RELATIONSHIPS SCHOOL – FAMILY: THE ADOLESCENTS’ PERSPECTIVE

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The case study of Alba County describes, conceptualizes and tries to explain the actual status of the school-family relationships from the adolescents’ perspective. Our purpose was to find out what perceptions, representations and behavior patterns the adolescents have towards their parents’ involvement in education and towards the relationships between school and family in the political and socio-economical context of Romania during the transition period to a democratic society.

The research theoretical support includes the social network paradigm (Blau, 1964; Barnes, 1972; Leinhart, 1977), J. Coleman’s concept of social capital (1987) and J. Epstein’s theory of overlapping spheres of influence (1990). The specificity of the proposed theme employs mainly interpretative research principles, the research design clearly showing details from the participants’ perspective. We used the focus group technique, recommended for obtaining substantial data from teenagers. Participants were selected so that we obtain as many different opinions as possible. The collected data were analyzed using the techniques and procedures of Grounded Theory and the software ATLAS.ti 5.0.

The research confirms that teenagers have a different perspective on the family’s style of education, on the attitudes and behaviors in school-family-community relations as compared to that of their parents; all these influence his/her reactions and ultimately, his/her psycho-social development. In the light of the overlapping spheres of influence theory, the representations that the student has acquired in high school overlap with the representations of his/her family experience, thus providing him/her with a new and broader horizon of understanding the family micro-cosmos in relation to the school and community environment.

The theoretical and empirical support of the research

Theoretical development and recent research demonstrate that the organizations based on communities, such as schools, serve the social strategy of the organization and mobilization of the groups of people to achieve actions with specific objectives. They embody their members’ ideals and they give value to the public debate and to the decisions of social politics. These kinds of organizations represent democracy in action to solve the local problems.

Schools are the key of the communities’ welfare and the future prosperity of nations. Their health is a barometer of the democratic way of life and, that is why, one of the important problems during the transition period is represented by the school transformation into centers of the community life. This social change is being built on the people’s desire to make the schools become better and better for all the children. We state that for the Romanian society, trapped into a too long and difficult transition, the partnerships centered on schools represent an important dimension of the civil society’s construction.

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Schools of all degrees are organizations which are responsible for the formal education of children and adolescents. The schools which carry out successfully and more efficiently this responsibility consider themselves and their students as part of the social system which includes families and communities. The research developed in the USA and in some European countries shows that when schools, families and communities work together as partners, the beneficiaries are the students. The partnerships between schools, families and communities can: (a) help teachers with their work; (b) improve students’ scholarly abilities; (c) improve the curriculum and the school environment; (d) improve parents’ educational abilities; (e) develop parents’ leadership abilities; (d) connect families to school and community members; (f) stimulate community’s service to the use of schools; (g) offer services and support to families; (h) create a safer environment in schools.

The main reason for the creation of such partnerships is the desire to help students be successful at school and, later, in life. When parents, students and other members of a community consider each other partners in education, around the students is being created a community of support which starts to work.

Recent syntheses of several studies indicate the fact that since the first years of childhood, the family, the school and the community influence simultaneously the children’s growth and development. The continuous importance of these contexts in each stage of the child’s development is minutely described by a number of theoretical connected perspectives. These include the paradigm of the social network (Blau, 1964; Barnes, 1972; Leinhart, 1977), the concept of social capital of J. Coleman (1987) and the theory of the intersection of influence spheres of J. Epstein (1990).

The paradigm of the social network refers to the connections between individuals, the groups and the institutions with which a person has contact and of whose support is dependent (Bott, 1971). In the research in the educational domain it was discovered an essential aspect: the children who are included into well-developed social networks have much better educational results than the children who don’t benefit of them (Coates, 1987). M. L. Clark (1991, 45) writes that the social networks provide social support (defined as “the availability of people we can rely on, people that we know they take care of us and love us”). She sustains that the bigger the social support of adolescence is, the bigger is the probability for a student to be successful at school. Clark suggests that schools can strengthen the support systems for young people, especially for the poor or the minorities, through guiding, tutorial and instruction programs leaded by responsible adults, ready for action in school, family and community.

J. Coleman refers to the social networks as to an integral component of the social capital, which designates the abilities of knowledge, the attitudinal and behavioral patterns which the individuals can spend or invest in order to
raise their success chances in social institutions, such as school. The social capital represents individual resources, values and advantages which the individuals earn as participants in a communitarian background. From here starts the idea that a community, rather than an individual, has a certain amount of social capital. The communities “build” the social capital by developing active relationships, by democratic participation, by strengthening the communitarian property and by social trust.

The theory of the intersection of the influence spheres of Epstein emphasizes the importance of mutual action of schools, families and communities in order to assure children’s needs. The recognition as main principle of this theory of “the history of tight connections between major institutions which socialize and educate children” (Epstein, 1992, 1140-41), determines certain objectives, such as scholar success, to be a mutual interest for each institution’s people, objectives which are reached through action and their cooperative support. This perspective is graphically represented under the shape of three spheres which intersect and symbolize the school, the family and the community. In his theory, based on the data of several researches, Epstein sustains that:

The status variables are not the most important measures to understanding the parents’ involvement. At all level classes, the evidence suggests that the school politics, the teacher and family’s activities are more important than race, parents’ education, family size, marital status and even the degree of determination if the parents continue to be part of their children education (109).

From here appears the option for a qualitative approach of the research theme and the use of the study case which ensures the work background for the profound understanding of social processes.

The design of the research

The research strategy. The specific of the theme engages with priority the principles of the interpretative perspective of research, the design of the research being conceived to show clearly the details from the participants’ point of view. For this we have used the abductive research strategy (Blaikie, 2000) which explores in the informal language the knowledge which the social actors use to produce, reproduce and interpret the phenomenon which is being investigated.

The questions and objectives of the research. According to the abductive strategy there are not used hypotheses but a work background in shape of questions, submissive to a process of development and refining during the investigation. Through the selection of questions and the attention given to their order, we can determinate what is studied, in what measure and how it will be studied. Therefore, there were formulated the next questions:

- Which are the concepts, attitudes and behaviors of teenagers towards the parents’ involvement in home studying activities?
Which are the knowledge, attitudes and behaviors of students towards the relationships school-family?

What kind of social processes produce these behaviors?

Which are the patterns of the relationships between characteristically behaviors?

Why do the identified patterns act this way?

The objectives aimed in the research are:

- the description, in order to provide rich details about the studied phenomenon;
- the understanding, to identify the rational of the actions of the people involved;
- the explanation, to determine the elements, the factors and the mechanisms responsible for the production of the relationships school-family.

The method, the selection of the participants and the collection of the data. The focus group technique has imposed as one of the most attractive and efficient investigation method, becoming the most utilized qualitative method of approach of some varied social domains, such as education. Also, the focus group is one of the few available techniques used to obtain consistent data from children and adolescents. The participants were selected in order to obtain a number as big as possible of different opinions. We took in consideration that they were sociable, that they could talk openly and honestly to each other, so that each group was homogenous concerning the experience but also the scholar environment which they come from. As a result, the opinion diversity was reached by choosing homogenous groups in which they interact and not by obtaining this characteristic from a heterogeneous human composition, anyway less recommended. We developed with the high-school students eight focus group sessions in order to gather their thoughts and opinions about the parents’ involvement in their education and in the activity of the high-school where they study.

Data analysis. We specify that the investigation is part of a more elaborate research, which enters both in the domain of fundamental research and the applicative one. It aims the development of a theory of the partnerships school–family–community, as well as the implementation of certain partnership programmes in some pre–university education units from the Alba County. The collected data were analyzed with the Grounded Theory techniques and procedures using the software program ATLAS.ti 5.0. This way we achieved the description and the interpretation of the studied phenomenon and, as much as possible, its causal explanation.

The value of truth and confidence of the research. Because “there are no operationally defined tests that can be applied to the qualitative research” (Eisner, 1991, 53), the pragmatic validation of the research results was achieved through the judging of its relevance and utility by a numerous group of M.A.
students consisting of teachers and general or high-school principals, as well as several groups of students. They confirmed that the study helped them understand a situation that sometimes seemed “enigmatic or confusing“.

The results of the study

The parents’ involvement in the home studying activities

In the primary group of family the inter-individual relationships are direct, as well as the communication relationships, fact that facilitates the mutual knowledge, the appearance of affective relation and specific norms, attitudes and behaviors. Through its actions, the family works as a mediator between the individual and other parts of society, such as the school. That is why it needs to accomplish its educational obligations of transmitting the cultural patterns and social status. From this perspective of the research we proposed ourselves to find out how and in which conditions and contexts parents and other members of the family involve themselves in the studying activities of the teenagers, which are the routine strategies and tactics through which the involved ones solve the problems and give a shape to the studied phenomenon. At the same time, the questions wanted to challenge answers that could emphasize the effects of the actions/interactions of the involved actors, the diversity of the generated consequences.

The shapes and the styles of the involvement. First the analyses surprised a series of shapes of the parents’ involvement in the home studying activities, which formed the code family 1. They resulted from the analyses of the transcript of the discussions which took place in the focus group

![Diagram of forms of parents' involvements in the learning activity]

**Family Code 1.** Forms of parents’ involvement in the learning activity
sessions, the participants’ descriptions being conceptualized under labels almost identical with their own words.

The grouping of the involvement shapes after the criteria of their presence and intensity, generates four educational styles of the parents: (1) active and constant, (2) limited, (3) excessive (authoritative) and (4) reduced or “parental rejection”.

*The style of active and constant parental involvement.* This style is characterized by an equilibrated and flexible combination between the offering of material and financial support, affection and support (guiding, encouraging, advice and reward) of the adolescent’s scholar activity, on the one hand checking and drawing attention and on the other hand exactingness in its evaluation. *The affective, material and financial support, the functional communication and the actions* – the four properties of this style, they manifest permanently and in harmony. The stress can be laid on more than one of those attributes, but none can completely miss. All these are sustained by the participants’ voices who tell about the parents’ active and permanent involvement in their education, for example:

They ask me every day what grades I took, how it was at school, how I get along with my teachers. My parents discuss with me about school, they get involved, they come to the school, they help me with the homework if necessary.

*The style of limited parental involvement.* From the analyses of the collected data we concluded that this style of “limited”, “sporadically”, “partial” (“in vivo” categories), seems to be the most common. Here are the adolescents’ voices: “From my point of view it is a partial involvement”, “My parents get involved only sporadically” or “In my case they get involved to a certain limit”. A participant’s words accurately describe the limited involvement style:

From my point of view it is a partial involvement... I experienced a serious participation from their part only when the problems imperatively demanded solutions, otherwise they seem reserved, almost absent, their daily involvement meaning a few questions which I would name of complaisance.

*Concentrating the interest on the results* is one of the generating causes of the style of parents’ limited involvement. It is invoked by the participants in wordings like:

S1: They are interested in me having big grades, and less in the essence.
S2: They don’t want me to run from the classes, nor to fail an examination.
S3: They ask me if I passed the class. Rarely do they come at the school, only when the main teacher or the principal call.

The pattern of this style of parental involvement sometimes has its roots in the extreme situations in which teenagers may find themselves. A participant talks about it like this:
My parents get involved and I involve them only when I find myself in extreme situations and they can stop them getting worse.

We believe that the lack of time, considered “limited resource” by students, and the positive evaluation of the situation are causal conditions which interact in many contexts and generate the pattern of the style of limited involvement which, sometimes, has positive consequences, such as gaining the freedom to decide by the teenagers and, implicitly, taking responsibility. Nevertheless, the parental supervision remains, as we can notice from what a student told:

My parents have a healthy vision on education: “Until now we took care of you, now that you stepped into another world (high-school), you will form yourself there on the structure that we offered to you.” There is a shade, too: if my behavioral tendencies deviate a lot from what they think is good, they will draw my attention. Quite firmly.

The avarice with which the parents spend time with their children, the interest limited to only some aspects, produce effects that teenagers perceive and of which they become aware as frustrations.

We don’t get time for what we think is important, namely they don’t support us where we are the best or when we have a problem. I noticed that they like so much the comfort of a “Did you take good grades? Do you need anything else? When is there another meeting? etc” and they avoid as much as they can the delicate events that occur to us by invoking, I may say, infantile reasons.

The style of excessive (authoritative) parental involvement. This style of parental involvement in education is more complex than the others because its perception is the least wanted and, at the same time, harder to deal with by the teenagers.

Semantic Network 1. The style of excessive (authoritative) parental involvement
The conceptualizing of the style of involvement as excessive was a consequence of lines like this:

S1: They get involved more than I have ever wanted.

S2: They tell me over and over again: “Keep studying, keep studying because you do it for you.”

S3: They tell me all day long: “study, study”.

Analyzed and visualized, the style finds its major cause in the mistrust of the parents towards the teenagers, plus the authoritarian parents’ manifestations like permanent and constant critics. The style, described by the words of a teenager, sounds like this:

They get involved, even too much. They want to know everything that happens at school, what activities take place, they don’t miss any participation. The spare time that I should have, they think it would be indicated to exploit, so there goes the private reading and supplementary classes, therefore I can say that I don’t know anymore which one is the family and which the school, they are both suffocating.

The intermediate variables are the mentalities and the behaviors that characterize the life of communities in small towns and/or “the obsession” of college that some parents manifest, especially those who, from one reason or another, didn’t get a superior education. The sayings of a teenage-girl illustrate the analytic approach:

In my case they get too involved and that’s why sometimes we have fights, my folks are so traditional and if I might break the habit, it’s wrong...I must be like everybody else. Maybe they are afraid of what people may say and I think that if we stayed in a big city, this wouldn’t happen.

Concerning the mistrust manifested by parents, the teenagers consider it as a cause:

S1: Nevertheless, they should have more trust in me, I know how to take care of me, and I can make right choices.

S2: They get involved in any possible way...my mother just can’t wait a meeting to take place so that she can find out everything that happens in our school; she wants to convince herself that I’m not part of some weird gang with which I may do bad things.

The consequences of the authoritative involvement are various, they begin with dissatisfaction, stress or frustration caused to teenagers, they may go through frequent “quarrels” between parents and teenagers or they can generate negative attitudes. It is not unusual to this style to impose some authoritative decisions that sometimes are taken against the teenagers’ desires and aspirations. This is an example:

...unfortunately, the parents know how to give you advice for what profile you should
choose. They forced me to go to informatics and yet I haven’t found my place in the info class.

“The obsession” of college is invoked by many subjects in different ways: 
S1: My parents didn’t have the possibility to go to college and they want me to go there and they are pretty obsessed with this. They make efforts so that I become as best as I can at school, so I can go to a good college and to be successful.
S2: ... they keep telling me to study in order to go to college, to make a future, to have a career.
S3: They wish I studied more, so I can have a better future through school, they wish a higher education for me, so I can make a career and not to end up as a simple worker.

The analyses revealed that the generation gap is an attribute to the style of authoritative involvement and the subjects declared that “there definitely is a conflict between generations”. A voice talks about this unequivocally:

I may say that there is a conflict between generations because the parents are losing their authority and they notice at their children something that they can’t control, even if it is nothing bad, something that no longer belongs to them, new ideas come up and they are maybe better than theirs. They don’t agree with this because of their pride and maybe because of some possession instinct.

The semantic network 2 presents the conditional structure and the process that explains the generation gap. Its interpretation tells that the parents’ “traditional” behavior represents the generating cause of the specific manifestations of dictatorship in familial education. It is the parents who are animated by “modern ideas” that maintain this conflict.

![Semantic Network 2. The generation gap](image)
A significant role has the interposed variable of the *resistance to change* that characterizes some parents’ behavior. It is known that unlike from other domains of the social system, culture is much slower to change because people oppose to it, considering that they lose important values and beliefs. This creates a situation that sociologists call tension or cultural lag. In this situation, a value, a norm or a belief persists even if it became dysfunctional. It continues to exist only because it was sometime functional and many people are still attached to it.

The resistance to change is a significant characteristic of a society in transition, like Romania. Many parents are still attached by the “traditional” values of the authoritarian behavior towards children. That is why, maybe, many teenagers use quite frequently the word “old folks” when talking about their parents, considering that age is responsible for a behavior that no longer resonates with the social changes that were made. This label is used in different ways: “they are too old”, “the old folks get involved” or “they are older, they have another mentality, they are surpassed”. Talking about the project of the partnership school-family, a participant reasons the parents’ resistance to change like this:

I think that this project won’t work; I mean you can’t do anything with this generation of parents because they are not able to accept this kind of projects... maybe when we’ll become parents, but now, no way.

*The style of reduced involvement, of “parental rejection”*. The collected data and their analyses with the scheme of *Grounded Theory* method paradigm put into light the style of reduced parental involvement in education. The analyses of textual data led to the identification of the causal conditions and then allowed us to deepen the analyses by building the matrix I that presents the scheme in which we sorted and organized the connections between categories.

**Matrix 1. The paradigm of the reduced involvement style**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Causal conditions</th>
<th>Phenomenon</th>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Action/interaction strategies</th>
<th>Consequences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>– Anachronistic conceptions – Lack of necessary abilities – Lack of interest – Family issues</td>
<td><strong>The style of reduced involvement, of ‘parental rejection’</strong></td>
<td>– The socio-economical situation – Communitarian life characteristics – The structure and the organizing relationships at school – Socio-economical and educational variables of the family</td>
<td>– Limited communication – Non-participation to high-school organized activities</td>
<td>– Affective, attitudinal and behavioral, which have a negative impact on teenager’s scholar success – Teenagers’ perception of the need of parental involvement in their education</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The participants’ affirmations revealed that one of the causes of the manifestation of this style is the anachronistic conceptions. There is a clear voice:

For my parents school was a necessary evil, so they don’t get too involved and they let me in peace. They couldn’t help me with anything if they got more involved.

The qualification of school as a “necessary evil” is an unusual thing and it is associated with the lack of necessary abilities for the involvement that you can see in the latent message: “They couldn’t help me with anything.” The teenager adds in the most sincere way what he thinks: “Anyway, a reproach coming from your parents is always welcomed because it makes you think about some things more seriously.” Other two opinions are:

S1: Every time when they are needed at the school they invoke the reason that they can’t miss their work for my school, that they send me to school in order to study and to get a diploma and that it’s enough that they are paying my school.

S2: Many parents see the involvement as a punishment, others barely think about it and, like my case, others see the involvement as a way of satisfying their pride.

The lack of interest is an often mentioned factor by the participants when they talk about the parents’ reduced involvement in their education:

S1: They don’t get involved too much, almost not at all. My mother gets involved a little, and my father is interested neither in my school issues, nor in my personal problems.

S2: All I can tell you is that my parents have nothing to do with my education.

S3: I was alone all the time. My father didn’t even know at what profile I went. They gave me a free hand. So far I handled alone and I’ll manage from now on too.

In some cases there are invoked as causes the family issues and some conflicts that represent obstacles to a bigger attention that parents should give to their children. There are two opinions:

S1: It is a situation in which lack of interest rules. This situation is due not to their trust in me, but to a family system that is subdued to internal conflicts.

S2: My folks don’t do anything else than having contradictory talks with me and I always discover myself labeled as a “problem child”.

Limited communication is a strategy action/interaction characteristic to this style, which frequently associates to parents’ lack of interest. A teenager of says:

We don’t talk about school almost at all. They are not interested in what I do there, they just want to see good grades and they just can’t wait to see that I’ve finished high-school and to get rid of me.

The effects of the involvement styles. The conditions-actions/ interactions-consequences paradigm, used in the analyses, prioritized the first two notions: the conditional structure and the process, and the consequences were named only generically. Now we develop the effects of the involvement styles for which we have built the matrix 2.
Matrix 2. The effects of the parents’ involvement in the adolescent’s education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consequences</th>
<th>Positive effects</th>
<th>Negative effects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Affective</td>
<td>Emotional support. “At home I was always surrounded by warmth; they support me very much in every event which is connected to school.”</td>
<td>Frustration. “I resent their involvement in a negative way. The effect of their reproaches is that I start thinking if I am like they say I am.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The perception of the need of involvement. “Their involvement means allowing the necessary time for discussions and activities with me.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudinal</td>
<td>The manifestation of trust. “They don’t tell me to go study because they trust me.”</td>
<td>Revolt. “Have you ever thought that a parent can change, if he wants – and in lack of any discussion-, the course of his child’s becoming, on reason that that way is better? Better for who?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioral</td>
<td>The imposition of dialogue. ‘My parents would have preferred me to follow a profile with a future… but I talked to them and explained them that it is better to do something you like.”</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The freedom of decision. “I take the decisions concerning school; eventually, they come with suggestions.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The assuming of responsibility. “They no longer send me to study; I am responsible.”</td>
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</table>

**The evaluation of social actors’ involvement.** In their affirmations, the teenagers evaluated the behavior and the actions of those involved in their education. The results revealed that there are differences between the modalities and the grade of involvement of the two parents –mother and father- in their children’s education. To one point, bigger brothers and sisters and other relatives get involved, too. Matrix 3 emphasizes all these aspects.

Matrix 3. The evaluation of social actors’ involvement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mother</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>+ I can’t talk about the family’s involvement, but about mother’s involvement. My mother just can’t wait for another meeting to take place in order to find out everything that happens in school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>+ My mother helps me with the subject matters at which I have difficulties.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>+ – My father has a long program at work and I don’t see him very often, so he asks me on Sundays how was at school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>+ My father follows everything from the background.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>– My father doesn’t even know at what high-school I go and he rarely asks me if I didn’t fail some examination.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>…</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Brothers and sisters | + My sister always tells me: ‘Go study!’
+ My brother helps me with my homework if I don’t understand. He asks me how was at school.

... |
| Other relatives | + My grandmother always took care of me, she told me ‘let’s study, let’s do the homework’, she asked me ‘how was at school today?’ and, in case of a bad grade, she sent me study.
+ My uncle gives me more money when I get good grades.

... |

Legend: +, +, −, − indicate the attitude towards the involvement (positive, neutral, negative)

One may observe the mother’s ascendancy over the involvement of other members of the family in children’s education, the father’s modest participation, the intervention, in some cases, of bigger brothers and sisters and, more rarely, the other relatives’ involvement. The analysis does not consider the father’s invoking of lack of time as a causal condition for his reduced involvement. We rather believe that the cause is a certain “traditional” mentality like “the father leaves this in the mother’s job.” We can affirm that the educational agents’ role emphasizes subscribes in the desirability of the study about the child’s educational relations with his father and the other members of the family, necessary for the over fulfillment of the stereotype that the mother assumes the natural responsibility of raising and educating the children.

**The parental support at studying.** A question demanded the teenagers to talk about what parents do to help them study. Through it we wanted to obtain details about parents’ contribution to the students’ scholar success. The analysis makes a difference between the routine strategies (advice, impulses, the insurance of study conditions etc) and forms of parental support that helps to the encouragement of children to study. The first ones are the same in the majority of cases, and the forms of support are reported to the family’s particularities. For example, the rewards and the meditations are forms of support which are accessible only to families with financial resources. The strategy of insuring optimal conditions to study clearly predominates. This is an example:

They give me all the time I need to make my homework and to get thoroughly to the knowledge I accumulated in class. They don’t give me extra work at home only if I have nothing to study. Recently, they bought me a computer to help me with my homework and they connected it to the internet so I can find the necessary bibliography.

We also emphasize the behavior invoked by many participants that affirm that their parents stay away from this subject. This is in contradiction with the fact that, one way or another, parents should encourage, support and supervise the children in the process of learning developed at home, this thing being one of the minimal conditions of the family’s involvement in the child’s education.

**The extra-lessons problem.** The extra-lessons, as a form of parental support, constituted a theme for long discussions, the main approach being critical
to the address of some teachers and the system that allows and encourages them. The analyze identified some dimensions of the extra-lessons: (1) the develop of a true system; (2) their perception as a way of increasing the teachers’ incomes; (3) the existence of the norms that regulate them, but eluded by a part of those who practice them; (4) the overwhelming financial efforts that some parents make.

In one of the focus groups where this problem was consistently discussed, a Romanian origin student from Canada also took part. The matrix 4 shows his conception and attitude, generated by a social context that doesn’t know this extra-lessons phenomenon, which, moreover, is illegal.

**Matrix 4. The Extra-lessons problem**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>The need of extra-lessons</th>
<th>The status of extra-lessons</th>
<th>Consequences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S1</td>
<td>“…teachers don’t give their best to their classes; moreover, they say that students can come for private lessons to learn more.”</td>
<td>“…teachers should have authorization and most of them don’t have it.”</td>
<td>“…it appears the competition to give your child to the best teacher who, logically, has a proportional price to his value or prestige. This is how parents come to some overwhelming financial efforts.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S2</td>
<td>“It seems that it has developed an industry of education; except for a few teachers, they all wait for the students to come to extra-lessons.”</td>
<td></td>
<td>“One way of helping me was that he gave me extra-lessons that cost me a fortune.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S3</td>
<td>“…it is almost impossible not to give your child to extra-lessons when he is in the 8th or the 12th grade.”</td>
<td></td>
<td>“The fact that teachers have learned that there is a new and more advantageous way of teaching, namely private classes, makes them give at school a minimum of information.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S4</td>
<td>“The extra-lessons thing is stupid; if the child wants to study, he does it at home, alone.”</td>
<td>“I don’t need extra-lessons; there aren’t such things in Canada. In their opinion something like this is illegal because if you go to a teacher and you pay him well he may tell you the subjects from the test.”</td>
<td>“The thing is that here in Romania life is very hard even if many children learn very well. In foreign countries those who broom the streets are paid double to and engineer from here.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The family participation to scholar activities

The students’ attitude towards participation

The active report of the family with the school is a recognized, accepted and encouraged phenomenon all over the world. E. Stanciulescu emphasizes that most of the parents, including those from the disadvantaged classes, prove to be real strategists of the educational action, they are concerned by the scholar success of their children, considering that this ensures their economic future and a good social position. From the scholar institution and teachers’ perspective, the relationship with the students’ families imposed with necessity.

The relationships between parents and teachers produce in multiple interaction shapes. There is an aspect of school-family relationship that is less known: the parents and the teachers are “doomed” to communicate through the student that plays the role of a messenger. No matter the shape and the content of the message, it moulds the relationships between adults and the student affirms his status of important actor. From this perspective it becomes interesting the investigation of the students’ attitude towards their parents participation to the activities of the high-school where they learn, the knowledge of what parents wish to accomplish by their participation, as well as the identification of the problems that students consider to be important, concerning the school’s improvement.

Data analysis has revealed four classes of students’ attitudes towards their parents’ participation to the activities in their schools: (1) participation to extracurricular activities only; (2) indifference towards their parents’ participation or non-participation; (3) participation to all activities, including classes; (4) the parents should not participate at all.

The parents’ participation only to extra scholar activities is approved, especially by the students from the high schools of art and sports, but also by a part of the students from other high schools. The explanation is to these activities students can show what abilities they have developed and what works they have done, waiting for social recognition from their parents first. A teenager says:

Except for the daily classes, I think that all students are excited to see their parents participate to the scholar activities. Moreover, if they, the children, initiated these activities, you can imagine how good they would feel in the presence of their parents.

The analyses discovered that, in general, the teenagers’ indifference towards the participation or non-participation of the parents at the high-school activities finds its explanation in the dissatisfying relationship between them and their parents. For example, the subjects invoked their sentiment of being guilty induced by their parents or the lack of interest towards them. Two voices say:

S1: To participate means for them only to be present; you cannot make them be interested in my school activities and me.
S2: According to my situation, for me it is the same. I am not afraid that after their
dialogue with the teachers they may find out something else that I have done. They
have already accused me of everything.

The students' favorable attitude towards the parents' participation to dif-
erent activities from the high school, including their presence in the classroom
during the classes, represent a causal condition that may produce positive effects
for the students. As teenagers say, the parents' participation may ensure: (1) a
better training of the students, who fear not to disappoint their parents when they
are present; (2) a better school environment and (3) the promotion of parents-
teachers dialogue. It has been discussed especially the implications of the pro-
motion of the parents-teachers dialogue. The subjects emphasized a few positive
consequences of this dialogue.

1. The advantages earned by the communication between the social actors
in the educational space.

S1: You can definitely realize how many communication and understanding barriers
can be surpassed.

S2: ...this way it can find a common denominator between my parents and me.

2. The possibility of correcting some teachers' behavior towards students.

S1: The parents should cooperate with the teachers because sometimes they treat us
like objects.

3. The clearing up of some possible negative consequences owed to the
parents' participation to the activities.

S1: It may happen that sometimes the parents to say that the teacher is right, to our
detriment, because they see in the teacher intelligence and justice, therefore the child
is the problem; but things are not always like that.

S2: It could be vice versa, namely the parents could realize what kind of person the
teacher really is, although, at the meetings, parents cannot get to know the teacher, so
they leave with the impression that it is only the student’s fault.

The manifestation of the teenagers' negative attitude towards their par-
ents' participation to different activities that take place in the high school is ex-
pressed like this: "I wouldn’t like it.", "I don’t want them to come.", "Definitely,
no!", "I’d like them to stay at home.", "Of course I don’t want to. I don’t want
my folks involved in any scholar activity.", "Simply I don’t like my parents to
come to my school." We have grouped the participants' arguments in table 1.
Table 1. Arguments against parents’ participation to the activities in school

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes and arguments</th>
<th>The researcher’s explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1 Negative conceptions</strong></td>
<td>The dissatisfying parents—teenagers relationships, the children’s need of independence, the lack of knowledge, they all contribute to this kind of conceptions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S1: I don’t go to their work place, so they shouldn’t come to school. S2: I’ve had enough of my parents at home, why do they have to bother me at school, too. S3: They are older. They should mind their own business and I’ll do the same.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2 Discomfort shame and compulsion feelings</strong></td>
<td>These attitudes are generated by the lack of knowledge and the lack of parents’ appropriate intervention abilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S1: I am inhibited by their presence and I do not feel at ease. S2: I do not allow them to come so they do not embarrass me. S3: I would not like them to come and give me a kiss and to tell me that my bench is a mess. S4: They scold me in front of my classmates. They embarrass me.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3 Parents that do not understand the problems</strong></td>
<td>The cultural discrepancy between teachers and some parents represents a variable of intervention.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S1: My parents were raised in a village and they have a traditional way of thinking. S2: Teachers are teachers and parents are workers.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4 Dissatisfying relationships and adverse communication</strong></td>
<td>Various social, cultural and economical factors are involved in this situation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S1: The impediment could be this lack of communication between my family and me. By coming to my school they would get information that they will interpret in their own way, without being interested in my perspective on certain situations; in other words, we would be two mirrors that reflect quite different realities so that we won’t be able to find similar solutions.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>5 Scholar activities are not interesting</strong></td>
<td>The festivities predominate and there are few interesting activities at school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S1: To our school, except for the festive activities and the meetings, nothing happens, but if it were, I would like my parents to take part. S2: What happens to our school is not interesting for my folks.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>6 The students do not realize the importance of their parents’ participation</strong></td>
<td>The students do not understand what the parents’ participation to the scholar activities means.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S1: There are certain people that take care of this kind of activities, why should my parents get involved, too.</td>
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</table>

*The students' participation to meetings together with the parents.* The concepts, the conceptual relationships and the texts from the semantic network 3 present the students’ opinions on their participation at the meetings with the parents, namely their presence where there are talked things that directly concern them. The teenagers talk about the probable reactions of some teachers and parents towards this problem.
Semantic Network 3. Students' participation to meeting together with their parents

What students want their parents to do at the school?

The list of students' desires concerning what their parents can do at the school is long. Of the problems seen as possible to realize we stop over the promoting of students' interests, a problem that launched animated debates and whose conclusion was that any try of that would end with a failure. The paradigm from the matrix 5 presents the conditional structure and the process of promoting students' interests by their parents, which, through consequences, shows the reduced probability of having success in practice. We observe that there are produced some favorable effects, especially the improvement of some situation in the school and the possibility of the parents' authority increase, aspects that may facilitate a better collaboration between students and teachers. They send us to the idea of spreading the power in the democratic society, fact that is perfectly valid for the educational institutions, too.
**Matrix 5. The Paradigm of promoting students’ interests**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Causal conditions</th>
<th>Phenomenon</th>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Intrinsic Conditions</th>
<th>Action/Interaction Strategies</th>
<th>Consequences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The parents are not organized</td>
<td>Failure in promoting students' interests by their parents</td>
<td>The general socio-economic situation and its local particularities - Specific features of community life - Structure and organizational relationships in school - Socio-economic and educational variables of the family</td>
<td>Traditional mentality and behavior - The “paternalist” conception of the teachers &quot;The teachers can’t do anything, they merely teach and that’s all, they can’t change anything, everything depends on the government&quot;</td>
<td>Due to the parents’ initiative, the problems were discussed in meetings - The parents applied to the secretariats - The Head of the class went to the Local Education Authority</td>
<td>Improvement of some momentary situations. The parents are treated with indifference. Reduced probability of success. “It seems to me almost impossible that they could do anything in school. You know very well that they are given little importance or they are taken into account momentarily. In the next moment everything is forgotten.”</td>
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The conclusion drawn by the adolescents regarding their parents’ probability of solving their interests is that the latter have little possibilities for achieving this. Two situations they have experimented are illustrative: the optional subjects and the changing of some teachers. Here they are in vivo:

Why are subject matters which should be optional imposed as being compulsory? What is optional should be subject to our choice, not imposed by our teachers. The teachers we do not like should be changed.

The solution to this issue should be given by the high school, and as far as changing teachers, the final decision belongs to the Local Education Authority. The two problems aroused by the students have been remained unsolved.
Issues to be discussed between parents and teachers. Identifying themes for parents-teachers a discussion highlights how the focus-technique materializes group-interactions and uses the information on this level and not on an individual level. The analysis has spotted from the research data the main issues the students consider to be the most suited themes to be discussed between their teachers and their parents so that their situation in school should improve. An interviewed person has given the following signification to such discussions:

I think they should discuss those problems that require urgent solutions. During these discussions we, the students should be necessarily invited to as we are the main target.

His sayings denote the fact that the students are aware of the fact that they represent the object of any action that takes place in the school, that they anything that takes place in the family has as a goal their better condition and, as they are the main actors it is natural that they should actively take part to debates and decision-making. From the great range of the problems the students consider to be very important both for the parents and the teachers, in thematic matrix 1 we hereby show a whole set of generic problems which produce two major discussion issues: curriculum for the modern educational process and involved social actors’ communication and behavior.

**Thematic Matrix 1. Conceptual Themes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problems</th>
<th>THEMES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Curriculum and the modern educational process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>High school generic problems</strong></td>
<td><strong>Parents instruction and counseling</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. What does being a student nowadays mean?</td>
<td>S1: “I think that teachers should teach our parents according to the way they teach us. Thus they could demonstrate that school is not what it used to be in the past. They say that school nowadays is very easy and you should have attended school in the past, that was the real school.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Instructional programs for parents</td>
<td>S2: “They should organize monthly sessions, discussions during which the teachers, the headmasters and students’ counselors should inform both the students and the parents what the educational system in the western countries consists of and how this can be applied in Romania so that the Romanian school system might become a specialized one, producing specialists and not only educated people.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Specialized education</td>
<td><strong>The Scholarship problem</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Scholarships</td>
<td>“I think that scholarships abroad”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problems generated by the high school educational process</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Subject matters which are treated the same way</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Too much information</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Optional subject matters are compulsory</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Too many tasks</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Patience, teachers’ understanding and tact</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Getting rid of any discrimination when treating students</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum and the modern educational process</td>
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<tr>
<td>Communication and behavior</td>
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</table>

**Overloaded Curriculum**
S1: “They should focus more on subject matters that are useful for our graduation exam. Why should we study subjects we won’t find necessary in the future?”
S2: “We get too much information. They ask too much from us. Every teacher wants us to be well prepared for his/her subject. It is too difficult to make everybody happy. If I want to focus on a certain subject, the other teachers should leave me alone.”

**Imposed optional courses**
“Why are the subject matters which should be optional compulsory? What is optional should be subject to our choice, not imposed by our teachers.”

**Very busy program**
S1: “We should have a much easier program, not like the one we have nowadays. We should have the possibility of choosing the subject matters we want to study and we should also have the possibility of changing the teachers we don’t like.”
S2: “I have a lot of chores at home. The teachers don’t understand the fact that we need time for other things, too.”

**Understanding students**
S1: “If the student has a problem or he/she is a little shy, the teachers should treat him/her more tenderly and they should make him/her feel at ease.”
S2: “There are some teachers who use a very aggressive language, especially those between 40-50 years.”
S3: “The teachers should be more indulgent, they shouldn’t come to courses when they are angry and they should use good language when addressing us.”

**Eliminating any discrimination when treating students**
“They should not make differences between the students who have money and those who don’t. If you “help” the teacher with something, he/she will also “help” you.”

**The theoretical-practical rapport; overloaded textbooks**
“The parents must understand that we get too less practice for the theory we have acquired. The parents should talk to the teachers so that they might understand that the textbooks are too sophisticated, they are overloaded with too much information that has to be assimilated for exams.”

**Too much information and a lot of requirements for all the subject matters**
“The parents should talk about the fact that we get too much information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Generic problems for the family</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The parents do not know the dysfunctional aspects of the educational process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The parents are not counseled by the teachers</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. The necessity of a teachers–parents collaboration for moral education</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>The parents arbitrarily impose professional options to the students</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“The teachers should make the parents understand that the students should choose the university they want to go to. My mother should meet the teacher who teaches the subject I am the best. The teacher should present the advantages of this subject and the future perspectives. This could be a sort of counseling regarding my future career.”</td>
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<tr>
<th>The parents should get involved in all the aspects regarding the educational process</th>
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<tr>
<td>“I would like my parents to take care of</td>
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<tr>
<td>Problems</td>
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<td>----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and students’ psychological assistance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context problems</td>
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<tr>
<td>Taking responsibility for the student’s behavior</td>
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</table>

**Conclusions**

During the analytical process we have meant the categories to be abstractions that do not represent an individual or the story of a group. They are the accounts of some participants or groups that are reduced and represented in highly conceptualized and related terms so that we could generally explain what is going on. In the semantic networks we have related the categories and the subcategories so that we could thoroughly explain aspects of the investigated social phenomenon. As a matter of fact, starting with the first investigated focus-group, we have linked the categories with their sub-categories, that is, we have noticed if the latter are conditions, actions, interactions or consequences. At any rate, the major categories have not been integrated yet to form a theoretical explanatory scheme. In order to achieve this we need a central category, a nucleus category which contains all the products of the analysis concentrated in few words, which seem to explain “what this research is all about”.

We have devised the integrating diagram 1 starting from the idea that the school-family-community partnerships represent just a desideratum. It visualizes the causal conditions, the intervention variables and the intended strategy thus justifying why we have chosen this idea as a central category. As we have seen, the quality and the degree of parents’ involvement in the students’ home learning and in the activities at school are affected by two involving styles: reduced or “parental rejection” and authoritarian (excessive), the latter having a serious impact on the adolescents who seek for independence, freedom of choice and action regarding the issues they consider to be their own concern. This thing represents one of the causal conditions that lead to the generation gap. The two negative styles we have mentioned create indifference and disagreement towards the parents’ presence to the activities that take place in schools.

The subjects, either parents, or teachers or teenagers, invoked the lack of interest of some parents and the anachronism conceptions of the others, as well as they emphasized their lack of appropriate abilities so that their participation to the school’s activities will not produce stress, frustration and dissatisfaction to the students. The analyses showed that the parents’ involvement in the studying activities at home is reduced, most of it, at the insurance of the material condi-
tions and the necessary financial support. It also emphasized that the pre-university education institutions do not have various partnership activities that makes the parents, the school personnel and the representatives of the community support the scholar success of the students. Instead of that, there are 'festivities' and 'meetings'.

**Integrating Diagram 1.** School-family-community partnerships between desiderate and reality

The resistance to change of some parents and some teachers (especially the aged ones), the authoritative attitude of other parents and the paternalistic mentality of solving all problems at the centre, were identified as obstacles that interpose to the renewal of the spirit of education in schools. They are emphasized by the contextual conditions generated by the socioeconomic situation, by the characteristics of the communitarian life, by the particular interactions that characterize a pre-university education organization and the families' socioeconomic and educational variables that lay their mark on the school–family–community relationships.

The research reached at two conclusions that establish themselves as favorable premises of action for the development and the application of certain viable partnership programs in the schools of Alba County.
1. Almost all the families care about their children, wish for them to have success and they try to obtain as much information as they can from the school and the community, therefore they are good partners in their children’s education.
2. Almost all the teachers and the school leaders would like to involve the parents in the scholar activities, but most of them do not know how to create positive and efficient programs, so they are afraid to try. This situation creates some
kind of “sterile rhetoric” in which the teachers feel “caught,” expressing their agreement for the development of the partnerships, but without undertaking any action.

On this base, we consider that it is possible to realize functional partnerships so that the parents and the members of the community could get involved in the process of educating the children and the teenagers. On the other hand, the investigation confirms what E. Stanculescu shows concerning the researches made in other countries about the way the child or the teenager evaluates the familial educating environment.

They (the researches) show that the perception of familial realities, attitudes and behaviors and of the parent-child relationships vary according to the evaluator’s position; the child interprets differently from the parents the educational style of the family, and this interpretation, no matter if it corresponds to reality or not, influences his reactions and his psycho-social development.

Following the same way of approach, we believe that the evaluation and interpretation of the instructive-educational environment of the school by the teenager generates specifically reactions and contributes to his psychosocial maturity. In the light of the theory of the intersection of the influence spheres, the representations that were earned by the teenager in high school overlap the representations of the experiences from his family, offering a new and wider horizon of understanding the familial micro universe in its relationship with the scholar environment.

References

Europeans Parents Association http://www.epa-parents.org


