THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKER IN IMPROVING PUPIL'S ACHIEVEMENT THROUGH A SYNERGISTIC PARENT-PUPIL-TEACHER CONTEXTUAL COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

*Pupil's level of achievement is enhanced by bridging the gap between learning spaces and facilitating the transfer of knowledge, behaviours, skills, values, preferences and understandings from one context to another. An important part in this process is the exchange of information between home and school through an improved parent-pupil-teacher communication assisted by the school's social worker. The research focus of this paper is to identify the challenges pupils face in relation to their learning spaces and to establish the role of the school social worker in improving pupil's achievement through a contextual communication model of maintaining the collaboration between family, school and community. The research methodology included (1) **a questionnaire** applied to 110 pupils from one Romanian high-school with ages between 12-15 years; (2) semi-structured **interviews** with social workers, school teachers, a school psychologist, educational experts and parents and (3) **synthesis and comparisons** of the psychological and didactical relations between pupils and the context studied. Using the results of the survey and the interviews, this research identified the areas of discrepancy between pupils and their learning spaces, and mapped the role of the social worker in improving pupils' level of achievement and school adaptation. This mediator role is exemplified through an innovative synergistic model of parent-pupil-teacher contextual communication.*
Key words: *school achievement, contextual communication model, learning spaces, school social work.*

Introduction

Pupils' cognitive as well as behavioral development in a formal and informal educational setting is rooted in socio-cultural factors such as the interaction between different pairs (pupil-pupil, pupil-parent, pupil-teacher and parent-teacher) and the cultural climate in which the social interactions and psychological processes occur (Rogoff, 1990). The social interaction in problem-solving processes takes the form of apprenticeship where parents and teachers being in authority and engaging in collaborative relationships with pupils through participation and authenticity, lead to intrinsic reactive knowledge *(learning to understand to be by living with others)* and extrinsic active knowledge *(learning to know to learn by doing)* (Pop, Popoviciu

and Popoviciu, 2010). However, if the structure between the parents/teachers and pupils is not accessible or flexible, then we will witness a one-sided engagement of either a strong orientation toward performance at the cost of interpersonal relationships or a strong collaboration in relationships at the cost of compromising individuality. Also, there can be situations where the interaction between pairs, such as pupil-pupil, pupil-parent, pupil-teacher and parent-teacher, are disintegrated to the point of almost no mutual engagement or the interaction between pairs may be so entangled or fused that it becomes hard to separate one's personal identity. This will, of course, have consequences on problem-solving abilities, creativity and social competences of pupils. In situations such as these, the school social work intervention is crucial as it uniquely focuses on repairing interactions between pupils and their context (Dupper, 2003). This is important because the outcomes of educational activities such as cognitive learning, value orientation and formation, skills acquiring practices, and models of understanding depend on both the learning context and the type of knowledge. In this paper, the term education is defined in a broad sense, as an activity or experience that has a formative effect on the cognitive, physical and moral abilities of an individual. We believe that the main goal of education is bridging the gap between the different learning contexts with the result of facilitating the transfer of knowledge, values and skills from one setting to another. In order for this goal to materialize, the school social worker views each pupil as an inseparable part of the various social systems within which she operates (Dupper, 2003). Therefore, instead of seeing, for example, poor academic achievement as a result of a disturbance within the pupil, the social worker views the problem as a consequence of the misfit between the pupil and his learning contexts. Since all educational activities are situated, different learning spaces (contexts) such as everyday learning, school learning, homework learning, interest-based learning and internet-learning, all become an integrated part of the learning process each leading to a fundamentally different learning result (Illeris, 2009). This means that education needs to be seen more as a life experience than just traditional cognitive assimilation of data. A divergence between the pupil and any of these learning spaces would result in the ineffectiveness of at least one of the facets of education: (1) knowledge; (2) skills; and/or (3) values. School social workers address this discrepancy through a dual-focused intervention which means that they must on one hand strengthen pupils' coping strategies and on the other hand improve the quality of the imposing context (Germain and Gitterman, 1996) while facilitating and maintaining the collaboration between family, school and community (Constable, 2009). In Figure 1 we propose an original schema of understanding the dual-focused school social worker's intervention regarding the challenges pupils face in relation to their learning spaces.
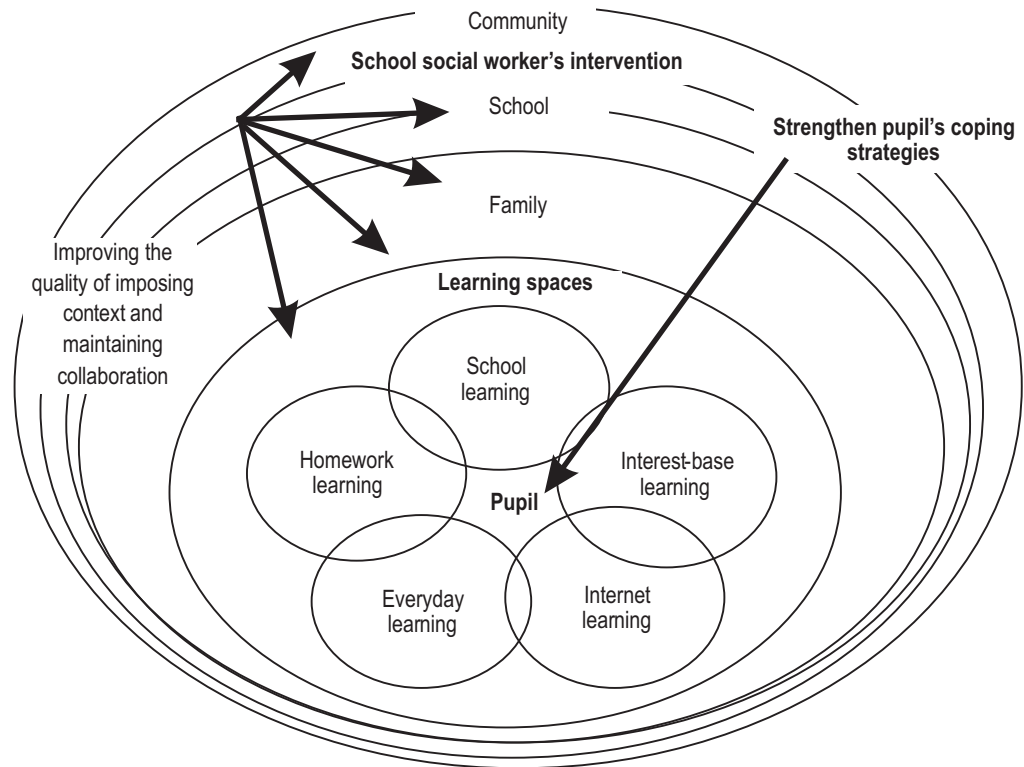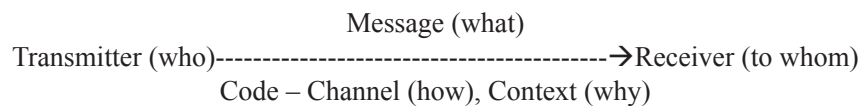
**Figure 1:   A model of a dual-focused school social work intervention based
on the interaction between pupil and context.**

Another innovative model presented in this paper is the parent-teacher communication
assisted by the school social worker model. This model is working with the key questions: *who,
what, how, why and with whom (to whom)*. At the transmitter's level (*who, which*), there is the
authoritative-expressive principle (*Pathos)*, with its rules, responsibility, credibility, deference.
The receiver's space (*with whom, to whom*) is governed by the participative-conative principle
(*Ethos)* with rules of receptivity (choice), availability (accountability), involvement (action).
The contextual message is working through the cooperative-referential principle (*Logos)* with
rules of the quantity and quality of the message *(what)*, the contextual relevance of the message
(why) and the manner of transmission, code and channel *(how)* (Pop, 2008).

Message (what)

Transmitter (who)---→Receiver (to whom)

Code – Channel (how), Context (why)

School social worker (WHO?)

Transmitter

(1) Ways of improving the imposing context (2) Coping strategies for pupils (WHAT?)

Pupil/Family/School/Community (TO WHOM?)

Receiver

Aiming to improve pupil's level of achievement and adaptaveness (WHY?)

Contextual message

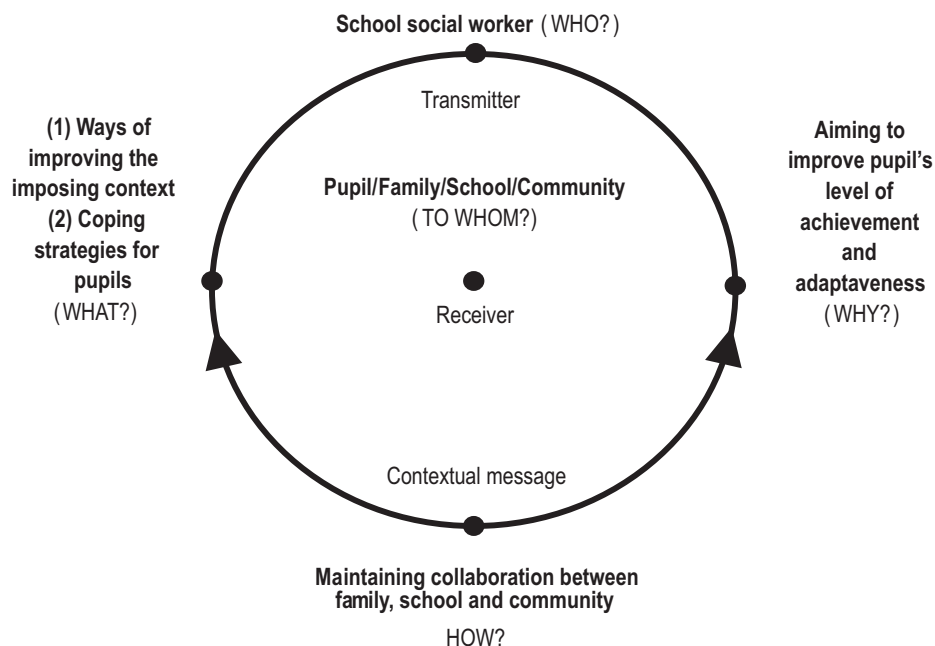**Maintaining collaboration between family, school and community**
HOW?

Figure 2: A contextual communication model of maintaining the collaboration between family, school and community (adapted from Pop, 2008).

In this contextual communication model of maintaining the collaboration between the tree systems that shape pupil's cognitive, moral, behavioural, and aptitudinal functions and processes, we   identified the importance of the school social worker as a catalyst. The objective of this status is improving the pupil's level of achievement and school adaptation. This goal is achieved by following through the subsequent responsibilities of the school social worker: (1) exploring ways of improving the imposing context and (2) helping the pupil find coping strategies for higher level of achievement and school adaptation. School social workers are professionals that value collaboration and are especially suited for initiating cross-disciplinary activities in order to meet the needs of pupils (Briar-Lawson et al., 1997). Studies show that intervention by cooperation between social workers, families and school personal help prevent later school failure and drop-out (Allen-Meares, 1995), poor work habits, low concentration, low self-esteem and disappointments in personal relations (Levine, 1985). Collaborative teams that include social workers, teachers, parents and pupils help improve behaviours and educational achievement. Moreover, the combination of collaboration and case management is the most effective way of improving pupil's grades, class attendance and behaviours (Bailey-Dempsey, 1995).

As it is seen in Figure 1 and Figure 2, the interaction between pupils and context (learning spaces, family, school and community) form a complex ecosystem. The changes or challenges that occur between a pupil and his learning context result in barriers in achieving educational and/or social success. School social workers are the only specialists that can intervene at both the contextual level and individual level by adopting this innovative synergistic contextual communication model of maintaining collaboration between the players involved in the ecosystem. For example, the school social worker can discover shared presuppositions and shared understanding based on common focus of attention that forms the ground setting of communication (Rogoff, 1990). From this perspective, pupils are neither isolated agents operating on

reality in order to understand its underlying structure, nor passive recipients of cultural transmission. Pupils are rather understood as both transmitters and receivers of a contextual message, and they learn through sharing information and experiences by participation and through apprenticeship.

Methodology of Research

Research Sample

The sample consisted of 5 classes from one Romanian high-school, parents and specialists in education. Subjects of this study are 110 pupils; 57% (n=63) are female and 43% (n=47) are male with ages between 12-15 years (Med=13.66). Table 1 includes data relevant to the group of pupils included in the research. The subjects were assigned by the school's director and the sample was convenient for our purpose in diagnosing discrepancies between pupils-family-school. The sample also included parents (n=5), school social workers (n=3), school psychologist (n=1), school principal (n=1), teachers (n=5), and educational specialists (n=5). The unit of analysis of this research is formed by the pupils, parents, school social workers, school psychologist, school principal and educational specialists. The unit of observation is the relations between pupils, their learning spaces (everyday learning, school learning, homework learning, interest-based learning and internet-learning), their family, school and community.

Table 1.   The structure of the group of pupils included in the research.

Criteria	No. of subjects	Percentage %
Sex:		
Male	47	43
Female	63	57
Ethnicity:		
Romanian	106	96
Hungarian	4	4
Demographics:		
Urban	98	89
Rural	12	11

The majority of the pupils come from below average income families; and therefore, the most frequently mentioned parental professions are truck or taxi driver, construction worker, sales clerk, caregiver/nurse, janitor and/or retired. In terms of ethnicity, Hungarians represent the main minority group of Romania, especially in the north-west territory where this research was carried out. In Bihor county (which is in the north-west side of Romania), there are currently six school social workers employed, five of which are involved in special needs education facilities. One of the school social worker that was interviewed is in charge of the mainstream education and is under the employment of *Centrul Judetean de Resurse si Asistenta Educationala Bihor (*The County Centre of Resources and Educational Assistance, Bihor – CJRAE). The main goal of this centre is the optimization of relations between pupils, family, school and community. The rest of the school social workers, psychologist, principal, teachers and educational specialists were chosen through the technique of snowball sampling where the existing study subjects indicated future subjects from among their acquaintances. The parents were selected through convenience sampling.

Research Instruments

This research took place from October 2009 to May 1010 and included two main aspects: the study of social and academic challenges of pupils and a synthesis and comparison from a psychological and didactical point of view of situations considered at risk. The research methodology included a questionnaire, semi-structured interviews with social workers (n=3), school teachers (head teacher and teachers) (n=6), a school psychologist (n=1), educational experts (n=5) and parents (n=5) and the synthesis and comparisons of the psychological relations between pupils and context studied. The questionnaire items were carefully selected and structured in order to investigate motives, opinions, attitudes and interests of pupils regarding the relationship between them and their context (Birle & Halmajan, 2006). Using the results of the questionnaire and the interviews, we aimed to identify the areas of discrepancy between the pupils and their learning spaces and to map the role of the social worker in improving pupils' level of achievement and school adaptation school adaptation by helping them find better coping strategies and/or by transforming/adapting the imposing context. The principle used in analyzing the results of the questionnaire is that any misfit between pupils and the five learning spaces: (1) everyday learning, (2) school learning, (3) homework learning, (4) interest-based learning and (5) internet-learning results in a low level of educational achievement and school adaptation. The items of the questionnaire identified the presence of an imposing environment by (a) questions that target maladaptive behaviour in school (low grades, deviant behaviour, low level of affinity with other pupils in school) and (b) questions that target social problems at home, school or in the community that put the pupil's achievement level at risk (*b1*-family instability – parental absence, divorce, death of family member, accidents, debt, loss of workplace, dependence on welfare, homelessness, alcohol abuse, domestic violence, disabilities, and/or imprisonment of family member – *b2*-school related problems – newcomer, abuse by a teacher, grades not given on merit, bullying, lack of friends at school – *b3*-community related problems – addiction, crime, discrimination, homelessness, parental absence, unemployment, dependence on welfare). As expected, some of the risk factors overlap.

Results of Research

The results of questionnaire that help identify the presence of risk factors at school are presented in Table 2.

Table 2.   Risk factors at school as identified by pupils.

Problems reported	%*
Pupil is newcomer in the school	10
Pupil's closest friends are not enrolled in the same school	27
Pupil does not feel comfortable talking with an adult about personal issues	35
Pupil does not have someone to talk with about problems that he/she thinks are important	19
Pupil has experienced bullying	18
Pupil feels that other children are discriminating him/her because of his/hers nationality/ethnicity	6
Pupil was physically threatened/hit by other children in school	9
Pupil has experienced name-calling at school	19
Pupil has been forced to do at least one thing against his/her will by other children	7
At least one teacher uses name-calling to humiliate pupils	42
Pupil believes that at least one teacher appeals to excessive punishment of pupils	16

Pupil believes that some children are favoured unjustly by teachers (ex. get better grades that they deserve)	69
Pupil believes that some children are discriminated against by teachers (ex. get lower grades than they deserve)	61
Pupil believes that low grades is a problem of those enrolled in the school	73
Pupil feels that choosing a high-school is hard work	45

*Each item represents the fraction value from 100.

All of the above are indicators of a lack of school adaptation. The first high risk factor identified by pupils is regarding low grades and their subjective perception of unfair grades. This belief can lead to a lack of motivation, disengagement, and patterns of compensation such as external attribution (external *locus of control*—"it is the teacher's fault that I have low grades"). However, parents and teachers believe that the grades are given on merit and state that they are not aware of any form of favouritism. The second highest risk factor is that pupils declare experiencing name-calling and bullying by colleagues and teachers. The respondents declared that their parents are involved and interested in their school situation (73%) and are encouraging overall academic achievement. This correlates with the results of the interviews where parents showed concern regarding the grades of their children. This is important since studies show that the prevailing attitudes of society/culture, in general, and of one's own family, in particular, influence the perceived academic ability of the pupils which in turn has an impact on the actual academic performance. This is especially true on a task that requires a great deal of effort such as school-work and home-work (Aronson, 2003). However, the same parental concern was not given to the negative effects of name-calling, bullying, humiliation and possible preferential treatment from teachers. A possible explanation is that grades are an easy and straightforward way of measuring school success, while emotional and behavioural risk factors are more subjective and less obvious, especially in the early stages. That is why we stress the need of a school social worker intervention, which can identify and prevent discrepancies between pupils and their contexts. 27% of pupils felt that there is not enough communication between them and their parents and teachers, and during interviews all parents and teachers expressed their desire for a closer collaboration. The school social worker can implement a communication model between pupils-parents-teachers particularly since educational specialists acknowledge that through dual-focused interventions there is an improvement in (1) perceived academic ability, (2) academic performance and (3) coping skills (Bailey-Dempsey, 1995).

The results of the questionnaire that help identify the presence of risk factors at home are presented in Table 3.

Table 3.   Risk factors at home in the last two years as reported by pupils (%).

Problems reported	%*
At least one parent left home to work abroad	15
At least one parent has had health related problems	38
At least one family member has been in jail	1
At least one family member has lost his/her job	10
For at least 12 months one family member provided the only source of income	7
Family has, at least once, depended on welfare	3
One parent has left the family for more that 3 months at a time	4
At least one member of the family has been homeless or lived in an improvised dwelling	3
At least one member of the family comes home drunk at least one time a week	4

At least once a month the pupil has witnessed domestic violence	4
Family has, at least once received help (food, money, clothing, emotional support) from an NGO	3
The pupil's parents are divorced	9
One family member has deceased in the last two years	21
The family has lost certain goods because of debt	3
The family has lost certain goods as a result of an accident	3
The pupil has experienced health problems	23
At least one family member suffered from a psychological disorder	3

*Each item represents the fraction value from 100.

All of the problems identified above represent risk factors for low academic achieve-ment, since a large part of everyday learning, homework learning and interest-based learning takes place within the context of family life. Moreover, in some cases, a family is confronted with several problems at once. For example, while 30% of pupils do not report having any dif-ficulties in the family environment, 30% report a single problem, 19% confirmed the presence of two difficulties and 21% are challenged by three or more risk factors. At the time of this research, the mentioned coping strategies of pupils were: "talking with friends," "sitting alone", "engaging in contact sports", "browsing on the internet."

The school social worker can adopt the dual-focused intervention by helping the pupil at risk cope better with the particular issue(s) that confronts the family such as parental absence, unemployment of family member, poverty, homelessness or health related problems. Also, since, in this case, the imposing environment is the home the school social worker needs to find ways of improving the quality of family life. During the interviews, the social workers, school teachers, and the school psychologist stated that the main cause of inadequate academic per-formance, negative behaviours and values reflect inadequate family interactions and/or poverty. The parents however, assumed that grades, behaviours and values are influenced by the pupil's friends, internet and television. This finding can be explained through an attribution bias that influences the way people determine who or what is responsible for an observed action or event. In this case, parents explain the actions of their children by appealing to situational causes such as the influence of friends or the internet while social workers, teachers and psychologists claim that both behavioural explanations such as family interactions and situations such as poverty are responsible for the observed facts.

The research also identified relevant data regarding internet-learning. A majority of pu-pils (52%) view the internet as a tool of information rather than as a form of relaxation (30%) socialization (11%) or escape (7%). Table 4 shows the average number of hours a day spent by the pupils on internet-learning. In this research internet-learning includes the pupil's contact with any visual interactive materials or games.

Table 4.   Average number of hours per day spent by pupils on internet-learning.

Avarage no. of hours/day	%
Less then 1	19
1 hour	14
2 hours	27
3 hours	11
More then 3 hours	29

If the time spent on internet-learning is disproportionate in regard to the other learning spaces, than this learning environment is at risk of becoming imposing on the others. All learning spaces are an integrated part of the learning process but each one is leading to a fundamentally different learning result (Illeris, 2009). An unjustified discrepancy between the amount of time spent on any of these learning spaces for a prolonged period of time would result in academic and/or behavioural ineffectiveness that requires an intervention from the school's social worker.

The educational experts identified family factors, school environment and peer relations as influences (positive or negative) on the pupil's cognitive, emotional and behavioural development. None of the respondents of the interviews believed that lower grades and/or behavioural difficulties are a result of a disturbance within the pupil but as a consequence of the misfit between the pupil and his learning contexts.

The results of the questionnaire that help identify the presence of risk factors that also have an impact in community are presented in Table 5.

Table 5.   Risk factors with impact in the community as reported by pupils.

Problems reported	%*
At least one parent left home to work abroad	15
At least one family member has been in jail	1
At least one family member has lost his/her job	10
For at least 12 months one family member provided the only source of income	7
Family has, at least once, depended on welfare	3
One parent has left the family for more that 3 months at a time	4
At least one member of the family has been homeless or lived in an improvised dwelling	3
At least one member of the family comes home drunk at least once a week	4
Family has, at least once received help (food, money, clothing, emotional support) from an NGO	3
The family has lost certain goods because of debt	3
At least one family member has been discriminated because of a handicap or age	2
At least one family member has been discriminated because of ethnicity or religion	4
Pupil reports smoking as a problem of his friends/classmates	60
Pupil reports alcohol abuse as a problem of his friends/classmates	15

* Each item represents the fraction value from 100.

The above mentioned risk factors not only have the potential of influencing the pupil's academic and social well-being but also the community at large. One aspect that was frequently mentioned in interviews as a risk factor was the low social-economical status of the family. Educational specialists, school social workers, teachers, the psychologist and the principal mentioned poverty, unemployment of one or both parents, and parental absence due to working abroad as a cause of cognitive and behavioural difficulties. Parents also mentioned financial worries, but they did not believe them to influence their children's academic performance and/ or behaviour. However, since studies show that poverty is correlated with academic challenges at school (McLoyd, 1998), the social worker also needs to intervene in improving living conditions for the children at risk. Therefore, the need for implementing a contextual communication model of maintaining the collaboration between family, school and community, and intervening at both the individual and contextual level becomes of foremost importance. During the interviews the school social workers remarked that at the moment, their central preoccupation is of

reducing the schools' drop-out rate, which reaches its peak at the end of 8th grade. To achieve this goal, they mediate between the school and the family, all the while stressing the importance of education. Some of the more common reasons why children are abandoning school as reported during the research interviews are: special educational needs (disabilities, behavioural impairment) delinquency (crime or suicide attempts), poverty, parental absence (divorce, working abroad or death), and teen pregnancy. Other responsibilities of the school social workers are supervising children at risk mainly while they are in school but also during holidays, career counselling concerning those with disabilities, inclusion of children with special needs in mainstream education, organizing leisure time activities for pupils, and mediating between pupils, teachers, parents and community in situations of conflict and/or misunderstandings.

Based on the results of the questionnaire and the interviews we identified the following areas of discrepancies: (1) the pupils' subjective perception of unfair grades as opposed to the teachers' belief in fair assessment; (2) incidents of bullying and name-calling experienced by some students versus the parents' lack of interest or knowledge about such acts (3) the social workers' teachers' and psychologist's ascription of the cause of inadequate academic performance and negative behaviours and values to defective family interactions contrary to the parents attributing the same problems to the influence of children's friends, internet and television; (4) parents' belief that that academic performance and behaviours are not influenced by poverty and the specialists' affirmation that financial difficulties are the main risk factors concerning pupils.

In order to address these discrepancies we propose a synergic model (Figure 3) that exemplifies the specific role of the social worker as mediator between pupils, parents and teachers.
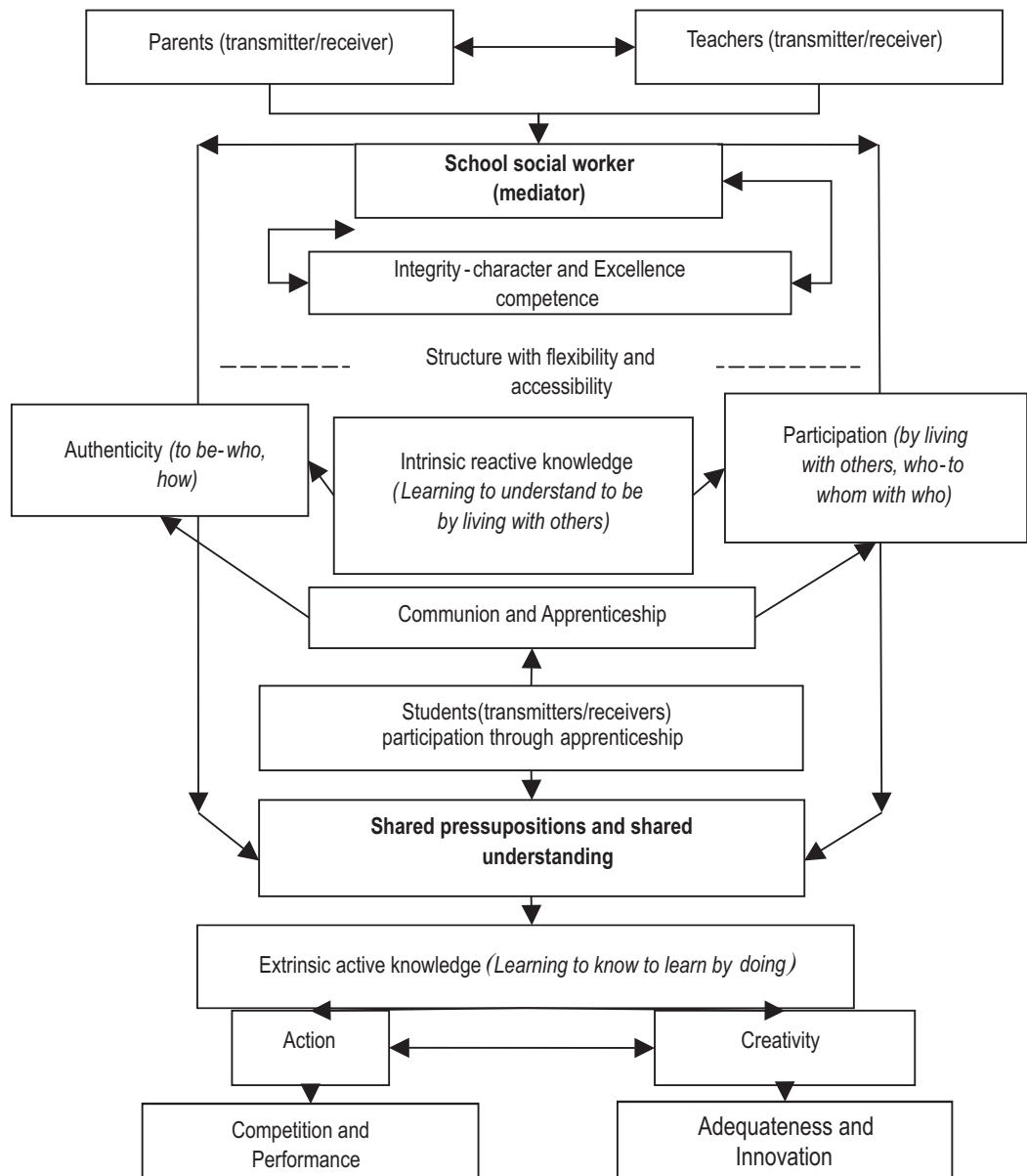
Figure 3: **The role of the school social worker in mediating between parent-pupil-teacer.**

In this model, the role of the school social worker is mediating between the different pairs such as pupil-pupil, pupil-parents, pupil-teachers and parents-teachers through integrity-character and excellence-competence. The relationships between the top level (parents and teachers) and the bottom level (pupils) needs to have structure but also flexibility and accessibility in order for the two levels of learning to be obtained. These two levels are (1) the intrinsic reactive knowledge, which is characterized by *learning to understand to be by living with others)* and (2) the extrinsic active knowledge, which involves *learning to know to learn by doing.* The intrinsic reactive knowledge is obtained in authenticity and through participation, and the extrinsic active knowledge produces (2a) action through competition and performance and (2b)

creativity through adequateness and innovation. Pupils are also understood as both transmitters and receivers of a contextual message and not as isolated agents trying to understand reality or passive receivers of cultural transmission. Therefore, they learn only through sharing information and experiences by participation and through apprenticeship.

Discussion

Using the results of the questionnaire and the interviews this research proved useful in identifying the areas of discrepancy between pupils and their learning spaces and helped us map the role of the social worker. The school social worker needs to firstly identify the children at risk, secondly evaluate the problems recognized, and thirdly intervene by discovering shared presuppositions and shared understanding between parent-pupil-teacher. In this research we identified four areas of discrepancies regarding (1) grades; (2) bullying; (3) family interactions as a cause of inadequate academic performance and negative behaviours and values, and (4) poverty as a cause of academic and behavioural difficulties.

Regarding pupils' subjective perception of unfair grades, the school social worker needs to firstly make sure that the teachers use ethical standards in assessment and evaluation. After this first step, specific measures must be taken in order to help low achieving pupils improve their grades. Studies show that pupil-perceived support from at least one teacher is positively associated with school motivation and academic achievement (Chong et al., 2006). This perceived support takes the form of the quality of the relations between pupils and teachers and it helps shape pupils' academic goals, interests, values and attributions about sources of success and failures (Chong, et. al. 2010). A good relation between teachers and students not only helps them get better grades but also helps pupils think of education as life learning, and not only the cognitive assimilation of data. Therefore, through pupil-teacher engagement based on mutual respect, pupils develop their academic competence and their moral values and social skills without feeling self-conscious or worried about failure (Roeser et al., 1996).

The second discrepancy found in this research is perceptions of bullying. This needs urgent addressing as school-bullying is linked to individual problems such as low self-esteem (O'Moore & Kirkham, 2001) depression, suicidal thoughts, eating disorders (Kaltiala-Heino, 1999), sleep disorders (Williams et al., 1996), substance abuse (Berthold & Hoover, 2000), weapon carrying (Berthold & Hoover, 2000), vandalism, police trouble, stealing (Rigby & Cox, 1996), lack of social acceptance (Mynard & Joseph, 1997) difficulty in engaging in meaningful relationships, lower academic achievement (Pellegrini & Long, 2002) and higher school drop-out rates (Juvonen, Nishina &Graham, 2000). In the case of bullying or name-calling it is not the coping style of the pupil that makes most difference but the school's perception, actions and prevention activities (Dake et al. 2004) which can be initiated and influenced by the school social worker.

The third discrepancy is concerned with family interactions as a cause of inadequate academic performance and negative behaviours and values. In our research specialists mentioned that low achieving students usually experience deficient family interactions. This is consistent with most studies as low parental expectations and lack of attention toward their children's education is shown to correlate with low academic and social achievement (Bradley et al 2001b). Also, in Romania one of the causes of deficient family interactions is parental absence due to working abroad. 15% of pupils in our research mentioned that their parents have left home to work abroad leaving them in the care of grandparents, neighbours or older siblings. Solutions for such problems need to be addressed at governmental and civil-society levels. The parents interviewed believe that low grades and negative behaviours are significantly influenced by the time spent on the internet. Studies show that literacy in the 21st century is directly related to the ability of using technology in general and the internet in particular (Looney, 2005). Internet-

learning is a form of active learning that gives learners a more active role in observing, arranging and transferring knowledge from one situation to the next (Huffaker and Calvert, 2003). This digital learning influences the curriculum and the instructors because meeting the diversified needs of learners, as implied by their lifetime learning needs, is one of the fundamental factors determining the dynamics of education (Atici and Bati, 2010). The internet becomes a risk factor only if the time spent online is disproportionate to the other learning spaces. An unjustified discrepancy for a prolonged period of time between the amount of time spent online and offline would result in academic and/or behavioural ineffectiveness that requires an intervention from the school's social worker.

The final discrepancy refers to the specialists' assertion that poverty is a cause of academic and behavioural difficulties. Studies show that children from lower-class families are more likely to drop out of school and receive lower grades (Bradley et al., 2001b), but they can be helped to develop the persistence and motivation to succeed (Brown, 2009). Children operating under stressful poverty conditions can be taught to control attention and behaviour in a moderately difficult task (such as home-work) as long as they feel that this persistence gives them a fare chance of attaining success. The school social worker can help a child from a low income family to attain a high success-to-failure ratio by collaborating with teachers in developing cognitive skills and with the school psychologist in training behavioural persistence. Also, one of the roles of the school social worker as specified in the model that we proposed in this paper (Figure 2) is to help pupils' improve their coping strategies. Therefore, the school social worker needs to distinguish between coping styles, coping strategies and coping processes. Coping style refers to a stable personality disposition in coping with different stressful situations. Therefore, the important aspect is person-attribution and not stressful encounter-attribution, even if the coping style in a particular situation does depend on several factors (Wrzesniewski, 1996). Coping strategies are cognitive and behavioural efforts in dealing with a particular situation that the subject finds stressful, and the coping process is a sequence of varying strategies depending on the particularities of the situation. In making this distinction, the social worker can initiate the collaboration between the pupils that have an inadequate coping style (ex. absenteeism, instrumental aggression, bullying behaviour) and the school's psychologist. Regarding the coping strategies, the school social worker can focus on improving the imposing context.

The shared presuppositions and understandings between parent-pupil-teacher discovered in this research are: (1) a concern for academic success (good grades), (2) a desire to improve the pupils' learning contexts and (3) a belief that communication and collaboration with the school social workers will deliver good results. These shared presuppositions and understandings are a good start for the school social worker to adopt the role of mediator between parent-pupil-teacher and address the discrepancies encountered.

Limits of Research

One of the limits of this research is the small study sample; and therefore, the results are representative only of the subjects studied. Also, in future studies, we see the need for the development of the following subject matters: (1) a comparative analysis between rural and urban school environments (2) a comparative analysis between national and international perspectives on the social workers role in reducing the school dropout rate, (3) a analysis of the social policy measures concerning low education among certain minorities, and (4) the testing of the efficacy of the dual-focused intervention of the school social worker using local, regional and/or national representative samples in order to improve the representativity of conclusions.

Conclusion

This research has discovered the following areas of discrepancies between pupils and their learning spaces: (1) grades; (2) bullying; (3) family interactions (4) low social economic status. The school social worker can address all of these discrepancies by mediating between home and school contexts through an improved synergistic parent-pupil-teacher contextual communication through the patterns of integrity-character and excellence-competence and by discovering shared presuppositions and understandings between parent-pupil-teacher.

This paper introduces the role of the school social worker as a new actor in the educational environment, which is that of helping pupils at risk overcome social and personal barriers. The school social worker addresses academic problems through a complementary expertise alongside the school psychologists, educational experts, teachers and families. Therefore, the school social worker provides the interface between pupils and their social contexts, by a multi, inter and transdisciplinary innovative approach.

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