Romanian secondary school students, parents and teachers. Intergenerational relationship and lifelong learning society

Studenti, genitori e docenti della Scuola secondaria rumena. Relazioni intergenerazionali e società dell'apprendimento permanente

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ABSTRACT

There is little known in Romania about the role played by parents, teachers and form masters on the secondary school students' attitudes towards school, level of grades and the intention to enroll in a higher education system. In order to find out the impact of parents and teachers on the teenagers' integration into the lifelong learning society, I conducted, together with my colleagues1, a national survey on Romanian secondary school students (n=2624) in 2011. The survey findings underline the importance of communication between teenagers, parents, teachers and form masters. Teenagers need united and supporting families and also teachers who are open to discuss their issues. Parents and teachers have to transmit the importance of school and not of the materialistic values, fact that can help secondary school students to be happier and integrated into society.

Si sa molto poco in Romania sul ruolo svolto dai genitori, docent e dirigenti scolastici relativamente alle attitudini degli studenti verso la scuola, il rendimento scolastico e l'intenzione di proseguire gli studi a livello universitario. Con lo scopo di analizzare l'impatto di genitori e docent sulla partecipazione degli adolescenti alla società dell'apprendimento, ho è stata condotta un'indagine nazionale a livello delle scuole secondarie in Romania (n=2624) nel 2011. I risultati sottolineano l'importanza della comunicazione tra adolescenti, genitori e docenti e dirigenti scolastici. Gli adolescenti hanno bisogno del support familiar e dei docent che sono aperti a trattare tematiche di rilevanza per gli studenti. Genitori e docent hanno una fondamentale importanza nel trasmettere i valori dell'istruzione anziché valori materialistici, aspetto che potrebbe collocarsi alla base della soddisfazione ed integrazione degli adolescenti alla società.

KEYWORDS

Secondary School Students, Parents, Teachers, Intergenerational Relationship
Studenti della scuola secondaria, genitori, docenti, relazione intergenerazionale.

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Introduction

In knowledge based economy, having a higher level of education, adapted to the technological and cultural challenges of the globalised word, is a *sine qua non* condition for a person to be integrated in the labour market and generally to be socially included. A positive attitude to school, high academic performances and intention to attend a higher education system have to be present in the children and teenagers' life for the new generations to integrate into the future society.

According to Eurostat, in Romania, in 2012, the share of early school leavers was 17,4%, and only 21,8% of the younger generation (population aged 30-34 years) had a tertiary degree. Taking into consideration that the European Union target for 2020 is that the share of early school leavers should be under 10% and at least 40% of the younger generation should have a tertiary degree, we can realize that political actors, educational institutions, families, NGOs have to do a common effort that future adult generations to be ready to adapt to economical and social challenges.

What is / should be the parents and teachers' role in socializing the importance of school in life to the new generations? What are the family characteristics that make children have higher school performances? What is the parents and teachers' role when secondary school students choose a college to enroll? To sum up, we want to know how important the intergenerational relationship between secondary school students is, parents and teachers so that actual teenagers to be ready to be future active adults in a globalised and a competitive labour market.

1. Family, teachers and secondary school students – intergenerational relationship

Many studies have approached the importance of family for children and teenagers' school performance, the latter attitude to school and their intention to enroll in a higher education institution. Intelligence correlates with the length of school career, and explains about 25% of school performance (Hatos, 2011, 618). Beyond native capacity to resolve problems, students' performance is explained by socio-economical factors, such as those related to family, teachers, or their relationships with children / students. The findings of a research realized in 2006 show that, in SUA, 10-15% of the school performance gap can be tackled by school-level actions or policies and 30-50% of the gap is determined by "uncontrollable factors", such as income, racial composition, disability and English proficiency (Hoerander & Lemke, 2006, 11). The relationship between controllable and uncontrollable gap makes that the controllable gap to be 11% for blacks, 26% for Hispanics, 9% for disabled students, and 11% for low-income students (Hoerander & Lemke, 2006, 12). Therefore, there are variables that are related to the possibility of school, local and central government intervention, where family characteristics (such as income, parents' education, and family unity) are central in the explanation of school performance.

Socialization of the children within the family, especially in the first years of childhood, consists in the transmission of the norms, values, behavior patterns and language. Basil Berstein (1971/2003), based on a research in the field of sociology of education, considers that in the middle class families children are taught to use an elaborated code and restricted code of language, when the parents from the working class can transmit only the restricted code. The last one is characterized by a simpler structure, shorter sentences, vocabulary drawn from a narrow

range, a higher probability of the usage of nonverbal communication (gestures and mimic), and by the demand of the confirmation that the message was understood. If the elaborated code supposes complex and large sentences, with implicit and explicit messages, the restricted code "becomes a facility for transmitting and receiving concrete, global, descriptive, narrative statements, involving a relatively low level of conceptualization" (Bernstein, 1964, 65-66). Therefore, children that have access only to the restricted code are disadvantaged in school, where the elaborated code is used and valorized more. Much more, beyond the advantages that are related to the possibility of a complex and nuanced communication, children from the middle class, that can use the elaborated code, "grows up in an ordered, rational structure in which his total experience is organized from an early age. Within middle-class and associative levels direct expression of feeling, in particular feelings of hostility, are discouraged" (Bernstein, 1971/2003, 19). Thus the access to the elaborated code, associated with the organized experience and verbalization of feeling, represents an advantage for the middle class children because school and universities use it and recompense the students that have this code (Hatos, 2011, 625).

Another characteristic of the family that has an impact on students' school performance is the level of cohesion of their family. This fact has to be addressed in Romania where the divorce rate has increased very much after the fall of the communist regime, and because of the parents' migration to work in the wealthier Western European countries, especially in Italy and Spain. In the '1990 and at the beginning of the '2000, mainly men left Romania to work abroad and women afterwards (Sandu, 2006, 31). Consequently, the number of children from dismantled families increased because of divorce, separation or migration of one or both parents abroad.

This phenomenon cannot have a negative emotional impact and affects the school performance. According to a study realized by Suet-Ling Pong and Dong-Beom Ju (2000) in SUA, children from families that changed the structure had three times higher risk of dropping out school than their peers whose families did not change. Authors underline that the change from two-parent to mother-only family increases the risk of dropping out not only because of divorce or separation, but largely because such families change is associated with a worse economical situation, as well. Similar findings were found by Yongmin Sun and Yuanzhang Li (2009) that focused on the post-divorce families and the impact of this situation on school performance. The findings confirm the fact that stable and cohesive families have a positive impact on school performance, and children who underwent additional family transitions during late adolescence make less progress in their math and social studies performance over time. Moreover, girls are more affected than boys by unstable postdivorce families, and have less academic progress over time.

A particular case that proves that conflict and instability are difficult for children is when children live with cohabiting mothers. According to a study realized by Raley et al. (2005), children who lived with cohabiting mothers have lower school performances than children who lived with divorced or remarried mothers. Based on their study and on the scientific literature, authors underline that "compared to children who live with both parents until adulthood, children from divorced families have lower educational expectations, poorer school attendance, and lower grades. They are also less likely to graduate from high school or to attend college" (Raley et al. (2005, 144). In summary, we can assume that Romanian teenagers have been negatively influenced by the phenomenon of increasing divorciality and migration.

The divorce and migration can be associated with the change of the school where children study. Smith et al. (1992, 83) found out that in SUA students who have changed schools three times or more because of family moves are almost three times more likely to drop out than students who have never moved. Moreover, if they are not members of church organizations too, they are almost four times more likely to drop out school compared to the others. Therefore, when the community social capitals together with family social capital are high then the risk of dropping out school is low.

A study realized in Romania confirms the importance of cohesive family and the negative impact of migration on children school performance. Nicoleta Laura Popa (2012), using average grade of a school semester as an indicator for school performance, found out that children with migrant parents have the lowest average school grades. On the other hand, Romanian children with migrant parents tend to internalize their psychological problems, such as depression, anxiety, or low self-esteem (Sava, 2010). A similar situation can be found in Ukraine and Republic of Moldavia, where children whose parents, especially mothers, work abroad face higher risk of dropping out rate, low school performances, lack of discipline or aggressiveness (Molodikova, 2008, 25). Therefore we can expect than Romanian secondary school students to face a higher risk of dropping out school and lower school performance compared to their peers' whose parents remained home.

The role of the family in children's school activity confirms the importance of communication and the need "to develop strong parent and child relationship and a sense of family connectedness and belonging" (Hamilton &Wilson, 2009, 346). Therefore, these authors consider that one solution for a better child-parents' relationship is family mealtimes that, beyond the fact that develop healthy eating patterns in children, can positively determine literacy and school performance. A better relationship and an intrafamilial communication is associated with higher school performance and with the decrease of children's levels of school-based aggressive behaviour (Lambert & Cashwell, 2004; Erginoz et al., 2013) or alcohol use (King & Vidourek, 2010).

The importance of parent-teacher communication and student-teacher communication stresses the educators' role and especially the form teacher's. A better parent-teacher communication can help teachers to understand better "parent's perception of his or her child and the parent's impressions and expectations for the program, and can help to build a working relationship that can support strong home–program collaboration" (McNaughton et. al., 2008, 223). Therefore, the author study underlines that the use of active listening skills between parent and teacher is necessary for a supportive communication between home and school, with a powerful positive impact on the children's development. Nevertheless, Annette Lareau and Vanessa Lopes Muñoz (2012) show that very high level of parents involvement can lead to many conflicts. Parents can demand a warmer and friendly relationship in school, when the principal favors orderly, safe and bureaucratic environment. Thus, authors sustain the need to reconceptualize the model of family involvement in schools.

The communication between teacher and children has the particularity that combines instruction and communication, thus academics use the concept of instructional communication (Nussbaum & Friedrich, 2005). Credibility, clarity, humor, immediacy, affinity seeking, and relational power in instructional communication are qualities that teachers have to dispose in order to have a strong and positive influence over students school activity (Steven & Mottet, 2009). Humor,

immediacy, and affinity seeking are ways for teacher to create a positive emotional relationships with students in the context of the instructional communication. As Lei et al. (2010, 326) mention, "humor has the power to make instructors more likable, approachable, facilitate comprehension, increase attentiveness, improve creativity, and promote social relationships". But even if it is recognized that humor is beneficial for student learning, studies show that there are appropriate and inappropriate uses of humor. For example, humor on the expense of a student, sexual humor, swearing or based on sexual or racial stereotypes, beyond the fact that can be illegal or immoral, they have a negative influence on children school activity. For a bigger psychological closeness and to express affinity, teachers can use the pronouns "we," "us," and "our", can call students by name, listen to them without interrupting, express in general optimism, dynamism, altruism, sensitivity and that are conformable with themselves (Steven & Mottet, 2009).

Another factor that influences the school performance is the values shared by students. Based on a study realized in Finland, Holm et al. (2009) show that students that have higher intercultural sensitivity, high moral judgment scores, and get earlier than their chronological peers high stage of moral and ethical reasoning have higher grades. Richins and Dawnson (1992) built a scale of consumer values orientation for materialism with three subscales focused on acquisition centrality, acquisition as the pursuit of happiness, and possession-defined success. Materialistic persons are less oriented to (emotional) interpersonal relationship and value more financial security. Moreover, materialistic persons are less satisfied with their life in general, as it was underline in a study realized on the secondary school students from Hungary (Piko, 2006).

Taking into consideration of Holm et al. (2009) findings and the fact that materialistic persons are less oriented to warm relationship with others, we can consider that students that share materialistic values have lower school performances. Richard Prince (1960) showed that there is a positive correlation between values expressed by secondary school students and school performance or option regarding professional career. Published before the phenomenon called by Roland Inglehart (1971) "silent revolution", the study of Richard Prince (1960) showed that students who share "traditional values" have higher grades than their peers who share "emergent pattern". If the first ones are more individualistic, focus on success and orient to the future, the latter ones have relativistic moral attitudes, conformity, sociability and present-time orientation. Thus, American researcher considered that "high-school teachers and counselors must emphasize the work-success ethic achievement, and individualism and de-emphasize the importance of sociability and conformity." (Prince, 1960, 383). The change of the values, phenomenon underlined by Iglehart in 1971 and by other later researcher, such as Ray and Anderson (2000), makes more people to be oriented to interpersonal relationship, self expression, spiritual development, or xenophile behaviors. Therefore we can question if the materialistic values, developed in the process of socialization, especially within the family and school, are positively or negatively linked with school performance.

In summary, we can emphasize that intergenerational relationship, mainly the communication between students, parents and teachers have an impact on school performances, and on the intention to enroll in a college. Having higher school performances and longer participation in the educational system are part of the lifelong learning process. Based on the theoretical background, with the final goal to offer solutions for a lower share of early school leavers and a higher share of younger generation, I will present the findings of a study that looked to respond to the next research questions:

According to secondary school students' opinion, how important is school and family cohesion that a person to have success in life?
How do secondary school students see their relationship with teachers?
What is the role of families for students' school performance?
What are the of families and teachers' roles when secondary school students choose a college to enroll?

Family characteristic, communication between teachers and students and the share of materialistic values are not the only variables that can explain students' activity. We can take into consideration as well the type of enrollment (daily or evening courses), overall students' attendance, time to get to school, the number of inhabitants where the high school is, gender, etc. (Frunzaru et al., 2013). Nevertheless, in this paper we focus only on the intergenerational relationship and socialization of values, as ones of the key elements that positively influence lifelong learning process.

2. Methodology

2.1 *Sample*

This study is based on a national survey (N=2642) of Romanian high school students using a probabilistic, stratified, multistage sample, with a cluster extraction in the last stage of sampling. We included 119 classes in the final sample, representing 2624 secondary school students, with a mean of 22 students in one class. The questionnaires were self administered, with the assistance of a survey operator, between 9-18 of May, 2011. Because the questionnaires were collectively administrated to all students who were found in classrooms, the sample is only representative for those respondents who had not dropped out school or did not use to skip classes.

2.2 *Measurements*

To measure the materialistic values we have used the scale developed by Marsha L. Richins (1987), where four items measure personal materialism and two measure general materialism. Secondary school students expressed on a Likert type scale with seven categories if they agree with affirmations like: "It is important to me to have really nice things" and "I'd be happier if I could afford to buy more things", for the first factor, and "People place too much emphasis on material things", "It's really true that money can buy happiness" for the second factor. The scale was translated and adapted into Romanian, and the reliability of the scale was acceptable (0.67). The internal consistency could be good (0.73) if we dropped out the item "People place too much emphasis on material things". A possible explanation for this fact is that this is the only one reverse item and that can create confusion within respondents, and because agreeing with this affirmation, even by the materialistic persons, is socially desirable. Nevertheless, we created with all six items an index of materialism whose values are higher for higher level of materialism. The index took values from 1 to 7, with a slightly skewed part of the distribution of responses to the left (mean=4,4, S.D.=0.98 skewness=-.489).

School performance was measured with an interval scale; secondary school

students should mention in what interval their average grade from last school year was. The scale had 12 categories, with two categories for every point of grades from 4 to 10. The skewed part of the distribution of responses was to the left (skewness=-.531), only 15,8% of the students mentioned that their average grade from the previous school year was in one of the first six categories (with the average grade between 4 and 6.99).

We used Likert type scale with five steps to measure the importance accorded by secondary school students to education and family cohesion, to consultation with parents and teachers when choosing a college to enroll, and the satisfaction regarding communication with teachers.

2.3 *Findings*

1. Regarding the first research question, we can say that the majority of the Romanian secondary school students consider that family cohesion and education is important and very important to have success in life (Fig. 1). In the opinion of the respondents, the most important qualities are personality qualities, such as ambition and intelligence. Contrary to the expectations, personal relations are seen only by a minority as needed to succeed in life. Therefore we can say that respondents appreciated first personality qualities as ambition and intelligence, afterwards education and family cohesion and finally luck and personal relations. Faith in God is considered very important by about a half of the Romanian secondary school students.

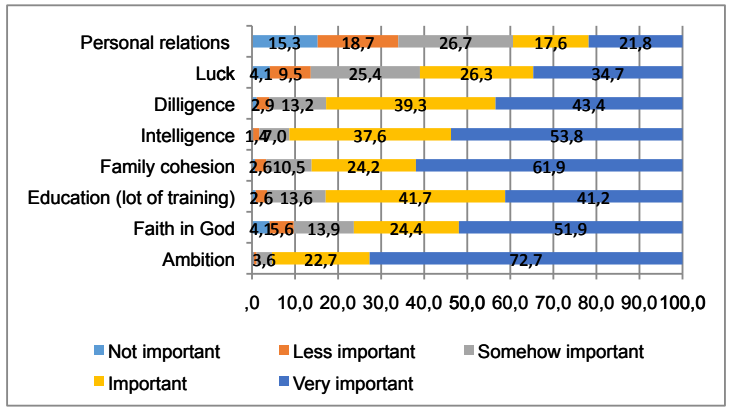


Fig. 1 - To succeed in life, how important it is for a person to have…?

There are not any relationships between the importance accorded to family cohesion or education on the one hand, and school performance or materialism, on the other hand. But students who share materialistic values consider the luck (rho=.22, p<.00) and to have personal relations (rho=.29, p<.00) important at a higher level. and to have personal relations (rho=.29, p<.00). Moreover, the lower the school performances are the more valued luck (rho=-.13 a, p<.00) and having personal relations (rho=-.13, p<.00) are. These significant relationships are explained in the context where materialistic persons students have lower school performances (rho=-.13, p<.00). The students who consider that faith in God is very important in life have lower grades (rho=-.13, p<.00), think that luck is very

important in life (rho=-.13, p<.00) and their mothers and fathers have lower level of education (rho=-.22, p<.00; rho=-.21, p<.00).

Respondents who were more supported by parents to have higher school performance during the high school consider more that family cohesion (rho=.13, p<.00) and education (rho=.16, p<.00) as important to succeed in life. Therefore the importance accorded to family unity and education can be determined by the support received by the teenagers from their parents.

In summary, we can say that there is room for improving performances in the higher secondary schools, taking into consideration that students appreciate education as important and consider luck, having personal relations and faith in God to have success in life less important to have success in life. Family support is very important in order to inoculate the value that education is outstanding and to make teenagers consider that cohesion of the family is necessary to succeed in life. The fact that respondents consider ambition, intelligence and diligence very important shows that beyond family, they rely on their individual qualities in a competitive world. The students who rely on external factors of success, such as personal relations, luck and belief in God have lower school performance, thus parents and teachers have to transmit more the fact they have to rely more on internal factors and education.

2. The respondents were less happy with the openness of teachers to discussing students issue and with the classrooms, and happier with chances of enrolling in a college based on what they learned in their secondary school (Fig. 2). These findings can be explained by the fact that there is a generous offer of the Romanian colleges and if one respondent passes the *baccalaureate* it is quite easy to become a student. Classrooms were not very well evaluated by fewer students because of the poor material conditions in some of the Romanian secondary schools.

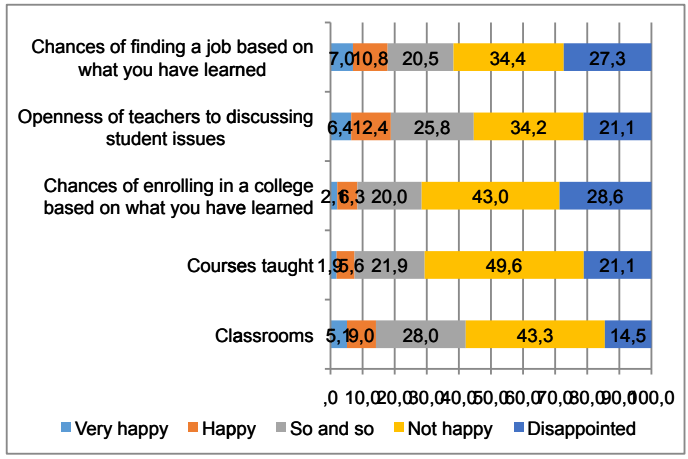


Fig. 2 - Think about your secondary school, how happy are you with the [...]

Only 54.3% of the students said that they are happy and very happy with the openness of teachers to discussing their issues. A possible explanation for this finding is that they are in general teenagers and consequently they are sensitive and build their identity usually in opposition with the adults (Schifirne , 2002, 94). One argument for this explanation is that students at evening courses that usu-

ally are over 18 years, compared with their colleagues from daily courses, are happier regarding the communication with their teachers (chi square=10.37, df=10, p<.05). Moreover, secondary school students from the higher grade are more satisfied with the teacher's openness (rho=.14, p<.00).

There is a small but a significant negative relationship between school performance and the appreciation of the courses (rho=-.09, p<.00) and of the communication with the teachers (rho=-.07, p<.00). Even if these are low correlations, we have to stress the fact that students with high school performances are more critical than students with low school performances. For example, if 24.4% of the students with average grade from the previous school year less than 7.50 are very happy with openness of teachers to discussing their issues, only 19,1% of the students with the average grade between 9.00 and 10 gave the same answer.

In conclusion, we can say that teenagers, especially from the lower grade, are less satisfied regarding the communication with their teachers, and consequently they need more openness of the latter ones to discuss their issues.

3. To see the relationship between school performance and other variables using chi square statistic, we recoded the 12 school grades categories in three categories: students with the average grades from the last school year less than 7.50, between 7.50 and 9.00, and between 9.00 and 10. Because there is a high level of correlation between father's level of education and mother's level of education (rho=.63, p<.00), we created a new variable "parents' education". This new variable has only two values: at least one of the parents has higher education and none of the parents had graduated a college.

School performance is higher for students that have at least one parent with higher education, neither of whom work abroad, and are supported by family to have higher grades.

	School performance
Parents education	137.79*** (df=6)
If parents work abroad	16.19* (df=12)
Supported by family	22.93** (df=15)

Table 1 - Relationship between school performance and parents characteristics (chi square)
*** significant for p<.001
** significant for p<.01
* significant for p<.05

As expected, family characteristics are very important to explain children's school performance. Because migration is a widespread phenomenon that can be found in Romania in the last decade, we have to express a special attention to the effect of the parents living abroad over the children school activity. Findings show that children are affected especially if both parents or only mother work abroad. A possible explanation is that it is difficult for children when they are cared by a relative or only by the father that cannot manage to take over the role of the mother. Because there is not any significant relationship between the fact that at least one parent works abroad and the family income (chi square=10.37, df=12, p=.58), we can say that migration has a negative impact on children school performance because of emotional and not financial reasons.

4. The majority of students (57.3%) had decided to enroll in a college in Romania or abroad. When secondary school students choose a college to enroll, respondents consider that they have to take into account family's opinion and in a much smaller percent the teachers' and form master's opinion (Fig. 3). Secondary school students, regardless their school performance, consider that choosing a college to enroll in is more a private issue, and consequently has to be discussed within family.

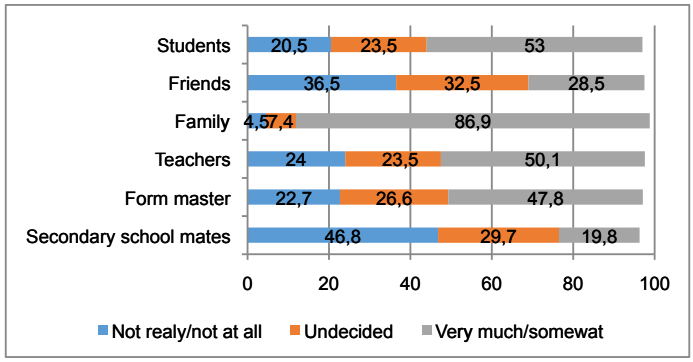


Fig. 3 - In choosing college/university to what extent a young person have to take into account the opinion of… ?

Students who consider their families' opinion when they choose in what college to enroll were encouraged by family to have high school performance (rho=.12, p<.00) and believe that the cohesion of the family is important to succeed in life (rho=.25, p<.00). Moreover, when parents want that their children to enroll in a college, the latter ones decide to continue to study at a higher education level, as well (chi square= 260.37, df=4, p<.00). Thus, parents are important both for the decision to enroll in and to choose what college to attend.

To sum up, students who receive support from their families during school compared to their peers who are not encouraged by parents to have higher school performances value education more and take into consideration to a higher extent their parents desire to enroll in a college. Family becomes more important for teenagers when the latter one feel the support of their parents.

Conclusion

Intergenerational relationship between teachers, parents and secondary school students is very important in order that the latter ones to integrate into lifelong learning society. Secondary school students that are mainly teenagers, instead of their need of independence and to build their identity in opposition with the adults, need the parents and teachers' support. If they are encouraged by parents to have higher grades and find openness of teachers to discussing their issues, secondary school students appreciate more the importance of education in life, have higher grades and intend in a higher number to enroll in a college. Parents and teachers, showing openness to talk teenagers' issues and encouraging them to have higher school performances, can help the new generations to be integrated into a competitive knowledge economy.

The family cohesion, considered by respondents as important to succeed in life, proved to be very important when we analyzed the school performance in relationship with the fact that one or both parents are working abroad. Especially if both parents and only mother work abroad, students have lower grades, fact that proves the importance of the satisfaction of the emotional needs beyond material needs.

Families and teachers are the main factors that contribute to the socialization of the new generations. They have to transmit to the secondary school students the importance of education, family unit and interpersonal relationships that have positive impact on teenagers school activity. Because within teenagers peer pressure is high, in a world of consumption, to have a gadget or some commodities is a must. Therefore, acquisition and possession of some materials things perceived as a source of success and happiness have to be counterbalanced by the importance accorded to family and education. Materialistic students have lower grades and expect more to have success in life based on luck and personal relations, so not on their own effort. Beyond economical problems, migration, and temptations of the materialism, parents and teachers have to have a better communication with children, to support and to transmit them values that can help them be integrated into society and happier.

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