendices (pp. 153–171) with the tools and materials used (detailed description of the didactic tasks, questionnaires, survey forms, assessment protocols, and the developed theoretical test on intercultural competence). All of this allows for replication of the study. The statistical methods used (descriptive statistics, factor analysis, Student's t-test, analysis of variance, etc.) are outlined, and their selection is well-founded and fully appropriate for the research design. A comprehensive battery of tests is proposed to evaluate the functionality of the developed methodology. The study participants included over 300 students from the National Sports Academy "Vasil Levski" in the diagnostic phase and 89 students in the formative phase, divided into an experimental group (46) and a control group (43). A variety of research methods were employed - pedagogical observation, a survey, for which a test battery was developed consisting of two questionnaires adapted for the purposes of this study (the Intercultural Effectiveness Scale and the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire), and a pedagogical experiment to test and evaluate the developed experimental model.

Chapter 2 confirms Alexandra Gencheva-Vasileva's ability to plan and conduct independent scientific research, fully grounded in both theory and practice, as well as to describe and present it competently to the reader. The author's model is comprehensive, multi-

component, and comprises an interconnected complex system of elements - objectives, content, methods, forms of instruction, and assessment - that are closely interrelated. It is scientifically grounded and has been successfully tested among students at the National Sports Academy as part of their foreign language training.

The quantitative and qualitative analysis of the data is presented in **Chapter 3**. It is supported by clear discussion and interpretation, and illustrated with numerous figures. The conclusions are reached in a logical and well-reasoned manner, highlighting the available facts and the researcher's personal judgment. The overall structure is a logical continuation of the previous chapters of the PhD thesis, and the balance between the theoretical framework and the experimental section is well maintained. The results from the individual stages of the experiment are presented in a balanced and consistent manner. The first part of the analysis presents and discusses the results of the conducted diagnostic pedagogical experiment. The attitudes of students at the National Sports Academy "Vasil Levski" toward participation in international projects and their intercultural effectiveness were examined. The author concludes that there is a need to develop an appropriate pedagogical model for acquiring a high level of intercultural competence, which will also lead to increased student motivation to participate in international activities and events. A thorough factor analysis of the instrument was conducted, and the psychometric study indicates the PhD student's excellent mastery of this method. The following sections include analyses of the data from the control phase of the experiment, presenting the results of pedagogical observations among students in the experimental group, which show that the proposed educational activities are effective, and the results of the study on intercultural effectiveness, motivational learning strategies, and theoretical knowledge in the experimental and control groups at the beginning and end of the semester. The comparative analyses clearly demonstrate the differences in the dynamics of change between the experimental and control groups. For this purpose, Student's t-test was used.

The significant differences observed between the two groups provide grounds for confirming the effectiveness of the tested pedagogical model. The results are presented in tabular and graphical form. The following two subsections provide information on the academic outcomes achieved and satisfaction with the training conducted in the experimental group. The results of the initial analysis confirm the high academic outcomes, while the correlation and analysis of variance (ANOVA) conducted demonstrate, respectively, that the tested assessment scale captures various aspects of achievement and is properly constructed, and can therefore be considered a reliable tool for measuring learning achievements according to the model. Students' attitudes and satisfaction were examined through a questionnaire consisting of 25 closed-ended questions. The students' high ratings unambiguously demonstrate their

satisfaction with the methodology and its significance for their professional development. The data is again appropriately interpreted both in the text and through graphical representations. The chapter concludes with a summary of the results, in which the main key points have been highlighted and systematized without repeating previous discussions.

Chapter 3 demonstrates the PhD candidate's high level of proficiency in collecting, processing, and analyzing research data, as well as in presenting it in a way that is understandable to the reader. Appropriate and concise conclusions and recommendations are provided at the end of the thesis.

In conclusion, the PhD thesis reflects Alexandra Gencheva-Vasileva's high level of scientific and research expertise and her indisputable ability to translate scientific and theoretical knowledge into a practical and applied framework. The logical and systematic review of the existing literature provides a clear, specific, and convincing foundation upon which she builds and proposes her experimental model. It is described and defended in detail, and the results clearly demonstrate its significance. Alexandra has an excellent command of the statistical methods used in the study to analyze data from the pedagogical experiment, and she possesses strong skills in describing and interpreting the results.

The PhD thesis summary presents accurately and correctly the main points of the PhD work. It is 43 pages in total. In compliance with the requirements, it gives concise information about the PhD work, as well as the author's contributions to the respective field of research and her publications on the topic of her PhD thesis. It is well-written and has a clear structure and content.

4. Scientific and applied significance and contributions of the research.

I accept the contributions identified as such by the PhD candidate at the end of the thesis. These contributions are of a scientific, methodological, and practical nature. The following aspects can be cited as the main contributions:

- The theoretical review enriches scientific knowledge in this field of research.
- The adaptation and validation of the intercultural effectiveness test for use in a specific Bulgarian context is an indisputable scientific and practical contribution.
- An original model and a comprehensive methodology for building intercultural competence among educators have been developed, allowing them to be used and adapted for similar courses and programmes in a broader context.
- A set of pedagogical activities, original questionnaires, and assessment tools has been developed, which can be used in future research and pedagogical work by various specialists.

- The model is an indisputable contribution to the education of students at the National Sports Academy “Vasil Levski,” for whom it is intended and among whom it has been tested and evaluated. Its implementation in students’ foreign language training would contribute to their professional development, language competencies, motivation, and confidence when participating in projects, initiatives, and other activities of an international nature.

5. Remarks and recommendations

I would like to express my great satisfaction with the present doctoral thesis and to congratulate the PhD candidate Alexandra Gencheva-Vasileva and her scientific supervisor, Assoc. Prof. Vesela Slavova, PhD, for the in-depth research they have conducted and presented as a result of their collaboration. I believe that this work should be published in the near future. Their excellent language skills will allow the experimental model and the results of the study to be made available to the international research community as well.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the PhD thesis presents an original, timely, and significant scientific study. It fully complies with the requirements of the current Law on the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria, the Regulations for its Application, and the Ordinance on the Awarding of the Educational and Scientific Degree of “Doctor” at the National Sports Academy “Vasil Levski.” Based on the mentioned merits and scientific contributions, I give my positive assessment of the PhD thesis and strongly recommend that the esteemed scientific jury **vote in favor** of awarding the educational and scientific degree of “**Doctor**” in the professional field 1.3. Pedagogy of Education in... Doctoral Programme “Physical Education in the Educational System” to the PhD candidate **Alexandra Kamenova Gencheva-Vasileva**.

Date: 05th May, 2026

Signature: