



## **Educational Strategies in Leadership Teaching in Secondary Education in Bulgaria**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper presents an extended theoretical analysis of teaching leadership within the system of secondary education in the Republic of Bulgaria, arguing for the necessity of targeted pedagogical strategies that integrate cognitive development, social-emotional learning, and values education in alignment with the priorities of Bulgarian educational policy. Within the framework of contemporary regulatory provisions and the competency-based approach established by the Preschool and School Education Act, leadership is conceptualized as a key transversal competence associated with civic engagement, social responsibility, and the capacity for effective interaction within the community.*

*The argument advances the thesis that the effective development of leadership competencies in Bulgarian schools requires the implementation of experiential learning and project-oriented methods that provide authentic contexts for exercising responsibility and decision-making. The importance of cooperative learning models is emphasized as a means of democratizing leadership roles and addressing inequalities in student participation. Systematic reflection, structured ethical discussions, and mentoring practices are considered essential instruments for fostering moral sensitivity and metacognitive awareness. Particular emphasis is placed on the necessity of criterion-referenced assessment based on clearly defined indicators of leadership behaviour, as well as on the creation of a psychologically safe and supportive school environment in which student voice holds genuine significance.*

*In conclusion, implications are outlined for curriculum design, including the integration of leadership modules into both compulsory and elective components of secondary education, as well as for assessment systems and school policies aimed at expanding opportunities for student participation and self-governance. The limitations of the present theoretical analysis are also acknowledged, and directions for future empirical research are proposed, particularly concerning the measurement of the effectiveness of different models of leadership education within the Bulgarian context and the impact of school climate on the development of leadership competencies.*

**Keywords:** *leadership; secondary education; experiential learning; project-based learning; social-emotional learning; reflection; ethics; distributed leadership.*

### **1. Introduction**

From a theoretical perspective, leadership is conceptualized not as a formal status or position of authority, but as a social practice and morally responsible form of influence enacted within the dynamic context of the school environment. Such an understanding corresponds to the efforts of Bulgarian schools to cultivate active, autonomous, and value-oriented individuals capable of responsible participation in democratic public life. The analysis draws upon the sociocultural theory of learning, which emphasizes the role of social interaction and cultural mediation in the development of higher psychological functions; social learning theory, which highlights modelling and observation as mechanisms for acquiring behavioural patterns; self-determination theory, which explains the motivational preconditions for sustained student engagement; as well as concepts of distributed leadership, which view leadership actions as shared responsibility embedded within organizational culture.

In conditions of dynamic social development and increasing complexity of societal processes, the school is increasingly viewed not only as an institution for the transmission of knowledge but also as a space for the formation of active, responsible, and ethical individuals. In this context, the teaching of leadership in secondary education acquires strategic significance. Adolescence represents a period of intensive identity formation, moral positioning, and the development of social roles. It is at this stage that students begin to reflect on their own influence within their environment and to experiment with different models of behaviour and interaction. Contemporary theories of leadership emphasize its processual and relational nature. Leadership is manifested within the network of interactions among



members of a given community and is closely linked to shared values and collective goals. The perspective of distributed leadership, developed by Spillane [12], draws attention to the fact that leadership actions are not confined solely to formal positions but may be exercised by various members of the community depending on the context and the task at hand. This concept is particularly significant for the school environment, where leadership can be cultivated as a shared practice.

## 2. Methodology

The pedagogical strategies for teaching leadership are grounded in several complementary theoretical frameworks. Vygotsky's [13] sociocultural theory emphasizes the social nature of learning and the role of interaction in cognitive development. From this perspective, leadership can be acquired through participation in collaborative activities in which students gradually internalize models of responsible behaviour and communication.

Bandura's [3] social learning theory complements this framework by emphasizing the importance of observation and modelling. Students develop leadership behaviours when they observe significant adults or peers who demonstrate ethical conduct, confidence, and responsibility. Therefore, the role of the teacher as a model of leadership is of central importance.

The motivational dimension of learning is further illuminated by Deci and Ryan's [6] self-determination theory, which posits that sustainable intrinsic motivation develops when the basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are fulfilled. In this regard, leadership education should provide meaningful opportunities for choice, create conditions that allow students to experience success and mastery, and foster a strong sense of belonging within the school community.

In addition to these pedagogical foundations, contemporary concepts such as transformational leadership [4] and servant leadership [7] offer valuable theoretical perspectives. Both approaches emphasize inspiration, moral responsibility, and care for others. These models are particularly relevant in the school context, where leadership is expected to be grounded in ethical principles and oriented toward social engagement and the well-being of the community.

One of the most effective strategies in teaching leadership is experiential learning. Kolb's [10] model conceptualizes learning as a cyclical process involving concrete experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation. In school practice, this approach can be implemented through role-playing activities, simulations of managerial situations, student parliaments, and real-life initiatives. A crucial condition for effectiveness is systematic reflection following each activity, through which students analyse their own behaviour and its consequences.

Project-based learning also represents a powerful instrument for the development of leadership competencies. Through participation in long-term projects, students practice planning, coordination, task distribution, and evaluation of outcomes. They encounter real challenges and learn to balance individual and collective interests. Within this process, leadership is experienced as responsibility toward a shared goal.

Cooperative learning, as described by Johnson and Johnson [9], creates structured conditions for positive interdependence and individual accountability. The rotation of leadership roles within the team enables each student to experience different dimensions of leadership, thereby challenging and overcoming the stereotype of the "born leader."

Reflective practices are central to the sustainable development of leadership. Schön [11] emphasizes the role of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action as mechanisms for professional and personal growth. In the school context, this can be implemented through reflective journals, self-assessment, and group discussions of experienced situations.

Debates and ethical discussions contribute to the development of critical thinking and moral sensitivity. They enable students to practice argumentation, respect diverse perspectives, and recognize the complexity of social issues. In this way, leadership becomes closely linked to value-based decision-making and civic responsibility.

The integration of social-emotional learning, as outlined in the CASEL (2020) framework, complements the cognitive dimensions of leadership with skills related to self-regulation, empathy, and relationship management. These competencies are fundamental to ethical and sustainable leadership.

## 3. Comparative Analysis

The term "ethics" was first introduced by the Greek philosopher Aristotle in the 4th century BCE. Ethics constitutes philosophical knowledge concerning everyday human relationships and the



distinction between right and wrong behaviour. It is a field of inquiry focused on the ultimate aim of human life – happiness – and on the positive qualities of character, namely the virtues. Consequently, ethics, as an integral part of everyday life, seeks to clarify what constitutes appropriate relationships among individuals. While ethics offers wise guidance for daily actions, it does not provide or guarantee absolute, universally valid knowledge applicable to all people across different times and contexts.

In the Bulgarian educational context, the teaching of leadership is grounded to a considerable extent in historical, philosophical, and traditionally established models of leadership that shape the cultural and value framework of society. This approach implies viewing leadership not merely as a contemporary managerial concept, but as a phenomenon with deep historical roots and enduring moral foundations, closely linked to national memory, societal ideals, and the development of civic institutions. Aretics [1] is an interdisciplinary humanities theory that examines "the concepts, categories, and laws of historical-psychological inheritance and ethical-pedagogical cultivation of values of general social significance in Hellas, Thrace, and Rome." The study of this phenomenon is based on written sources spanning more than three millennia – from the Trojan War in the 13th century BCE to the era of globalization in the 21st century.

The development of its theoretical foundations follows an ascending sequence: individual–virtues; personality–inner strengths; leader–qualities, which together form a unified system of values. Within the Aretē system, leadership qualities are understood as the product of the fully developed individual as a personality, built upon and transcending the corresponding virtues and inner strengths.

In order for an individual to become a leader, he or she must first be educated and formed within a framework of ethical values. Today, ethics is understood as the science of morality. These moral values constitute the generally accepted rules and norms of society. To understand the formation of values in a leader, we examine the Aretē system of values. This system is symbolically represented as a five-pointed star, meaning that it comprises five core values that serve as guiding principles in the cultivation of moral virtues.

- Faith – it becomes a universal expression of an enduring humanism which, as a moral aspiration, is broader and more compassionate than the concept of religion. Religion may be considered "major", that is, global, or "minor", yet it distinguishes between people and nations and is based on a strictly hierarchical, pyramidal structure that requires obedience and subordination. In this sense, a clear distinction must be made between the concepts of faith and religion. Within the concept of Faith, each individual perceives God not as an abstraction, but as the "reason of action" and the "meaning-making force of historically active human behaviour".

- Power – it is always a contested category. The idea of a balanced and universally acceptable form of governance for all classes and social groups – an idea that sounds utopian in itself (since Plato's Republic) – together with the figure of the King conceived as the benevolent hero of history, standing somehow beyond it, appears, if not exaggerated, then at least intentionally constructed. Gradually, the image of the king as divinely tolerated gives way to that of the legitimate ruler or the leader. In any case, the figure of the leader is intrinsically associated with power, which implies that power, when properly understood and exercised, constitutes a virtuous category within the education and formation of a leader.

- Struggle (Bran) – another name for war. In contemporary discourse and in media projections about the future of the world, the struggle for honour has largely been replaced by a struggle for supremacy – not on the battlefield, but rather in the sphere of technology, innovation, and other competitive sectors. Nevertheless, if in the process of cultivating virtues an individual does not learn how to struggle, he or she is ultimately destined to fail.

- Labor (Work) – in the disorder of discredited ideologies, industriousness has increasingly come to be regarded as outdated. Particularly today, in a context marked by the rapid expansion of entrepreneurship and the pursuit of quick wealth at any cost, work is no longer honoured as strongly as in the past. Nevertheless, from antiquity to the present, the hardworking individual has been regarded as virtuous. Even if not everyone aspires to industriousness today, it remains essential, because the development of leadership qualities necessarily presupposes diligence. Leadership is incompatible with laziness. A person chosen by a group to guide and coordinate its efforts cannot be indolent, as leadership requires sustained commitment, responsibility, and active engagement.

- Love – it is a socio-psychological category that may be individualized in concrete, even everyday manifestations. At the same time, love can become a defining characteristic of a team, a collective, an ethnic group, a nation, or even a community of nations. Since antiquity, it has been considered that love must be present among the core values of a leader – love for one's homeland, for family, for lineage, for one's partner, and for others. All of these dimensions are closely connected to the leader's readiness for self-sacrifice and commitment to the well-being of the community.



These five virtues are essential in the formation of every leader, for if a leader does not possess qualities grounded in them, he or she is destined to fail as a guide. A leader cannot remain indifferent to, or detached from, the group that has chosen him or her as its representative. Nor can a leader lack the willingness to struggle in defence of the group's interests and continue to stand at the forefront of its followers.

When analysing the mission of the leader as embedded in leadership education, the stages of behavioural formation can be clearly distinguished through the mechanism of the five rays of the Aretē star. The process begins with the explanation of the value system as the primary motivation for socially creative activity. This initial stage establishes the ethical foundation upon which leadership identity is built.

The next stage involves the reassessment of general values within a specific historical context, where motivation becomes formalized through the individual's actions, understood as interconnected and mutually dependent. Here, values are no longer abstract principles but are translated into concrete deeds shaped by social circumstances and collective expectations.

The third phase is decisive: it evaluates how the individual acts in accordance with the ethical framework already constructed through the previous two stages. At this point, leadership is manifested not merely as intention or declared commitment, but as consistent behaviour aligned with internalized virtues and socially responsible action.

In the process of cultivating ethical virtues in a leader, it is necessary to achieve the development of specific personal qualities, including character, the ability to work effectively with people, determination, intelligence, and influence. These qualities represent the practical expression of internalized values and constitute the foundation of responsible leadership behaviour.

Character ensures moral consistency and integrity; the ability to work with people reflects communicative competence and social sensitivity; determination sustains perseverance in the pursuit of collective goals; intelligence enables sound judgment and strategic thinking; and influence allows the leader to mobilize and inspire others. The presence of these qualities is essential for effective leadership and for gaining the respect of the group the leader serves [2].

The educational and formative process encompasses established international standards, the acquisition of effective conceptual frameworks of cultural-historical, socio-group, genealogical-formal, and national character, as well as the development of advanced practical skills in working with technological tools at the highest possible level. Within this framework, lifelong learning occupies a central place, since – even after values have been internalized – they continue to evolve throughout an individual's life. In a context characterized by the constant emergence of new technologies, knowledge, and information, a leader must remain up to date in order to guide others effectively and responsibly.

The definition of the goals of these processes is grounded in the preservation of fundamental human qualities, ensuring continuity and succession within a changing historical environment. The search for open forms of education and formation – namely, active communication among participants engaged in shaping a new ethical framework of behaviour – has become an object of increasing interest. More and more individuals aspire to such participatory and dialogical educational models. The internalization of ethical conduct requires learners to take an active role in the educational process itself. An active formative stance is increasingly preferred by broader segments of society. In this regard, it becomes progressively more important not merely where one studies, but with whom one studies; consequently, the role of the teacher in shaping the good leader is significantly strengthened.

Within the context of efforts to institutionalize leadership education at the upper secondary level, it should be noted that a specialized textbook on leadership and leadership practices has been developed within Bulgarian educational practice for students in secondary education. The textbook is structured in accordance with the competency-based approach and conceptualizes leadership as a social phenomenon, a historically conditioned practice, and a value-oriented activity, rather than as a formal position or administrative function.

The content of the textbook covers the foundations of leadership, including the historical development of the idea of leadership, the philosophical underpinnings of leadership responsibility, and the relationship between power, authority, and legitimacy. Both classical and contemporary concepts of leadership are examined, along with their manifestations in various spheres of social life. Particular attention is given to the social roles of the leader – as a bearer of vision, mediator in conflicts, representative of public interests, and organizer of collective action.

The textbook provides a comprehensive examination of the foundations of leadership, tracing the historical evolution of leadership as an idea and exploring its philosophical foundations, particularly in relation to responsibility, moral authority, and legitimacy. It analyses both classical and



contemporary theories of leadership, situating them within broader social, political, and cultural contexts. In addition, the textbook examines how these theoretical perspectives are manifested across different spheres of public life, including civic society, governance, and organizational practice. Special emphasis is placed on the social roles of the leader – as a visionary who articulates shared goals, a mediator who facilitates dialogue and conflict resolution, a representative who expresses collective interests, and an organizer who mobilizes coordinated action toward common objectives.

From a methodological perspective, the textbook draws on examples from history, philosophy, the development of civil society, political processes, and business in order to illustrate diverse models and styles of leadership. The analysis of historical figures and events enables students to trace manifestations of leadership within the context of national and global transformations. Philosophical texts and ideas support the understanding of the ethical dimensions of leadership, while examples from contemporary economic and organizational practice demonstrate the applied aspects of leadership decision-making in dynamic and complex environments.

In this way, the textbook offers an interdisciplinary and culturally grounded approach to teaching leadership, combining theoretical argumentation with an analytical reading of real social processes. It provides a foundation for the development of critical thinking and civic engagement among students and contributes to the formation of leadership competencies in alignment with the objectives of contemporary Bulgarian education. This model of instruction establishes a connection between past and present, enabling students to understand leadership as a value-oriented activity shaped by specific historical and cultural contexts. In this way, the teaching of leadership in Bulgaria is situated within the broader tradition of humanistic education, where historical experience and philosophical reflection serve as foundations for the development of civic awareness, social responsibility, and personal maturity.

#### **4. Assessment and Organizational Conditions**

The assessment of leadership competencies requires a comprehensive approach that goes beyond the traditional measurement of academic achievement. Appropriate instruments include analytic rubrics, portfolios, self-assessment tools, and structured feedback mechanisms. Research by Hattie [8] highlights the importance of clearly defined criteria and high-quality feedback as key factors in enhancing learning effectiveness.

At the same time, effective leadership education presupposes the creation of a psychologically safe environment in which students are able to take risks, express their opinions, and learn from mistakes. The classroom should function as a “laboratory for leadership”, where democratic dialogue and shared responsibility are embedded in everyday practice.

#### **5. Conclusion**

Teaching leadership in secondary education represents a purposeful and systematically organized pedagogical process that integrates cognitive, social-emotional, and value-based dimensions of development in accordance with the competency-based model embedded in the Bulgarian educational framework. Within the context of contemporary Bulgarian schooling, leadership is not approached as an independent managerial discipline, but rather as an interdisciplinary educational field that can be integrated into subjects such as History and Civilizations, Philosophy, Civic Education, Economics and Entrepreneurship, as well as various forms of elective and optional training.

In the Bulgarian context, the relationship between leadership and the formation of civic identity is of particular significance. The historical tradition of the national liberation movements, the establishment of modern statehood, and the development of civil society provide a rich foundation for analysing leadership models associated with responsibility, self-sacrifice, vision, and public duty. In this sense, the teaching of leadership can draw upon the cultural and historical experience of Bulgarian society, guiding students to understand leadership as service to the community and as a morally engaged stance.

Effective educational strategies in this direction combine experiential engagement, analytical reflection, and social involvement. In Bulgarian schools, this may be implemented through participation in student self-governance structures, community initiatives, volunteer activities, and projects connected to the local community. Such forms create conditions for students to exercise real influence and to develop skills in coordination, argumentation, and decision-making. At the same time,



systematic reflection on historical and contemporary examples of leadership supports the development of critical thinking and value-based resilience.

The social-emotional dimension of leadership education acquires particular relevance within the Bulgarian educational environment, where issues related to school climate, the prevention of aggression, and the cultivation of a culture of respect are strategic priorities. Leadership, understood as the capacity for dialogue, empathy, and constructive conflict management, contributes to the improvement of the school environment and to the formation of democratic attitudes. In this way, leadership education becomes an instrument for strengthening the social capital of the school community.

Supported by contemporary pedagogical theories and empirical research, leadership education can be positioned as a key component in the modernization of the Bulgarian educational system. It facilitates the transition from a reproductive model of instruction to a competency-based approach, in which students are not passive recipients of knowledge but active participants in the educational process. In this sense, teaching leadership has the potential to contribute to the formation of autonomous, socially responsible, and ethically oriented individuals capable of actively participating in the development of democratic society and the knowledge-based economy in Bulgaria.

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