

STATEMENT OF OPINION

by **Assoc. Prof. Christina Nickolaeva Beleva, 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: **Model of intercultural competence for students at the National Sports Academy “Vasil Levski”**

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

Structural and content-related aspects of the doctoral thesis

The topic of the doctoral thesis, authored by Alexandra Gencheva-Vasileva, is significant and timely in both its pedagogical dimensions and the context of the rapidly evolving sociocultural relationships in the modern world. The need to build intercultural competence among students at the National Sports Academy “Vasil Levski” is substantiated by the PhD candidate with great precision and skill. The distinct practical and applied nature of the doctoral thesis, wherein the general and specific theoretical aspects of the topic are examined in analytical depth, finds its convincing expression in the developed practical model for building intercultural competence, based on a “specialized teaching methodology” (p. 55).

Structurally, the doctoral thesis is organized into three main chapters and contains seven appendices. It comprises a total of 171 pages. The bibliography includes 114 relevant titles,

which attests to the PhD candidate's commendable effort in synthesizing contemporary publications on the subject.

In the first chapter of her doctoral thesis, Alexandra Gencheva-Vasileva provides a comprehensive overview of the key theoretical framework and relevant issues. She examines the nature and main characteristics of intercultural competence, as well as existing established and innovative models for developing intercultural knowledge, skills, and competencies. The PhD candidate analyzes works on the topic by both Bulgarian and leading international authors such as Karadencheva (2022), Shushlina (2021), Monev (2014), Byram (1997), Bennett (1986), Hofstede (2009), Adler (2008), Deardorff (2006), etc. Strategic documents and programs relevant to the topic at the European and national levels are examined. Alexandra Gencheva-Vasileva discusses the nature of existing pedagogical approaches, principles, and models in education and highlights didactic principles such as visualisation clarity, learning by doing, systematicity, retention and transfer of knowledge and skills, teamwork, communication, and interactivity. She also proposes and tests an experimental model based precisely on these principles. In addition, a number of contemporary interactive methods are discussed, which enable learners to actively participate as partners in the learning process. This chapter also describes models for building intercultural competence, applied in higher education at a number of Bulgarian and foreign universities, and the need for the sustainability of such effective programs.

The need for such a model to develop the intercultural competence of NSA students—who are preparing for future careers as educators and coaches in the field of sports, as part of a larger international community—is clearly articulated and outlined. To be successful and competitive in such an environment, young people must focus not only on personal achievements and skills, but also on building tolerance and demonstrating respect and understanding for the cultural differences of the other participants in the interactions they engage in. Moreover, future physical education teachers should successfully impart the acquired skills and knowledge to the children and adolescents they will work with.

The theoretical analysis of existing scientific concepts, models, and pedagogical approaches provides the basis for the main hypothesis of this doctoral thesis regarding the positive effect of the proposed pedagogical model on the development of intercultural competence among students at the National Sports Academy “Vasil Levski”.

The PhD candidate's experimental research is presented in Chapters 2 and 3. The research objectives are formulated clearly and accurately. The number of students (nearly 400) who participated in the experimental study is impressive, with over 300 in the diagnostic phase and eighty-nine in the formative phase. The methodology and organization of the study stand out for their consistent internal logic, precision in the selection and adaptation of testing instruments, and the author's research expertise in developing original questionnaires. The rich array of mathematical and statistical methods employed clearly demonstrates Alexandra Gencheva-Vasileva's in-depth command of conducting research.

The pedagogical model designed by the PhD candidate for developing intercultural competence among students at the National Sports Academy "Vasil Levski" (pp. 63–82) also deserves high praise. The carefully outlined pedagogical dimensions of the proposed methodology for specialized training highlight Alexandra Gencheva-Vasileva's skills in the careful design of educational activities, organized around clear objectives and expected outcomes, and linked to an objective system for assessing learning outcomes. The planned modules and the activities included in them are distinguished by their practical orientation and the applicability of the knowledge and skills acquired by the participants. It should also be noted here that the author's model enriches the communicative repertoire of the students in the experimental group not only in terms of intercultural skills and attitudes, but also in terms of teamwork skills, information interpretation skills, creative thinking, and more. Evidence of the effectiveness of the proposed innovative methodology in terms of increasing engagement and motivation is provided by the positive feedback from participants in the experimental group regarding the practical components of the specialized training, such as workshops and group work. The PhD candidate also succeeds in offering an in-depth analysis of the results obtained.

The hypothesis of the experimental research has been conclusively confirmed, and the statistically significant differences between the results of the control and experimental groups provide grounds for concluding that the specialized methodology developed by Alexandra Gencheva -Vasileva is effective, and its practical orientation leads to a convincing improvement in intercultural communication skills and attitudes.

The contributions and recommendations outlined at the end of the doctoral thesis are objective and demonstrate academic maturity. The recommendations can contribute to further improving the quality of education for students in the "Pedagogy of Physical Education" program at the National Sports Academy "Vasil Levski." The contributions outlined by the PhD

candidate in terms of their scientific, methodological, and practical value accurately reflect the innovative and original components of the research implementation.

Alexandra Gencheva-Vasileva's doctoral thesis is an independent and comprehensive scientific study. The PhD candidate's writing style is characterized by clarity and persuasiveness and meets the requirements for a doctoral dissertation. The exposition is structured logically and coherently, reflecting a high self-set standard of textual organization. In turn, the thesis summary accurately encapsulates the content of the dissertation.

Conclusion

This doctoral thesis demonstrates a deep and mature research interest, an innovative approach to pedagogical intervention that is tailored to the specific needs of learners, as well as the ability to analyze and interpret research findings with precision. The innovative aspects of the study, its successfully achieved objectives, and the valuable original components—such as the model and methodology for specialized training, the development of a scale for assessing academic achievement, and the adaptation of a test for intercultural effectiveness give me reason to propose with full conviction to the members of the esteemed academic jury that they vote to award the educational and scientific degree of “**Doctor**” in area of higher education 1. Pedagogical Sciences, professional field 1.3. “Pedagogy of Education in ...” to the PhD candidate **Alexandra Gencheva-Vasileva**.

05. 05. 2026

Assoc. Prof. Christina Beleva, PhD