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**STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF SCHOOL AND EDUCATIONAL
ACTIVITIES**

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Abstract

The present study aims to draw a fact finding analysis regarding the teenage students' perception towards school and educational activities, with a focus on aspects concerning the students' interest and attitudes shown within the school space. A number of 370 students enrolled in the Romanian pre-university education participated in the study. The investigation was carried out with the help of a questionnaire regarding the students' perception of the educational activities and an interview guide. Unfortunately, the results pointed out a phenomenon which has been frequently noticed in the school space, namely the predominance of a superficial attitude and a relatively low level of interest showed for school and its activities. The students' opinions represent an important step the teacher is invited to take into consideration in his or her endeavor, in order to offer the students actual experiences of learning and life. The added value of the study lies in the organized focus group, through which the students discussed their opinions regarding different aspects in relation to the school role in their training and development.

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1. Introduction

One of the present challenges of the educational practice is represented by the way in which students of all levels of education perceive and behave in relation to school, in general, and the teaching/didactic activities, in particular. The efforts of the educational actors, may they be teachers or educational/school authorities, are oriented towards stimulating students and their interest in school; the need to increase the students' additional and sustained motivation leave from the presumption that building and developing positive attitudes stand, among other aspects, as basic objectives of school. We

know that a positive attitude towards school and the actual educational activities favors the student's strong commitment for his or her own process of training and evolution. In numerous cases, teachers show a strong concern for the transmission of knowledge, and the obedience of school curriculum, yet they should be aware of the fact that their students' attitudes and emotional states are equally important. Also, if we refer strictly to the teenage period of time, as the students in our target group are experiencing at present this development stage, there is a unanimous recognition of the fact that this is the most difficult stage in one's life, the age of great impetus, crises, anxiety and insecurity, the most "disagreeable" period in life. We are not aiming here to conceptualize the teenage from the causal, factorial, reportorial or phenomenological points of view, we'll resume ourselves at drawing attention upon the fact that the educational process at this age is characterized by a series of distinct characteristics whose importance shouldn't be neglected. We also want to recall the fact that in school practice more and more teachers blame the students' poor training and interest for learning.

One of the early definitions of attitude is that offered by Louis Thurstone (1928), who describes attitude as „the total sum of one's inclinations, feelings, preconceived ideas, worries, threats and beliefs about a specific object" (p. 531). Later, the quoted author cut down the definition and affirmed simply that an attitude is „the emotion for or against a psychological object" (1931, p. 261). Contemporary visions express through attitude the trends regarding thinking, feeling and action, positively or negatively, regarding the surrounding phenomena and realities (Salta and Tzougraki, 2004). Chelcea and Iluț (2003) defined the attitude as the position adopted by a person or group of people, of acceptance or rejection of objects or phenomena, people or institution with an intensity which may range from minimum to maximum. Another known conceptualization is that offered by W. Allport (1935) who defines by attitude „a state of mental and neural training, organized thorough experience, which performs a guiding or stimulating influence on the individuals' answers to all objects and situations they come in relation with" (p. 798). In view of these considerations, there is a special interest in finding out if the investigated students show attraction or rejection towards school and in what way can these attitudes be translated.

The attitude and interest varies from the point of view of intensity and character and according to genre, age or a series of variables of a social order. In relation with the school context, attitudes and interests are conditioned by factors regarding the class of students and the classroom climate, teachers, and the content of knowledge. Various empirical studies have emphasized the impact of attitude and interest upon the school activities. Thus, Siegel and Ranney (2003) have demonstrated by their research that attitude and interest correlate with the students' perseverance and performances; practical and participative instruction fund positive attitudes and ensure an increasing interest towards learning; the quality of school instruction represents a determining factor of attitudes (Trumper, 2006); motivation correlates with attitude (Cannon and Simpson, 1985). In addition to that, the relationship between attitude and superior school results are influenced also by contextual factors, by the class management and the nature of academic or evaluative tasks.

Regarding the fact that learning should be based on students' interests and experiences, there is a general agreement, yet there comes the need to identify those educational contents which are significant and relevant for the students. In order to stimulate students' interest, the teaching activities have to integrate personal life experiences, there should exist strong connections between the transmitted scientific information and the students' cultural and experiential background.

Albu (2005) conceptualizes the concept of interest in terms of the motivational factor with an increased importance, which „implies a person’s selective and relatively stable orientation, from her own initiative, towards certain objects and/or domains of activity, in order to carry out certain activities” (p. 18). In addition, the author draws attention upon the fact that the interests require aspects relating to organization, invariability and efficiency (2005). A person’s orientation, the student in our case, towards a certain activity or task involves „the presence of knowledge, mental activism, its experiencing as agreeable/ disagreeable, which produce pleasure and, in the same time, drive to action, control, based on determination and perseverance” (Albu, 2005, p.19); this way the structural elements of interest, namely those cognitive, emotional and volitional ones, are underlined.

2. Objectives of The Study

Through this investigation, we aim to identify students’ perception of school and educational activities. On this line, we proceeded to identifying and analysing two indicators, namely the students’ interest and attitude towards school and the educational activity.

3. Methodology

3.1. Measures

In order to accomplish the aimed objective, two research tools were used. The first one was a questionnaire regarding students’ perception of school activity, whose items targets numerous aspects, among which we mention: the students’ preference for the fields of study (with the necessary argumentation), the degree of understanding of those fields, the interest and attitude for the learning activity/school, the satisfaction regarding different parts of the process of education, opinions concerning the school schedule, etc. In order to determine the students’ perception of school reality, we additionally used a qualitative method of research – the focus group, and we employed an interview guide which includes questions aiming at aspects relating to the students’ attitude towards school, their learning motivation, obstacles or difficulties faced by students in the learning process, ways to improve the didactic process in students’ opinion.

3.2. Participants

The target group included 370 students enrolled in the pre-university education. If we refer to criteria based on genre, girls are better represented (N= 201) in comparison with boys (N= 169). Students’ ages range between 14 and 19 years old.

3.3. Procedure

The investigation started with the application of a questionnaire regarding the students’ perception of school activities in which all the subjects belonging to the target group participated. Then, there followed an interview selection of 86 students belonging to every level of study (21 students from 9th grade, 22 students from the 10th grade, 20 students from the 11th grade and 23 students from 12th).

4. Results and Discussions

The first analyzed indicator was the interest shown by the investigated students for the didactic/learning activity. The results are synthesized in Table 1.

Table 1. Students' interest in the didactic/learning activity

Options of answers	Frequency of answers	Boys	MEAN	Girls	MEAN
Not at all	21	13		8	
Very poor	63	32		31	
Poor	44	21	3.46	23	3.79
Medium	162	76		86	
Much	58	20		38	
Very much	22	7		15	
TOTAL	370	169		201	

As for our group, we found that most of the subjects (N= 162) showed a moderate level of interest. The decreasing frequency of answers put on the secondary place a very low interest (63 subjects); further on, 58 students claimed a high level of interest in school activities. The reality discovered draws an alarm signal and may stimulate a series of further actions meant to increase students' interest in school. By insisting on the idea that the interests are strongly connected with aspects relating to curiosity, the desire to search and discover, the multiple advantages the students may benefit from an activity or action, the school in general and teachers in particular, during the instructive-educational activities, find themselves in the situation to quickly identify and implement actions to fight the lack or the low level of students' interest. This urge is primarily based on the identification of types of interests, and we discuss in this context about „general and personal interests; professional and extra-professional interests; material and spiritual interests; immediate and perspective, technical, scientific, sports, literary and artistic, touristic, etc. interests” (Albu, 2005, p.19).

The second indicator analyzed by us is represented by students' attitude towards school, and the results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Students' attitude towards school

Attitude	Masculine	Feminine	Total
Positive	138	173	311
Negative	31	28	59

From the perspective of attitude, out of the total batch of 370 subjects, 311 declared a positive attitude towards school that may be fuelled by the action of some factors relating to the educational environment, group of friends and parents or the process of actual teaching (with an accent on the teaching methods). The efficient teaching determines the manifesting of a positive attitude towards science, and the process itself (Papanastasiou and Zembylas, 2002). The reactions launched by the quality

and efficiency of teaching stimulate and perpetuate a positive attitude towards teachers, curriculum, lessons, in other words, towards school.

The relationship between attitude and genre reveals a positive character in girls' case. While researching the issue, White (1999) noticed that the male students tend to show a positive attitude, especially during primary school, then this tendency will be manifested by girls. On the level of secondary school, it's been noticed that the positive attitude is shown mainly by girls. As for the present study, the data support the hypothesis.

According to some specialty studies, the attitude towards school may also change depending on the level of the class of students; in some cases, the attitudes towards school is favorable as the level of study goes higher (Akpinar et al., 2009), but other cases disagree with this hypothesis. In our case, the attitude is negatively influenced simultaneously with the advancement to another level of study (9th grade: $M = 1.24$, $SD = 0.43$; 10th grade: $M = 1.22$, $SD = 0.41$; 11th grade: $M = 1.10$, $SD = 0.30$; 12th grade: $M = 1.10$, $SD = 0.30$).

Complementary to this analysis, the investigative endeavor also aimed to provide a qualitative analysis regarding the students' perception of school and school activities. In trying to observe the phenomenon, as accurate as possible, we selected 86 students belonging to every level of study (21 students – 9th grade, 22 students – 10th grade, 20 students – 11th grade and 23 students – 12th grade) to participate in the interviews.

One of the questions of the focus group targets the role of school in the contemporary society. Thus, most of the students admit that school brought its contribution to their own development and to the development of society at the same time, and they affirm that *„Through school and education, the society develops”, „Education favors evolution”, „Without school and education, a society cannot exist”*. Other contrasting opinions were displayed: *„Society offers numerous examples of individuals who accomplished themselves without learning”, „Why do we need education, when the society does not support us when we graduate from high-school or college?”, „The concept of school should be changed in today's society”*. These reflections are completed by those referring to the identification of the extent in which school contributes to the accomplishment of objectives and personal interests. Many students appreciate in a negative way the implication of school in their support to follow their aspirations, as they consider that the basic objective of school is to teach, in a rigid manner mostly, specialty disciplines: *„The school does not have time anymore to listen to us, to help us in other areas”, There are too many important disciplines, time runs too short, and teachers cannot help us with what we would like”, „Every school wants to have the best students, and that means first of all to study for the most important disciplines”*.

Regarding the didactic activities, students' opinions describe them as rigid and less attractive: *„We are given too much information, so we don't have time to understand and learn that”, „Teachers are mostly preoccupied to teach, they don't listen to our opinions”; „Very many lessons are boring because teachers do not capture our attention, they don't make us be curious”*. The students think that the didactic process should be made more attractive thorough modern teaching and evaluation methods, a more original display of the learning material, by organizing study teams, and the usage of modern didactic materials. We continue this investigation on motivation with the students' answers to the question: What motivates you most to study? Here are some of the answers: *„The desire to be the best”, „I learn to demonstrate my parents that I can do it”, „I learn because I have to, not because I like it”, „I learn when*

I like the subject or the teacher”, „I learn in order to attend the university later”, „I don't learn because it doesn't help me”, etc.

Among the difficulties faced by students during some learning activities we could mention: the terminology in use, the large amount of information to assimilate during a short period of time, the lack of further explanations, too much homework with high degree of complexity and difficulty, no exercises to stimulate attention and curiosity, poor knowledge of efficient learning techniques. The solution proposed by students include that teachers should come closer to their needs and interests, and offer further explanations any time the situation requires; also, teachers should assign the homework according to each student's rhythm and capacity; the lessons should be more relaxed from the perspective of information, the terminology should be adequate and the material resources should facilitate the understanding of new knowledge.

At last but not least, a growth in efficiency of the didactic process may be stimulated, in students' opinion, by organizing activities in an interactive manner, by the correlation of theory with practice, a stronger accent on practical activities, the more frequent usage of teamwork, a renewal of material resources, the simplification of school curriculum, a reduction of daily schedule, by organizing relaxing activities during the school day, the involvement of students in new learning situations adapted to the present context, and responsibility offered to students according to their potential.

5. Conclusions

The themes approached by the present study, the students' interest and attitude towards school and educational activities, represent hereinafter and beyond no doubt, extremely important issues in every teacher's agenda. The quality and success of learning depend on the extent of students' commitment (that is interest, attitude, desire and motivation), and we think here that the students' success is also their teachers' success. This study underlined a reality which is unfortunately quite frequently present in school practice, namely that of students showing a low level of interest in school. As for the attitude, the results indicated its rather positive character. The added value of the study lies in the organized focus group, through which the students discussed their opinions regarding different aspects in relation to the school role in their training and development, the attractiveness or lack of that role of the didactic activity, the learning motivation, and their difficulties in learning, the growing of quality of instruction. We should mention that, at the end of this intervention, the students' opinions, which are quite grounded, represent an important step the teacher is invited to take into consideration in his or her endeavor, in order to offer the students actual experiences of learning and life.

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