Babes-Bolyai University

Faculty of Sociology and Social Work

Parental role in the child's school situation

PhD Thesis Abstract

Scientific coordinator

Prof. Maria Roth, PhD

PhD Candidate

Ágnes Kacsó

Content

Key words: *school success, parent involvement, parental style, educational behaviors, risk of school failure*

Abstract

The purpose of the present research is to identify the role of family factors in the child's school situation. The considered familial factors are family cohesion, parental emotional support, the parents' expectations regarding behavior and achievement in school, as well as the educational climate at home. In order to measure school outcomes was used an indicator regarding the risk of school failure, which includes behavioral aspects as well as the ones regarding school performance. The used method is a mixed one, of expansion, combining quantitative methods with qualitative ones in order to enable a broader perspective in approaching the issue. Thus, the obtained results that show the students' perception can be confronted with the parents' representations.

The present analysis is based on the data obtained in the national study conducted within the project *"Social diagnosis of school performance from the perspective of the social scale of school success and the designing of methods of intervention proven to work through research"*. The project was based on the validation in Romania of the School Success Profile Questionnaire (Bowen and Richman, 2005), realized at the University of Chapel Hill from the USA.

Having as a starting point specialized literature (ex. Feinstein and col. 2004) concerning the effect of parenting practices on school outcomes we checked the effect of emotional climate and of parent educational behavior on school risk index.

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A theoretical model was proposed according to which parenting practices influence the risk of school failure by influencing the degree of adaptation of the child to the requirements of the school environment. A theoretical method was proposed, which states that parental practices influence the risk of school failure, by affecting the student's grade of adaptation in the school's environment. Taking into consideration the evidence showing that students with different gender have a different school evolution (Hatos, 2006; Sălăvăstru, 2004) and Becker's findings (1991) regarding the difference in parental approach depending on the child's gender and age, the present research compares the way in which students of different gender and students on different school levels see these parental practices. The proposed model was tested separately for two school levels (secondary and high school) and for students with different gender.

Results show that the effect of family factors on school failure risk decreases in high school compared to secondary school, but remains significant nevertheless. Family factors that have an effect on school failure risk as well as their effect on the student's adaptation to the school environment show significant differences rather depending on the gender of the student than on the school level.

In the second part of the study, qualitative interviews were used in order to identify parents' representation regarding school success and their role in achieving that success. The results confirm Stănciulescu's (2002a) findings on the importance of school success for parents in Romania, which is considered essential to social success. However different representations of social success have been observed in parents with a different educational level. According to the interviewed parents, the key element is assuring the completion of school tasks and first assisting the children in the execution of the tasks. However,

according to the quantitative analysis, assisting in the completion of school tasks does not have a positive effect on the risk of school failure.

The present study proves the importance of the family's emotional climate and of some educative behaviors in the risk of school failure of students. In the same time, it highlights the parents' lack of knowledge regarding parental practices that affect school success, regardless of their educational level. While parents consider that their main role in school success is assuring the completion of school tasks, the quantitative outcomes of the study show that family harmony, emotional support, regular conversations, consistent and clear expectations are the factors that influence the school results of the students.

Chapter 1 presents the main sociological theories of education, showing the role of the family and the school in the process of forming an individual integrated in the society. The first few contacts with the structures of society are realized by social experiments of the individual, first with family members, then slowly with other meaningful people. These people transmit the structures of reality to the child, the transmitting process being the education. Education orientates the evolution of the human being, but in the same time it is a social function, meaning the harmonization of the individual evolution with the social requirements. The social dimension of education is the socialization (Stănciulescu, 1996).

Representatives of different orientations have a different perception regarding the role of the family and that of the school in forming an individual integrated in society. Functionalist theories say that institutional education, schools, should be more important than the familial one, arguing that only the school is able to transmit the moral codes indispensable for the proper

functioning of the society. The conflict theories show the role of the educational systems in maintaining the relations of power, legitimizing them by transforming them into individual worth. The constructivist theories highlight the role of the participants and that of the process itself in making the reality. For the child the only possible representation of the world is the one transmitted by the family and the structure of reality acquired in the primary socialization will influence all that will come after this.

Chapter 2 presents the factors that resulted in the expansion of the school system in modern societies and the functions which are met by the school in these societies nowadays. School education has multiple purposes: social integration, social control and economic growth are the most important ones (Craig, 1981). Some of these purposes are explicit, like transmitting knowledge or training the future workforce, while others are not declared, though they are followed latently. Implicit functions of the education have the goal to embed the dominating cultural values into the future generation and the conservation of social order. These functions are realized by a hidden curriculum, which contains elements included knowingly but undeclared in the educational content as well as ones that are not followed knowingly but they appear as the result of spontaneous interactions between participants in the educational system, realized in the institutional frame of the school (Somlai, 1997). The development directions of the educational system are determined by the needs of the decision-making staff, by the educational policies and by the costumers' needs, because their needs as well as their resources exercise an indicative force on the educational system.

Chapter 3 includes different aspects of the relation between families and school: the ones existing spontaneously, the ones foreseen in the educational policies and the ones focusing specifically on improving the performance of the

students and that of the schools – parental involvement in education. There is a model of parental decisional process on involvement in school education based on Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997). Pomerantz and col., (2007) state that not only the quantitative aspects of parental involvement are the ones that matter in the children's achievements in the school, but that the qualitative aspects are equally important. The involvement barriers identified by Harris and Goodall (2007) (the parents' own school experiences, their lack of social cognitive abilities, their involvement in other activities and the school staff's negative attitudes) are illustrated with empirical studies referring to parents with a lower social-economical status, because their involvement is less likely than that of the others with superior education (Lareau, 2002). At the end, based on Auerbach (2007), are presented a few modalities of involvement for the marginalized families, modalities that are not visible or are even sanctioned in school. Thus, parents contribute to the success of the educational process as part of this system with emotional support of the children and with their system of values manifested in aspirations and expectations. The parents who have succeeded in accomplishing these were capable to support their children even in spite of the lack of the cognitive and social abilities (Auerbach, 2007).

Chapter 4 shows the characteristics of the Romanian educational system, the place occupied by the school in the society and the role assigned to the parents in this system, as they are reflected in the recent normative acts. Based on empiric researches there is presented the parents' attitude regarding the education of their children. The decision-making staff is conscious of the need of improving the educational system in order to grow its competitiveness on European level, although they do not break from the political-pedagogical debate based on the functionalist philosophy of an all-knowing state and the incompetent families, the objective of the state's intervention. Accentuating the parental disinterest towards education has the role of delegating the

responsibility for the failures of the system to the neglectful families, which do not fulfill their obligations (Stănciulescu, 2002b). Research focused on identifying the parents' point of view, however, showed that most parents in Romania are interested in the education of their children and are willing to make sacrifices for this purpose (Agabrian, 2005; E. Stănciulescu, 2002b). Not valuing this potential deprives the school of important resources, which could be used to improve performances.

Chapter 5 begins with definitions of school success and presents the determining factors of school success. Intelligence, gender and the student's affective-emotional characteristics are the individual factors most often related to the school outcomes in the literature. The social-economical status of the family is the most often addressed among the social determinants of school success. Feinstein and col. (2004) say that the parenting style and the educative behavior of the parents mediate the social-economical factors towards educational success. The influence of these factors on school outcomes is demonstrated by a series of empirical quantitative (for example Annunziata and col., 2006; Crosnoe and Elder, 2004; Garcia-Reid, 2007, etc) and qualitative (for ex. Auerbach, 2007; Murray and Naranjo, 2008; O'Connor, 2002; Terrion, 2006) studies.

The second part of this chapter presents the personal research. One of the objectives was to identify parental practices with effect on the student's situation at school, particularly on the risk of school failure. The present study tests a theoretical model according to which the effects of parental practices on the risk of school failure are mediated by the children's adaptation to the school environment.

Although the relation between familial factors and school is a well-researched area in the international scientific world, in Romania there are only a few studies focusing on the relationship between family factors and school results. The present study aims to increase awareness in Romanian society

regarding the importance of families in children's school outcomes, as well as to identify those parental behaviors, which have the most important role in these outcomes.

The methods used are mixed, with an expansion design, which means enlarging it the analysis using different methods. This form of design involves parallel collection and procession of the data, mixing taking place in the interpretation (Jang, 2008).

The quantitative research is based on the analysis of the data obtained in the national study conducted within the project "*Social diagnosis of school performance from the perspective of the social scale of school success and the designing of methods of intervention proven to work through research*", with the aim to identify parental practices with influence on the child's school situation, and to test a theoretical model regarding the variables that meditate the effect of parental practices on the risk of school failure.

The research hypotheses are:

1. The data from the literature (eg. Hatos, 2006; MECI 2009; Sălăvăstru, 2004) show that school outcomes depend on the gender of the students: in general, girls tend to have a better school performance and less behavioral problems (Annunziata et al. 2006; Dumka et al., 2009). Becker (1991) says that parenting techniques depend on the gender of the children in the family. On the basis of these results taken from the literature, we presuppose that:

    1.1. the school performance of girls will be higher than that of boys in the sample that we studied;

    1.2. the risk of school failure will be lower for girls than for boys;

    1.3. there are differences between the parenting practices perceived by the students of different gender on each of the school levels;

2. According to Feinstein et al. (2004), the constellation of factors that describe the parenting style in the family and the educational behavior of the parents influence the outcomes of the educational process. Becker (1991) says that parenting techniques depend on the age of the children in the family. On the basis of these observations we formulated the following hypothesis:

   2.1. There are differences in the way family characteristics are perceived by students from different school levels (secondary and high school);

3. Because the family's socioeconomic status is one of the risk factors of school failure in Romania (Hatos, 2006), the present research tested the extent to which parents' education contributes to the prediction of the risk of school failure.

4. Becker (1991) shows that parenting practices differ depending on the age of the child. The research conducted by Dumka et al. (2009) and Plunkett et al. (2008) shows that parenting practices have different effects on the school outcomes of students of different genders. On the basis of these observations taken from the specialized literature we presuppose that family factors that have an effect on school outcomes differ depending on the school level and on the gender of the child.

5. The socializing theory of phenomenological constructivism (Berger, 2008) shows that primary socializing represents the premises of a successful secondary socializing. Feinstein et al. (2004) show that the family behavior patterns that play a role in educational success are the parenting style and the educational behavior. On this basis we formulate the hypothesis that parental behavior patterns determine the child's capacity to adapt to the requirements of the secondary socializing environment – in our case school requirements, and adaptation to the school environment will influence the school failure risk (Sălăvăstru, 2004). Thus, our hypothesis is that parental behavior patterns will influence the child's school failure risk mediated by the adaptation to the

school environment. The following figure presents the tested theoretic model:
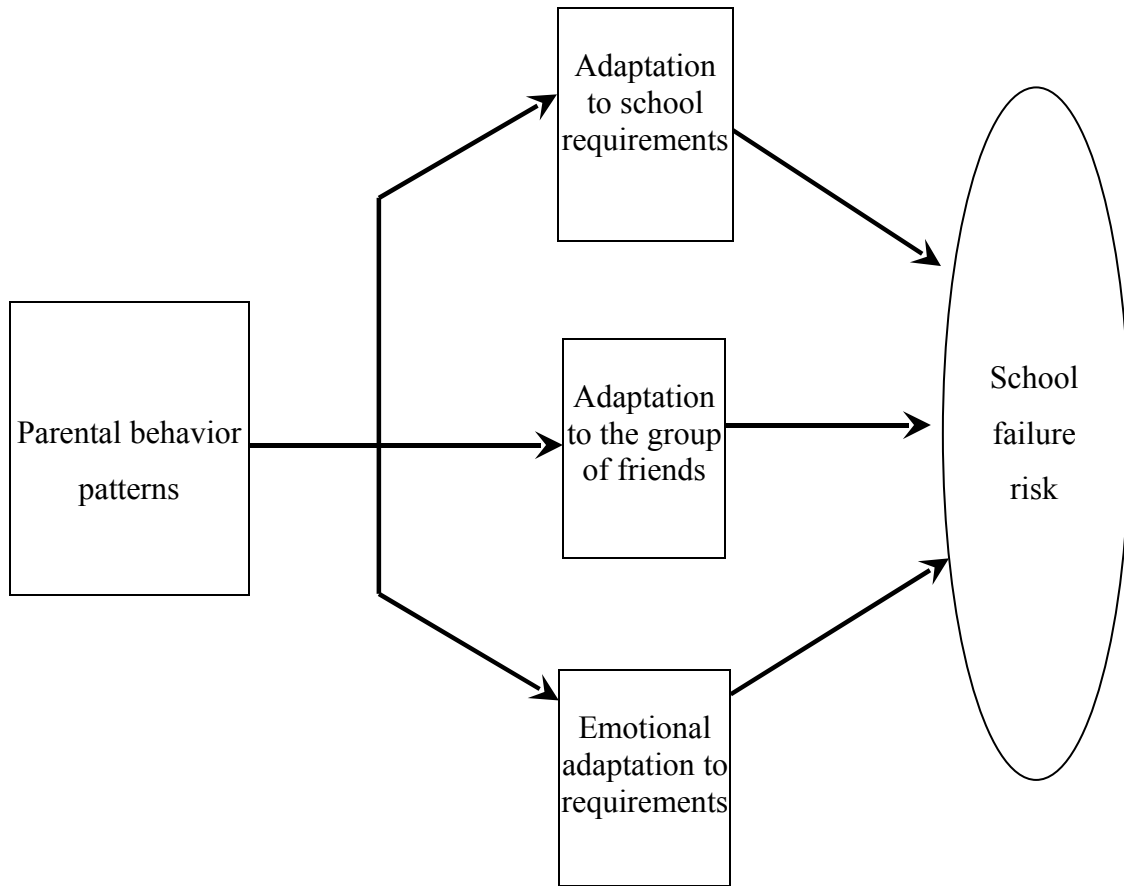
The theoretic model for the influence of parental behavior patterns on school failure risk.

The current database was obtained between November 2009 and January 2010, and was initially developed from 2609 cases, a representative sample for the population of secondary and high school students in Romania. For the purpose of the present study we eliminated the cases that had missing answers in more than 3 of the 27 dimensions. Thus we obtained a database made up of 2465 cases.

The measuring instruments used in this study are scales and items of the Romanian version of the questionnaire *School Success Profile (SSP-Ro)* (Haragus, Damean,, Roth, 2009).

Family factors of which the effect on school development was analyzed, are divided in factors that refer to the emotional climate of the family and parenting style (family togetherness and emotional support given to the child and monitoring the out-of–school activities of the child) and the educational behavior (the family expectations regarding proper school behavior and regular conversations with the child on current topics).

Results of the quantitative analysis

The school risk index shows significant differences both between school levels and sexes. Regarding family factors, we can see that they are perceived differently by the students from the two school levels, with the exception of the parent's school related expectations.

At the same school level, we see that in secondary school there are no significant differences between sexes in the students' perception of family togetherness, emotional support and educational support. Nevertheless there are significant differences in parent expectations and home academic environment, the mean of the variables being higher for girls.

In high school there is a significant difference between sexes in all family variables, with the exception of family togetherness and educational support, which may be related to parent behaviors which are different depending on the gender of the child (Becker, 1991; McHale et al., 2003).

The direct effect of family variables on the school failure risk was small but significant in all four groups, the explanatory value of the model being the highest in the case of secondary school boys where it reached 9.2%. The educational support provided by the parents had a significant effect on the

school failure risk in three of the four groups (girls-secondary school, girls-high school, boys-high school), but the direction of the relationship was the opposite of what was expected, which is in accordance with the results of Rogers et al., 2009. Pomerantz et al. (2007) consider that this result can be caused by the fact that parents get involved in doing homework when children already have problems (especially in high school). On the other hand, parent involvement in doing homework – especially in high school – shows the lack of autonomy of the child in fulfilling school tasks, which has a negative effect on the outcomes (Pomerantz și col., 2007; Stănciulescu, 2002a).

The indirect effect of family factors on school failure risk is mediated by the student's adaptation to the school environment in both school levels and in both sexes. The factors with a significant effect on school adaptation differ depending on the school level and the gender of the students. There are common tendencies for girls and boys irrespective of their school level: emotional support has an indirect effect on the failure risk in girls on both school levels. In the case of boys family togetherness has a significant indirect effect on the school failure risk. Emotional adaptation had a significant effect on the school failure risk at every school level, for girls as well as for boys, but depressive mood in the case of girls and anxious mood in the case of boys were the factors that had more effect.

The qualitative analysis tried to identify the meaning of school success for parents with different levels of education and their perception regarding their own role in school success. To this purpose, semi-structured interviews have been used. The sample was made up of 10 parents, among which 6 had a low level of education, while 4 had university degrees.

The results show that parents, irrespective of their level of education, take seriously the role they play in the school success of their child. Ensuring the fulfillment of school tasks and satisfying the fundamental needs of the child are

two of the main components of the parental role with regards to the school success of the child. Both are mentioned by parents with a low level of education as well as by those with university degrees. However, parents with university degrees have also mentioned the control and the completion of school activities and the cultivation of the children's talents as components of their role in the child's school success. As we can see, the major difference is represented by the position that parents with a different educational status consider to have with regards to school: those that have university degrees think that they are the most competent and responsible for the child's education, school having only a specific role. These parents control school education activities, and complete them where they feel that these are not enough or not efficient. So these parents consider having a compensatory role. On the other hand, parents with a low level of education consider school activity as being out of their reach. Their feeling of submission to school requirements is strengthened by their feeling of incompetence in relation to school curricula. They consider they have the role of supporting school – perceived as an authority – in its requirements. This fundamental difference regarding the perception of their role in the education of the child corresponds to the results of Reay (2004).

The results of the present research strengthen the observations of Stănciulescu (2002b), according to which the current politico-pedagogical discourse generates two categories of parental identification: „good" parents (responsible, competent) and parents that don't fulfill their duties, thus being responsible for the failure of their children. The main task of the „good" parent is to assist the child in doing his homework, thus, parents that do not systematically do that – because of a lack of cultural resources or for different reasons – feel the need to justify themselves in order to overcome the accusation of being „ a parent that doesn't fulfill his duty".

The cultivation of the child's talents is present only in the case of parents with university degrees, which corresponds to the results of (Gillies, 2005),

according to which parents from the middle class see their children as being „special" and „talented", while for those from the lower class being „special" has a rather negative connotation.

School success is seen as the first step of social success, irrespective of the level of education, as in the research of (Stănciulescu, 2002b), but social success has a different meaning for parents with a different level of education. For those with a low level of education social success is equal to having a trade. As a result, school is seen as a tool for obtaining that „certificate" required for professional integration. This perception of school success influences the parent expectations; they see school just as a place where you have to survive in order to have access to a „trade".

On the other hand, parents with a higher level of education (as the parents from the research of Vincent, 2001), having experienced the importance of social capital for obtaining the social position they have, consider the incorporation of this aspect to be valuable in itself, as an essential requirement for social success. This perception influences their expectations regarding the accumulation of knowledge and they monitor the process itself, intervening personally or through tutors, when they consider it is needed. If their children don't have only very good results, these parents feel the need to explain why they didn't put more pressure on their children.

School involvement was not mentioned by any of the parents as a component of the role they play in their child's school success. Nevertheless, when directly asked they said that they regularly attend parent meetings. Communication with teachers is not seen by the parents as playing a role in their child's school success, irrespective of their level of education.

Final conclusions

According to phenomenological constructivist theory, the success of secondary socialization is conditioned by the primary one (Berger and Luckman,

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2008). The results of our quantitative analysis have confirmed this through the demonstrated theoretical model. The results show the importance of the structure of the reality (expressed by expectations and continuous, coherent conversations) transmitted by the family and the importance of the emotional climate (family togetherness and emotional support) in the adaptation of the child to the school environment. The different perception of school success by parents with different educational level reflects the difference of their subjective realities arising from their life experiences. The reality of the parents is the only possible one for the children; in this way the importance that parents assign to the school is reflected in the children's adaptation to the school requirements, and influences their results. Weaker performance of students from disadvantaged families does not reflect the lack of interest of these parents toward school. Data obtained through interviews show that parents, regardless of their educational level, take seriously their role in the child's education. The reality of these parents reflects their life experience and the role education played in this experience.

Correlation of results of quantitative and qualitative analysis show the lack of awareness of parents, regardless of their educational level, related to parental practices connected to school results. Parents consider that their primary role is direct assistance in school related tasks, but our quantitative results show a negative relation between assistance in homework and the risk of school failure. The explanations are of twofold: the parents involve with direct assistance when they perceive already a problem with the child's school performance. Assisting a secondary or high school student with homework reflects a lack of autonomy in the realization of school tasks, which has a negative effect on school results (Pomerantz et al., 2007).

According to Feinstein et al. (2004) the constellation of the factors related to the parental style and educational behaviors are related to the educational success, and these differ in function of the gender and age of the child (Becker,

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1991, McHale et al. 2003). The results of this research have confirmed these findings; we found different constellations of family factors related to the risk of school failure depending on the school level and the students' gender.

Berger and Luckman (2008) emphasize the role of conversations in validating the children's experiences; Feinstein et al. (2004) show the importance of conversations in transmission of educational success. Quantitative results of this research also underline the importance of regular conversations between students and their parents: the home academic environment, which had no significant direct effect on the risk of school failure, influences the student's adaptation to the requirements of the school in three of four subgroups (boys in secondary school, high school girls and boys). Its effect was mediated by time spent with homework (for boys in secondary school), grade averages (high school girls) and satisfaction with the school (high school boys).

The importance of parental expectation related to school in school outcomes is reflected on the direct effect this variable had on the risk of school failure in all groups, except secondary school boys.

The direct and indirect effect of the family's emotional climate (family togetherness and emotional support) emphasizes the importance of the affective-emotional aspects for the success of primary socialization (Berger and Luckman, 2008). Emotionally warm and supportive family relationships facilitate the identification of the children with parental values but also increase the student's emotional adaptability to the demands of the school environment. Our results underline these facts by the effect of these variables on time spent with homework, school satisfaction and depression (high school girls), school satisfaction and anxiety (secondary school boys), school satisfaction and time spent with homework (high school boys) and grade averages and depression (secondary school girls). Our results show gender differences in the emotional factors with effect on the risk of school failure: for boys the family togetherness, for girls the parents' emotional support was demonstrated to be significant. The

importance of a warm family climate in school outcomes was underlined by Pomerantz et al. (2007), who stressed that the warm emotional climate has a role in the effectiveness of parents' educational activities as well as for the child's emotional wellbeing, which, in turn, affects again the school performance. Emotional adaptation presents against particular tendencies for boys and girls: anxiety for boys and depression for girls were related significantly to the risk of school failure. These differences result from the different realities of girls and boys, built in the primary and secondary socialization. Both parents and teachers have different attitudes toward girls and boys, expressed in different expectations and offering different interpretations of success and failure (Becker, 1991; Sadovnik, 2008; Toth, 2005). Invoking capacity (which happens frequently when girls fails) generates helplessness linked to depression (Comer, 2005) , and the lack of effort (invoked when boys fail) can generate anxiety as expression of the fear to not meet expectations (Comer, 2005).

These results draw certain directions of intervention in order to reduce the risk of school failure in the case of students with learning and behavioral problems. The work with the families towards this purpose must be concentrated on improving the family environment and ensuring the emotional support of the child. This will contribute to the children's adaptation to the requirements of their school and of their peers. The family's function of validating the child's experiences through regular conversations has to be stimulated. Parent attitudes towards school expressed in clear expectations, in a warm affectionate environment that increases the adolescent's desire to follow parental values contribute to the reduction of the problems. The interviews show that the parents, irrespective of their level of education, feel responsible for the fulfillment of school tasks, so raising their awareness concerning family factors that play a role in school success would ensure a flow of resources in the educational system. These directions of intervention differ from those that focus

on motivating the parents to become directly involved in their child's school activities, and of which the efficiency is usually low (Dumka et al.2009; Pomerantz et al., 2000; Rogers et al, 2009; etc.).

Giving a different orientation to parent involvement in school education would give more satisfaction to the parents with a low level of education who are caught in between their feeling of incompetence with regards to doing homework and their feeling of responsibility concerning the fulfillment of school tasks. It should also be pointed out that as a result, parent involvement in education doesn't become a source of tension as Stănciulescu (2002b) observed in Romanian families, but creates a feeling of bonding between parents and children (Pomerantz, 2007).

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