

ABSTRACT

Current sociological researches refer to the troubled behavior and the unstable educational level of some teenagers who are facing socio – economic pressure, family problems or even divorces. This paper will present existent researches concerning the social or family-based problems that interfere in the teenagers' education and that may lead to further instability in facing life's demands. It will also identify a study (based on the quantitative longitudinal design) developed during a period of one month (October 15 – November 15, 2010), organized within a group of 10 teenagers, coming from different social backgrounds. The objective of the study is to measure the academic performances of the examined adolescents and the factors that may influence their educational achievements. This study will try to identify if: the social background interferes in the teenager's education, what are the reasons that lead to this drawback and what actions can be undertaken to overcome this problem and to sustain the family resilience. The results will strongly be connected to the objectives of the study: even if people respond differently to these problems and each individual has a different capacity to get over them, the socio - economic issues and the familial concerns do influence the teens educational level: they focus less on their school performances, lose interest for studying, are overwhelmed with stress and some are even predisposed to depressions. There will be also presented some distinctions on how the divorce and/or poverty influence gender. The results of the study will be compared with the available researches in order to understand how the product of this study has contributed to the already existing knowledge. There will be arguments to support the researches, but this paper will also insist on the fact that people's reactions, emotions, concerns, difficulties, capacity of overcoming problems, learning abilities manifest differently. Hence, becoming stable adolescents, prepared for life, is not a group issue, but an individual one.

KEY WORDS: education, teenagers, divorce, socio-economic problems, resilience, capacity

INTRODUCTION

The adolescence is the interval between the childhood and maturity. Sometimes a child reaches adolescence later than others and it develops differently in the maturity, depending on the facts that may influence his/her adolescence.

The adolescent period all in all is a very complex one. Teenagers have to face so many new problems: puberty, being liked, some manifests adaptability problems, new life and educational demands and it is the period when everybody is telling them what and tries to influence their lives: "Many teens are already feeling extreme highs and lows because of hormonal levels in their bodies; added stress or trauma can make these shifts seem more extreme.

Having all these normal problems for this age and also facing socio-economic and/or familial rupture, the teens will become even more sensitive. Their behavior may change drastically and so may their academic performances. When having problems at home, youngsters will carry them everywhere, even if they are not very disposed to talk about them. They will manifest lack of concentration at school, during classes and also their attitudes towards their colleagues/friends will change. Dealing with these sorts of problems will get the teenagers involved in a behavioral changing process, which may take different forms, depending on each individual and his/her abilities to face the problems and to move forward.

Having these incipient information, this paper will present some theoretical perspective regarding the family resilience and how the problems inside a family manifest on the teenagers' educational level. Sustained by a personal study, the objective of the present paper is to show how is the familial background influencing the students' academic performances and what methods can be used for determining teens to get more involved in their educational achievements and to pass their familial problems in order to prepare for a stable maturity.

METHODOLOGY AND DOCUMENTATION

This chapter will present some theoretical perspectives of the utilized methodology, the quantitative experimental (also known as the longitudinal) research and also some studies conducted on adolescents to identify if their familial background is connected with their academic performances. The presented definitions will be sustained with practical facts, which have emerged from a personalized case study. Combining theory and personal research, the study will identify the proposed objectives.

A first definition classifies the quantitative research as a “systematic empirical investigation of quantitative properties and phenomena and their relationships. The process of measurement is central to quantitative research because it provides the fundamental connection between empirical observation and mathematical expression of quantitative relationships” (*Quantitative Research*)

Will G. Hopkins proposes a similar definition emphasizing on the relations between variables “Quantitative research is all about quantifying relationships between variables.” (2000). Hopkins continues, explaining what variables stand for and how are they measured: “Variables are things like weight, performance, time, and treatment. You measure variables on a sample of subjects, which can be tissues, cells, animals, or humans.” (*Quantitative Research Design*, 2000)

Analyzing the above, a connection with the study is required: the present examination uses a number of 10 people. It is a quantitative research due to the fact that it tries to present the relations between the subjects' socio-economic and familial context and their academic performances. The researches take place within a determined period of time (one month) and it also attempts to treat the subjects' disabilities in order to form some stable people, prepared for the life's challenges.

Moving further with the theory, Hopkins identifies two types of quantitative research: descriptive (samples are usually measured once and it uses hundreds, even thousands of subjects) or experimental, also called longitudinal (subjects are measured before and after a treatment). (*Quantitative Research Design*, 2000)

Based on the specified objectives, the study will focus on the longitudinal quantitative research. The students' interest and involvement in their educational performances will manifest a change after the “treatment”. Next, it will be presented some theoretical description of this utilized design, in order to understand the theoretical background and the steps of the unfolded examination.

Michael Berbaum defines the longitudinal analysis as “the study of short series of observations obtained from many respondents over time and is also referred to as panel analysis (of a cross-section of time series), or repeated measures, or growth curve analysis (polynomials in time), or multilevel analysis (where one level is a sequence of observations from respondents).” (*Longitudinal Analysis*, 2009)

In the process of finding treatments (for the present study they will be named measures), there must be reported sufficient information about the subjects to be able to identify the population group from which they were drawn. For human subjects, variables such as sex, age, height, weight, socio-economic status, and ethnic origin are common, depending on the focus of the study. (*Quantitative Research Design*, Hopkins, 2000)

Referring to the conducted study, the subjects are all teenagers and students (there is already established a common age and also an educational level) with socio-economic and familial problems: either poverty or facing their parents' divorce (a common socio-economic status is recognized).

Once the common traits are identified, the examination goes further, by presenting the interventions made upon the subjects, aiming to observe how their academic results evolve in a determined period and also how their perceptions about family, education and life will change.

The study will focus both on the already existent theoretical perspectives and on the study conducted upon a group of students. For understanding some of the factors that influence a teen's educational achievements and his way to perceive life, there will also be presented some classic cases that contribute to teenagers' turbulences.

Family resilience

According to America Psychology Association, "building resilience is the ability to adapt well to adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or even significant sources of stress." (*Resilience Guide for Parents and Teachers*, p. 1)

Family resilience is a complex and always actual thematic. Sociologists have always been concerned about creating programs, proposing advices and solutions on how to enforce family ties. The family institution is probably the most important segment of a healthy community and a strong society. Nowadays the family resilience is becoming more threatened every day, because of the modern approaches of the domestic concerns. A strong family is based, usually, on traditionalist habits: respect, open communication, discipline, sharing moments, commitment, solidarity and unity.

In his study, Farid compares the values of a traditional family with the ones' of the actual, modern family: in the traditional family the structures were solid and the children were integrated in a coherent and homogenous group, where they could feel safe. Meanwhile, in our today society, the most important trait that defines a couple is the parents' career. The children are not integrated so much in the family traditions and the feelings of security and stability are not enhanced. (1988, p. 37).

Farid has identified a socio-economic factor that can affect the family resistance: the career. In today's economy, people are more and more concerned about earnings; they spend the most part of the day at work and they don't have so much time, to spend with the family. Because of the pressure that the working environment may cause them, parents will not be able to speak or to share activities with their children. This will only bring distance between the parents and the teenagers and conflicts within the family are likely to happen.

Adolescents manifest changes in their behaviors, which are natural for this age. They are being disrespectful with their parents, talking back, disobeying their parents' orders and in general having

a bad temper. As hard as it might be for the parents, these are normal stages in a teen's life. He/she only acts badly because he/she don't know how to behave. The parents' not having time for them may also be a reason for their bad conduct.

Teenagers are frustrated because they can't find their individuality and they are in that step of life where they disapprove everything their parents say or do, just because they don't want to be like their parents. It may even seem that they hate their parents for no reason, but these are just some moody phases which will disappear in time. This is the specialists' opinion: "part of adolescence is about separating and individuating, and many kids need to reject their parents in order to find their own identities." (Nadine Kaslow, PhD at Emory University in Atlanta, quoted by Frank, 2007, revised 2009)

At this age they are more inclined in imitating their friends, to whom they feel more attached. They are spending a lot of time with their peers and influencing one another is a direct result of their appreciation for each other. Parents should be very attentive at this closeness because teens tend to do crazy things just for being considered "cool": smoking, consuming alcohol or even drugs. At this age they are very sensitive and influential and most of all, they feel tempted to try new things.

A parent's role in defining a teenager's strong individuality is crucial. Parents must engage their children in open and sincere discussion presenting their points of view about what a true friendship is all about, how friendships are good for stimulating each other in education, sports and how a real friend only watches the best interest of his/her buddy. (Frank, 2007, revised 2009)

As teens are very stubborn, parents must be patient and they must try to use different approaches for making their children listen to them and, very important, to open up, to share their feelings, their ideas, their fears.

Watching over the children even when they are teenagers is necessary, but parents must also learn how to trust them. It is not always easy, but with the proper counseling parents might reach a level of spiritual interaction with their children. This is actually what the American Psychology Association also advises: "Help your child learn to trust himself to solve problems and make appropriate decisions." (*Resilience Guide for Parents and Teachers* p. 2)

Divorce and its influences upon teenagers

A shock of surprise will be the first reaction they will manifest regarding the separation. At first they will not be able to understand the gravity of the problem and they may not want to accept that this will actually really happen. So they will act like everything is normal, not wanting to face the truth. When they will finally understand that the divorce is imminent they will still not understand what lead to this situation. Some will blame themselves for this, others will feel that their parents don't love them, or don't care enough for them in order to try to redress the problem. At this age, teens are not mature enough to understand that their parents' splitting has nothing to do with them, and that the separation is only an end point in two people's relationship.

"Emotionally detached parents make children feel unwanted and unloved. There are not available as a resource in times of stress and thus cannot satisfy the child's dependency needs." (Coleman, 1987, p. 190)

When facing the parents' divorce, adolescents tend to believe that they were responsible for the breakage. They incline to blame themselves for their parents disagreements, thinking that they were the cause of the family rupture. Most of the times they hide their feelings, hold everything inside them and avoid referring to their troubles, feeling embarrassed to admit their familial concerns to anybody. For them this is shameful and they think that this may contribute to their integration in certain groups. They may feel less accepted if they admit having problems at home, and at this age, being accepted is crucial. They may either adopt isolation or aggressiveness for showing their frustrations.

Teenagers may feel sad for losing one parent that they will not get to meet, talk or spend time with him/her as much as they used to. The family habits, traditions will not be the same and they just don't have anything to say about it. They must just accept the situation, get used to it, and embrace a new way of life. Having to face these changes so suddenly, may have a terrible effect on youngsters. Feelings of loss, losing the lust for life, manifesting depressions are serious consequences that could appear if the teenagers are not closely observed and reconciled.

““Loss”” is an important social and environmental correlate of suicidal behavior and the loss can be in terms of death, desertion or separation from a significant person or the anniversary of such an event.” (Coleman, 1987, p. 190).

The sentiment of fear of life is another consequence of the divorce. The teenagers can manifest emotions of distrust in life, distrust in love, having in front of their eyes an example of love failure, that they may even associate with life failure. So they may not be able to commit to relations, because of their family background, doubting the stability of feelings and not believing in people. (*Dealing with Divorce and Separation*, 2009). Once they faced a familial problem that couldn't be conciliated, they will believe that all the relationships will be the same and that the family as an institution is only but a myth.

As stated above, some may feel responsible for the problems they are facing (their parents' divorce) while others may feel victimized and they will manifest a revenging behavior, for feeling abandoned: talking badly to their parents and their teachers, hanging out with wrong crowds, starting to consume alcohol or narcotics, are just some of the forms that the teenagers' revenge can take.

Other problems may arise from their parents' decision to end their marriage: teens will start feeling worried about their situation, not knowing what will happen next: where will they going to leave, will they not see one of their parents again or so often, will they just go back and forth from one parent to another, putting their lives in a backpack and traveling with it from parent to parent. After the divorce the parents must organize their time very wisely in order not to put their children in an embarrassing situation, to be treated like a ball, thrown from a corner to another. The adolescents must live with a divorce and in the end they must embrace it like a part of their life. (Farid, 1988, p.142).

Some teenagers can adapt harder to some situations and they can be victims of self-isolation or, on the contrary, they can manifest violent behavior. Parents need to observe their children, even if they are overwhelmed by their own fears and anxiety, otherwise their lack of involvement could be the main cause of their children's behavioral changes: “It is not unexpected, therefore, that many youngsters should respond to this continual frustration of their dependency needs by becoming angry and aggressive.” (Coleman, 1987, p. 190)

An adult's intervention is required when these behavioral acts are recognized. Teens must understand that their parents are concerned for them and want to help them get over their hard times. Although youngsters feel a special need of being in the spotlight and deep down inside them they are begging for attention and affection, they will not admit that and having an open and honest conversation with them can be extremely difficult. They may consider their need of affection a weakness and they may think that facing weaknesses will affect their process of identifying themselves as individuals.

This is a communication barrier and as hard as it may seem to overcome it, this is an essential step for developing good, healthy relations with the teens and also for consolidating the family resilience. Sociologists consider that the best way to start a discussion with a teenager is by parents to admit their vulnerabilities. In this way, the girl or the boy will be more relaxed, feeling an emotional connection between her/him and the parent(s). The adolescent will be encouraged, in this way, to start a discussion, admit his/her feelings, fears and desires: "Teens may act like they feel immortal, but at bottom they still want to know that they will be all right and honest discussions of your fears and expectations can help your high scholar learn to express his own fears." (Resilience Guide for Parents and Teachers, p. 2).

The divorce is a traumatic experience which cannot be easily erased from the teenagers' memory. The divorce it is what it is: a rupture of the family structure, alliance. Every parent must assume the responsibilities implied by being a parent and must carefully consider the consequences to which they put their children to. (Farid 1988, p. 158).

Teenage poverty

The presented research will also identify some aspects of how the poverty influences educational achievements and life perspectives. The available studies show that experiencing poverty as a teenager could negatively mark the adolescents' life goals. Just because they are borne poor and because they are facing many disadvantages in life (not being able to afford things, sometimes not having what to wear) strongly influence their desire to rise higher, to achieve good educational performances and to build future life prospects.

„Teenage poverty and adult prospects are directly linked, according to the findings of new research published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation today." (Teenage Poverty, 2006).

So, the studies have identified that once a poor man, always a poor man: child, teenager or grown up.

Discussing about what is considered to be the success in the society, ("achievement oriented, intelligent, having a job that is dependent on mental, rather than manual activity"), Erickson makes a comparison between the children whose parents' poses those qualities and the children who are raised by the poor, uneducated, blue-collars people. He considers that the first category of children is much more likely of acquiring the success than the second category of children. (1987, p. 90).

Having blue-collars parents should not be perceived as a complex, though the society sees it this way, even as a handicap, according to the presented studies. Teenagers who have economic problems have just the same rights to study as everybody else. What the researches seem not to present is the desire of those "blue collars" parents of helping their children to have a better life. As

paradox as it may sound, sometimes a family resilience is built on these types of economical problems: every member of the family shows understanding and sustains the same goals.

In this case it is a good thing that adolescents manifest differently. Even if they are facing money problems and can't afford proper higher education, some of the teenagers coming from poor families manifest great interest in study and they apply for scholarships.

Education

After presenting some familial prospects that may influence the teenagers' development, there will be further analyzed their connection with the academic life. From the beginning, it must be mentioned again that these are some possible perspectives of how teens' educational performances might be affected. But reader must take into consideration that in the end people are different and individuals respond distinct to external factors.

First of all, considering high school education, this means they must prepare for a new way of life. New colleagues, other subjects in school, other teachers, other expectations from them, a new school, a new locker, all these might be overwhelming. They might even have to get through a friendship separation caused either by distance (attending different high schools), either by meeting other people in the new school and spending more time with them.

This is a very sudden accommodation process. As adolescents are different, for some of them it might take a while longer for adapting to new situations, while for others this might not be a problem at all. Some of them might be shy, while others only curios and anxious to know all about their new way of life, new colleagues, new school. These differences might be caused both by the familial background and by the individuals' personal traits.

These causes may affect the students' academic performances as well. In this case, there will also be observed that adolescents manifest different interests towards some preferred subjects, detrimental to other domains. But this is not disturbing. Indeed, students must perform at a certain academic level in order to pass all the subjects, but it is unlikely for adolescents to have great results to all the exams. As Hargreaves et al. indicate, the diversity is an element that will determine some students to learn more slowly. (1996, p. 71).

In these troubled times, with all the temptations around them, teens might get distracted of the study. It is both the parents' and the teachers' role to closely watch over the teens' performances, have frequent discussions with them, following their interests in a certain academic field (curricula), their learning abilities and propose educational coordination in order for the teens to better understand what they would like to specialize in.

Teachers must be very observant at the pupils' inclinations towards a certain subject and they must be prepared to direct children, guiding their steps, providing them extra-curricular activities and literature on their preferred subjects, with the purpose of developing their abilities in a certain area, that they have identified an interest for. Even so, all the other subjects must be treated also for enhancing a harmonious development:

“Schools and teachers must organize and provide instructional support to ensure the success of all students, including those who are at risk of academic failure and those who need periodic assistance.” (Hargreaves et al., 1996, p. 71).

It is anyway hard to maintain the teenagers’ attracted in learning so they must be stimulated. Hearing once in a while: “You did a great job!” it gives confidence to the adolescents. They will feel proud that their work is appreciated and they will consider this a reward. This is stimulating.

No need to impose strict deadlines and to require overwhelming performances from teens. Their learning abilities are at this age in a changing process, so they need to be understood and supported in achieving performances, on a step-by-step basis. It is also very important for them to feel like they are contributing to significant projects, so their merits must be recognized with each step.

Hargreaves et al., are concerned about the institutionalized care that schools offer to teenagers who confront with familial problems: “Many young adolescents today are living postmodern lives in fractured families, culturally diverse communities and fast-paced worlds of visual imagery. Yet in school day, these postmodern lives are trapped in modernistic institutions with bureaucratic schedules, compartmentalized knowledge and little care” (1996, p. 55)

Education is extremely important for teenagers, but having to go every day through a complex and continuous routine and through a procedure-based educational system, concerned only with the academic tasks, a teenager development could be a difficult and stressful one.

Presenting other stress factors in a students’ life, Farid talks about socio-economic factors. Sometimes teenagers feel like working for two reasons: to start earning some money for themselves and to gain the feeling of responsibility and second, because their families need an extra-salary. Either way, working and studying can greatly affect a student’s concentration in school. (1988, p. 27).

In high school, the academic requests are higher so adding to this the after school working hours, the desire of earning money (more intense in the case of the students who decide to work for helping their families) the student will feel tired and very stressed. This is why, Farid recommends that the teenagers who want to work to be closely supervised by their parents in order for them not to exaggerate. The employment during school vacations is recommended, but even so, the teens must have time to rest. (1988, p. 26-27).

School can be a good contact point between teens and parents who find it hard to start a conversation with their children. Having frequent discussions with the teenagers about their homework, subjects, academic interests, offering friendly suggestions, telling stories about their own educational life, will create a bond between the parents and their children. They will feel more encouraged to discuss not only about school with their parents but also about their goals, their perspectives and like this they will receive some interesting advices from an elder person, who confronted the same problems, the same insecurities. With the right approach from the parent or the educator, a teenager could find resources to identify himself/herself, to discover his/her individuality.

A stable teenager is the product of a powerful family resilience. Even if a family faces problems, the well – being of the teenagers must not be ignored. It is the parents’ task to help the children overcoming hard periods in life, by offering their support, underlying as much as possible the fact

that they – the parents – will always be there for the children, always prepared to help. Even if a family is facing economic issues, or is involved in a divorce, teenagers must not be neglected.

American Psychology Association remarks that teenagers can learn about themselves from the hard times they are exposed to. The tough periods usually make adolescents to understand “what they are made of” and to define their individuality. (*Resilience Guide for Parents and Teachers* p. 2)

Teenagers’ learning abilities might be slower than in the childhood. To this consequence contribute also the external factors presented above (very sudden changes, adaptability process, and possible familial problems) and mental structure, also in a changing process.

In her article, based on previous researches, Jessica Hamzelou refers to teens having problems of seizing new information: “When children hit puberty, their ability to learn a second language drops, they find it harder to learn their way around a new location and they are worse at detecting errors in cognitive tests” (2010, par. 2).

On the other hand, dealing with problematic teenagers who will intentionally not learn or even develop a habit of skipping classes, requires for another type of intervention. First of all, their familial situation must be checked in order for the school to offer counseling programs, if necessary. Discussion with parents is another approach, even if not always very successful: “Parents of the antisocial children often have many of their own problems.” (Kazdin, 1985, p. 193)

So, if the parents have their own problems and are not able to get involved in the welfare of their children, some other measures must be considered. As seen above, sometimes parents are the main causes of the teenagers’ antisocial behavior. It is somehow a normal consequence for the teens to manifest an aggressive temper and to persist in having bad conducts in school. In this case it is required the intervention of the specialized authorities which may imply visits to psychologist and a social assistance program.

A recommended approach would be to involve the problematic teens (and not only the problematic ones) in extracurricular activities: working as volunteer could change their attitudes and their perceptions about life. Involving in somebody else’s problems help the teens get out of their shells. They might understand that their problems are maybe insignificant compared to the problems that children from a foster home face, for instance. Not being the center of their own universe, caring for others, involving in other activities will make them become more sensitive to people’s problem and start acting responsible. Also, if they are facing troubled periods at home (familial or socio – economic issues), a volunteer program could also help them get over their own problems easier.

Anyway, a teenager must have some time just for himself/herself. Adolescents dream a lot, they are building future life hypothesis, they dream themselves being grown ups and draw imaginary perspectives of how prosper their life will be like. Dreaming is a part of being a teenager and it develops perspectives for a mature life. (*Teen Advisor*, 2003).

RESULTS

The conducted study has identified many similarities with the already available literature on the subject. Even though the quoted researches present many other details regarding the adolescents’ behavior, traumas and prospects on future life development of the teens with socio – economic and

familial pressure, the proposed study is more strictly concerned with the students' academic performances and their capacity of overcoming the hard times.

As mentioned above, the study was conducted on ten teenagers (seven boys and three girls), during a period of one month (October 15 - November 15, 2010). The subjects had both, troubles in their familial lives and in study. A direct connection between the two parameters was immediately recognized. Nine of the ten students who had familial problems showed a regress in their academic performances. They didn't manifest any educational goals and no interests in any field that they studied in school. They seemed empty and disappointed on their lives and the school was not among their concerns.

However, during the research period, they had an intense counseling program. Teachers engaged them more often in active discussions and practical activities. In time they started showing their feelings, their fears, and anxieties. By admitting their factors of concern, their uncertainties and their insecurity feelings, the students could be easily emotionally evaluated. The counselors could give them proper advices and could present suitable approaches in order to make them care about their prospects, about their academic results and getting through their hard times.

The contribution of the teachers to their cheer up process was very efficient. They helped the students to develop new outlooks and sustained them in their schooling activities by assisting them to extra study. The adolescents needed to identify with some life models in order to start caring again about their success in school. Having successful adults as models encouraged them to open up and to start getting more involved in their day-to-day school tasks. Imitation is a part of the process of being a teenager, but sometimes its effects are positive. In the presented case, the students practically embraced some role models as mentors and imitate them, as a way of succeeding in life.

Although copying is just a phase in the teens' lives, their tutors and parents must be careful about whom the children chose to go after. As seen earlier, adolescents tend to frequently imitate their friends, to whom they are becoming much attached. Negative role models must be diplomatically presented as such. The best way this could work is by having mature conversations with the teens, transposed within stories.

Remember, adolescence is the initiatory journey that an individual takes from childhood to maturity. He has to be treated as an adult, and encouraged to act like one, but he also has to be cared for and protected as a child.

CONCLUSIONS

The theoretical perspectives and the conducted study showed that a very big percentage of teenagers are negatively influenced by their familial problems. Their abilities to study are lower; they lose interest in considering future perspective. For teenagers to lose their lust to dream, they must face serious emotional problems that may conduct to either self-isolation or an aggressive behavior.

The counseling programs are essential in both cases. Also, the family must actively participate in the teens' recovery, by involving in their academic evolution, by trying to maintain a permanent communication with them. As seen, this might usually be a problem, as teens search for their independence and try, as much as possible to detach of their family. Also, facing parents' separation, they become upset and vulnerable and they might even build communication bridges between them

and their parents. Parents are encouraged to keep persisting in convincing their children to open up to them and sometimes for this they may have to find some unconventional communication methods: talking about their own fears and uncertainties may be an approach; spending as much time as possible with the teenager, doing common activities together lead to strengthening the family resilience.

If there is one thing that the teenagers hate more at this age this is for them to be neglected. They are at the age when everything is a drama for them. Ignoring them is not a solution to fight their depressions and their aggressive moods.

Family resilience means first of all admitting having problems and developing a strong connection with all the members of the household in order to create unity, support and a safe place, called home.