

# THE FAMILY AND SCHOLASTIC SUCCESS OF YOUNG ROMANIAN IMMIGRANTS IN ITALY

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## ABSTRACT

This article presents part of a wider research investigating the overall condition of young Romanian immigrants starting from their scholastic success, applying for the first time in Italy the SSP (School Success Profile) already tested in the USA and in Romania. 1500 questionnaires were distributed in four Italian regions: Piedmont, Marche, Abruzzo and Apulia: 1028 of these were returned, of which 881 were held to be valid for the purposes of research. The high numbers enrolled at different scholastic (141,015 in 2011–2012) and in Universities (5,714) clearly suggests a good level of integration in Italian society on the part of young Romanians. The fact that so many young people complete their school careers and continue their education at university indicates that policies for their reception in Italy have been successful and that they have had effective support from their families of origin. The results presented below show how important it has been to be able to count on the family and the traditional values it offers in the gradual progress towards the integration of the young Romanians in the society which hosts them.

**Keywords:** Immigration, Integration, Family, School Success.

## INTRODUCTION

Italy is one of the small group of western countries that must confront the influx of a permanent and substantial flow of immigrants. Of the country's 60.6 million inhabitants in 2012, 7.4% were foreigners from different European, African, Asiatic and Latin American countries.<sup>1</sup> A significant proportion of these

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<sup>1</sup> The statistical Dossier Immigration 2013 produced by the UNAR describes Italy as 'an established outlet for international migratory flows' (p. 16) as demonstrated by the 4.387.721 foreign residents, around a million more than the 3.4 million registered only 5 years previously in 2007. The same Dossier reinforces this indication with an overall number of regular presences estimated at 5.186.000.

arrivals is represented by Romanians, whose migration to Italy for reasons of work or to reunite their families has accelerated in the course of the last decade (Harja and Melis 2010, 9). Their number now exceeds a million and is still growing. While in the first years of the new millennium Albanians and Moroccans were the most numerous immigrant communities in Italy, since 2011 Romania has been in first place. In these past years the Romanian community has not only become the most numerous, but also that in which most children are born and with the highest number of citizens who wish to remain in Italy permanently. There are a large number of Romanians in 15 of the 20 Italian regions, although their presence is significant in all parts of the country. More than 30,000 Romanians live in both Rome and Turin.

The Romanian immigrants in Italy are prevalently young (18-45 years old). Although they have emigrated from all parts of Romania, Moldavia, Wallachia and Oltenia are the areas from which the greatest number left for Italy. Their main fields of activity are construction and agriculture in the case of men, and domestic service and the care of the elderly in the case of women (Harja and Melis 2010, 18).

#### THE RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

The work contained in this article presents part of wider research investigating the overall condition of young Romanian immigrants starting from their scholastic success, applying for the first time in Italy the SSP (School Success Profile) already tested in the USA and in Romania (Bowen *et al.* 2005). 1500 questionnaires were distributed in four Italian regions: Piedmont, Marche, Abruzzo and Apulia: 1028 of these were returned, of which 881 were held to be valid for the purposes of research. The distribution of the research instrument took advantage of Romanian citizens belonging to immigrant associations in the 4 regional areas examined who reported a general willingness on the part of young Romanians to cooperate.

The research tool is designed to assess the influence of the social environment on the academic success of students in the adolescent age. SSP is structured so as to analyze the answers of respondents in relation to 30 indicators divided into two main areas. In the first part of the questionnaire the student is asked to answer questions related to its inclusion in the various relational contexts (neighborhood, school community, peer group and family) and in the second he is invited to check his personal level of inclusion/adaptation in the society in which he lives (personal opinions, feeling of physical and psychological behavior, conduct at school, aptitude for study, educational achievements). In detail the variables that make up the instrument SSP that we report from their original USA composition:

## 1. Social Environment Profile

- *Neighborhood*
  - Neighborhood Safety
  - Neighborhood Youth Behavior
  - Neighbor Support
- *School*
  - School Safety
  - School Satisfaction
  - Learning Climate
  - Academic Rigor
  - Academic Relevancy
  - Teacher Support
  - Micro Interactions
- *Friends*
  - Friend Behavior
  - Peer Group Acceptance
  - Friend Support
- *Family*
  - Home Academic Environment
  - Parent Education Support
  - School Behavior Expectations
  - Parent Support
  - Family Togetherness

## 2. Individual Adaptation Profile

- *Personal Beliefs and Well-Being*
  - Physical Difficulties
  - Body Weight
  - Physical Health
  - Adjustment
  - Self Confidence
  - Religious Orientation
  - Social Support Use
- *School Attitudes and Behavior*
  - Success Orientation
  - School Engagement
  - Extracurricular Participation
  - Trouble Avoidance
- *Academic Performance*
  - Grades Self Report

The questionnaire was translated into Italian and Romanian and student responses were largely complete. The cases of blatant contradiction or failure to complete the research tool were only 147 which allows us to consider the sample examined in terms of clear reliability given the adolescent age of respondents (11–18 years with the sole exception of a nineteen years old and a twenty years old).

#### TRADITIONAL REFERENCE VALUES AND SCHOLASTIC SUCCESS

The high number enrolled at different scholastic levels (141,050 in 2011–2012) and in Universities (5,714) clearly suggests a good level of integration in Italian society on the part of young Romanians. The fact that so many young people complete their school careers and continue their education at university indicates that policies for their reception in Italy have been successful and that they have had effective support from their families of origin. The results presented below show how important it has been to be able to count on the family and the traditional values it offers in the gradual progress towards the integration of the young Romanians in the society which hosts them.<sup>2</sup> It has long been established by previous studies that there is a close connection between the factor of family and the scholastic success of children, and that parents can play a fundamental role in supporting the scholastic progress of their children<sup>3</sup>. Even though in many cases the parents are unable to assist their children in a specific area and lack particular abilities, this does not mean they cannot play an essential role in encouraging the students and creating positive attitudes towards school<sup>4</sup>.

The involvement of adults in children's learning process is significantly influenced by the cultural factors and background of the parents themselves when they transmit particular values to their children (Dweck 2010, 26–29). The migratory phenomenon offers interesting reflections in this respect, since the values which parents communicate on the importance of hard work and a good education often appear among the most important factors for students who are immigrants or the children of immigrants (Graham and Hudley 2005, 392–413).

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. [http://stranieriinitalia.it/attualità-oltre\\_1milione\\_di\\_romeni\\_in\\_italia\\_primato\\_in\\_ue\\_16849.html](http://stranieriinitalia.it/attualità-oltre_1milione_di_romeni_in_italia_primato_in_ue_16849.html)

<sup>3</sup> There is extensive literature on this subject. For the correlation between parental involvement and the scholastic progress of their children in particular from the point of view of intrinsic motivation see amongst others: GOTTFRIED A.E.-FLEMING J.S.-GOTTFRIED A.W., *Role of parental motivational practices in children's academic intrinsic motivation and achievement*, in *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 86 (1) 1998, pp.104–113.

<sup>4</sup> Also on the question of positive motivation: GROLNICK W. S., FRIENDLY R. W., BELLAS V. M., Parenting and children's motivation at school, in WENTZEL K. R., WIGFIELD A. (eds.), *Handbook of motivation at school*, New York-London, Routledge, pp.279-330.

Comparing the results of this research with analysis of the families' origin, it should be recalled that the Romanian situation is part of a wider political and social context in the countries of Eastern Europe. Studies have shown that in general terms these countries are experiencing a process of social change, with a reduction in the birth rate and, as a consequence, a greater number of women without children and an ageing population: these are factors which also have effects on the present family model (Bradatan and Firebaugh 2007, 179–192).

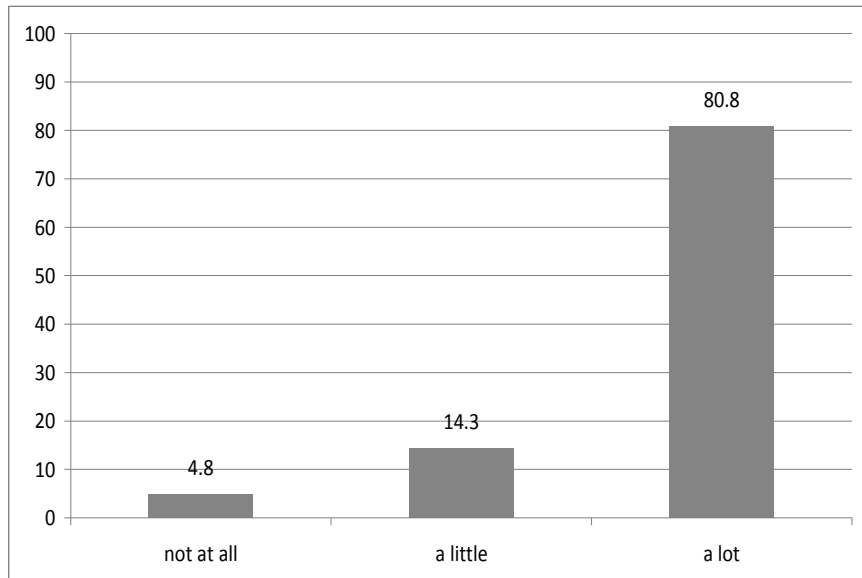
However, the traditional family model is still prevalent in countries like Romania where the majority of stable relationships lead to marital unions and where there is a low percentage of unmarried couples and of divorces (Cornelia and Vasilache 2009, 73). In Romania the family is still seen as the fundamental unit of society which, as such, performs a wide variety of economic, cultural and educational social functions where the most important commitment is to the care and education of the children (Vrasmas 2001, 174).

In Romania, as in many other parts of Eastern Europe, the child is considered the central value of the family (Robila 2003, 1370–1373) and the degree of satisfaction of the family members is measured by the need to have at least one child.

#### FAMILY UNIT AND MUTUAL ASSISTANCE

In analyzing the questions focused on the *family unit* which explore the levels of attention the family members dedicate to each other and the relations of mutual support in the resolution of the problems which arise within the domestic environment, it should be emphasized that the value of the so-called *social capital assets* is now widely recognized: within the family these are related to the quality of family relationships and the time and attention which the parents dedicate to their children (Bowen and Richman 2010, 21).

Given a choice of three possible replies a) *not at all* b) *a little* c) *a lot* – 78% of the interviewees state that the members of their family support each other a lot, and pay a lot of attention to each other, they openly discuss (82%) and face (82.3%) their various problems together and dedicate a lot of time to shared activities (73.6%). The overall picture which emerges is of a significantly united family (this is confirmed by 80.8% in reply to one of the questions presented in these very terms) with considerable time also dedicated to moments of relaxation spent together (79.1%).



**Figure 1** – My family is united.

#### **AFFECTION AND EMOTIONS**

An analysis of the contribution that emotive support can make to the scholastic performance of their children shows that the parents have given frequent emotive support to their children: 73.3% of the interviewees declare that in the course of the previous month the adults with whom they live frequently demonstrated affection and appreciation (75.9%) and personal esteem (75.5%).

The above data on moments of relaxation spent together is confirmed by the free time which the same adults spend with their children (75.5%). In terms of scholastic success the data can be compared with studies which have verified the existence of correlations between emotive security and scholastic results especially at particular educational levels (specifically at the so-called '*scuole medie*' or middle schools), while emotive dependence tends to fall during high school (Dávid-Kacsó 2010, 67).

#### **HOME ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT**

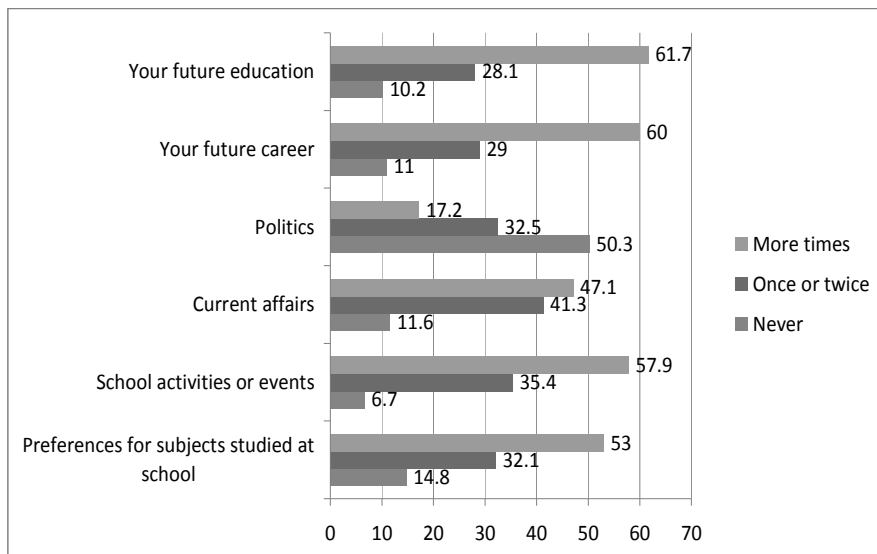
Among the factors analyzed in the research is that which some authors have defined as the so-called home academic environment (Hărăguș *et al.* 2010, 44), that is the interest which the adults show towards the subjects studied at school.

The literature on this argument has clarified how the students whose parents are actively involved in their scholastic progress and demonstrate an interest in what is learned at school are more successful than students whose parents do not show the same level of involvement (Hill 2004, 1491–1509). The series of questions presented with three possible answers – a) *never* b) *once, twice* c) *three or more times* – measures the degree of discussion between adults and students in the course of the previous month on the preferred subjects studied, the activities or events proposed by the school, future career and plans for subsequent scholastic progress.

In general there is a positive correlation between discussion with the children about school subjects and equipment and the resulting encouragement in terms of learning.

Two further items are added to these questions which do not concern school learning in the narrow sense but rather the discussion of current events and politics. It is significant that the percentage replying ‘*three or more times*’ is greater than either *never* or *once-twice* as regards all that happens at school. In the same way it is high the level of interest in the subjects studied at school (53%) and about the future plans in terms of both career (60%) and further studies (61.7%).

The level of involvement in discussion falls when the questions concerned are linked to current affairs (47.1%) and even more so when political arguments are considered, with 50.3% declaring that they never discuss certain topics.



**Figure 2** – Frequency of discussion between students and parents in the last month according to topic.

Young Romanians like all teenagers are pretty focused on themselves and would like to discuss with their parents first of all about their future neglecting issues of general interest in respect of which they still show a significant distance.

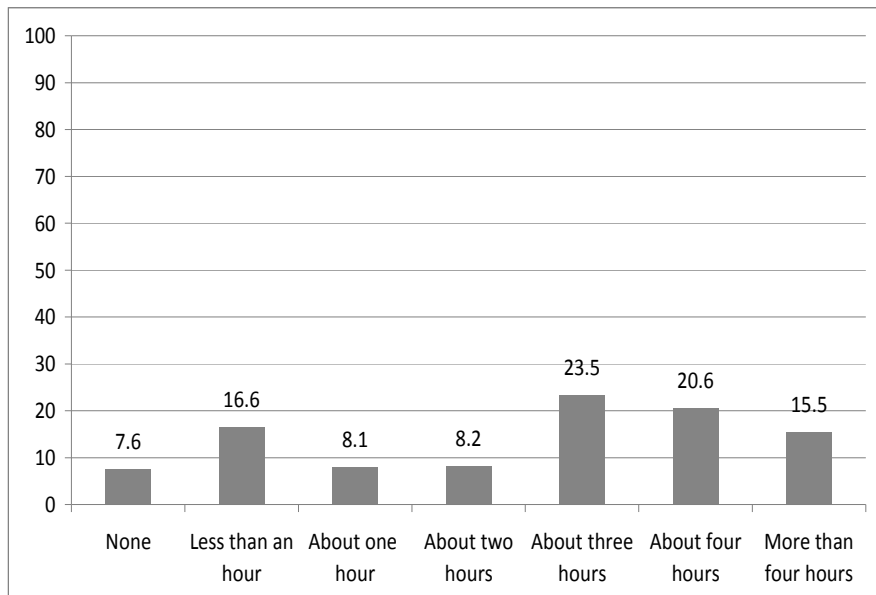
### FAMILY SUPPORT IN THE LEARNING PROCESS AND THE MONITORING OF OUT-OF-SCHOOL ACTIVITIES

Analyzing the series of questions in the section regarding the encouragement offered by adults in the overall development of their child – with reply indicators a) *never* b) *once, twice* c) *three or more times* – the adults clearly provided a high level of moral and psychological support in the month prior to the administration of the questionnaire: 63.5% gave reply c) to the question about encouragement of positive results at school, and this figure is repeated (63.6%) in the case of having received encouragement three or more times to participate in out-of-school activities.

A similar percentage is reported in the case of material support, specifically referring to help given in buying books and teaching aids (66.9%), to the offer of help with homework (57.3%), and to the offer of help in project work (61.9%).

It has been stressed that the motivation to learn represents the “core element” in family education since families encourage in their children a strong interest in obtaining good school results as well as completing their entire scholastic career (Vrasmas 2001, 174).

In the case of the questions relating to the students’ out-of-school activities, the highest percentage (32.1%) is that for the interviewees who prefer to watch television for at least two hours a day, while 16.3% do not watch it at all. It is of interest to note that 20.6% of the students spend 4 hours a day surfing the Internet and that a further 15.5% even go beyond the limit of 4 hours.



**Figure 3** – Use of Internet in the last month.



43.1% of the interviewees *always* inform their parents about their movements in the time they are free from school<sup>5</sup>.

The question relating to working activities was presented in terms of “how many hours a week do you work to earn money?” with possible replies “*none, I don’t work*”, “*less than 10 hours a week*”, “*more than 10 hours a week*”. 84.9% of the students reply that they do not perform any working activity: while this is a reassuring result, it cannot be seen as positive that 15% of the students of school age risk being distracted from their school work by the need to work.

### HOPES AND EXPECTATIONS OF ADULTS

Research carried out in the past confirms that the education of children is a central value of the Romanian socio-cultural tradition so that the motivational aspects become a fundamental element of family education. In this motivational context the adults’ pressure on their children to attain satisfactory results in their studies is closely related to the objectives and, therefore, to the expectations of the parents.

This is confirmed by the significant sacrifices often made by the parents whose efforts to guarantee their children a satisfactory level of education represent a valid criterion for the evaluation of the educative force of the family and the degree of social influence (Vrasmas, 2001. 174).

The question concerning brothers and sisters who give up school provides further confirmation, since 68% of the interviewees declare that none of their brothers or sisters have ever given up school. It is interesting to note that a quarter of the interviewees declare they have no brothers or sisters; in doing so they provide significant information about the composition of the family unit.

In the replies to the question “How sorry would the adults you live with be if they knew that the following things had happened to you?” it is to be noted how, apart from the positive expectations linked to scholastic results (promotion to the following school year 71.1%, marks achieved 65.8%, I have not done my homework 61.8%), a high proportion of suffering on the part of the adults is related to behavior with other students at school (“I have argued with other students” 70.9%, “I have behaved badly at school” 70.3%, “I have been called to see the Head because of my behavior” 70.0%, “I have argued with the teachers” 70.3%).

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<sup>5</sup> In this context, according to DÁVID-KACSÓ A. (*op cit.*, p. 67) the monitoring of the student’s activity together with the family unit and the discussion of various aspects of scholastic progress represent an indication of intergenerational concatenation as described by COLEMAN J.S., *Social capital in the creation of human capital*, in *American Journal of Sociology*, Supplement: Organizations and institutions: sociological and economic approaches to the analysis of social structure, 1988, pp. 95–120, who speaks of parental forms of social capital emphasizing the significant value in bringing up the child.

### PRESENCE OF PARENTS AT SCHOOL AND AT HOME

As regards the questions that measure respectively the presence of the parents at school when the child needs it and their presence at home when the child needs to communicate with them, the parents' moral and material support is indicated in this case by their presence at school, the average percentage is never less than 60%, a figure which bears witness to the useful support the families offer in the children's educational progress. Only 14.4% report a real absence of their parents on the occasions when their presence is requested at school.

This tendency to give dedicated care to the children is given further confirmation by the analysis of the presence of the parents at home when their children need to communicate with them: 35.3% reply that they *always* find at least one parent, 37.0% reply *almost always*, 14.4% *sometimes*, 13.3% *never*.

### CONCLUSION

It can be affirmed that the Romanian families in which all members have immigrated into Italy are in a healthy condition. The presence of both parents in the most difficult situations and their ability to listen have a very positive influence on the success of the processes of integration of young Romanians.

These children and youths feel encouraged in their schoolwork and so appreciate the sacrifices made by their parents to guarantee them a good level of education. The fact that in most cases they are not required to work so that they can concentrate exclusively on their education means that they can look to the future with some optimism.

The school context composed of youngs able to emancipate themselves more naturally than adults from prejudices that often accompany immigrants and negatively affect social life offers us an encouraging integration framework that in perspective will bring benefits to the whole collectivity in terms of achievable cohesion.

In the final analysis the results show that the family remains the most valuable institution in guaranteeing social cohesion also and above all in the delicate situations involved in the processes of inclusion and integration of the youngest immigrants in a different society from that of their origins.

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