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## Peer influences, learning experiences and aspirations of Romanian high school students in their final school year

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### Abstract

More than 80% of the Romanian senior high school students wish to continue their studies after graduation, even it is not a realistic aspiration in the conditions of the actual Romanian society. In the frame of this study the social context-related factors that influence the aspirations of the students were analysed. Beside demographic characteristics, variables related to the most relevant social contexts of adolescents (family, friends, school, neighbourhood) were taken into account. The sample is composed from 3524 high school students in their final school year (12<sup>th</sup> grade). These adolescents were surveyed in the first wave of the survey "Outcomes of Adolescence; a longitudinal perspective on the effect of social context on successful life transitions". The measure used was a questionnaire based on the SSP [1] which was completed and adapted to Romania by the research team. The results indicate that among the demographic characteristics used, educational level of the parents had the strongest effect on the students' aspirations. Conversations with parents and aspirations of friends also influenced the respondents' own future plans. In contrast, perceived teachers' support and school-related attitudes of youth from the neighbourhood had no significant effect on the aspiration of the students.

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## 1. Main text

In Romania, in conditions of economic instability and narrow opportunities for those who are at the beginning of their work career, the vast majority of senior high school students wish to continue education. In a national survey carried out in 2009 on a nationally representative sample of senior year high school students, 94.7% of the respondents answered that they wish to attend university after high school, but 43.3% had not decided at that moment the profile where they intend to continue their studies [2]. On the other hand, the rate of transition from high school to tertiary education is 58.9%, and the rate of graduation from tertiary education is 52.3% [3]. 17% of those who graduated in the last five years from university are unemployed, and about 16% of those employed have jobs that do not require a university degree [4]. In the light of these data, the question arises what factors influence the aspirations of students in their final school year, what are their aspirations at this crucial moment for their transition to adulthood.

### 1.1 Literature review

The individual differences could be understood considering both human and situational factors [5]. The situational factors are part of the social contexts that frame the individual orientations and choices. The main social contexts framing the adolescents' development - named microsystems in social ecological theory – are the family, the school, friends and the neighbourhood [6]. The family, as one of the main influences on the child's school achievement and school-related decisions is mentioned in a vast body of literature [7]. The demographic characteristics of the family (SES, race and ethnicity, educational level of parents, their marital status, the size of the family) are one of the most important factors that influence the child's educational attainment [8]. The parental values and expectations are transmitted to the children through parental practices, which, to be effective, have to meet the child's developmental needs [9]. As children are growing, the interaction between parents and children has to be based on conversation, negotiation and shared decisions to be effective [10]. Sibling interactions are part of the complex family context of social learning [11]. When moving through adolescence, the individual becomes more involved with peers, which influences his/her values and aspirations. The term “peer group” can cover more than one group, that do not necessarily overlap, but all of them contribute to the value orientation and identity formation of the adolescent. The geographical closeness with peers from the neighbourhood eases the relationships with them, the norms and opportunities characteristic of a living area influencing the pathways of youth from that area [12]. As the main context of the education, the school itself influences the achievement of children by managing the “goodness of fit” between the needs of the students and the school environment. Teachers' expectations constitute the most important factor with effect on the performance of the students [13]. School performance can be considered a human factor which reflects the abilities, motivations and attitudes of individuals and has a high predictive role regarding the students' aspirations [14].

Based on the mentioned theoretical and empirical findings, the aim of this study is to analyse the influence of individual and social contextual factors on the aspirations of senior high school students. The social contexts considered will be: the family, both with demographic characteristics and guidance offered by conversations, siblings' school experience, the peer groups' (friends and neighbours) attitude toward education and perceived teachers' support. As individual factor considered the school results of the student will be used.

## 2. Method and calculations

### 2.1. Source of data

A questionnaire was applied to senior high school students (12<sup>th</sup> grade) in the period of September 2012 – January 2013. The students were informed about free consent. It was a class based survey; 70 schools and 219 classes were being reached, resulting in a nationally representative sample of 3524 students. The questionnaire is comprised of scales of School Success Profile (SSP), which is a powerful assessment tool of individual and social factors influencing school performance [1] [15]. The scales of SSP were completed with sections about use of drugs and alcohol, sexuality and contraception, mental and physical health and demographic data.

### 2.2. Variables

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